The History of Doing

An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India 1800–1990

R A D H A K U M A R

kali for women

1993
The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800–1990 was first published by

Kali for Women
A 36 Gulmohar Park
New Delhi 110 049

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ISBN 81–85107–15–0
11. The Agitation Against Sati 1987–88

Protesting against Roop Kanwar's immolation, Delhi 1987
In September 1987, an incident of sati (widow immola-
tion) in a village in Rajasthan sparked off a campaign
which gave rise to a furious debate which spanned not
only the rights and wrongs of Hindu women, but ques-
tions of religious identity, communal autonomy and the
role of the law and the State in a society as complex and
as diverse as India’s. While some of the arguments used
in the debate were not new, its form and structure were
illuminating, as much for what they obscured as for what
they revealed of the intricate web of social change in
India (including the current state of the feminist
movement).

In the course of the debate a series of binary opposi-
tions were invoked, between rural and urban, tradition
and modernity, complementarity and sameness, the
state and religious communities, spiritualism and mate-
rialism, and so on. The invocation of these oppositions
had the effect of presenting either side (for and against
sati) as homogeneous, so that the former were described
as representing rural, traditional communities who were
struggling to preserve themselves from the homogeniz-
ing tendencies of the Indian nation-state, while the latter
were described as representing elite, urban, modern
sections of society, who were pressing the state to inter-
vene in communities they bore no relation to, and were
thus supporting and encouraging the nation-state to
extend its sphere of control over civil society.

Versions of this argument began to be advanced
within a couple of weeks of the incident of sati, and
almost immediately after the campaign against it began.
While the argument itself was earlier used by the sup-
porters of the Muslim Women’s Bill in 1986–87, the way
in which it appeared in the debate over sati showed how
greatly the argument had developed. For example, in
the earlier agitation the argument was advanced mainly
by pro-Bill leaders, but in the latter it was advanced both
by pro-sati leaders and by a group of ‘outsiders’ (in the
form of a series of newspaper articles). These appeared
first in the Delhi-based Hindi and English language
national dailies, Jan Satta, (‘Banwari’ 29.9.87), Indian
Express (Ashis Nandy, 5.10.87 and Statesman (Patrick D
Harrigan, 5.11.87), and all three writers, in their various
ways, lent a kind of outsider respectability to the argument so that it also began to be advocated by considerable numbers of those very urban, modern sections of society which it sought to attack.

Perhaps the most striking point about the articles by ‘Banwari’, Ashis Nandy and Patrick Harrigan was that all three propounded their arguments in the form of a polemic against the Indian feminist movement, accusing Indian feminists of being agents of modernity who were attempting to impose crass market-dominated views of equality and liberty on a society which once gave the noble, the self-sacrificing and the spiritual the respect they deserve, but which is now being rapidly destroyed by the essentially selfish forces of the market. All three, moreover, defined these crass market-dominated views of equality and liberty as being drawn from the West, so Indian feminists stood accused of being Westernists, colonialists, cultural imperialists, and—indirectly—supporters of capitalist ideology.

Though Indian feminists had suffered a series of attacks in the eighties, this was to date the most major of them, for not only did it appear to be concerted, its timing was such that it appeared to lend legitimacy both to an ideology which claimed that the finest act a woman could perform was to die with her husband, and to a specific incident of sati which was beginning to seem more and more like an incident of murder. Outrageous as the accusations against themselves seemed to Indian feminists, who had shown themselves to be anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist in a number of ways—and many of whom had, ironically enough, themselves launched a critique of ‘Western feminist’ goals and methods many years prior to this attack—what made it worse was the fact that not one of these writers addressed themselves to the question of what had happened, or was happening, in Deorala where the sati had taken place, nor did any of them ask under what conditions Roop Kanwar had lived, or under what conditions she had died.

