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Whose Sati?

Widow Burning in Early-Nineteenth-Century India*

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Intentionally interrogatory, the title of this essay emphasizes the speculative nature of my remarks regarding the phenomenon of sati. Derived from the Sanskrit term for pure or chaste (*sat*)—the very term 'sati', therefore, is a misnomer—sati has come to signify both the act of immolation of a wife on the funeral pyre of her husband (in some areas a widow was buried with her deceased husband or took poison) and the victim herself rather than its original meaning of a 'a virtuous woman'.[1] Generally, a woman was burnt together with her deceased husband, a practice termed *sahamarana* or *sahagamanan* (dying together with). But if concremation was not possible, such as when a husband died in a distant place or a woman's pregnancy required that she wait till after delivery, a sati conformed to the practice of *anumarana* or *anugamana*: burning with the husband's ashes or with some other memento representing him, for example, his sandals, turban, or piece of clothing.[2]

The title also has another meaning, a double trajectory: an interrogation of the historical literature on the subject and an interrogation of sati as a practice involving women of different times, places, and backgrounds. Both lines of inquiry seek to converge on the same objective: better questions *and* answers regarding the phenomenon of sati.

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Hitherto, much of the literature on sati has tended to favour an institutional approach.[3] Not surprisingly, the most familiar aspect of sati is the British campaign against it culminating in the promulgation of Regulation XVII in 1829 'declaring the practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, illegal and punishable by the criminal courts.'[4] Viewed from this angle, the history of sati has been appropriated by some scholars to represent the beginnings of 'a deliberate policy of modernizing and westernizing Indian society', as embodied in the person and policies of Governor-General Lord Bentinck who directed the official campaign against sati, and in the emergence of a Bengal 'Renaissance' under the guiding hand of the 'Father of Modern India', Raja Rammohun Roy, who acted as the Indian architect of this and other social reforms.[5]

The legislative prohibition of sati has also 'become a founding moment in the history of women in modern India.' To continue in the words of this scholar,

> colonial rule, with its moral civilizing claims, is said to have provided the contexts for a thoroughgoing re-evaluation of Indian 'tradition' along lines more consonant with the 'modern' economy and society believed to have been the consequence of India's incorporation into the capitalist world system. In other words, even the most anti-imperialist amongst us has felt forced to acknowledge the 'positive' consequences of colonial rule for certain aspects of women's lives, if not in terms of actual practice, at least at the level of ideas about 'women's rights'.[6]

But as Lata Mani's deconstruction of the colonial discourse on sati reveals, women were neither the subjects nor the object of this discourse, 'but rather the grounds of the discourse on *sati*. . . . For the British, rescuing women becomes part of the civilizing mission. For the indigenous elite, protection of their status or its reform becomes an urgent necessity, in terms of the honor of the collective—religious or national.'[7]

For the political and ideological context in which the government campaign for social reforms was waged, whether focusing on sati, infanticide, *thagi* (ritual murder), or human sacrifice, aimed at entitling the British with the right to proclaim the superiority of their own values, and ultimately, to justify their right to rule. Only they could

usher in the morality they found wanting in the indigenous civilization. Consider the tenor of the following government pronouncement on sati:

> Of the rite itself, of its horror and abomination not a word need be said. Every rational and civilized being must feel anxious for the termination of a practice so abhorrent from humanity. . . . But to the Christian and to the Englishman, who by tolerating sanctions, and by sanctioning incurs before God the responsibility of this inhuman and impious sacrifice not of one, but of thousands of victims, these feelings of anxiety must be and ought to be extreme. The whole and sole justification is state necessity—that is, the security of the British empire, and even that justification, would be, if at all, still very incomplete, if upon the continuance of the British rule did not entirely depend the future happiness and improvement of the numerous population of this eastern world.[8]

In part, the prevailing modes of inquiry have fashioned their own blinders because they have not until recently sought to penetrate the purdah of rhetoric imposed on sati, whether that made out of the fabric of discourse woven from the religious ideology sanctioning its practice, or that stitched together from the doctrines of policy makers and reformers seeking its abolition. In part, the peculiar emphases in the literature on sati reflect the predominant orientation of South Asian studies towards conventional political history rather than the 'new' social history.[9]

No wonder the history of sati is still being written—or perhaps better stated, being revised. And the fact that its full reconstruction is only now being attempted reflects not only the biases and limitations of the historical record but also of historians. Enough has been uncovered by the new scholarship to establish, as does the discussion below of sati as 'an invented and reinvented tradition', that the practice can no longer be merely ascribed to and explained away as a 'tradition' rooted in an immemorial past. On the contrary, recent scholarship has treated it more as an 'invented tradition' whose origins can be roughly dated and whose construction, institution, and development can be traced over historical time.

Another perspective, largely absent in the literature, is the focus of the human face of sati: neither the identities of those who committed

sati, nor their reasons for seeking 'virtue' in death has received much attention. A notable exception—although raising more questions than providing answers—is the work of Ashis Nandy which unequivocally states that not only did the incidence of sati rise sharply in the late eighteenth century because of the effects of the British presence on certain sectors of Bengali society but also that the considerable surge can be traced to the upper-caste Bengali gentry (*bhadralok*) who resorted to sati as a means of compensating for the social and cultural price they paid for abiding by the new rules established by the British system rather than the traditionally prescribed norms. According to this psychocultural interpretation, 'the rite had anxiety-binding functions in groups rendered psychologically marginal by their exposure to western impact. These groups had come under pressure to demonstrate . . . their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture. To many of them sati became an important proof of their conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky within.'[10]

This essay will attempt to identify the faces of sati victims by highlighting their social and economic conditions and circumstances. Such a characterization intends to examine the practice of sati as part of the fabric of the local society in which the widows lived, and such a portrait seeks to draw us closer to the subjects themselves and their subjectivity in playing out their lives as satis. Because of limitations of data, however, a complete portrait of the victims is not possible; the best close-up of these otherwise invisible women can only put faces on them, faces whose features can be partially filled in by considering their act as an 'option' bound by economic, social, and religious constraints.[11] The specific reasons for their sacrifice, however, cannot be fully determined from their perspective because their voices have not been preserved in historical documents; in fact, they appear largely as mute objects even in the most detailed of sources—colonial records of the early nineteenth century. Indeed, even their names have been 'grotesquely mistranscribed'. To continue in the words of Gayatri C. Spivak, 'one never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness. Such a testimony would not be ideology-transcendent or "fully" subjective, of course; but it would have constituted the ingredients for producing a counter sentence. As one goes [through] the records of the East India Company, one cannot put together a "voice".'[12]

In order to develop a more sharply focused portrait, this essay will rely on a local-level perspective based on data from the Bengal Presidency, an area which returned the highest reported cases of sati in British India. An extensive territory stretching across northeastern and northern India, this area (then encompassing the present-day Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh [UP], and the new nation of Bangladesh) also represented a diversity of local contexts because it included several distinct cultural, linguistic, historical, and structural regions. Most studies regarding sati in Bengal have concentrated their attention on Bengal proper, particularly the area focusing on the metropolitan centre of Calcutta—Calcutta Division reported the highest number of satis in the Presidency. This essay, however, will also consider the local contexts of sati in the Gangetic plain area in the western peripheries of the Presidency, the Bhojpur-speaking region. In the Bhojpur districts of Gorakhpur and Ghazipur in UP, Saran and Shahabad in Bihar, and, to a lesser extent, in the premier city of the region, Banaras, the incidence of sati reached such significant proportions that only in Calcutta Division were there a greater number of cases.[13]

