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SATI THROUGH ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL INDIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical evolution of the practice of Sati in ancient and medieval India and analyses the social, religious and political factors that contributed to its development and continuation. It discusses the position of women in different historical periods, the role of patriarchal traditions and the impact of colonial intervention and social reform movements in abolishing the practice. The paper also highlights the contributions of reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the significance of legal measures including the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829 and the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987. Through a historical and socio-legal analysis, the study explores how Sati became both a social custom and a subject of reform, resistance and political debate in India.

Keywords: Sati, widowhood, social reform, colonial India, women's rights, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, patriarchy, abolition of Sati.

Introduction

"Sati is a form of suicide forbidden by the Shastras." — Raja Ram Mohan Roy¹

Sati or suttee² is the ancient Indian and Nepalese³ ritual in which a widow burns herself on her husband's funeral pyre or is buried alive in his grave. The practice was associated with certain Hindu beliefs and traditions. The term "Sati" is derived⁴ from the goddess Sati, the wife of Shiva, who immolated herself in protest against her father's mistreatment of her husband. The word originates from the Sanskrit term *asti*, meaning "she is true" or "pure." The term also refers to the widow who performs the act.

¹World History Commons, *Rajah Rammohun Roy Excerpts*, World Hist. Commons, <https://worldhistorycommons.org/rajah-rammohun-roy-excerpts> (last visited May 8, 2026).

²Ranjit Roy, *The Practice of "Sati": A Historical and Socio-Cultural Analysis*, 7 Int'l J. Hist. 95 (2025).

³Tina Manandhar, *The Sati System in Nepal: Religious Conviction and Social Complications*, 15 Nepalese Culture 57 (2022).

⁴*Sati: Practice, History, & Abolition*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/suttee> (last visited August 10, 2023).

Sati, also written as "suttee," was regarded in some communities as an act of honour, loyalty, and devotion, particularly among higher castes where a woman's identity and social status were closely linked to her husband⁵. Although the practice was most prevalent in India and Nepal, similar customs have also been noted in other regions such as Russia, Vietnam, and Fiji.⁶

The practice of Sati has been heavily criticised⁷ as a form of gender-based violence and a violation of women's rights. It reflects the subordinate position of women within patriarchal social systems and continues to remain a sensitive issue in discussions concerning Indian history, religion, culture, and social reform. Even today, Sati remains a subject of debate in both Indian and Western discourse, where it is sometimes used as a political and cultural symbol.

While Sati existed in several parts of ancient India, it was neither universal nor uniformly accepted across the subcontinent.⁸ Its prevalence and social acceptance differed according to regional, caste, and cultural variations.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF SATI

1.1 Early References and Origins

The origins⁹ of Sati remain a subject of scholarly debate. One of the earliest references resembling Sati can be found in the Mahabharata through the story of Madri, the wife of Pandu, who immolated herself after her husband's death. Another early historical reference is connected to the wife of the Hindu general Keteus, who died fighting against the Greek ruler Antigonus in 316 BCE. According to historical accounts, both of Keteus' wives wished to die with him, though only the younger wife was permitted to do so.

Despite these isolated examples, Sati does not appear to have been a widespread or organised custom during the ancient period. Apart from the exception of Madri in the Mahabharata, references to the practice are largely absent from early historical records. Ancient Indian texts such as the Rigveda and Manusmriti contain some references to widows sacrificing themselves after the death of their husbands, but these references were neither clearly codified nor commonly practised in the way Sati later developed.¹⁰

Some historians suggest that the practice may have evolved from warrior traditions where it was believed that the deceased would require all of their possessions, including family members, in the afterlife. Similar customs

⁵John Stratton Hawley ed., *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India* (Oxford Univ. Press 1994).

⁶Kallie Szczepanski, *Introduction to the Custom of Sati*, ThoughtCo, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-sati-195389> (last visited Aug. 5, 2023).

⁷Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, 7 *Cultural Critique* 119 (1987).

⁸*Id.*

⁹Mohammed Shamsuddin, *A Brief Historical Background of Sati Tradition in India*, 3 *Din ve Felsefe Araştırmaları* 44 (2020).

¹⁰Mani, *supra* note 7.

were also observed among groups such as the Thracians, ancient Scandinavians and later among the Manchus in China, although these practices were never as socially established as Sati became in certain parts of India.¹¹

1.2 Development During the Gupta and Medieval Periods

Sati first clearly appeared in the historical record during the Gupta Empire¹², which lasted from approximately 320 to 550 CE. Memorial stones commemorating instances of Sati were first recorded in Nepal around 464 CE and later in Madhya Pradesh from about 510 CE onward. Because of this, many scholars believe that Sati was a relatively later development in the long history of Hindu traditions.

