

SHARMA, ARVIND with AJIT RAY, ALAKA HEJIB, KATHERINE K. YOUNG. *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays*. Foreword by M. N. Srinivas. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988. xvii+129 pages. Bibliography, indices for Sanskrit, authors, and subjects. Cloth Rs75; ISBN 81-208-0464-3. Paper Rs45; ISBN 81-208-0561-5.

The recent Deorala incident of *sati* has evoked a great deal of response among scholars as well as the general public in India and abroad. The current book is certainly a welcome addition to this growing literature. In fact, out of the various aspects of *sati*, the collection of essays in this book concentrates mostly on the different reactions and responses toward this "phenomenon" till its abolition in 1829; that of the Greeks, from their earliest accounts in the fourth century, to that of the Muslims, Christians, (especially the Christian missionaries), and the indigenous Hindu population. These responses range from "admiration" and "sensationalization" to downright "condemnation." While underlining the non-existent scriptural sanction for *sati* in Hinduism, the essays also touch upon the tradition of indigenous protests against this custom. In a phenomenological approach, one of the essays seeks out the possible reactions of those who practiced it, i.e., the widows themselves, in an attempt to understand its acceptance from within.

The in-depth study of different reactions and responses in fact underlines this work's curious silence on the current raging debate, both national and international, among supporters as well as detractors of this practice. Given the fact that *sati* is such a live issue, an inclusion of an essay on the topic would have been most useful. This is especially so in view of the fact that the whole rationale for the publication of this book, as acknowledged in the Foreword (xvi), was the recent resurgence of *sati*. Mere mention of a few names in the Foreword is hardly satisfactory. This inclusion would perhaps have satisfied the need I myself felt for a lengthy introduction posing the *sati* problematic in its different dimensions, ranging from ideological to psychosexual to socio-economic. This would have helped to situate the *sati* in its resurgent form with its contemporary needs, where perhaps most of these dimensions (including the debate itself) could be seen to cut across historical times.

Although needlessly repetitive in both the main text and footnotes, the book scores highly for its stimulating and thought-provoking qualities. It brings to light several tantalizing areas of further research, especially in relation to women. I shall, therefore, attempt to highlight a few of the essays that have succeeded in generating fresh perspectives. This approach has been deliberately adopted in view of the fact that the Foreword of this book, written by the eminent sociologist, M. N. Srinivas, already provides a comprehensive review.

The essay titled "The *Bhagavadgita*: Its Role in the Abolition of *Sati*" (67-72), by Arvind Sharma, shows how Raja Rammohan Roy drew upon the *Bhagavadgita* among other texts to present his case against *sati* to his coreligionists. The Raja effectively argued that the goal of heaven sought by the act of *sati* was an end inferior to that of salvation, to which not only men but also women were entitled. This salvation could be attained by the widow through an austere life of desireless activity, or *nishkam karma*. This dimension can be fruitfully built up to show the attempt at a democratization of gender relationship at a certain level that brooked no notion of the spiritual inferiority of woman, and a modification of the patriarchal ideology operating within the Hindu community—a thought process which places Rammohan Roy far above the other thinkers of his time.

Another interesting essay by Arvind Sharma, although all too short (15–18), delves into the tradition of indigenous protests against *sati*, involving litterateurs and commentators on *smritis* and *tantrikas*. Of these, the role of tantric and *shakta* cults can be analysed not only in terms of protest but also as positively offering, within the Hindu fold, perhaps a different model to Hindu widows than that of *sati*, i.e., a somewhat more equitable status for women in direct opposition to the complete subordination of the upper-caste widows.

The final essay, “*Sati, Widowhood and Yoga*” (73–84), by Alaka Hejib and Katherine K. Young, attempts to see *sati* as the orthodox Hindus saw it and to explain the logic of *sati* in terms of the ideals and values of orthodox high-caste Hindus. An uneasy impression that the authors are attempting to justify the practice is laid to rest by their explicit assertion to the contrary. The use of a *yoga* analogue operating as a philosophy of action behind the Hindu widow and those who perform *sati* is refreshing, though it fails to explain much. The authors themselves are unsure whether the Hindu widows and *sati* widows were conscious of the *yogic* dimension of their lives. Moreover, the suggestion made by the authors about the *bhakti yoga* linking the twin issues of devotion to the *pati* (god husband) and attainment of personal salvation (the *yogic* ideal of a man, not a woman), remains dubious. Recent research on *bhakti yoga* shows an implicit devaluation of the *pativrata* (faithful) wife concept, where salvation lay in unqualified devotion to the husband. In fact, the life of a *bhaktin* (female devotee of *bhakti yoga*) shows the weakening and sometimes even discarding of the marital tie, rather than its strengthening, and the finding of space outside the role of a dutiful wife or a chaste and austere widow or a *sati* widow. However, the internalization of the *sati* ideology by women, in which they join their husbands after death and also act as vehicles for the departed husbands to enter heaven, is effectively brought out. To this ideology is conjoined the *sati* widow’s own elevation to the place of a goddess. In fact, this idea needs to be investigated more closely, as it may very well have been the overriding one. Quite clearly, somewhere along the way the idea of the faithful wife following her husband into death was superseded by the idea of the *sati* being a goddess. A clue to the dominance of this idea and feeling can in fact be gleaned from the quotation of Janaki Devi Bajaj given on the front page of this book itself, which reads:

“As soon as I got married, I thought of committing *sati*, so that I, too, would be worshipped.”

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ZVELEBIL, KAMIL V., trans. *Two Tamil Folktales: The Story of King Matanakāma, The Story of the Peacock Rāvaṇa*. UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, Indian Series. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987. lvii+236 pages. Introduction, list of Indic terms, selected bibliography, index. Hardcover Rs120; ISBN 81–208–0212–8.

Two Tamil Folktales is a welcome addition to the growing body of English-language material on Indian folktales. The two popular narratives Kamil Zvelebil has translated here are *Matanakāmarājan katalai* (“The Story of King Matanakāma”), and *Mayilirāvaṇa katalai* (“The Story of Peacock Rāvaṇa”). The first of the two tales is in reality