The Documentary Basis of Sati

Data exist to compile a portrait, albeit incomplete, of the many faces of sati in the early nineteenth century. As Bayly notes, 'the British obsession with sati was boundless. Thousands of pages of Parliamentary papers were given up to 4,000 immolations while the mortality of millions from disease and starvation was only mentioned incidentally.'[14] But these accounts 'cannot be read as photographic representations of reality' because they reflected the 'anxieties of the new rulers as much as of a practice of the people . . . ruled'.[15]

The documentary basis for this essay is the data collected annually on sati in British India prior to its prohibition in 1829. Drawn from local-level police records, much of the information for the period between 1815 and 1829 was compiled into parliamentary papers for the scrutiny of the authorities in England. District judicial and police records, were they to exist in their entirety, of course, would offer the most comprehensive official inventory of sati cases. Eyewitness accounts of sati can be found both in official reports and in contemporary memoirs and travelogues.

To track the growing British interest in documenting the phenomenon of sati is not only to comprehend the biases of the source materials but also to see the gradual development of a policy. From Poona in western India, from Banaras, and from Shahabad, in 1787, 1788 and 1789, respectively, came the first official reports of widow burning.[16] In response to the Shahabad administrator who had informed the authorities of his intervention in a sati case because he had mistakenly thought that the practice had been disallowed in the Calcutta area, the government spelled out its initial position on sati. Although approving his actions, the government directed him, in future, to 'exert all his private influence to dissuade', but not 'to prevent the observance of it by coercive measures, or by any exertion of his official powers'.[17]

Because official documentation was only kept if a sati raised questions relating to government policy and procedure, or to other matters requiring administrative attention,[18] systematic data do not exist for the early years of British rule although some local officials kept records of incidents they encountered in the course of their administrative rounds. Some sati reports also appeared in other guises. For instance, an 1801 account of a 'desperate affray' involving several hundred armed men in Shahabad, although filed as a record of a 'heinous crime', reports not only of the death of 16 men in the fighting but the subsequent satis of four widows.[19]

Sati surfaced again as an issue in 1803–4 when the missionary William Carey produced reports documenting the incidence of sati in the Calcutta area. Although appalled by the missionary accounts, and eager to prohibit the practice, Governor-General Lord Wellesley deferred taking decisive action in 1805 by turning the matter over for the consideration of the legal authorities.[20]

Until the promulgation of Regulation XVII of 1829, the main principles of the official policy on sati emanated from a directive issued by the Nizamat Adalat (head criminal court) in 1805. In providing the 'guidance' sought by a district magistrate who had rescued a 12-year-old girl from burning with her deceased husband, the Nizamat Adalat refused to outlaw sati on the grounds that such a step was 'impracticable at the present time' and inconsistent 'with the principle invariably observed by the British government, of manifesting every possible indulgence to the religious opinions and prejudices of the natives'. This

court also expressed concern about stirring up 'alarm and dissatisfaction in the minds of the Hindoo inhabitants of these provinces'.[21] Nevertheless, it asked judicial officials to secure advance notice of the occurrence of a sati, *then* to depute police officers to proceed personally to the site of the burning in order to ensure that the rite was performed voluntarily and not under the influence of intoxicants or drugs, and to establish that the 'youth' or the 'state of pregnancy' of a widow did not violate the norms of 'tradition'.[22]

In enacting these procedures, however, the government invariably played its hand cautiously, consulting with its Hindu pandits before setting up any rules regulating sati. Thus, the parameters of a 'legal' sati were drawn with the assistance of Pandit 'Ghunesham Surmono' who informed the court: 'Every woman of the four cast[e]s (brahmin, khetry, bues, and soodur) is permitted to burn herself with the body of her husband. . . . No woman having infant children, or being in a state of pregnancy, uncleanness, or under the age of puberty is permitted to burn with her husband; with the following exception, namely, that if a woman having infant children can provide for their support, through the means of another person, she is permitted to burn.'[23]

The issue of sati returned to the political limelight in 1812 when a local administrator sought instructions on 'whether a magistrate ought to take any and what steps to prevent Hindoo females from sacrificing themselves on the funeral piles of their husbands'.[24] The Nizamat Adalat's rejoinder was to revive its 1805 statement—largely a dead letter until then—to redraft the earlier instructions into 'Directions to be issued by Magistrates to the Police Daroghas', and to insert an additional proviso into the Draft specifying 16 years as the age of puberty.[25] The government also took this opportunity to remind local officials of its earlier orders enjoining them to gather information on satis occurring in their jurisdictions.

From a statistical and documentary viewpoint, systematic records begin in 1815 when annual reports on satis indicated name (of widow), age, caste, name and caste of husband, date of burning, name of police jurisdiction, and in a separate column entitled 'Remarks', 'any particular circumstances in the report of the police officers, which may appear to deserve notice'.[26] The 'Remarks' column allowed local officials to note whether or not a sati was legal by government's definition. Beginning

in 1821, information was also gathered on the kind of sati committed: sahamarana or anumarana. The purpose behind this directive was to ensure that the customary and legal prohibition (first enacted in 1817) against Brahmin widows committing sati by anumarana was being enforced. Prior to the outright ban in 1829 the British strategy was to restrict the practice by tightening up the definition of a 'legal' sati—a definition for which they invariably sought and received the sanction of their 'authoritative' Indian advisers. In 1821 information on the economic backgrounds of the deceased husband was also collected; by 1824 data on husbands became a regular feature of sati reports.[27]

After the prohibition of sati in 1829, no doubt its practice did not fall into disuse entirely, although government vigilance and enforcement of severe punishments for offenders must have sharply reduced the number. Cases of sati also tapered off dramatically because the official ban on it—notwithstanding the fact that the implementation of legal sanctions was entrusted to a weak administrative infrastructure—proved to be enough of a blow to shake the foundations of an institution that enjoyed greater support in the spirit than in the actual practice; the number of widows who resorted to immolation never amounted to a sizeable proportion of the population. Furthermore, the attack on sati was launched with the active cooperation of Indian reformers. Thus, in the initial years after its prohibition, as police and crime reports indicate, the numbers were quickly down to only one or two in districts where there had formerly been considerably more.[28]

Sati: An Invented and Reinvented Tradition[29]

The Vedas, the religious hymns constituting the earliest literature of the Aryans who arrived in India in the centuries after 1700 BC, reveal no evidence of sati. The Rig Veda, however, refers to an act, appropriately termed a 'mimetic ceremony' where a 'widow lay on her husband's funeral pyre before it was lit but was raised from it by a male relative of her dead husband'.[30] A later, and probably deliberate, mistranslation (perhaps in the sixteenth century) was made in order to attain 'Vedic sanction for the act [of sati] by changing the word *agre*, to go forth into *agneh*, to the fire, in the specific verse.'[31]