Initially, the practice was largely confined to royal and noble families belonging to the Kshatriya caste, especially warriors and ruling elites. Over time, however, it gradually spread to other sections of society. Certain regions, particularly Rajasthan and Kashmir, became well known for the prevalence of Sati across different social groups.

The custom appears to have become more widespread between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. During this period, Sati acquired strong social, cultural and religious significance. It came to be regarded as a symbol of loyalty, devotion, chastity and sacrifice.¹³ Widowhood was often associated with social stigma and vulnerability, and Sati was portrayed as a means of preserving a woman's honour and dignity.

Religious interpretations further strengthened the practice. Some Hindu beliefs promoted the idea that a woman who accompanied her husband in death would ensure his peaceful passage into the afterlife while also securing spiritual merit and a place in heaven for herself. These beliefs contributed to the glorification of Sati as a sacred and noble act.

1.3 Spread Beyond India

As Hindu influence spread¹⁴ through Indian Ocean trade routes between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the practice of Sati also travelled to parts of Southeast Asia. Historical travellers and missionaries recorded instances of widows practising Sati in regions such as Cambodia, Burma, the Philippines and areas of present-day Indonesia, particularly Bali, Java and Sumatra.

¹¹Shrikanth Krishnamachary, *Historical Perspective of Sati*, Indica Today, <https://www.indica.today/long-reads/historical-perspective-of-sati/> (last visited Aug. 6, 2023).

¹²Radhakanta Seth, *Eran Inscription: Earliest Recorded Evidence of Sati in India*, Samachar Just Click (Oct. 25, 2024), <https://www.samacharjustclick.com/eran-inscription-earliest-recorded-evidence-of-sati-in-india> (last visited May 6, 2026).

¹³Hawley, *supra* note 5.

¹⁴Vasudha Narayanan, *The Spread of Hinduism in Southeast Asia and the Pacific*, in *Hinduism*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism/The-spread-of-Hinduism-in-Southeast-Asia-and-the-Pacific> (last visited August 28, 2023).

An Italian traveller in the early fourteenth century noted that widows in the Champa kingdom, located in present-day Vietnam, also practised Sati. In Sri Lanka, however, the custom was comparatively limited and was generally associated only with queens and royal women rather than ordinary widows.¹⁵

1.4 Opposition and Abolition

The acceptance of Sati varied across regions and rulers in India. Some kings attempted to regulate or discourage the practice while others tolerated or supported it. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka is believed to have introduced measures aimed at discouraging Sati.

By the nineteenth century,¹⁶ British colonial authorities had become increasingly opposed to the practice. Reform movements within Indian society also strongly criticised Sati for its oppressive and inhuman nature. Raja Ram Mohan Roy emerged¹⁷ as one of the leading voices against the custom and campaigned extensively for its abolition.

Finally, Lord William Bentinck declared Sati illegal through Regulation XVII of 1829. Subsequent legal reforms and social movements eventually led to the complete prohibition of the practice in India.

Chapter 2: Sati and Women's Position in Society

The position of women in ancient and medieval India was not uniform. It changed across different periods, regions and communities, reflecting the diverse social and cultural structure of the Indian subcontinent. A woman's status often depended on factors such as caste, class, religion and local customs. While some women enjoyed influence, education and authority, many others faced restrictions imposed by patriarchal traditions. The practice of Sati developed within this broader social framework and became closely connected with changing attitudes towards women and widowhood.

2.1 Women in Ancient India

In the early Vedic period, women generally occupied a respected position in society. They participated in religious ceremonies, received education and, in some cases, held important social and intellectual roles. Historical and literary sources suggest that women had comparatively greater freedom during this time.

¹⁵*Sati Primary Source Packet*, Geo. Mason Univ. Ctr. for Hist. & New Media, <https://www.chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson5/pdfs/primarysourcepacket.pdf> (last visited May 7, 2026).

¹⁶Jörg Fisch, *Humanitarian Achievement or Administrative Necessity? Lord William Bentinck and the Abolition of Sati in 1829*, 34 *J. Asian Hist.* 109 (2000).

¹⁷Malin Chandra Biswas, *Abolition of Sati: Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Role in Women's Rights in Colonial India*, 10 *Int'l J. Sci. Dev. & Rsch.* (2025).

