

The Problem of Sati : Conflict between the British and the Maharaja of Tripura

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It may seem strange but it happened to be true that the custom of Sati i.e. the burning of widows with their deceased husbands, was prevalent among the hill tribes of Tripura. And this Practice continued as late as the end of the nineteenth century, long after the abolition of Sati in British India.

This was really something unique in the sense that normally tribal societies are very much liberal about marriages and widow remarriage is a widely accepted practice among them, even though, they had no Rammohan or Vidyasagar. Certainly, widow remarriage is also a common practice among the hill tribes of Tripura. But side by side, we find evidences of Sati among them. This peculiar behaviour is one of the most interesting aspects of the social history of the Tripura tribes.

From the volumes of the '*Rajamala*' (the Court-history of the Kings of Tripura), we come to know that the Sati was an age-old practice in Tripura and the various volumes of the *Rajamala* are replete with instances of Sati¹. But then the '*Rajamala*' dealt exclusively with the affairs of Kings and the instances of Sati there, were of those related to the royal family. As far as the commoners were concerned, we have at all no information about how long it was practised or when it was first introduced. Though the '*Rajamala*' claims Sati to be an age-old practice in Tripura, the first case of Sati has, however, been dated only in the sixteenth century A. D., when Kamala Devi, the queen of King Dhanyamanikya (1490-1520 C.) self-immolated at the pyre of her husband². Hence it is reasonable to conclude that the custom of Sati was not introduced among the hill tribes before that date.

It was in the nineteenth century, particularly during the reign of the Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (1862-1896), that we get evidences of Sati among the hill tribes, in particular,

among the Jamatia tribe. The first record, so far found, is a secret letter, written by one of the officials of the Maharaja, to Baboo Haracharan Nandy, the Nyeb-Dewan, dated 24th Sravana, 1294 T. E. (1884 A. D.). In this letter, the Nyeb-Dewan was informed that the wife of one Charan Senapati of Brahma Cherra, Police Station, Udaipur, had become Sati on the 7th of that month³. The matter was, however, kept secret as per instructions of the Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya.

In this connection, it is interesting to note the attitude of the Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya to the question of Sati. The Sati was abolished in British India in the year 1829. But the custom continued in the neighbouring Tripura for more than half a century just because the Kings of Tripura thought it to be a genuine religious practice and hence allowed it to be continued. And this became possible because the Tripura Kings enjoyed certain amount of internal autonomy vis-a-vis the paramount power, and as such, the Bengal government remained ignorant of the actual state of affairs with regard to Sati in this state.

This is particularly true in respect of the Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya who has been hailed as the greatest reformer of the Tripura Kings. It was he, who put an end to the practice of domestic slavery as well as the practice of Sati in Tripura. But the papers, found in the Secretarial Archives of Tripura, establish the fact that Bir Chandra was all in favour of retaining the custom and instructed his officials to keep all cases of Sati a state secret,⁴ away from the eyes of the Bengal Government. There were two main reasons for this. First, he genuinely believed it to be a religious rite, and by allowing it to continue even when it was abolished in British India, he wanted to prove how devout a Hindu King he had been. In fact, he even started a movement to raise his status in the Hindu society.⁵ Secondly, he thought that the prohibition of a traditional religious custom would create popular discontent and disturbances. As such, far from abolishing the inhuman practice, he tried to retain the custom as it had been. When the Sati was ultimately abolished in Tripura, that was not out of any belated enlightenment on the part of the Maharaja, but because of the pressure of the Bengal Government.

It was the Bengal Government which out of their civilizing mission, began to put pressure on the Maharaja as soon as a

Political Agent was appointed for the state of Tripura in 1871. This becomes clear from a Memo dated 22nd October, 1883, issued by Gouri Sankar Biswas for the Political Agent, to the Assistant Political Agent at Agartala, directing him to "place the matter again before the Maharaja and report after 3 months (if) a law for suppressing the custom of Sati has been passed and is enforced in Hill Tipperah."⁶ The word 'again' in the Memo clearly indicates that the matter was already raised.