That sati was not a practice in vogue in the early Vedic period is also suggested by the occurrences of widow remarriages which, apparently, were not uncommon. Vedic texts, furthermore, indicate the existence of a system of *niyoga* or levirate whereby a widow without male heirs was allowed to marry her husband's brother, an act designed to consolidate property.[32]

Nor is sati featured in the literature that developed in the wake of the Vedas, whether the Hindu expository texts stemming from the period 1,000 to 500 BC or the early Buddhist literature. Sati makes an occasional appearance in the popular religious texts of early Hinduism, the epics, but these are works that developed by continuous accretion over a thousand-year period beginning in the fifth century BC; some of the references to sati, moreover, have been attributed to later interpolations. Nor is there a clear-cut endorsement of sati in the prescriptive literature dating to the beginning of the Christian era. The codes associated with the names of Manu and Yajnavalkya, considered among the most authoritative of Hindu law books, for instance, prescribe austere and chaste lives for widows but issue no specific injunctions for them to become satis. Increasingly, however, in the first millennium AD, for instance, in the popular texts of later Hinduism, the Puranas, sati is mentioned as an option for widows. But so is a life of asceticism; other texts of this period, however, glorified sati.[33]

The 'virtue' of this practice was ostensibly defined by a religious logic that deemed a widow inauspicious for having outlived her husband—an abnormal circumstance said to have been brought about by her sinful nature in this, or a previous, life. A life of ascetic discipline could diminish the stigma with which widowhood branded her, but she was, nevertheless, considered a spiritual hazard to all around her except her own children. Closely related to this idea was the belief that an unattached woman, a woman without a husband, for instance, constituted a grave danger to her community because of the supposedly irrepressible sexual powers she possessed, a capacity which always had the potential to disrupt her ritually prescribed life of austerity. No wonder at least one writer has considered sati 'an expression of the perceived superfluity of women who were considered unmarriageable in a social context where marriage was the only approved status for

women'.[34] By becoming a sati, furthermore, a widow not only ended the threat she posed to the spiritual welfare of others but also reaped honour and merit—according to some religious texts enough to last 35 million years—for herself, her husband, and the families of her husband, her mother, and her father.[35]

The fact that sati is not featured in the earliest religious texts and is referred to infrequently in the later literature leading up to the Christian era is supported by historical information that tracks the first instance of sati only back to the fourth century BC. Such a chronology also reflects the changing status of women in Indian society. Although the characterization of the Vedic Age between 1700 and 500 BC as a 'golden age for women' is debatable, the decline in their status in the centuries thereafter is less a matter of dispute. As a recent review of the literature on women in South Asia notes, 'by 500 BC women were increasingly assigned the same low status as *sudras*, forbidden to wear the sacred thread, and excluded from the performance of sacrifice either as priests or as partners with their husbands'.[36]

But to attribute the rise of sati solely to the declining status of women—a position that eventuated ideologically in the model of a dutiful wife and of sati as the ultimate wifely act of duty—is to overstate the equation; nor does it adequately explain its uneven geographical spread. Just as sati lacked clearcut scriptural authority, so too did the paradigm of dutiful wife that represented only one construct of the feminine in Hindu ideology and, at that, one emanating from the priestly tradition of Brahmanic Hinduism. Hinduism, 'a composite of religious traditions in which diverse philosophical, sectarian, and cultic movements are loosely associated', has historically comprised two distinct ideological traditions: 'brahmanic Hinduism [that] has tended to objectify and exclude women . . . [and] nonbrahmanic Hindu traditions [that] have tended to provide for full recognition and active participation by women'.[37]

Furthermore, as Romila Thapar states, although the beginning of sati can be 'traced to the subordination of women in patriarchal society', changing 'systems of kinship and inheritance' and '[c]ontrol over female sexuality' were also factors in the rise of widow immolation. Moreover, the 'practice may have originated among societies in flux and become customary among those holding property such as the

families of chiefs and kshatriyas. Once it was established as a custom associated with the kshatriyas it would continue to be so among those claiming kshatriya status as well'.[38]

Principally associated with high status and rank during its early history, particularly with families of kingly or warrior (Kshatriya) status or those aspiring for such status, sati, according to another version, became more widespread during the Muslim period when invasions and conquests precipitated its development as a means of preserving the honour of Hindu women. Its rise, in this interpretation, is therefore typically linked to 'wars of conquest and their inevitable toll on the women of the defeated groups'.[39] But evidence exists from western and southern India indicating that women were becoming satis in appreciable numbers well before the advent of Muslim rule; in some areas, the peaks in numbers were reached in the pre-Islamic period. According to one scholar, inscriptional and archaeological sources, including sati stones erected at the sites of immolation, suggest that the practice was increasing towards the end of the first and the beginning of the second millennium AD. This rise, moreover, occurred in areas characterized by internal conquests and competition, often involving traditional castes, newly emergent castes, and tribal groups. In this setting, competition for status may have made upper-caste practices such as sati more prevalent. That is, sati became valorized as a practice—a practice emphasizing the subordination of women—as groups with different conceptions regarding the status of women encountered one another. Thus, widow immolation 'may have been . . . a method of demarcating status'.[10]

The spread of sati across caste boundaries must also have been generated by Sanskritization—the process whereby lower castes aspire for higher position by emulating the 'customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life' of higher castes. Although the effect of Sanskritization is evident from the enormous range of castes who performed sati, the practice never became generalized throughout the subcontinent but was confined to certain areas: in the north, particularly to the Gangetic Valley, Punjab, and Rajasthan; in the west, to the southern Konkan region; and in the south, to Madurai and Vijayanagar.[41]

Whether its rise can be attributed to groups aspiring for Kshatriya status or of lower castes emulating the rituals of higher castes, sati

clearly developed as a reinvented tradition, a tradition no longer confined to warrior widows whose husbands had died in battle. A crucial development in this regard may have been its adoption by Brahmins who, according to some religious texts, were specifically prohibited from taking up this practice.[42] Perhaps the Brahmin appropriation of this warrior practice represented yet another round in the ongoing 'inner conflict of tradition' that J.C. Heesterman regards as the 'pivot of Indian tradition': the 'irreconcilability of "brahmin" and king", who yet are dependent on each other, for the king will need the transcendent legitimation that only the brahmin can give. But the brahmin, however much he may need the king's material support, cannot enter into relations with the king, for this would involve him in the world of interdependence—a situation that would be fatal to the brahmin's transcendence.'[43] Surely, with the practice rooted in both the kingly and Brahmanical traditions, its constituency must have grown rapidly across spatial and social boundaries.