However, as society evolved, patriarchal norms became stronger. During the later Vedic period, texts such as the *Dharmashastras* began defining stricter social rules for women. Greater emphasis was placed on their duties as wives and mothers, and their independence gradually became limited. Women were increasingly expected to remain under the protection and authority of male family members throughout their lives.¹⁸

Although isolated references to Sati appear in ancient texts, the practice was neither widespread nor organised during this period. Widowhood, however, gradually became associated with social restrictions and loss of status, laying the foundation for later customs connected with female sacrifice and devotion.¹⁹

2.2 Women in Medieval India

During the medieval period,²⁰ the social position of women became more restrictive in many parts of India. Practices such as the purdah system became more common, particularly among upper-class communities. Women were often secluded from public life and their interaction with men outside the family was restricted.

At the same time, the experiences of women were not entirely uniform. Several queens, administrators and noblewomen exercised political power and influence. Women also contributed significantly to literature, art, religion and social reform. In some regions, matrilineal and matrilocal traditions provided women with greater property rights and social standing.²¹

Despite these exceptions, patriarchal values remained deeply rooted in society. Widowhood was often viewed negatively and widows faced social isolation, economic hardship and loss of dignity. Within this environment, Sati gradually gained social and religious acceptance, especially among upper-caste warrior and ruling communities. The practice came to be portrayed as an act of loyalty, purity and sacrifice that preserved a woman's honour after the death of her husband.²²

Religious beliefs and social expectations further strengthened the custom. Many people came to believe that a widow who committed Sati would secure spiritual merit for herself and ensure her husband's peaceful journey into the afterlife. Over time, these ideas contributed to the glorification of Sati as a noble act, despite its tragic and oppressive nature.

2.3 Social Inequality and Women's Experiences

¹⁸*Dharmashastra's Control Over Women: Institutional Patriarchy in Classical India*, Studocu, <https://www.studocu.com/in/document/university-of-delhi/political-science/dharmashastras-control-over-women-institutional-patriarchy-in-classical-india/145693098> (last visited May 7, 2026).

¹⁹Sangeeta Roy, *Educational Status of Women in the Vedic Period: An Introduction*, 3 Int'l J. Applied Rsch. 357, 357–358 (2017).

²⁰Surendra K, *Problems and Improving Status of Women in Medieval India*, 12 Int'l J. Creative Rsch. Thoughts (2024).

²¹Chinmoy Mani, *Exploring Women's Roles, Contributions and Challenges in Medieval India from the 10th to 18th Century*, 6 Int'l J. Multidisciplinary Rsch. (2024).

²²Rekha Pande, *Sati, Re-married and Celibate: Exploring Indian Widowhood from a Historical and Gender Perspective*, 14 Urdhva Mula (2021).

The condition of women in historical India varied significantly according to caste, class and region. Women from higher castes often enjoyed relatively greater social recognition, but they were also subject to stricter codes of behaviour meant to preserve family honour.

At the same time, women from lower castes or tribal communities sometimes experienced greater mobility and economic participation, though they faced other forms of marginalisation.²³

Scholarly studies highlight that the practice of Sati itself was not universal and was more prevalent among specific communities, particularly upper-caste groups.

Historians also argue that Sati was closely linked to patriarchal control over women, property and family honour, as well as efforts to restrict widow remarriage and inheritance rights.²⁴

It is important to recognise that women's experiences were complex and cannot be reduced to a single narrative. Alongside restrictive practices, there were also instances of resistance, leadership and cultural participation, demonstrating that women were active agents within society rather than passive subjects.

Chapter 3: Debates and Dissension: Opposition to Sati and the Movement for Abolition

Opposition to Sati did not begin suddenly during the British period. Criticism of the practice had existed for centuries, with many scholars, reformers and religious thinkers questioning its morality and legitimacy. Over time, growing social awareness and reform movements created strong resistance against the custom, eventually leading to legal intervention and abolition.

3.1 Early Opposition to Sati

Evidence suggests that resistance to Sati existed even before colonial intervention. Medieval and early modern observers expressed discomfort with the practice and questioned its justification. Some critics argued that Sati was inconsistent with broader principles of compassion and non-violence within Indian religious traditions.

European travellers such as François Bernier (17th century) recorded instances of Sati and noted that not all widows willingly participated; some were coerced or influenced by social pressure.²⁵

Scholars also emphasise that Sati was never universally accepted across India, and its prevalence varied by region and community.

²³*Unpacking the Complex Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, Sociology.Inst. (Sept. 28, 2025), <https://sociology.institute/sociology-of-gender/sati-debate-colonial-india> (last visited May 6, 2026).

²⁴Prasenjit Sarkar, *The Practice of Sati and the Concept of Motherhood in Bengali Society: The Social Status of the Motherless Child*, 7 Int'l J. Multidisciplinary Rsch. (2025), <https://www.ijfmr.com/papers/2025/5/57370.pdf> (last visited May 8, 2026).