September 1987 was not the first time that Indian feminists encountered the problem of sati. The first encounter in Delhi was in 1983, when a campaign to further popularize the ideology of sati was launched by a Marwari-funded organization known as the Rani Sati Sarva Sangh. The RSSS, which already ran several sati temples in Rajasthan and Delhi, had got the then Government to grant them a plot of land in Delhi to build yet another sati temple, and had decided to celebrate this grant by leading a procession of men and women to the temple. Delhi feminists heard of this plan, and decided to hold a counter-demonstration along the route of the procession, which they did with signal failure, partly because they had had no time to mobilize, and thus found themselves outnumbered, and partly because this was the first time that they had had to confront a group of women in a hostile situation; this was in itself so distressing that it took the heart out of their demonstration. Most distressing of all, however, was the way in which the processionists appropriated the language of rights, stating that they should have the right, as Hindus and as women, to commit, worship and propagate sati. At the same time, they also appropriated feminist slogans on women’s militancy, for example, ‘hum Bharat ki nari hain, phool nahin, chingari hairi hain’ (we, the women of India, are not flowers but fiery sparks). The feminists who attended that demonstration experienced, therefore, the humiliating sense of loss which accompanies the discovery that your own words can so readily be snatched and turned against you to serve an antithetical cause.1 This experience led to two different reactions: one, the determination to research into the existence of sati, sati temples and the proponents of ‘sati-dharma’ in India; the other, to find non-confrontational ways in which to undermine the ideology of sati. Both, however, emphasized the need to study, comprehend and deal with the traditional.

Whether for these reasons, or because no further public campaigns in support of sati occurred, the issue faded out until Roop Kanwar’s death in 1987. Given that there has been, on an average, something like one sati a year in India, why did this incident arouse such frenzy when others had not? Only four months earlier, the police had prevented a woman called Banwari from committing sati, and had dispersed the twenty thousand odd people who had assembled at Bagda village in Pali district to witness the event.2 Two years earlier, in March 1985, the police had prevented another sati in Jaipur district and had used both tear gas and lathicharges to disperse the thirty thousand odd people who had collected at the proposed site.3 In neither incident did police intervention result in agitations against them. Yet Roop Kanwar’s death, which no-one prevented, led to a massive agitation both for and against sati. It was only as a campaign around the issue developed that it became evident that this particular sati was indeed different from most of the others. In contrast to some of the other areas in which sati had been attempted, Deorala was a relatively highly developed village. The family, while not perhaps wealthy, were well-to-do. Roop Kanwar’s father-in-law was headmaster of a district school, while she herself was a graduate. A Rajput family, they had links with influential Rajputs and mainstream state-level politicians.

Roop Kanwar had only been married a short while before her husband died. Her dowry included some thirty tolas of gold. Her husband suffered from mental disorder and they had spent only around six months together. When, after his death, it was decided that Roop Kanwar would ‘become’ sati, the impending event was announced in advance, because sati is always a public spectacle. Yet her family were not informed. Evidence
which trickled out pointed to murder: some of her neighbours said that she had run away and tried to hide in a barn before the ceremony, but was dragged out, pumped full of drugs, dressed in her bridal finery and put on the pyre, with logs and coconuts heaped upon her. The pyre itself was lit by her brother-in-law, a minor.

Hearing that the press was on its way, the organizers of her sati brought forward the ‘event’. When the press arrived at Deorala, they were abused and manhandled by self-appointed protectors of the Sati-sthal (site of sati). In other words, it was evident that the planners of the sati saw themselves as being in a state of siege before any questions of a battle had even arisen. Could it be that they themselves chalked out the battles: were they in fact looking for a battle? Some credence was lent to this view by the response of the government.

Reports indicated that the local authorities knew of the planned sati, yet their only action was to despatch a police jeep which had overturned on its way to the site. Following this debacle, three more days elapsed before a government representative visited Deorala. Even more shocking was their general attitude, consisting as it were not of the usual tactic of slothful procrastination which government uses when it wishes to avoid an issue, but of a kind of sullen paralysis in which over two weeks went by before any statement was made by government spokesmen, either in the state or at the centre. No attempts were made to arrest anybody, despite mounting evidence of coercion and mounting public pressure. The doctor who drugged Roop Kanwar meanwhile disappeared.

Immediately after the immolation, the site became a popular pilgrimage spot, and, as in Jhunjhunu, a number of stalls sprang up, selling auspicious offerings, mementoes (such as a trick photograph of Roop Kanwar sitting on the pyre with her husband’s head on her lap and a blissful smile on her face, while the flames spurted about her,) and audio cassettes of devotional songs. Her father-in-law, prominent men from the village, and members of a newly formed organization, the Sati Dharm Raksha Samiti, (organization for the defence of the religio-ethical ideal of sati), together formed a Trust along the lines of the Rani Sati Sarva Sangha Trust, to run the site and collect donations. What passes for modern technology in our country was used by the Trust to organize worship at the site: parking lots were arranged and traffic controllers appointed; a control tower was set up near the site and a fairly elaborate system of loudspeakers was strung around the area, through which instructions from the control tower were transmitted to pilgrims, Trust functionaries, et al. The mahajans took the responsibility of organizing stalls selling food, and accommodation for the pilgrims (these are their areas of expertise). Though no information was collected as to how much money was made by them, or by the stall-owners, it was reported that within some three weeks the Trust itself had collected around Rs 50 lakhs.

