

The Banning Of Sati And The Emergence Of European Liberalism In India

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ABSTRACT

The research paper examines the extent to which the emergence of the ideas of liberalism contributed to the banning of Sati (self-immolation) among women in colonial India during the 19th century. This paper encompasses the arguments and debates between the side of the Indian liberals (like Raja Ram Mohan Roy) and the Western ideologies of the British and the beliefs and values of the Indian conservatives. This paper aims to show that liberal ideas of freedom and equal rationality played a significant role in several political and socio-cultural reforms in India. Although these liberal ideas were criticised by many, they not only led to the law banning the practice of Sati but also opened the gateway to many progressive social and political reforms in India during and after colonisation.

Keywords: *Liberalism, Sati, social reforms, colonial rule, liberals, conservatives.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Liberalism is a political and economic doctrine that emphasises individual autonomy, equality of opportunity, and the protection of individual rights. The main focus of liberalism is that all individuals are equal and have the same rationality. It also focuses on fair treatment under the law and equal respect for all, reinforcing the freedom of speech, action, and belief. Essentially, liberalism protects individual rights. It is based on the idea that individuals can fulfil their rights even sometimes against the government and private actors, allowing the right to dissent. This encompasses diverse interpretations, but it often encounters complexities in colonial and post-colonial settings when dealing with marginalised communities. Overall liberalism is an ideology that plays a key role in shaping political thought and practice across several societies and countries (Bell, 2014; Chandra, 2024).

Liberalism, the variety of enlightenment thought, emerged in India throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. It was catalysed by the presence of Western ideas and education, particularly British influence. The Britishers first came to Surat (an Indian city in the state of Gujarat) as a trading company in 1608 and then took power in the following decades. Throughout their rule in India, their consistent referral to India as ‘barbarian’ and unfit to understand liberalism fueled the liberal thought in India. Indian liberals were influenced by Western thinkers like John Stuart Mill, who emphasised ideas like freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and local representation. Influenced by these ideas, many Indians borrowed and relied on those ideas in their context and to understand their society such as the position of various groups and individual rights available to people. For example, Raja Rammohan Roy advocated for the liberty of the press as early as 1823, emphasising its positive effect on the government and society. Such advocacy for the freedom of the press and local representation appealed to many Indians and aided in the development of Liberalism in India (Kumar, n.d.).

It is important to note that liberalism in India wasn't just an imitation of that in Britain. Indian culture, values, and conditions also influenced it. This might even be why, unlike the British emphasis on ‘Negative liberty’, Indians viewed liberalism in the context of positive freedom and interventionist measures. Thus Indian liberals looked beyond the absence of harm to actively promoting generosity and social welfare and saw freedom as a positive concept.

(Kumar, n.d.) One of the domains where we can understand the implementation of liberal ideas is the issue of gender justice and equality of women.

Sati and the Status of Women in Indian Society

Pre-colonial India witnessed a period of immense gender inequality. Several practices like female infanticide, child marriages, and brutal rules for widowhood were practised and prevalent in sections of Indian society. Women were subordinated to men and were deprived of equal rights, freedom, and representation. They were denied education and were not financially independent. Their biggest duty was believed to be that of being a dutiful wife and devoted mother. Among many upper-class communities, women were not allowed to step outside without a male companion. They were not allowed to work outside and an ideal woman was perceived as being obedient and shy. Moreover, the concerns about women were often mediated by religion and society. The Hindu scripture Manusmriti includes the proverb, "The drum, the village fool, the low-caste, animals and women – all these are fit to be beaten" indicating that women are to be tamed and controlled. The right to remarry was also a privilege Hindu women were deprived of. Indian society placed many restrictions against women and their rights.

One of the customs that sections of Indian females were obliged to follow was Sati. The Hindu religion has many sacraments, a significant one being Sati. Dating back to around 300 BCE, sati was an integral part of India's cultural practices in the colonial era. Its practice encompassed widows sacrificing themselves by walking into their late husband's funeral pyre. The practice entailed proving loyalty and devotion towards the late partner with women sacrificing themselves as a religious duty (Shamsuddin et al., 2020). Mythologically, this practice originated historically with the Hindu goddess Sati being the first woman to participate in self-immolation. Sati was practised in many forms - mass suicide or Jauhar is a form of sati practised by the Rajput and Hindu women at the end of battles. This was to prevent themselves from falling into the hands of the enemy troops after the loss at war. It was considered a symbol of "dignified sacrifice", glory, or a way to cleanse the spouse's sins.