Certainly, in Bengal, where sati dates back to at least the twelfth century AD, Brahmins figured prominently among its practitioners. But from very early on, as vernacular sources indicate, it was not restricted to Brahmins, but observed by both upper and lower castes.[44] Perhaps its rise in Bengal was not unrelated to the growing reliance on marriage in the period between 1450 and 1800 as 'the way to sustain rank and the path to fame [for upper castes—Brahmins and Kayasths]'.[45] And, as the emphasis on marriage intensified, so must have the importance of sati as its structural concomitant. Not surprisingly, Brahmins took to this practice in great numbers; so did merchants and the writer caste of Kayasths who sought to emulate the ritual observances of the Brahmins. And once elevated to new heights as a status-conferring ritual, the next step was its practice by lower—artisan and entrepreneurial—castes who saw it as an avenue for attaining prestige and status in society.[46]

A practice once tied to the warrior ideal of the Kshatriya thus became a tradition appropriated by all of society. But in the process of widening its constituency, as the evidence from Bengal shows, sati emerged as a reinvented tradition. How novel the reinvented tradition was—assuming that the old tradition really was guided by a heroic ideal—is apparent from looking at sati in its 'new' context, a context

in which it figures as an 'option' bound by the economic, social, and religious constraints of widowhood.[47]

Sati: Subjects and Subjectivity

Abraham Caldecott, writing in 1783, stated that had he not seen a sati with his own eyes he would 'have been apt to doubt the veracity of it, but the fact is so well established, and so many instances of the like nature have occurred . . . as leaves no doubt of the generality of the Practice all over Bengal'.[48] A few 'hard' estimates reinforce this impression of the 'generality of the Practice' for the pre-1815 period. William Carey's investigations in a 30-mile radius of Calcutta in 1803–4 showed that as many as 438 widows had committed sati over a 12-month period.[49] District records can also provide some information for the pre-1815 years, but if the numbers for Saran are any indication, these may not be reliable. For 1812, 1813, and 1814, Saran returned one, two, and five cases—a far cry from the 15 noted for 1815 when the administrative machinery was geared to the task of collecting such information. In the magistrate's words, the police did not pay attention 'to cases of this nature, and it is most probable that a small part only of those that actually took place . . . were reported.'[50] Much more consonant with later statistics is the estimate for Burdwan district that 114 cases occurred in 1811–12 and 1812–13.[51] Statistical investigations conducted in Bengal at roughly this same period reported an average of 25 satis a year for Shahabad and 13 for Gorakhpur.[52]

In the 10 years between 1815 and 1824, 6,632 cases of sati were reported for the three Presidencies of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras. Of these, 5,997 (90.4 per cent) occurred in Bengal.[53] In the 14 years between 1815 and 1828 (Table 1), a grand total of 8,134 cases of satis were reported for the Bengal Presidency. But as the data reveal, the practice was not uniformly observed across the region but predominated in specific areas. The division of Calcutta alone accounted for 5,119 cases, or almost 63 per cent of the Presidency total, followed by Banaras, Dacca, and Patna divisions in a distant second, third, and fourth position, respectively.

Further geographical breakdown of these figures shows (Table 2) that sati was practised throughout the districts of Calcutta Division,

Table 1: Sati Cases in Bengal Presidency, 1815–28

Division	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824	1825	1826	1827	1828	Total
Calcutta*	253	289	442	544	421	370	392	328	340	373	398	324	337	308	5119
Dacca	31	24	52	58	55	51	52	45	40	40	101	65	49	47	710
Murshidabad	11	22	42	30	25	21	11	22	13	14	21	8	9	10	260
Patna†	20	29	49	57	40	42	59	70	49	42	38	43	55	55	689
Banaras	48	65	103	137	92	93	114	102	121	93	64	70	49	33	1153
Bareilly	15	13	19	13	17	20	15	16	12	10	17	8	18	10	203
Total	378	442	707	839	650	597	654	583	575	572	639	518	517	463	8134

Source: Compiled from Great Britain, Parliament, *Parliamentary Papers* (hereafter *PP*), *1821*, *1823*, *1824*, *1825*, *1826/27*, *1830*; Amitabha Mukhopadhyay, 'Sati as a Social Institution in Bengal,' *Bengal Past and Present* 76 (1951): 106.

*Includes the numbers for the Orissan 'districts' of Cuttack, Khurda, Puri, and Balasore, which then formed part of Calcutta Division. The totals for these districts varied from 9 in 1815 to a high of 45 in 1825.

†The tallies for Gorakhpur have been retained in the Banaras totals although that district was transferred to Patna Division in 1824.

Table 2: Sati Cases in Districts of Bengal Presidency, 1815–26

Presidency Division	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824	1825	1826	Average
Burdwan	50	67	98	132	75	57	62	40	45	56	63	45	66
Hughli	72	51	112	141	115	93	95	79	81	91	104	98	94
Jessore	7	13	21	23	16	25	31	21	14	30	16	3	18
Jungle Mehals	34	39	43	61	31	18	39	24	27	16	9	11	29
Midnapur	4	11	7	22	13	12	6	16	15	22	22	15	14
Nadia	50	56	85	80	47	59	59	50	59	79	60	44	61
Suburbs of Calcutta	25	40	39	43	52	47	39	43	46	34	48	35	41
24-Parganas	2	3	20	31	39	26	33	25	21	22	26	20	22
Cuttack†	9	9	14	11	33	33	28	27	30	24	30	45	24
Dacca Division													
Dacca City	4	6	18	25	15	18	26	9	14	7	18	12	14
Tipperah	20	7	13	22	21	17	11	6	9	6	8	4	12
Bakarganj	no figures available				6	3	3	18	11	28	63	45	21
Patna Division													
Saran	12	16	25	23	10	11	15	12	7	12	15	10	14
Shahabad	4	9	14	25	17	19	39	36	30	18	20	22	21
Banaras Division													
Banaras City	13	12	16	15	18	11	12	10	18	16	17	15	14
Ghazipur	8	15	27	43	26	34	35	48	55	33	21	19	30
Gorakhpur	14	23	24	50	23	32	44	28	32	17	9	22	26

Source: Compiled from *PP, 1821, 1823, 1824, 1825, 1826/27, 1830.*

repeatedly on its sati rosters: in 1824 Mussamut Dela, wife of Naik Tiwari, Brahmin, and M. Somerin, wife of Sahi Rai; in 1825 Nagbansi, wife of Adhir Singh, Rajput, Jethun, wife of Bissambhar Ojha, Brahmin and Hisabea, wife of Raghubans Rai, Bhumihar Brahmin; in 1826 Musst. Fakania, Rajput, Musst. Dhupia, Rajput and Musst. Abhi Lakhi, Brahmin.[58]

Nandy may be right, however, in insisting that sati was rooted in a different tradition in the region of Bengal focusing on Calcutta. Certainly, the notion of sati in the Bhojpur region seems to have had much of a 'kshatriya connection' as evidenced not only in the roster of victims above but also in the above-mentioned account of a 'desperate affray' in Shahabad in which 16 men were killed and four widows committed sati subsequently. Consider also the place of pride given to the tradition of sati in the Choudhary family, a Patna family of Bhumihar Brahmins with a long history of military service.[59]

Some scholars have also sought to relate the high incidence of sati (and female infanticide) in Bengal to the extreme hypergamy of the higher castes (*kulinism*), the practice whereby women of high castes had to marry men of equivalent or higher status. Presumably, this practice so restricted the pool of appropriate bridegrooms that a few eligible high-caste males were able to accumulate many, often young, wives for whom the demise of their husband left no choice but for them to commit sati. The evidence regarding the geographical distribution of sati in Bengal, however, offers little conclusive proof because rates of sati were higher in the west than in the east (more in Calcutta than in Dacca Division), whereas kulinism was more predominant in the east than in the west.[60]