Sati is big business. Despite demands from feminists and social reformers, this money was not impounded. While certain aspects of this business side of the sati are neither new nor particularly modern, such as the site becoming a pilgrimage spot and stalls springing up all around it to sell objects to the devout, the scale of it and the technologizing of the pilgrimage event is obviously modern. Kum Kum Sangari has pointed out how the new palatial sati temples replay the act of sati through models of the woman, the dead man and the burning pyre; she shows, further, that the ‘worship’ of sati-dharm or sati is produced and controlled through commodification, for next to the new temples there are sati-memorial stones which lie neglected and unworshipped.

In other words, far from the feminists imposing market-dominated notions of equality on an anti-materialist society which celebrated self-sacrifice, the event revealed the gruesome materialism of a society which permitted the production of ‘sacrifice’ for profit.

Further, and in many ways more dismayingly, feminists discovered through this campaign the complex relations through which issues concerning women can be used to stake claims to power. Sudesh Vaid has shown how the ‘tradition’ of sati and sati-dharma was created in Shekhavati region (where Deorala is located) after Independence, largely to regain lost authority. (Interestingly, some three quarters of recorded satis since 1947 have been in this region). Originally comprising small princely states and chiefdoms, the area had supported the outlawing of sati in 1846. After Independence, with the abolition of princely states, and the further abolition of the zamindari and jagirdari systems of land relations,
together with land reforms, the Kshatriyas and banias lost some of the power and privilege they had held. Anti-land reform agitations were launched first by ex-rulers and large land-owners under a newly formed organization, the Kshatriya Mahasabha. When they were successful in reinstating the Jagirdari system, small landowners followed by launching a similar agitation and forming an organization called the Bhooswami Sangh.

Both organizations invoked a chivalric 'Rajput' tradition in which men defended the Hindu tradition on battlefields by killing and being killed, while women defended it at home by killing themselves (jauhar and sati). Rajput identity was, further, fused with a militant neo-fundamentalist Hinduism, with demonstrations of 'tens of thousands of lathi-weilding saffron-clad Rajputs'. Sati now began to be projected as exemplifying the true Rajput identity: the first post-Independence sati in this area was in 1954, and at the same time an old sati-memorial, Jhunjhunu, was rebuilt and expanded. Annual 'sati melas' now began to be held.

This glorification of sati was funded and supported by mahajans, in particular, marwaris. It was they who rediscovered and rebuilt old sati shrines, and founded the Rani Sati Sarva Sangh, which now runs 105 sati temples all over India. In a sense therefore the old relations of mutual advantage between Rajputs and mahajans gained a new fillip through sati.

The parallels between the 1950s use of sati to assert an identity and the event of 1987 are fascinating. Hard on the heels of Roop Kanwar's death, a Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti was formed in Jaipur city, whose leaders were urban men, many of them professionals or businessmen from land-owning families, whose sphere of influence extended over both rural and urban areas. Together with the Deorala Trust, this Samiti announced that a Chunri mahotsav (veil festival) would be held some ten days after Roop Kanwar's death. A ritual cremation of the veil after the woman's death is, it seems, traditional in the area, but never before had it been called a mahotsav or festival.

Feminists in Jaipur petitioned the High Court to forbid the ceremony, and the High Court instructed the state government to prevent it from taking place. Though the Attorney-General announced that it would be stopped, the sole action of the state government was to stop vehicles at a certain point, but to allow people to disembark and join the procession. Five hundred policemen were posted along the route, clothed 'in civilian dress so that they would not offend the crowd'. The mahotsav was performed, and from an act of mourning it was transformed into a show of strength, a victory celebration, with the male marchers, traditionally dressed, waving their fists aloft in triumph and shouting slogans. The site itself was transformed into a political rallying ground: a highly charged state-of-siege.
atmosphere was created by sword wielding youth who surrounded the sati-sthal, and instead of devotional songs they shouted slogans which were clearly modelled on mainstream political slogans. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita have shown how these slogans fell into three major groups:

(1) Slogans based on leader glorification, such as ‘Sati ho to kaisi ho? Roop Kanwar jaisi ho’, which is based on ‘Desh ka neta kaisa ho? Rajiv Gandhi (or x) jaisa ho’.

(2) Victory chants, such as, ‘Ek do teen char, sati nata ki jai jai kar’.