Some scholars believe that sati was a voluntary act that often gave women a choice to decide if they wanted to die alongside their husbands. Nevertheless, cultural pressures overpowered the freedom of choice resulting in a perception of disgrace and unloyalty if the women opted out of the practice (ibid.). In some extreme cases, the women were even forcefully thrown

into the fire. Sati was commonly practised after the 13th century in India due to its reference in many religious texts such as Puranas, and Mahabharata. Moreover, the economic difficulties several widows incurred were also another reason they were motivated to perform Sati. This is because women were often economically dependent on their husbands thus the death of the husband could lead to financial insecurity or loss of social status for the widow. This also made Sati an option perceived to maintain honour and avoid poverty (ibid). Widows were also forced to commit Sati by their relatives. This often happens to prevent the transfer of the late husband's properties to the widow in instances where the couple had no sons. To prevent this, male relatives and their families often pressured females to perform Sati.

Keeping the historical context, condition of women in precolonial India, and British dominance in mind, the following section aims to analyse the role and significance of the idea of liberty in implementing the ban on the practice of sati under British India.

British Colonialism and the Debate on Sati

In the early years of the British colonisation of India, the East India Company officials adopted a policy of non-interference. This policy was implemented as they understood the sensitivity of Indians regarding their practice and belief in their socio-cultural traditions. It restricted them from inviting themselves to intervene in the socio-cultural and religious affairs of the local citizens (Belkacem, 2007). The policy resulted in the British company restricting any intervention based on their perception of the practice of Sati as "barbaric" and "Inhumane". However, a few decades later, there was an increased interest of the British to govern the Indian native society. One of the reasons was increased English education and training in Western concepts and ideas among native citizens. Thus, a larger portion of Indians were now increasing their demands to have better governance. This led to increased petitions of people urging the company officials to participate in ruling and governance.

Another motivation among the native intelligentsia was to challenge the negative stereotypes associated with Indian society. Practices like Sati in India were perceived as a violation of freedom and a dismissal of equality. The British argued that this act was tyrannical while comparing the act to Western standards of female equality and cultural morality. The ideas of Western standards were also pushed forth by the ongoing evangelical missionary movement in England that petitioned to abolish Sati and promote Christian education in India (Bruton, 2013).

Mary Daly, an American philosopher and theologian who describes herself as a “radical lesbian feminist” defended these groups stating that women are victims of gender oppression due to the patriarchal Indian society. Daly’s examination of sati allowed her to argue that women were forbidden from remarrying due to the societal standards set by religious scriptures. The ideas of femininity and traditional roles of women in Indian society resulted in them not having value as individuals in the absence of their husbands. Widowhood was seen as the “worst calamity that could ever befall a woman” as described by Sakuntala Narasimhan, an Indian Journalist, and activist. Being a widow degraded and invalidated the need for a continued existence. This narrative stemmed from the need for the banning of sati to retain a woman's individuality and provide them with modern standards of equality (Cierpial, 2015). Among the native Indians, one of the strong voices against Sati that borrowed from liberal ideas for the cause of women was Raja Rammohan Roy.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is often now referred to as, the ‘father of the Indian Renaissance’ because of his several protests against orthodoxy and efforts to improve the degraded social condition of Indian society. He established schools to promote a modern and more liberal system of education in India. Along with this, he advocated for rational, ethical, non-authoritarian, and socially-reformed Hinduism. Roy’s interventions prompted the discussion on the banning of sati as he aimed to integrate Western concepts with the ‘best’ aspects of Indian culture. In 1830, he also presented a petition along with 300 signatories to Sir William Bentinck to aid his case regarding the incorrect interpretation of the religious texts against the continuation of Sati. His petition emphasised the nature of Sati calling it inhumane, and it called for its abolition based on moral and ethical grounds. This individual petition played a key role in challenging the long-followed social norms and other conservative practices prevalent in Indian society during that time (Ray, 2014).

Liberal and Conservative Ideas in 19th-Century India

Indian liberals started advocating for several social reforms and educational reconstruction. They aimed to liberate Indian individuals from social tyranny and general ignorance. Hoping for freedom, democratic rights, and parliamentary democracy, they supported movements like the abolition of Sati and the introduction of Western education in India. This was to such an extent that Raja Ram Mohan, in hopes of doing away with the practice of Sati among orthodox Brahmins founded the Brahmo Samaj. Here, he expressed his beliefs in social and religious upliftment. However, this kind of humanitarianism was not without extreme

criticism by the Hindu conservatives- people who supported non-interference in religious beliefs and practices. This clash of ideologies gave rise to a series of heated discussions and debates amongst the Indians, especially the Hindus on not only the banning of Sati but also the increasing influence of liberal ideas in general (Das, n.d.)