Though no law to that effect was actually passed, the Political Agent was probably deliberately given a false impression that the custom of Sati had been prohibited in the state. That is why Uma Kanta Das, Asstt. Political Agent referred in his letter, dated 11th June 1888 to Banga Charan Bhattacharyya, the Officer in Charge of the Maharaja's English Office, "The Minister has informed me that the practice in question is prohibited in the country."⁷ But, in the same letter, he pointed out that during his recent movement in the Sonamura Division in March last, he had learnt three cases of Sati (i. Wife of Charan Senapati of Burma Cherra about three years ago ; ii. Wife of Ganga Mohan Senapati, named Beni Lakshmi of Falilong Cherra in about Baisakh before last ; iii. Wife of Milaram Burma of Hantarai Choudhury's para on Tuiruppa Cherra in about Magh last)⁸ having occurred amongst the Jamatias in the course of the last two or three years. Still believing in the existence of a law prohibiting Sati, Uma kanta Das apprehended that "the order of prohibition is perhaps either very old and has now well neigh be forgotten, or is not sufficiently strict, as otherwise so many cases as three occurring in succession to one another .could hardly have been passed unnoticed. I therefore beg to suggest that a fresh proclamation strictly prohibiting the practice and making it punishable as a heinous offence be issued and widely circulated."^{8a}

The Maharaja's reply to this letter came in August 1888. In a letter dated 26th August 1888, Banga Charan Bhattacharyya, (Officer in Charge of Maharaja's English Office) informed the Asstt. Political Agent that the Sati was practised in this country for a very long time and the people considered it to be a sacred one. Therefore, any interference in this regard would immensely hurt their religious feelings and that might lead to widespread disturbances. Moreover, the number of Sati had been decreasing over the years. As such, the Darbar (the King's Court) was of the opinion that instead of pro-

mulgating any law prohibiting Sati, it would be wiser to allow the custom wither away in course of time. In British India, a punishable law prohibiting the Sati had become necessary, because, there, the widow was often pressurized by the relatives to perform the Sati rite. But in Tripura, force was never used and those who had performed the Sati rites, did it on their own. So there was no point in issuing an order prohibiting it.⁹

This reply clearly shows the attitude of Bir Chandra Manikya. In Bengal Raja Rammohan Roy took a somewhat similar stand in so far as he was also against governmental interference for the suppression of Sati. The reason was, there already was a growing anti-Sati movement in Bengal during this period, and Rammohan was in favour of achieving the same end through the social movement. But no such movement ever existed in Tripura. Therefore, Bir Chandra Manikya's stand can not be equated with that of Rammohan's. He was simply unwilling to put an end to the Sati because of his orthodox views about Hindu rites and religion. The question of popular disturbances was clearly imaginary, because, from his own admission, the cases of Sati were only very few, and moreover, the Maharaja did not make any police enquiry as to the probable effect had there been a prohibition of Sati in the state, which Bentinck had done in Bengal before outlawing the Sati.¹⁰

The Maharaja's answer made the Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, D. R. Lyall, very displeased. In a letter to the Political Agent dated 2nd October, 1888, he wrote :

"The reply is excessively unsatisfactory and not what I should have expected from a ruler usually so enlightened as the Maharaja, nor can I admit that the facts are correctly stated.

The custom of Suttee is certainly not indigenuous and is, to the best of my belief, practised by none of the Hill Tribes except as an innovation. It is only the Hinduised portion of the Hill men who practise the custom and they are not a class likely to become disaffected nor would their disaffection be of the faintest consequences.

The practice has clearly declined because it was believed to be forbidden - the Koylashar case which took place in February last proves this - and if it is now publicly admitted by the Maharaja that it is not forbidden, the custom will very soon revive as it is quite clear that what is not forbidden is allowed, or in other words, tacitly concurred.

I request that you will place the matter before the Maharaja strongly advising him to pass a law to the same effect as Regulation XVII of 1829 and to see that it is enforced.

I can not too strongly impress on the Maharaja the fact his present action amounts to be a direct encouragement of an act which has for nearly 60 years been declared illegal in India and which the whole civilised world unites in holding to be absolutely barbarous.

I should be very unwilling to lay this question at length before the Government and trust that the Maharaja will take such action as will not necessitate my pushing the matter further."¹¹

Thus in this letter, the Commissioner not only refuted the arguments put forward by the Maharaja, but also gave a stern warning that he must, in his interest, comply with the directives of the Bengal government.

In spite of this, the Maharaja refused to take any action on the question of Sati and delayed his reply. Then, after a period of four months, in a letter dated 7th February, 1889, the Political Agency was informed that :

"The Darbar has bestowed its best attention on the subject, but the question being a most serious one regarding very careful consideration in all its bearings, it has not yet been able to come to a definite conclusion."¹²

Then again, in another letter dated 24th February, 1889, the Darbar regreted "its inability.... as it has not yet been able to come to a definite conclusion on the subject. It will, however, be its best endeavour to send in the reply as early as practicable."¹³

This delaying tactics on the part of the Maharaja made D. R. Lyall impatient. In an angry note to the Political Agent, he wrote :

"..... the Government of Bengal are pressing me for a report.