(3) Slogans drawn from Hindu communalist movements, such as ‘Desh dharam ka nata hai, sati hamari mata hai’ which is based on ‘Desh dharam ka nata hai, gai hamari mata hai’.10

Even though several laws exist under which the ideologues and profiteers of sati could have been punished, the state government took no action, largely because the issue had become one of Rajput community identity, and the Rajputs are an influential community. In fact, several state level politicians immediately rushed down to pay their respects at the site, among whom were the state Janata Party Chief, a Bharatiya Janata Party member of the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly and a Lok Dal member, the acting president of the Rajput Sabha, and an ex-member of the Legislative Assembly from the Congress-I.11 So almost all the major centre to right wing political parties went to the site, not to enquire into what had happened but to stake their own claim to ‘tradition’, and via this to the Rajput vote. Behind this there also lurked the spectre of the ‘Hindu vote’, and behind both were questions of majority-minority politics, caste and communal representation.

The process through which this happened is a revealing one, for it sheds light on communal formations in India and shows how issues of gender can become central to these. At the policy-maker and intelligentsia levels the major argument of the pro-sati camp was that if the state represented the people, then the Rajputs were a people among whom sati was an ideal and a tradition and as such it should be recognized and legitimized. On the ground, however, it was argued that a refusal to legitimize sati was a deliberate attempt to marginalize the Rajputs. The opponents of sati, for example, were presented as people who were using the issue as a cover to attack the Rajputs per se. The widespread appeal of this argument became clear to feminists who were active...
in the campaign against sati, for a majority of the Rajputs whom we met focussed on this point rather than on a defence of sati itself. Almost without exception, they asked why such an issue was being made of sati and, almost without exception, they saw the campaign as being directed against the Rajputs per se.

Both arguments were taken a step further by two other groups. The first, head priests of the major Hindu temples in such centres as Benares and Puri, issued statements that sati represented one of the most noble elements not only of Rajput culture, but of Hinduism, and claimed scriptural sanction for this view. While re-iterating the need to legitimize sati, the main thrust of their argument was that such issues came under their purview and not that of the state. At the same time they also raised the bogey of ‘Hindusim in danger’ from the opponents of sati.

The second group consisted of a section of extreme right Hindu nationalists, spearheaded by the Shiv Sena. The Shiv Sena was active in the pro-sati agitation, organizing demonstrations on the Hinduism-in-danger line, and arguing that the State is particularly biased against the Hindus, for it is willing to accede to the demands of minority communities for representation, but is unwilling to do the same for the majority. (The particular point of reference here was to the Muslim Women’s Bill).

In a way the definition of the democratic state in India has always been deeply ambivalent on the relationship between secularism and religious representation. What is new really is the extent to which the two are today converging, so that secularism has become synonymous with providing ‘fair’ representation to different religious communities, which are defined in opposition to each other. Thus the ‘true’ representatives of different religious communities are held to be their fundamentalist leaders, rather than, say, the reformers within their ranks. Mobilization on communal grounds is thus an extremely effective political tool, both to gain political space and State recognition, and to create political-electoral bases. An index of the mainstream communalization of politics and the constituency of women as a communal ‘sign’ is the rise of two centrist Janata Party
politicians, Syed Shahabuddin and Kalyan Singh Kalvi, both of whom shot into prominence as communal fundamentalist leaders, the former via the Muslim Women’s Bill agitation, and the latter via the pro-sati agitation. Shahabuddin today heads his own political party, while Kalvi is an elected representative of the Janata Dal.

Questions of representation, politics and the state arose in a new way for feminists in 1987–88. Religious fundamentalism, as we find all over the world, not only rationalizes the sexual oppression of women, but also mobilizes them in support of their own oppression. The pro-sati agitationists mobilized considerable sections of women in their own support, both on a casteist (Rajput) and on a religious (Hindu) platform. That is to say, they mobilized women who would seem to be directly affected by their demands. This allowed them to claim that they represented the ‘true’ desires of Hindu women, and to accuse the feminists of being unrepresentative. So the feminists were placed in the anomalous position of appearing to speak in the interests of women whom they could not claim to represent and who defined their interests differently.

The tradition versus modernity argument entered this context in such a way as to further isolate the feminists. The bogey of modernism was so successfully created that the fact that sati was being used to create a ‘tradition’ went unrecognized despite feminist efforts to emphasize it. Tradition was defined so historically and so self-righteously that it obscured the fact that sati was being used to reinforce caste and communal identities along ‘modern’ lines, with modern methods of campaigning and organizing, modern arguments, and for modern ends, such as the reformation of electoral blocs and caste and communal representation within the state.