Another argument has been to relate the high incidence of sati to the existing system of law in Bengal, the Dayabhaga school of law. In contrast to the Mitakshara school of law, the Dayabhaga school allowed widows greater access to their deceased husbands' property for support although it did not favour their rights of inheritance. Whereas this 'might have encouraged heirs to do away with widows or to pressurize them into suicide' and may therefore explain the 'numbers of satis in Bengal by comparison with other parts of India . . . it hardly explains the great variation of incidence between the different districts and cities of Bengal'.[61]

Some correspondence can be established, however, between the incidence of sati and mortality rates: 'There is no doubt that the rite was a primitive Malthusian means of population control in famine-ridden Bengal. Previously, high mortality rates and prohibition of remarriage of widows had helped the society to limit the number of mothers to below the level of available fertile women. However, at times of scarcity, these controls became inadequate and . . . the widows at certain levels of consciousness seemed "useless" drags on resources.'[62] But if sati were 'a Malthusian form of population control, stimulated by a series of crop failures and widespread famines', as G. Morris Carstairs notes, 'it would surely have resulted in higher rates among the poorer castes, less well protected against starvation, than among the gentry.'[63]

Much more significant is the correlation between changing rates of sati and shifts in mortality rates due to epidemics. Consider especially the increase in numbers of sati during peak years of cholera epidemics: in Bengal this occurred in 1817 and 1818 when cholera had a devastating effect on mortality rates (see Table 1). The close correspondence between the geography of the epidemic and sati rates in affected districts further demonstrates this correlation. Note that the unusual rise in cases of sati in 1817 and 1818 was registered primarily in Calcutta Division—in and around Calcutta, Burdwan, Jessore, Nadia, and 24-Parganas—precisely those areas that were also the most seriously afflicted by cholera.[64] In other parts of the Presidency, too, where increases, although not on a par with those for Calcutta Division, were registered for 1817 and 1818, local officials attributed the rise 'to the mortality occasioned by the epidemic'.[65] Much the same conclusion was reached by the Banaras magistrate who plotted the rise in sati cases in his city in 1823, 1824, and 1825 with the 'extreme sickness and mortality' of those years.[66] Similarly, the noticeable increase in satis in Dacca Division in 1825, especially in Bakarganj (see Table 1), was attributed 'to the excessive mortality which occurred in the district, owing to the prevalence of cholera morbus'.[67]

According to an official report in 1824, the annual death rate in the Bengal Presidency (total population 50 million people) was one in 33, that is, approximately 1,500,000 people. A sixth of this total, or 250,000, represented the number of Hindu women who became

widows. Rounding out to 600 the figure for those who burned themselves that year, the number of immolations constituted only 0.2 per cent of the overall number of widows.[68] By this calculation, the incidence of sati in Hughli, the district consistently reporting the highest number of cases in British India, added up to 1.2 per cent.[69]

Perhaps Banaras provides the best illustration of the limited incidence of sati, especially when the practice of sati is viewed against a backdrop of that city's reputation as a place to which 'large numbers of elderly people . . . [came] specifically to die . . . and so achieve immediate salvation'.[70] Thus, the Banaras magistrate noted with surprise—and in an obvious ethnocentric manner—that only 125 cases had occurred in the nine years between 1820 and 1828.

> Benares is one of the most sacred homes of Hinduism . . . in it the bigotry of the people is nurtured . . . it is peopled by the wealthiest and most scrupulous of Hindus . . . inhabited by crowds of every description of religious enthusiasts, the place where every Hindu is anxious to die, and the resort of all classes of rank of all ages, more especially those whose earthly career is drawing to its close. . . . At such a place then it would be expected the performance of this most inhuman rite would be frequent, and that its frequency would be in proportion to the peculiar sanctity of the spot, a sanctity immemorially acknowledged.[71]

The practice of sati, in short, was not only peculiar to certain regions of the subcontinent, but within those particular areas, taken up by only a small fraction of the widows. Although difficult to verify because the data say little about kinship ties between satis, this restricted scope of the rite probably indicates, as many scholars suspect, that it was a practice that must have been a tradition only in certain lineages.[72] The Choudhary family of Patna, for instance, honour and worship, 'along with their family gods', two satis, wives of one of their ancestors who 'immolated themselves on the funeral pyre at their Patna house on hearing of the death of their husband on the battlefield. . . . It is still believed that the lineage which was threatened at that time with extinction continues through their blessing.'[73]

Another aspect of the identity of sati victims in the early nineteenth century that explains the phenomenon better is their caste and economic backgrounds. Contrary to the conventional wisdom regarding the

high-caste status of sati victims, a different portrait emerges from a close examination of the detailed information. Of the 575 cases reported in 1823, 234 were Brahmins (41 per cent), 35 Kshatriyas (six per cent), 14 Vaishyas (2 per cent), and 292 Sudras (51 per cent).[74]

That this configuration of nearly even representation of both high and low castes was not uncommon is also borne out by the figures for individual districts. Of the 52 victims in 24-Parganas in 1819, 20 were Brahmins, 10 Kayasthas, and two Vaidyas, and the rest comprising such low castes as Sadgope, Jogi, Kaivarta, Kansari, Suri, and Ahir (Goalla). The 141 cases enumerated for Hughli district in 1818 reveal a similar composition: other than 40 Brahmins, 26 Kayasthas, and 4 Vaidyas, the remaining 71 were of the lower castes.[75] The diversity of caste backgrounds of sati victims also shows up clearly in the details regarding the Bhojpur districts of Ghazipur, Gorakhpur, Saran, and Shahabad. While Saran's numbers include a disproportionately higher percentage of high-caste women among its satis, the figures for the other three districts conform more closely with those for the rest of the Presidency. But in Saran, too, lower-caste women followed the practice. Noticeably present among the 168 satis in that district between 1815 and 1826 are two Harijans (Untouchables): in 1816 Punbosia Chamar, the wife of Jodhi, and in 1818, Dukhni Chamar, the wife of Dohari. Such diversity in the caste composition of sati victims certainly does not authenticate Nandy's characterization of sati as the expression of a rudderless upper-caste Bengal gentry seeking to anchor themselves in a period of flux by resorting to the 'traditional' practice of sati.

The caste backgrounds of satis in Banaras city, however, add up to a different picture. An overwhelming majority were upper caste, particularly Brahmins. In 1821 all 12 satis were upper caste (11 Brahmins and one Rajput); only in 1816 and 1820 did the proportion fall below 70 per cent (66 and 63 per cent, respectively). No doubt, the caste profile for this city is skewed by the fact that people from other areas of the subcontinent converged on it to die there. Not surprisingly, then, many 'foreigners' stand out among the roster of sati victims, including such typically Bengali names as Biswas, Mukherjee, Chakravarty, Bhattacharya, and Banerjee, as well as the well-known Maratha name of Joshi and even a 'Moorleedhur', identified as a former resident of Nepal.[76]

Table 3: Caste Composition of Sati Victims in Bhojpur Districts, 1815–1826

	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824	1825	1826
Ghazipur Upper Caste	2	7	13	19	14	17	13	16	32	25	13	13
% of total	(25)	(46)	(48)	(42)	(50)	(50)	(37)	(34)	(54)	(75)	(61)	(68)
Gorakhpur Upper Castes	8	16	14	28	14	16	24	15	18	14	7	16
% of total	(57)	(69)	(58)	(56)	(60)	(50)	(54)	(53)	(56)	(82)	(77)	(72)
Saran Upper Castes	8	12	11	3	6	7	12	9	6	6	12	6
% of total	(73)	(63)	(79)	(57)	(60)	(64)	(80)	(75)	(86)	(50)	(80)	(60)
Shahabad Upper Castes	1	5	9	13	9	11	29	21	18	10	13	12
% of total	(25)	(56)	(64)	(52)	(50)	(58)	(51)	(58)	(60)	(55)	(65)	(55)