"Unless I get a report within a reasonable time I shall be compelled to report the matter officially to the Government accepting Baboo Banga Chandra Bhattacharyya's letter No. 254 dated 26th August, 1888 as the Maharaja's final reply and I have already pointed out how injurious such a report will necessarily be."¹⁴

This threatening tone of D. R. Lyall and also several reminders made the Maharaja apprehensive. In order to avoid a real conflict, the Maharaja, in a conciliatory gesture, put forward a new proposal whereby the performance of Sati would be a most difficult task. In this proposal the Maharaja maintained :

“... the Durbar has very anxiously reconsidered the whole question and it trusts that its views and the conclusion at which it has arrived will commend themselves to the approval of the government.

“While the Durber is sincerely anxious to put an end to a practice that is so repugnant to the feelings of all enlightened and civil communities as the practice of the Suttee it feels that a sudden and direct prohibition of the custom by law might be attended with serious danger among a wild and ignorant population like the hill tribes of Tipperah. Under the circumstance the Durber is of opinion that the safer course would be to attain the desired end by indirect means rather than by direct prohibition so as not to wound the religious susceptibilities of the tribes among whom the practice has prevailed for generation under the rule of a long succession of the Hindu sovereign.

The Durber accordingly proposes to issue a proclamation forthwith to the effect that in every case of proposed Suttee the widow shall be brought up before the Maharaja himself or such of his principal officers as he may appoint in that behalf and that in no instance shall Suttee rites be allowed to be performed until after the Maharaja or such officers are satisfied from a personal examination of the widow that she is a perfectly free agent and that no sort of influence or pressure has been brought to bear upon her, it being declared at the same time that non-compliance with these rules will amount to a capital offence. Such a law the Durber believes will at once put an end to the practice as regards the interior of the State by reason of the delay involved in complying with its requirements and the impossibility of postponing the cremation of the dead for the necessary period. In the few cases where distance from the Capital may not be sufficient to prevent an application for permission under the new Law the Durber has no doubt that the personal influence of the Maharaja and his officers will be sufficient to induce the women who may be

brought up before them for examination to withdraw from the proposed self-immolation. Even if it should be necessary in any exceptional case to withhold permission in spite of the obstinancy of any unfortunate woman the Durber believes that a prohibition in a particular case will not give rise to any such discontent as a general prohibition of a traditional practice is almost certain to create.

The practical effect of the proposed measure will be to make Suttee rites impossible without incurring the risks with which a general prohibition would in all probability be attended and the durber hopes that its action will meet with the approval of the Govt."¹⁵

But the Commissioner insisted on an outright prohibition of Sati immediately, and did not approve of the proposal. The Asstt. Political Agent, in a letter dated 16th May 1889, finally informed the Officer in Charge of the Maharaja's English Office that "no further delay may be allowed to occur"¹⁶ with regard to a final solution of the Sati question.

The Maharaja, now, unable to withstand any more pressure, finally decided to issue the proclamation. The proclamation came on 22nd May, 1889. The practice of Sati was prohibited with immediate effect. Any violation of it was made a punishable offence.¹⁷

Heaps of praise now began to be bestowed on the Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya. The Asstt. Political Agent, in his report to the Political Agent observed :

"His Highness deserves to be congratulated on the order issued by him."¹⁸

A delightful Commissioner, D. R. Lyall, in his report forwarded to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated 4th June, 1889, similarly observed :

"It is a matter of congratulation that the Maharaja has taken this step."¹⁹

Thus ended the conflict between the British and the Maharaja of Tripura over the question of Sati. In spite of his unwillingness, the Maharaja had to bow down to the wishes of the Bengal Government, which only shows the extent of Tripura's 'independence'. Unwittingly, the Maharaja acted as the Bentinck of Tripura. There was no popular upsurge of whatever kind. But in the interior of the state the practice continued for some more time. These were, however, kept secret "as ordered by His Highness the Maharaja Bahadur."²⁰