Worst of all, by polarizing women along the rural-urban, traditional-modern axis, it disallowed a whole series of questions and insights. For example, looking more closely at the nature of women’s support for the pro-sati agitation, it became clear that this was ambiguous, and at many points consisted of drawing a firm line between worship of sati and the actual practice of it.

Secondly, an examination of the women who were mobilized for the pro-sati demonstrations made it clear that they were not, in fact, the women who were most
Street play against widow immolation, Sabala Mahila Sangh, Delhi, 1987

Critiquing the 'martial honour' ideology, anti-sati march, Delhi 1987

directly affected by the issue. The figure of the widow was conspicuously absent. The elevation of sati into a tradition of ideal man-woman relations, in the context of widowhood, not only obscured the miserable conditions under which most Hindu widows live, it actually rationalized their slavery: for if the widowed woman is not capable of living up to the sati ideal by immolating herself, then what better fate for her than to be the servant either of her family or of the temple?

For the feminists the realization of how these polarizations between tradition and modernity, materialism and spiritualism, rural and urban, had successfully sidelined all questions of affection or compassion for women was a bitter one. Even worse, because peculiarly ironic, was the way in which these polarizations forced them into positions which appeared not only to contradict earlier stands but also to diverge sharply from the directions which they had been pursuing. One such position was the demand for state intervention, made in three ways: first, that Roop Kanwar’s in-laws and the doctor who drugged her should be charged with murder; second, that all those who profited financially or politically from her death should be punished; and third, that a new law should be promulgated banning both the committal and glorification of crimes against women in the name of religion.

Feminist unease about demands of this kind has existed from the beginning of the contemporary women’s movement and has been a kind of constant undercurrent in all their campaigns, most of which have, for fairly obvious reasons, tended to focus on demands of the state. Partly due to this unease, the draft Bill which was prepared by a sub-committee of the Joint Action Committee Against Sati in Delhi was never circulated to M.P.s and so never tabled in Parliament. Instead, the Government was left to introduce its own Bill (which it only did because of opposition furore), under which sati was defined as suicide and the first person to be punished was the woman herself, for attempting to commit suicide.

For most of us, at the time, the campaign around sati revealed the growing strength of the opposition to feminism, and spelled a considerable setback to the movement. Yet the challenges it posed to our self definitions yielded some insights of value: a more complex understanding of the ways in which different groups and communities saw themselves; that it is not helpful to view the state as a monolithic entity from a purely oppositional stance, especially at moments of crisis, for it is important for us to assert that we have the right to a voice in the administration of our society. Thirdly, that representation consists not merely in a show of numbers but in the seeking and encouragement of a plethora of voices, which is to some extent taking place through the feminist and associated movements. Opposition to sati, for example came from a variety of sources: both the right-wing Hindu reformist tradition and maverick left-wing Hindu reformers such as Swami Agnivesh of the Arya Samaj, opposed it. Swami Agnivesh in fact went on dharna outside Deorala, and challenged the head priests of the Puri and Benaras temples to a debate on the scriptural ‘sanction’ of sati. His challenge was declined. Opposition also came from sections of the Gandhians, who held a rally of about 10,000 women in Orissa, who gheraoed the head priest of the Puri temple, calling him to account for his views, which he was unable to do. And it also came from the anti-caste movement in Maharashtra, who announced their opposition to sati. Finally, within Rajasthan, considerable opposition both to sati and to state inaction of Roop Kanwar’s death was voiced by huge numbers of
women, largely rural, who joined demonstrations to protest against the glorification of her death.

Most of these voices and actions were not co-ordinated at the time, because feminist resources did not permit of co-ordination. But in a sense co-ordination was not really necessary, because the problem of sati, like most other problems of women, cannot be resolved simply through a campaign. Perhaps one of the most valuable insights in this regard has been the understanding that while specific and short term campaigns are necessary, if only in order to mark reactions, the roots of feminism are now spreading in a variety of ways of across the country.

NOTES

1. Recounted to me by Nandita Haksar and Sheba Chhachi, December 1983.
2. Indian Express, 10.5.1987.
6. Ibid.
10. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, 'The Burning of Roop Kanwar', Manushi, No. 42-3, 1987. The slogans/chants listed above translate as follows: (1) 'What should a sati be like? Like Roop Kanwar; which is based on 'What should a country's leader be like? Like Rajiv Gandhi; (2) 'One, two, three, four, raise your voice in praise of sati'; 'Our land and our religion have decreed this: that sati is our mother', which is based on 'Our land and our religion have decreed this: that the cow is our mother'.