²⁵*Id.*

Despite such criticism, opposition remained limited in scope. The practice was deeply embedded in patriarchal social structures, where widows often faced intense pressure from family and society. Many widows had little autonomy, making resistance difficult.

3.2 Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Fight Against Sati

One of the strongest voices against Sati was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who is often referred to as the "Father of the Indian Renaissance." Deeply disturbed by the suffering of widows, he strongly condemned the practice and argued that it had no true sanction in Hindu scriptures.

Roy believed that social reform was necessary for the progress of Indian society. To promote these ideas, he founded the Brahma Samaj, a reformist movement that challenged regressive customs and encouraged rational thinking, women's education and social equality.

Through petitions, writings and public campaigns, Raja Ram Mohan Roy created widespread awareness about the cruelty of Sati. His efforts played a major role in influencing the British administration to take legal action against the practice.²⁶

3.3 Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Social Reform

Another important reformer who contributed to the movement against social oppression was Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. He was a strong advocate for women's rights and education and worked tirelessly to improve the condition of widows in Indian society.

Vidyasagar believed that women deserved dignity, education and equal treatment. Although he is more widely remembered for his campaign supporting widow remarriage, his reform efforts also strengthened the broader movement against practices such as Sati. His work helped generate public discussion and encouraged society to reconsider harmful traditions imposed on women.

3.4 Intellectual and Religious Reform Movements

During the nineteenth century, several intellectual and religious reform movements emerged across India. These organisations challenged orthodox practices and promoted social reform, education and equality.

3.5 Brahma Samaj

The Brahma Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, strongly opposed Sati and other discriminatory customs. The movement encouraged rational thought, criticised blind adherence to tradition and advocated women's education and social upliftment.

²⁶Roy, *supra* note 2.

3.6 Prarthana Samaj

Another important reform movement was the Prarthana Samaj, established in Bombay in 1867. The organisation promoted social and religious reforms and openly criticised practices that discriminated against women. It supported female education, social equality and reform within Hindu society.

3.7 Early Legislative Efforts Against Sati

As criticism of Sati increased, the British colonial administration began considering legal measures to suppress the practice. Colonial officials viewed Sati as a cruel custom that violated humanitarian principles.

3.8 Bengal Sati Regulation Act, 1829

One of the earliest and most significant legal steps against Sati was the Bengal Sati Regulation Act of 1829. This law was introduced by Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General of India at the time.

The Act declared the practice of Sati illegal in Bengal and treated it as a criminal offence. Anyone involved in organising, encouraging or assisting the act could face legal punishment. This marked a turning point in the history of social reform in India.²⁷

3.9 Expansion of Legal Reforms

After the Bengal Regulation Act, similar laws were gradually introduced in other regions under British rule. Over time, legal reforms expanded across India and contributed to the eventual elimination of Sati as an accepted social practice.

The abolition of Sati was not simply the result of colonial legislation. It was also the outcome of sustained efforts by Indian reformers, intellectuals and social movements that challenged deeply rooted customs and demanded justice and dignity for women.

Chapter 4: British Colonial Rule and Sati

Some early British scholars, including Sir William Jones, reflected the growing criticism of Sati among British officials and scholars during the colonial period. As a noted scholar of ancient India, Jones was one of the early British voices to openly condemn the practice.

4.1 British Intervention in the Practice of Sati

²⁷Averill Earls, *Sati: The Virtuous Woman, the Chaste Wife, and the Immolated Widow in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, DIG Podcast (Aug. 3, 2025), <https://digpodcast.org/2025/08/03/sati-the-virtuous-woman-the-chaste-wife-and-the-immolated-widow-in-colonial-and-postcolonial-india/> (last visited May 7, 2026).

The arrival of British colonial rule had a major impact on Indian society, including on social customs such as Sati. During the nineteenth century, British authorities increasingly began to interfere in practices they considered inhumane or socially harmful. Among these practices, Sati received particular attention.²⁸

British officials viewed Sati as cruel and barbaric and argued that it violated humanitarian principles and basic human rights. At the same time, their intervention was not driven only by moral concerns. Political motives also played an important role. The British often used social reforms to present themselves as a "civilising force" and to justify colonial rule in India. By portraying Indian society as backward and in need of reform, they attempted to strengthen the legitimacy of their administration.²⁹

4.2 The Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829

The most significant legal step against Sati came in 1829 when Lord William Bentinck introduced the Bengal Sati Regulation. This law officially declared Sati illegal and punishable by law within British territories in Bengal.³⁰

The regulation marked a turning point in the history of social reform in colonial India. For the first time, the colonial government directly criminalised a long-standing social and religious custom. Those who encouraged, organised or assisted in the act of Sati could face legal punishment.³¹

The abolition of Sati was strongly supported by Indian reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who had campaigned extensively against the practice. His efforts and public advocacy played an important role in influencing the British administration to enact the law.