Source: Compiled from *PP, 1821, 1823, 1824, 1825, 1826/27, 1830.*

A different light on the practice of sati is also cast by analysing the ages of its victims. Whereas many studies have tended to emphasize the young ages of widows in any given year, almost half of them were 50 and over, and two-thirds 40 years and more (see Table 4). In 1818, out of 839 cases 123, or 14.6 per cent, were 70 and over; but only 98, or 11.6 per cent, aged 25 or under. The overwhelming majority, as in other years, were 40 years and more. As the official report concluded in presenting these statistics, 'a great proportion of these acts of self-devotion have not taken place in youth, or even in the vigor of age; but a period when life, in the common course of nature, must have been near its close'.[77]

Almost every district also yields examples of women who had not only reached a ripe old age but who immolated themselves long after their husbands' demises. To draw on illustrations from Ghazipur's 1822 cases: 60-year-old Jhunia committed sati 15 years after her husband passed away; 70-year-old Karanja 40 years after her husband's death; 80-year-old Bhujagan 25 years after her husband's death; and 70-year-old Hulasi immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her son, 16 years after her husband Niamdhar Tiwari had died.[78] Equally striking are cases from other Bhojpur districts: Lagni burnt herself at the age of 90, 25 years after the death of her husband; Namao ascended the funeral pyre at the age of 80 following the absence of her husband, presumed dead, for a period of 15 years.[79]

Such characteristics of its victims suggest that sati was a form of ritual suicide[80] conditioned at least in part by personal considerations. The economic conditions of many widows further underscores this colouring. Data collected on satis from 1822 onwards reveal that many widows came from impoverished families. Of the 40 cases reported for Burdwan in 1822, only three or four of the deceased 'left any considerable property . . . the greater proportion were in a state of poverty'. Similar observations were filed for other districts that year: Hughli's 79 satis followed 25 husbands who had died in 'opulent circumstances, thirteen in middling, and forty-one in poor circumstances'; Bakarganj's 18 cases involved only five deceased husbands who were 'in respectable circumstances, all the rest died indigent'.[81]

The high representation of poor widows who took their lives after the demise of their husbands is again borne out by the statistics for

Table 4: Age Composition of Sati Victims in Bengal Presidency in 1825 and 1826

	0–19	20–9	30–9	40–9	50–9	60–9	70–9	80–9	90–9	100+	Total
1825	17 (2.7)	98 (15.3)	104 (16.3)	122 (19.1)	110 (17.2)	112 (17.5)	46 (7.2)	26 (4.1)	3 (.5)	1 (.1)	639 100%
1826	20 (4)	104 (20)	70 (13.5)	77 (14.9)	84 (16.2)	81 (15.6)	53 (10.2)	24 (4.6)	3 (.6)	2 (.4)	518 100%

Source: Compiled from *PP*, 1830, vol. 28, pp. 113–18, 208–13.

1823. Hughli's 81 cases involved 37 husbands who were 'poor, sixteen in middling, and twenty-four in opulent circumstances'; Jessore's 14 incidents involved six husbands in 'good [condition], three in middling, and five in bad circumstances'; Jungle Mehals' 27 cases included 10 said to be 'poor, the rest were generally in moderate circumstances'; and 'the greater part' of the 31 cases in Cuttack 'appear to have been in low circumstances'.[82]

Much the same conclusions regarding the advanced age and impoverished conditions of sati victims emerges from the information collected for 1826 when almost every district report turned in full details on these subjects. Burdwan's report on 45 satis referred to women who 'generally speaking . . . have attained mature ages, and their deceased husbands to have been in low circumstances'; Hughli's 98 cases evoked the observation that the 'greater proportion of the husbands appear to have been in poor or middling circumstances'; Nadia's 45 'female sacrifices . . . [involved] parties . . . for the most part . . . in poor circumstances; and the widows were, generally speaking, of an advanced age'.[83]

Furthermore, even in the best of circumstances, the practice of sati was shaped by other considerations. For it existed in a milieu in which widowhood was regarded as the final and lowest stage in the life of a woman, a stage sometimes termed 'cold sati'.[84] In other words, a widow was regarded as 'a marginal entity in society':

> She was not allowed to wear the insignia of her active married state, that is, her clothes and her jewelery, but wore rags. In some cases her hair was shorn. She was not permitted to partake in family meals, could only sleep on the ground and in all ways was kept separate from the active social world of the living. She was treated by the family and the rest of society as unclean, and polluting, and her marginality was enforced by these pollution taboos. She was expected to devote the rest of her life to asceticism and worship of the gods, especially Siva, and her dead husband.[85]

Thus, viewed from the perspective of widows in early nineteenth-century India, the 'option' of becoming a sati was not only conditioned by their economic and social circumstances but also by the 'virtue they earned in gaining long-term spiritual rewards for themselves and their families and by the deliverance they attained by closing out their lives

as the 'symbolically dead,'[86] a role to which they were consigned. As an alternative to life as a 'cold sati', a life of marginal existence and symbolic death that was made more precarious for many by advancing age and poverty, self-immolation was an act of ritual suicide that terminated their 'after lives' of certain misery as widows.[87]

Notes

This is a much travelled essay that has benefited from many readings and suggestions. An excerpt from an earlier version appeared in *Manushi* 42–3 (1987): 26–9.

1. This essay follows the now common usage of the term to refer to both the act of widow burning as well as the woman victim. To differentiate between the two, some writers use suttee, the Anglicized term for sati, to refer to the practice and sati to the victim. E.g., see V.N. Datta, *Sati: A Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow Burning* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988), 1. See also Datta, *Sati*, 2, regarding the prevalence of widow immolation in other parts of the world.
2. Edward Thompson, *Suttee* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 15; Upendra Thakur, *The History of Suicide in India: An Introduction* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1963), 141–2.
3. E.g., see Thompson, *Suttee*; R.K. Saxena, *Social Reforms: Infanticide and Sati* (New Delhi: Trimurti Publications, 1975); Amitabha Mukhopadhyay, 'Sati as a Social Institution in Bengal', *Bengal Past and Present* 76 (1951): 99–105.
4. 'Sati: Regulation XVII, AD 1829 . . . ',in *The Correspondence of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, vol. 1: 1828–1831*, ed. C.H. Philips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 360.
5. John Rosseli, *Lord William Bentinck: The Making of a Liberal Imperialist, 1774–1839* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 1974), 208–14; Rajat K. Ray, 'Introduction', in *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India*, ed. V.C. Joshi (Delhi: Vikas, 1975), 1–20.
6. Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India', *Cultural Critique* (1987): 119–20.
7. Ibid., 153. British attitudes towards sati were also characterized by a 'deep ambivalence'. See Veena Das, 'Gender Studies, Cross-Cultural Comparison and the Colonial Organization of Knowledge', *Berkshire Review* 58 (1986): 68.
8. 'Government circular on sati addressed to military officers', 10 Nov. 1828, in *Correspondence of Bentinck*, 91.
9. Hanna Papanek, 'False Specialization and the Purdah of Scholarship—A Review Article', *Journal of Asian Studies* 44 (1984): 127–48. A significant

departure from the conventional modes of interpretation is the work of Lata Mani (cited in notes 6 and 47).