Notes & References

1. Kaliprasanna Sen (ed), *Sri Rajamala*, Vol II (in Bengali), Agartala, Tripura (1927), pp. 33, 36, 63,-64, 89.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 330
3. Letter of Chandrakumar to Baboo Haracharan Nandy, dated Sonamura, 24th Sravana, 1294 T. E., B-6, Sl.+1, PD/T.S.A. (Unpublished).
4. Note on the burning of a woman with her deceased husband, from the Prime Minister, Agartala, dated 25th Sravana, 1294 T. E./1884-1885 C. E., Regd. No. 389, "Directing to keep the matter secret as ordered by His Highness the Maharaja Bahadur", -B-6, Sl. -1, PD, TSA (Unpublished).
5. N. R. Roychoudhury, *Tripura Through The Ages*, New Delhi, (1983), p. 51.
6. Memo. No. 2289 dated Comillah, the 22nd October, 1883, B -6, Sl. -1, PD/TSA (Unpublished).
7. Letter from Baboo Umakanta Das, Asstt. Political Agent, Hill Tipperah, to Baboo Banga Charan Bhattacharjya, the Officer-in-Charge of His Highness the Maharaja's English Office, Agartala, No. 276, dated Agartala, 11th June, 1888, B- 6, Sl. - 1, PD, TSA.
8. Loc. Cit.
- 8A. Loc. Cit.
9. Copy of the letter from Baboo Banga Charan Bhattacharjya, the Officer-in-Charge of His Highness the Maharaja's English Office to Baboo Umakanta Das, Asstt Political Agent, Hill Tipperah, dated nill, B-6, Sl. -1, PD, TSA

In this connection it may be noted that N R Roychoudhury in his 'Tripura Through the Ages', (New Delhi, 1983), p. 52, has referred to this as Durbar's reply, but has dated it "3rd September, 1888" This date was actually the date on which the Political Agent forwarded the Durbar's reply to the Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, D R Lyall, as is clear from Lyall's letter No. $\frac{687}{IX-37}$ H. I., dated Chittagong, the 2nd October, 1888, to the Political Agent :

"I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your No. 1993/XVI-27 dated 3rd September, forwarding the reply of the Hill Tipperah Durbar on the subject of Sati", (B-6, Sl.-1, PD, T. S. A.)

The actual date of Durbar's reply/Baboo Banga Charan Bhattacharjya's letter to the Asst. Political Agent is 26th August, 1888. This becomes evident from another letter of Lyall, No. $\frac{493}{IX-8}$ HI, dated nil to the Magistrate of Tripura & Ex-Officio Political Agent of Hill Tipperah, where he said :

"Unless I get a reply within a reasonable time I shall be compelled to report the matter officially to the Govt. accepting Baboo Banga Charan Bhattacharjya's letter No. 254 dated 26th August, 1886 as the Maharaja's final reply....' (B-6, Sl.-1, PD, T. S. A.)

10. For Bentinck's police enquiry, see C. H. Philips, (ed.), *The Correspondence of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, Vol - I, 1828 1831*, Oxford University Press (1977), Introduction - xxvii.
11. Letter from D. R. Lyall, Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, to the Political Agent, Hill Tipperah, No. $\frac{687}{IX-31}$ HI, dated Chittagong, the 2nd October, 1888, B-6, Sl.-1, P.D., T. S. A.
12. Letter from the Officer-in-Charge of Maharaja's English Office to the Officer-in-Charge, Political Agency, Agartala, No. 449, dated 7th February, 1889, B-6, S.I.-1, PD, T.S.A. (Unpublished).
13. Letter from the Officer-in-Charge of Maharaja's English Office to the Officer-in-Charge, Political Agency, Agartala, No. 483, dated 24th Feb, 1889, B-6, Sl.-1, PD, T. S. A. (Unpublished).
14. Copy of Letter from D. R. Lyall, Commissioner of the Chittagong Division to the Magistrate of Tripura & Ex-Officio Political Agent of Hill Tipperah. No. $\frac{493}{IX-8}$ HI, dated nil, B-6, Sl -1, PD, T S A (Unpublished).
15. Copy of Durbar's reply (No. & date not found, signature-illegible), B-6, Sl.-1, PD, T. S. A. (Unpublished).
16. Letter from Baboo Umakanta Das, Asst. Political Agent, Hill Tipperah, to Baboo Banga Charan Bhattacharjya, Officer-in-Charge of High Highness the Marharaja's English Office, Agartala, No. 446, dated 16th May, 1889, B-6, Sl.-1, PD, T. S. A. (Unpublished).
17. *Rajgi Tripurar Sarkari Bangla* (in Bengali), published by the Education Directorate, Tripura (1977), p. 97.

18. Copy of the Report submitted to the Magistrate & Political Agent from the Aast. Political Agent, Agartala, No. 486, dated 23rd May, 1889, B-6, Sl. -1, PD, T. S. A. (Unpublished).
19. Copy forwarded to the Chief Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal by D. R. Lyall, Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, No. $\frac{685}{1x-8}$ HI., dated 4th June, 1889.
20. Note from the Prime Minister, Agartala, dated 28th Magh, 1300 T. E. No. nil, Regd. No. 387, B-6, Sl-1, PD, TSA (Unpublished).

Note :

B	- Bundle
Sl	- Serial No.
PD	- Political Department
TSA	- Tripura Secretarial Archives.