4.3 Colonial Attitudes and Cultural Superiority

The British often believed that their culture, legal system and social values were superior to Indian traditions. This sense of cultural superiority influenced many colonial policies. Reforms relating to Sati and women's rights were introduced according to British ideas of morality and governance, often without the participation or consent of Indian society as a whole.³²

The British used these reforms to strengthen their authority and expand control over India's legal and social systems. By intervening in religious and cultural matters, they demonstrated their power to reshape Indian society according to colonial interests.

4.4 Social Divisions and Colonial Politics

²⁸*Id.*

²⁹Roy, *supra* note 2.

³⁰Earls, *supra* note 27.

³¹*Id.*

³²Roy, *supra* note 2.

The abolition of Sati also had political dimensions. Colonial authorities sometimes used social and cultural issues to create divisions within Indian society. Debates over reforms such as Sati often led to tensions between conservative and reformist groups. These divisions indirectly benefited the British administration because a divided society was easier to govern.

Laws concerning women and family life also became a means through which the British attempted to influence social structures in India. By altering traditional customs and gender roles, colonial authorities increased their involvement in everyday social life and extended their control beyond politics and administration.

4.5 Impact on Women and Society

The abolition of Sati was undoubtedly an important step towards protecting women from a violent and oppressive practice. However, the issue remains historically complex because colonial intervention was shaped by both humanitarian concerns and political interests.

The debate surrounding Sati during British rule therefore reflects two parallel realities. On one hand, Indian reformers and social movements genuinely fought for women's rights and dignity. On the other hand, colonial authorities used these reforms to reinforce their image as rulers bringing "civilisation" to India. The history of Sati under British rule is therefore closely connected with questions of gender justice, social reform and colonial power.³³

Chapter 5: Social Reform Movements and the Abolition of Sati

The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of several social reform movements in India that challenged oppressive customs and sought to bring social change. These movements questioned practices that were considered unjust, regressive and harmful to society, including Sati. Reformers believed that social progress could only be achieved by promoting rational thinking, education and human dignity.

Among the many reformers of this period, Raja Ram Mohan Roy³⁴ played the most significant role in the campaign against Sati. His efforts not only contributed to the abolition of the practice but also laid the foundation for broader social reform movements in India.

5.1 Raja Ram Mohan Roy and His Reformist Vision

³³*Id.*
³⁴Priya Soman, *Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Abolition of Sati System in India*, 1 Int'l J. Humans., Art & Soc. Stud. (IJHAS).

Raja Ram Mohan Roy³⁵ was born on 22 May 1772 in Radhanagar, Bengal. He is often regarded as the "Father of Modern India" and the "Father of the Indian Renaissance" because of his progressive ideas and contribution to social and religious reform.

Roy strongly believed in rationalism and was deeply disturbed by the social practices that oppressed women and restricted human freedom. He considered Sati to be cruel, inhuman and unsupported by the true principles of Hinduism. Through extensive study of religious scriptures, he argued that Sati was not an essential part of Hindu religion but rather a later social distortion that had gained acceptance over time.³⁶

5.2 Intellectual Campaign Against Sati

Raja Ram Mohan Roy used³⁷ his knowledge and influence to create awareness about the harmful effects of Sati. He wrote essays, pamphlets and books in both Bengali and English to educate people and challenge orthodox beliefs. Through his writings, he presented logical and scriptural arguments against the practice.

One of his important works was *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin* ("A Gift to Monotheists"), in which he criticised social evils such as Sati and advocated rational and ethical thinking. His writings encouraged educated Indians to question blind customs and think critically about social reform.³⁸

5.3 Role of the Brahmo Samaj

In 1828, Raja Ram Mohan Roy³⁹ founded the Brahmo Samaj, originally known as the Brahmo Sabha. The organisation promoted monotheism, rational thought and social reform. It strongly opposed practices such as Sati, caste discrimination and other forms of social inequality.

The Brahmo Samaj encouraged a modern interpretation of religion and emphasised the importance of education and moral values. It became one of the leading reform movements of nineteenth-century India and inspired many later reformers.

5.4 Influence on Colonial Legislation

Raja Ram Mohan Roy also understood the influence of British colonial administration and attempted to use it as a means to achieve social reform. He communicated with British officials and presented arguments explaining why Sati should be abolished. His advocacy helped convince the colonial government that legal intervention was necessary.