10. Ashis Nandy, 'Sati: A Nineteenth Century Tale of Women, Violence and Protest', in *Rammohun Roy*, ed. Joshi, 174–5.
11. See Helena Znaniecka Lopata, ed., *Widows*, 2 vols (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), for a study emphasizing the significance of the social context of widowhood in shaping the 'after life' of widows in positive or negative ways. Also see Betty Potash, ed., *Widows in African Societies: Choices and Constraints* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986) for an anthropological analysis of the lives of widows and their options, choices, and strategies.
12. See Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice', *Wedge* 7/8 (1985): 120–30, for a provocative discussion of the 'muting' of subaltern women in the colonial discourse.
13. On the Bhojpur region, see Gyan Pandey, 'Rallying Round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpur Region, c. 1888–1917', in *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 60–129. See also Robert I. Crane, ed., *Regions and Regionalism in South Asian Studies: An Exploratory Study* (Duke University, Monograph and Occasional Paper Series, Monograph No. 5, 1967).
14. C.A. Bayly, 'From Ritual to Ceremony: Death Ritual and Society in Hindu North India since 1600', in *Mirrors of Morality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 174.
15. Das, 'Gender and Colonial Knowledge', 69.
16. Great Britain, Parliament, *Parliamentary Papers* (hereafter *PP*) (Commons), *1821*, vol. 1, 3–22.
17. Ibid., 22.
18. See, e.g., Magistrate, Nadia, to Secty., Judicial, 30 Oct. 1803, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, 5 Nov. to 29 Dec. 1803, 3 Nov., no. 10.
19. Collector, Shahabad, to Board of Revenue, 29 Sept. 1801, Bengal Revenue Consultations, 2 Sept. to 29 Oct. 1801, Oct. 22, no. 13.
20. Thompson, *Suttee*, 61.
21. Acting Register of the Nizamat Adalat (N.A.) to Secty., Judicial, 5 June 1806, in *PP, 1821*, vol. 18, 27.
22. Police officers were also ordered to submit information on sati cases in their monthly reports to the magistrates, ibid., 28.
23. In the four-fold division of Aryan society, Brahmins or priests constituted the highest order followed by Kshatriyas or warriors, Vaishyas or merchants and artisans, and Sudras or serfs. According to this pandit, if a woman reneged on her intention to commit sati before pronouncing the *sankalpa*, or resolution to die, she faced no punishments. However, if she had already announced her sankalpa and performed other ceremonies but refused to

ascend the funeral pyre, then her decision could only be rectified by her 'undergoing a severe penance'. 'Question to the Pundit the Nizamut Adawlut', in ibid., 28–9.

24. Magistrate, Bundelkhand, to Register, N.A., 3 Aug. 1813, ibid., 32.
25. Register, N.A., to Chief Secty., 11 March 1813, ibid.
26. *PP, 1821*, vol. 18, 44.
27. *PP, 1823*, vol. 17, 7–26; *PP, 1824*, vol. 23, 76; *PP, 1825*, vol. 24; *PP, 1826/27*, vol. 20. A column entitled 'Profession, and Circumstances of the Husband' was added to the 1824 report.
28. Commissioner, Patna, to Secty., Judicial, 15 Oct. 1834, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, 26 Jan. to 9 Feb. 1836, 26 Jan, no. 22.
29. This section draws on the highly suggestive and provocative ideas of Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14.
30. Romila Thapar, 'In History', *Seminar* 342 (1988): 15. See also the other essays in this important and informative special issue on sati.
31. Ibid. Whether or not sati was referred to and endorsed by the Vedas is a subject of some disputation. See, e.g., Datta, *Sati*, 2–3.
32. Thapar, 'In History', 15; A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That was India* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 186–7.
33. P. Thomas, *Indian Women through the Ages* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964), 217–24; Datta, *Sati*, 3–4; Benoy Bhusan Roy, *Socioeconomic Impact of Sati in Bengal and the Role of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1987), 1–2; Thapar, 'In History', 15–16.
34. Dorothy Stein, 'Burning Widows, Burning Brides: The Perils of Daughterhood in India', *Pacific Affairs* 61 (1988): 465, and her 'Women to Burn: Suttee as a Normative Institution', *Signs* 4 (1978): 253–68; and Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 114–18, regarding the belief that women have a greater need of sexual satisfaction than men.
35. Ṭhakur, *Suicide in India*, 126–45; Basham, *The Wonder That was India*, 186–8.
36. Barbara N. Ramusack, 'Women in South and Southeast Asia', in *Restoring Women to History* (Bloomington: Organization of American Historians, 1988), 4. Sudras were said to be the servants of the three higher orders.
37. Sandra P. Robinson, 'Hindu Paradigms of Women: Image and Values', in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 183. See also Susan S. Wadley, 'Women and the Hindu Tradition', *Signs* 3 (1977): 113–25.
38. Thapar, 'In History', 15.

39. Vina Mazumdar, 'Comment on Suttee', *Signs* 4 (1978): 273. See also Sanjukta Gupta and Richard Gombrich, 'Another View of Widow-burning and Womanliness in Indian Public Culture', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 22 (1984): 255–6 for an argument that Hindu emphasis on the chastity of women was reinforced under Muslim rule because Muslim rulers posed a threat to the purity of Hindu women and because Muslim culture placed an even higher premium on chastity as 'virtually the sole repository of family honor'.
40. Thapar, 'In History', 16.
41. Mukhopadhyay, 'Sati in Bengal', 100; Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Social Policy and Social Change in Western India 1817–1830* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 291. See also Ray, 'Introduction', 3–5 regarding the 'spread of sati as a Sanskritizing rite'; and M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 6 for a standard definition of Sanskritization.
42. Thapar, 'In History', 17.
43. *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 15.
44. Mukhopadhyay, 'Sati in Bengal', 99–101; Zakiuddin Ahmad, 'Sati in Eighteenth Century Bengal', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan* 13 (1968): 149–50; Thompson, *Suttee*, 15–43.
45. Ronald B. Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle-Period Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 82.
46. Bayly, 'From Ritual to Ceremony', 175; Thapar, 'In History', 17.
47. No wonder the practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is often seen as an involuntary act, more akin to murder than ritual suicide. E.g., Datta, *Sati*, 216–19. Note also that in the nineteenth-century debate over sati the British followed legal and Brahminical precedents and ignored the multivocal nature of the discourse on sati. See Lata Mani, 'Production of an Official Discourse on Sati in Early Nineteenth Century Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly* 21 (1986): 32–40.
48. Caldecott to Petter, 14 Sept. 1783, Caldecott Manuscript, Eur. Mss. D. 778, India Office Library and Records, London.
49. S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1923), 209.
50. Acting Magistrate, Saran, to Acting Suptd. of Police, Lower Provinces, 20 Feb. 1819, Saran District Records, Letters Issued, 11-4-1816 to 17-6-1819, Bihar State Archives, Patna.
51. Magistrate to Register, N.A., 18 Dec. 1813, *PP, 1821*, vol. 18, 37.
52. Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Shahabad in 1812–13* (Patna: Patna Law Press, 1934), 213; Montgomery Martin, *Eastern India*, vol. 2,

Bhagalpur, Gorakhpur (1938; reprint ed., Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1976), 475.