The significance of religion to individuals and communities was often highlighted by orthodox leaders who opposed the ban on the practice of Sati. The orthodox Hindus argued on the basis that the words of the scriptures and shastra were more sacred. The case was further validated with the use of and reliance on shastras such as Manusmriti, Shrutis, and Smritis. Liberals like Rammohan Roy reinterpreted shastras to argue that they do not offer any support for the practice of Sati. They argued that scriptures (such as Manusmriti and Puranas) were often cited to justify Sati but did not explicitly endorse the practice, emphasising that the verses were often misinterpreted or taken out of context to justify social customs that had evolved. They also highlighted the principles of compassion, justice, and the dignity of human life, which they believed were central to Hindu philosophy. The orthodox community, however, defended Sati even when presented with arguments about the absence of support from the scriptures. To defend the practice of sati, the conservative community used arguments that ritualistic festivals such as Durga Pooja, which were not mentioned in the text, were still performed, as the failure to do so is considered a sin. The conservatives believed that the so-called liberals working towards the banning of sati were disobeying scriptures and non-believers of religion. The narrative of the diverse opinions on sati was perceived as believers versus non-believers of religion by the conservatives.

The liberals side, aligned with the British belief and believed that the scripture was used to camouflage imbalance in power in favour of men. The banning of sati convicted perpetrators of "aiding and abetting" in the burning of a Hindu widow and "whether the sacrifice is voluntary on her part or not", resulted in them being found guilty of homicide. This translated into the court being allowed to impose death penalties on those who have been involved in forcefully or assisting in the burning of a widow. The public had a mixed reaction to this. The majority of the public, with their conservative belief, didn't agree to the implementation of this regulation due to the misalignment of socio-cultural perceptions with the liberal values underlying the intervention from the government. The liberals, on the contrary, applauded the action that would change the stigma attached to the characteristics of Indians associated with the murder of widows (Raina, 2018).

DISCUSSION

The research findings highlight the significant influence of liberal ideas on the banning of Sati in colonial India, demonstrating how these concepts challenged and reshaped deeply rooted cultural practices. The primary point of discussion revolves around how Indian reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and British administrators utilised the emergence of liberalism, which was defined by ideas of equality, freedom, and reason, as a crucial foundation to refute Sati. The findings are significant as they demonstrate how liberalism was able to infiltrate and transform the socio-cultural context of 19th-century India in spite of substantial resistance from conservative groups. The paper shows that liberalism was not just an imported concept but rather became entwined with indigenous reform movements, leading to significant legal and societal changes, by analysing the debates between Indian liberals and conservatives and the interaction between Western and Indian ideologies.

In future research, it would be valuable to explore how these early liberal reforms influenced other areas of social and political life in India, particularly in the context of women's rights and the evolving relationship between the state and religious practices. Understanding the long-term implications of these reforms can provide deeper insights into the ongoing process of modernization and democratisation in India. This research contributes to the broader understanding of knowledge regarding the role of ideology on historical events and societal transformation by demonstrating how the interplay of Western and Indian liberalism led to the ban of Sati and created avenues for further progressive developments in India.

CONCLUSION

The banning of Sati in India in 1829 was not an individual act, rather it gave rise to many liberal ideas that followed. The prohibition was initially marked by a step towards women's emancipation. However as the debate followed, there was increased attention to the deeper complexities, such as the increased clashes over the definition of Hindu traditions, the role of ritual in religious practices, and the influence of colonialism and evangelism. The controversy also emphasised the need to reconsider traditional practices in light of modern values and human rights. The banning of Sati not only catered to a specific harmful practice but also catalysed broader debates on traditions, modernity and the rights of individuals within Indian society. These discussions also exposed the complexities of the liberal- democratic politics in

contexts outside Europe where deeply religious and caste-based communities exert influence on individual identities.

The banning of Sati is often seen as opening Pandora's box to many other social and political reforms in India, especially those concerning gender equality (Acevedo, 2020; Yang, 1989). Currently, numerous efforts have been made since colonial India to foster a more liberal, progressive and gender-equal society, traces of the patriarchal mindset persist within communities in India today. Issues like domestic abuse, violence, the dowry system, preference for the male child and sexual harassment are still exceedingly prevalent in households all over the country. Stemming from the conventional dominance of male counterparts, lack of economic independence and patriarchal views on marriage continue to prevail. These issues underscore the ongoing need to address socio-cultural stigmas surrounding gender equality and women's liberation in Indian society (Johnson, n.d.).

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