³⁵Ram Mohan Roy, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ram-Mohan-Roy> (last visited Aug. 6, 2024).

³⁶Earls, *supra* note 27.

³⁷Mani, *supra* note 7.

³⁸Earls, *supra* note 27.

³⁹Biswas, *supra* note 17.

The growing public opposition created by reformers eventually contributed to the enactment of the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829 by Lord William Bentinck. This law declared Sati illegal and made participation in the practice punishable by law.

5.5 Lasting Legacy of the Reform Movements

The contribution of Raja Ram Mohan Roy went far beyond the legal abolition of Sati. He worked to transform social attitudes and promote respect for women's rights, dignity and education. His efforts inspired future reformers to address other social problems such as child marriage, caste discrimination and the lack of educational opportunities for women.

The social reform movements of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of a broader intellectual and cultural awakening in India. They encouraged people to question oppressive traditions and promoted ideas of equality, justice and social progress.⁴⁰

The legacy of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the reform movements he inspired continues to hold importance in discussions about social justice, women's rights and progressive thought in modern India.

Chapter 6: Efforts Taken to Curb Sati

Efforts to prevent the practice of Sati did not begin only during British rule.⁴¹ Long before colonial intervention, several rulers, religious leaders, scholars and social thinkers in medieval India had already expressed concern about the practice and attempted to restrict or discourage it. However, because Sati had become deeply rooted in social customs and religious beliefs, these efforts often achieved only limited success.

6.1 Opposition by Kings and Rulers

Many medieval rulers tried to control or prohibit Sati within their kingdoms. Historical records show that some kings considered the practice inhumane and attempted to protect widows from being forced into self-immolation.

For instance, Prithviraj Chauhan is believed to have issued orders against the practice in the twelfth century within his territory. Similarly, Maharaja Ranjit Singh prohibited Sati among Sikhs during the nineteenth century.

⁴⁰*Id.*

⁴¹*When Was Sati Banned? The History of Its Abolition*, LegalClarity (Aug. 5, 2025), <https://legalclarity.org/when-was-sati-banned-the-history-of-its-abolition> (last visited May 5, 2026).

Although these measures reflected growing concern over the practice, enforcement remained difficult because many communities continued to regard Sati as a sacred or honourable act.

6.2 Role of Religious Leaders and Saints

Several religious leaders and spiritual reformers also criticised Sati. Saints associated with the Bhakti movement questioned practices that promoted social inequality and blind ritualism.

Guru Nanak⁴² openly condemned Sati and argued that true devotion and spirituality had nothing to do with self-destruction. Similarly, Kabir criticised social customs that oppressed women and challenged rigid religious traditions.

These voices played an important role in shaping early social criticism against Sati and encouraged people to rethink accepted customs.

6.3 Contribution of Scholars and Intellectuals

Poets, philosophers and intellectuals of medieval India also contributed to the opposition against Sati. Through literary works, religious interpretations and philosophical discussions, they questioned the legitimacy of the practice and argued that it lacked genuine spiritual justification.

Education also became an important factor in challenging social customs. As awareness about women's dignity and rights slowly increased, educated sections of society became more willing to oppose practices such as Sati and advocate reform.⁴³

6.4 Support for Widows and Widow Remarriage

In some communities, efforts were made to improve the condition of widows and reduce the social pressures that often pushed them towards Sati. Certain social groups and reform-minded individuals tried to provide widows with support and protection.

Encouraging widow remarriage became another important way to weaken the practice. Reformers argued that widows should have the opportunity to rebuild their lives instead of being forced into isolation or sacrifice after the death of their husbands.

6.5 Sati During the Mughal Period

⁴²*Sati*, SikhiWiki: The Free Sikh Encyclopedia, <https://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Sati> (last visited May 5, 2026).

⁴³*Id.*

Sati continued to exist during the Mughal period⁴⁴ and was practised in several regions of India, including the Ganges Valley, Punjab, Rajputana and parts of South India. Historical texts such as the *Akbarnama* mention the prevalence of the custom.

Among Muslim rulers,⁴⁵ Muhammad bin Tughluq was one of the earliest to express opposition to Sati. He introduced regulations requiring official permission before a widow could perform Sati, with the aim of discouraging the practice and preventing forced immolation.

Later Mughal emperors also attempted reforms. Humayun and Akbar tried to prevent women from being compelled into Sati. Akbar, in particular, opposed forced Sati and occasionally intervened to stop it. However, he did not completely prohibit the practice if a widow voluntarily insisted on performing it.