53. Mukhopadhyay, 'Sati in Bengal', 105. These numbers do not include satis occurring in such areas as Punjab and Rajasthan that were then territories not completely under British control but where the practice was prevalent. On Rajasthan, see Saxena, *Social Reforms*, 57–147. On sati in the Bombay Presidency, see Ballhatchet, *Social Policy in India*, 275–91.
54. Anand A. Yang, *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Saran District, India, 1793–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Basudeb Chattopadhyay, 'The Penetration of Authority in the Interior: A Case-study of the Zamindari of Nakashipara, 1850–1860', *Peasant Studies* 12 (1985): 151–69. See also Nandy, 'Sati', 174–5.
55. Gupta and Gombrich, 'Another View of Widow-burning', 254.
56. Nandy, 'Sati,' 175.
57. Ashis Nandy, 'Cultures of Politics and Politics of Cultures', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 22 (1984): 265.
58. Wherever possible, I have attempted to correct the 'grotesquely mistranscribed' names. Compiled from *PP, 1826/27*, vol. 20, 108; *PP, 1830*, vol. 28, 30, 93–100, 189–91. The 1830 identifications of sepoy widows also lists Musst. Una of Ghazipur and Musst. Gurua of Kanpur. See also Buchanan, *Shahabad*, 153 for an estimate that at least 4,680, and as many as 12,000 men from Shahabad were serving in the military in 1812–13.
59. 'A Short History of the Chaudhary Family, Patna City (translated from the Hindi of Pandit Rampratap Pandey)', in Babu Ramgopal Singh Chowdhary, *Select Writings and Speeches of Babu Ramgopal Singh Chowdhary* (Bankipur: Express Press, 1917), ii. Bhumihar Brahmins, a dominant landholding caste in the region, sometimes termed Kshatriya Brahmins, have historically valorized their military and kingly identities. See M.A. Sherring, *Hindu Tribes and Castes* (1872; reprint ed., Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1974), 39–54.
60. Gupta and Gombrich, 'Another View of Widow-burning', 256; Mukhopadhyay, 'Sati in Bengal', 108. Infanticide is said to stem from the same dynamic because the dearth of men of appropriate status also meant that high castes were faced with the dreadful prospect of raising unmarriageable daughters.
61. Bayly, 'From Rituals to Ceremony', 174. Such pressures have also been cited as reasons why many satis in Bengal should be seen as involuntary, i.e., as murder. E.g., see Ahmad, 'Sati in Bengal', 161–3.
62. Nandy, 'Sati', 171, goes on to argue that large-scale scarcities occurred in Bengal, such as the disastrous famine of 1770, after a period of about 150 years of relatively famine-free existence.
63. 'Ashis Nandy on the Inner World', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 22 (1984): 259. Perhaps this was another dynamic in

the generalization of the practice across social and economic liens.

64. James Jamesson, *Report on the Epidemic Cholera Morbus* (Calcutta: A.G. Balfour, 1820), 3–32, 167–74.
65. Magistrate, Patna, to Suptd., Police, 21 Dec. 1818, *PP, 1821*, vol. 18, 233.
66. Robert Hamilton to Captain Benson, 1 March 1829, in *Correspondence of Bentinck*, 175. For a similar trend in western India, see Ballhatchet, *Social Policy in India*, 275.
67. 'Extract from . . . suttee report . . . for the year 1825', *PP, 1830*, vol. 28.
68. 'Mr. Harington's Minute', with Governor-General's, 3 Dec. 1824, *PP, 1825*, vol. 24, 11.
69. I have used an 1822 population estimate of 1,239,150. See Durgaprasad Bhattacharya and Bibhavati Bhattacharya, eds., *Census of India, 1961: Report on the Population Estimates of India (1820–1830)* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1963), 71.
70. Bayly, 'From Ritual to Ceremony', 161.
71. Hamilton to Benson, 1 March 1829, *Correspondence of Bentinck*, 172.
72. Elizabeth Leigh Stutchbury, 'Blood, Fire and Meditation: Human Sacrifice and Widow Burning in Nineteenth Century India', in *Women in India and Nepal*, ed. Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee (Canberra: Australian National University Monographs on South Asia No. 8, 1982), 41.
73. 'History of the Chaudhary Family', in *Writings of Chowdhary*, ii.
74. *PP, 1825*, vol. 24, 153.
75. Mukhopadhyay, 'Sati', 108–9. Although upper-caste victims comprised approximately half the total number of satis in most districts, in proportion to the percentage of high to low castes in the overall population, they, of course, constituted a substantial proportion. Interpolating on the basis of the systematic census data of the late nineteenth century, one can assume that high castes typically represented eight to 20 per cent of the total population of most Bengal districts, their numbers standing higher in Bihar than in Bengal proper.
76. E.g., see *PP, 1821, 1823, 1825*. Nearly eight per cent of the population of Banaras, a centre of pilgrimage, were Marathas in 1820. See Bayly, 'From Ritual to Ceremony', 164–5.
77. 'Remarks . . . for the year 1818', 21 May 1819, *PP, 1821*, vol. 18, 222. For a different emphasis—on the youth of the victims—see Gupta and Gombrich, 'Another View of Widow-burning', 256.
78. *PP, 1825*, vol. 24, 67–70.
79. *PP, 1821*, vol. 18, 166–8.
80. For a discussion of sati as suicide and particularly Durkheim's views on this subject, see Raj S. Gandhi, 'Sati as Altruistic Suicide', *Contributions to Asian Studies* 10 (1977): 141–57; Arvind Sharma, 'Emile Durkheim on Suttee as Suicide', *International Journal of Contemporary Sociology* 15 (1978): 283–91.

81. *PP, 1825*, vol. 24, 76–7.
82. Ibid., 140–1. For a different profile, see the details regarding the 46 cases from the suburbs of Calcutta where the majority of the deceased husbands of satis were said to have 'been in good [economic] circumstances' (141).
83. *PP, 1830*, vol. 28, 138–9.
84. Susan Hill Gross and Marjorie Wall Bingham, *Women in India* (Hudson, Wisconsin: GEM Publications, 1980), 30.
85. Stutchbury, 'Widow Burning in India', 37; Stein, 'Women to Burn,' 254–5.
86. See Lina M. Fruzzetti, *The Gift of a Virgin: Women, Marriage, and Ritual in a Bengali Society* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982), 103–7 for an excellent discussion of the present-day status of the widow. Also Manisha Roy, *Bengali Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 146–7.
87. Nor have the conditions and ideologies favouring sati completely disappeared in twentieth-century India. Thousands were present at the recent burning of 17-year-old Roop Kanwar, a bride of eight months, who immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre in Rajasthan on 4 Sept. 1987. For the literature—and some shocking pronouncement—on this incident, see, e.g., the special issues of *Manushi* 42–3 (1987); *Seminar* 342 (1988); and *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 Nov. 1987 and 14 Nov. 1987.