Jahangir later issued orders against both infanticide and Sati, though historians argue that these laws were not always strictly enforced. Shah Jahan introduced further restrictions by forbidding pregnant women from performing Sati and allowing widows' children to receive education.

Finally, Aurangzeb declared Sati illegal during his reign. Despite this, isolated incidents continued because social acceptance of the practice remained strong in many communities.⁴⁶

6.6 Limited Success of Medieval Efforts

Although many attempts were made during medieval India to oppose or restrict Sati, their overall impact remained limited. Deeply rooted social traditions, religious beliefs and patriarchal attitudes made it difficult to eliminate the practice completely.

More organised and widespread opposition emerged during the nineteenth century when Indian social reformers and British colonial authorities together launched sustained efforts to abolish Sati through public campaigns and legal reforms.

Chapter 7: Acts and Laws Made to Curb Sati

To combat the use of Sati in modern India, particularly during British colonial authority, a variety of social, legal, and administrative methods were used. Both Indian reformers and British officials recognized the need to end this terrible practice, and they spearheaded these efforts. In 1828, Lord William Bentinck was appointed Governor-General of India. He assisted Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the abolition of numerous widespread social

⁴⁴Md Sarif, *The Practice of "Sati" in Medieval India: An Enquiry Through the Accounts of Foreign Visitors*, 4 Int'l J. Advance Rsch. Multidisciplinary 207 (2026).

⁴⁵Susil Chaudhuri, *Sati as Social Institution and the Mughals*, 37 Proc. Indian Hist. Cong. 218 (1976).

⁴⁶Sarif, *supra* note 44.

evils like Sati, polygamy, child marriage, and female infanticide. Lord Bentinck enacted legislation prohibiting the use of Sati throughout the Company's dominion in British India.⁴⁷

There were and are many Laws and Acts made to prevent Sati in British India and independent India. Listed below are some key examples:

- **Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829⁴⁸** : This was one of the first legal measures aimed at reducing the practice of Sati. It was adopted by the British colonial authorities in the Bengal Presidency (now part of India and Bangladesh). The regulation made Sati illegal and punishable by law.
- **The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987⁴⁹** : This Act was passed by the Indian Parliament in 1987 and applies to all of India. The statute criminalises abetment of Sati, which includes coercing, compelling, or intentionally assisting the act. It also calls for the punishment of individuals who celebrate or encourage Sati in any way.
- **The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Rules, 1988⁵⁰** : These rules were drafted under the Sati (Prevention) Act to offer guidelines for the prevention of Sati and the implementation of the statute.
- **The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013⁵¹** : While not solely concerned with Sati, this Act made various modifications to the Indian Penal Code to reinforce rules against sexual offences and crimes against women. It also broadened the concept of "abetment" to include assisting or helping the commission of Sati.
- **Constitutional Provisions⁵²** : Several provisions in the Indian Constitution, such as Article 15(3), which permits the state to make specific arrangements for women and children, and Article 21, which ensures the right to life and personal liberty, also help in the prevention of Sati. Courts have interpreted these provisions to enforce the ban on Sati and promote gender equality.

Chapter 8: The Last Known Case of Sati: The Roop Kanwar Incident

⁴⁷Roy, *supra* note 19.

⁴⁸Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829, Regulation XVII, *available at* http://bdcode.gov.bd/upload/bdcodeact/2019-07-04-11-11-26-6_The_Bengal_Sati_Regulation_1829.pdf.

⁴⁹The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, No. 3, Acts of Parliament, 1988 (India), *available at* <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/1814/1/aA1988-03.pdf>.

⁵⁰The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Rules, 1988, *available at* https://upload.indiacode.nic.in/showfile?actid=AC_CEN_9_17_00003_198803_1517807326065&type=rule&filename=Sati%20Rules.pdf.

⁵¹The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, No. 13, Acts of Parliament, 2013 (India), *available at* https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/15357/1/criminal_law_ammend_act_2013.pdf.

⁵²India Const., *available at* <https://www.legislative.gov.in/documents/constitution-of-india>.

The case of Roop Kanwar⁵³ is widely regarded as the last known case of Sati in India and remains one of the most controversial incidents in modern Indian history. Although incidents resembling Sati had been reported earlier, the Roop Kanwar case attracted nationwide attention because of the intense public reaction, political controversy and involvement of women's rights groups. The incident transformed the debate on Sati into a larger conflict between religious orthodoxy and the assertion of women's rights.

8.1 The Incident at Deorala

On 4 September 1987, eighteen-year-old Roop Kanwar allegedly immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her husband in the village of Deorala in Rajasthan. She had been married for only eight months before her husband's death.

Eyewitnesses and supporters of the act described it as voluntary. However, many activists, scholars and human rights organisations questioned this claim and argued that social pressure and patriarchal expectations may have influenced the incident. The event immediately sparked outrage across the country and led to widespread protests by women's organisations and civil rights groups.

Reports surrounding the incident added to the controversy. Roop Kanwar was reportedly dressed in bridal attire and adorned with jewellery before the immolation. Photographs taken shortly before her death circulated widely and became symbolic of the larger debate surrounding widowhood, tradition and women's autonomy in Indian society.

While her in-laws and several villagers publicly supported the act as an expression of devotion and honour, her parents reportedly learned about both her husband's death and the planned Sati through newspaper reports. This deepened suspicions regarding the circumstances under which the incident occurred.⁵⁴

8.2 Public Reaction and Women's Movements

The Roop Kanwar incident triggered one of the strongest women's rights movements in post-independence India. Activists strongly condemned the glorification of Sati and argued that the practice reflected deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes towards widows and women.

The case highlighted the vulnerable position of widows in certain sections of society, especially among orthodox upper-caste communities where widowhood was often associated with social isolation, stigma and loss of dignity. Women's groups argued that practices such as Sati could not be separated from the larger issue of gender inequality and systemic oppression.

⁵³Gayatri Misra, *Roop Kanwar: Last Known Case of Sati in India & Its Relevance Today*, *Feminism in India* (Aug. 7, 2020), <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/08/07/roop-kanwar-last-known-case-sati-india-relevance-today/> (last visited Aug. 6, 2023).

⁵⁴Seema Parihar, *Status of Women in Medieval India: Roots of Cruelty and Key to Excellence*, *Vidyabharati Int'l Interdisciplinary Rsch. J.* (Special Issue) (2021).

At the same time, some conservative groups defended the incident as a matter of religious faith and cultural tradition. As a result, the case became a highly emotional and politically charged issue across India.

8.3 The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987

In response to the nationwide outrage, the Indian government introduced the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Bill on 1 October 1987. The legislation made not only the practice of Sati illegal but also criminalised the abetment, support and glorification of the act.

The law was passed by both Houses of Parliament and received Presidential assent on 3 January 1988. It came into force on 21 March 1988 as the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987.

Under the Act, anyone encouraging, participating in or glorifying Sati could face severe punishment. The legislation also empowered authorities to prevent ceremonies, gatherings or structures that promoted the practice.⁵⁵

8.4 Legal Proceedings and Continuing Controversy

Several individuals were charged in connection with the Roop Kanwar case for abetment and glorification of Sati. However, the legal proceedings stretched on for years. Many accused persons were eventually acquitted due to lack of evidence, while some died during the trial or absconded.

Despite the legal ban and public condemnation, the site of the incident continued to attract supporters. A makeshift shrine was created in Roop Kanwar's memory and ceremonies honouring her were reportedly organised even after court restrictions had been imposed. One such event was the "chunri ceremony" held shortly after the incident, where large gatherings celebrated her act despite legal objections.

8.5 Significance of the Case

The Roop Kanwar case exposed the continuing tension between social reform and traditional beliefs in Indian society. It demonstrated that even after decades of legal reforms, awareness campaigns and social movements, certain sections of society still continued to romanticise or defend the practice of Sati.

The incident also revealed the challenges faced by reformers and women's rights activists who worked against deeply rooted patriarchal customs. Many reformers encountered social isolation, threats and resistance for opposing such practices.

⁵⁵Kritika Sangtani & Shagun Tuteja, *Women in Vedic India: A Narrative Review of Their Roles in Education, Philosophy, and Religion*, 12 Int'l J. Rsch. & Analytical Revs. 718 (2025).

Today, the Roop Kanwar case remains an important reminder of the need to protect women's dignity, autonomy and rights. It continues to be discussed in debates concerning gender justice, cultural traditions and the role of law in social reform.

Conclusion

The practice of Sati reflected the patriarchal structure of ancient and medieval Indian society, where widows often faced social pressure, discrimination and loss of dignity after the death of their husbands. Although the custom was sometimes justified in the name of religion, honour and devotion, it was closely connected to gender inequality and the limited status of women. At the same time, Sati was never universally practised across India and its acceptance differed across regions and communities.

The abolition of Sati was the result of continuous efforts by reformers, scholars and social movements along with legal intervention during the colonial period. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy played an important role in challenging orthodox beliefs and advocating women's rights and dignity. Even after its abolition, incidents such as the Roop Kanwar Incident showed that harmful social attitudes still persisted in some sections of society, making the history of Sati an important reminder of the need to protect women's equality, autonomy and human dignity.