

“WEST MEETS EAST: SATI AND UNIVERSAL MORALITY”

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In 1889 under the pseudonym “Yussef,”¹ Rudyard Kipling, eventual English literary demigod and prince of British Empire, made his début. Those original classic lines from Kipling still provoke debate and misunderstanding,²

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, tho’ they come from the ends of the earth!*³

Though various literary and historical scholars either much love or much hate Kipling, his rhetorical skill is undeniable. Born in Bombay, educated in Britain, and employed as a writer in Lahore, India, at age sixteen, Kipling knew well the interaction and conflicts between west and east, which he depicted in his eminently popular stories such as *The Jungle Book* and *Kim*. Salman Rushdie said of him, “There will always be plenty in Kipling that I find difficult to forgive; but there is also enough truth in these stories to make them impossible to ignore.”⁴ For

¹J. K. Buda, “Rudyard Kipling’s ‘The Ballad of East and West.’” *Otsuna Women’s University Faculty of Literature Annual Report*, XVIII, (1986); online, <<http://www.f.waseda.jp/buda/texts/ballad.html>> accessed October 16, 2007.

²For a misinterpretation of Kipling that reflects a selective reading of these lines, see Fred Dallmayr, “Western Thought and Indian Thought: Comments on Ramanujan,” *Philosophy East and West* 44/3 (July 1994):527, ¶ 1; Harry M. Buck, Jr., “Teaching the History of Religions,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* XXV/4 (October 1957): 279.

³Rudyard Kipling, “The Ballad of East and West,” in *Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, new ed. (New York: The Macmillan Co.; London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1898), p. 3. This ballad originally appeared in *Macmillan’s Magazine* (London, December 1889) as Kipling’s debut.

⁴Salman Rushdie, “Kipling,” in *Imaginary Homeland: Essays and New Criticism, 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 80. The stories to which Rushdie refers surely would include *Kim* (1901).

this lecture, Kipling provides an open window into a cultural collision of west and east as that meeting relates to the Indian practice of *suttee*.⁵

*A Short History of Sati*⁶

The Sanskrit word *sati* derives from the root word *sat*, which means “truth, reality . . . and essential inner virtue or purity.”⁷ *Sati*, the feminine form of *sat*, literally means “faithful or virtuous wife.”⁸ The variant spelling, *suttee*,⁹ usually refers to the Indian custom¹⁰ of a widow burning on her husband’s funeral pyre to show her virtue, “to join him in death,”¹¹ to follow him into the afterlife,¹² or to atone for her sins, her husband’s sins, her parents sins, and her husband’s parents’ sins, and, in addition, the *sati* would receive a reward of 35,000,000 years in heaven because the human body has that many hairs on it.¹³ The first English occurrence of

⁵Along with “The Ballad of East and West,” Kipling also penned the ballad “The Last Suttee.” See *Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, pp. 12-17.

⁷John S. Hawley, ed., *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 191.

⁸“[S]uttee,” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd ed. 1989, online, internet, <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>> accessed October 9, 2007.

⁹Various spellings of this term occur in the literature, the two most common being *sati* and *suttee*. Usually, *sati* refers to the woman who becomes *sati* or who performs the act, while *suttee* refers to the “ceremony of immolation.” See Monika Fludernik, “Suttee Revisited: From the Iconography of Martyrdom to the Burkean Sublime,” *New Literary History* 30/2 (1999):413.

¹⁰Various cultures have practiced some form of *suttee*. See Jörg Fisch, “Dying for the Dead: *Sati* in Universal Context,” *Journal of World History*, 16/3 (2005):293-325. Included in this wide-ranging discussion are the Shoshone Indians and the Natchez Indians of the south Mississippi Valley.

¹¹Hawley, ed., *Sati*, p. 191.

¹²Jörg Fisch, “Dying for the Dead: *Sati* in Universal Context,” *Journal of World History*, 16.3 (2005):293-325.

¹³[N.A.], “Art. V.—On the criminality of burning Widows alive, with a brief View of what has been already published on this subject,” *The Friend of India*, Quarterly Series, No. VI. Published in September 1822 (Serampore: Printed at the Mission Press, 1822), p. 258.

either spelling of the word—*sati* or *suttee*—occurred in 1787,¹⁴ but the term used for a widow *dying with her husband* in this manner was *sahamarana*.

This obligation to burn was enjoined upon every female except mothers of infant children, pregnant women, young girls, and women who are actually unclean after childbirth or from other cause. This exception was admitted in consideration of other lives being at stake, or the extreme youth of the person who is to suffer, for, among the commentators, Raghunandana in particular observes:—That, if the infant can be nurtured by any other person, then the mother is entitled to follow her deceased husband. It was further held, that all the wives of a man are entitled to die with or after him; and the cremation of the husband may be postponed by one day . . . to allow the absent wife to come and die with her husband.¹⁵

[B]y such an act, she would be exalted to heaven: this will secure her residence in another world in a region of joy for thirty-five millions of years, and shall expiate the sins of her husband's family, which have accrued during three generations. She will also have the great merit of removing her husband from a region of torment: and expiate all his sins, although they may be of the most heinous description. If the widow declined to burn herself, she is subject to be born again in this world in the body of some female animal, and this penalty will attach to her in all successive transmigrations.¹⁶

In some cases, *sati* could refer to a widow choosing dying in some other manner soon after the husband's death, and in early nineteenth century India, the drowning of wives or burying alive of wives appears in various *sati* contexts.¹⁷

¹⁴Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, "Suttee," in *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical, and Discursive*, new ed., ed. William Crooke (London: John Murray, 1903), pp. 878-82. According to Yule and Burnell, two persons used the term in 1787: Sir Charles Ware Malet and Sir William Jones.

In "Extract of a Letter from Sir Charles Ware Malet, Resident at Poona' dated the 18th June 1787," in *Papers Relating to East India Affairs; viz. Hindoo Widows, and Voluntary Immolations*, Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed, 10 July 1821, p. 6, Malet said, "I take the liberty to enclose Mr. Cruso's account of a Brahmin *suttee* [italics mine]." The Cruso account relates an immolation on July 24, 1786.

¹⁵Mitra Trailokyanath, *The Law Relating to the Hindu Widow*, Tagore Law Lectures—1879 (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, and Co.; Bombay: Thacker & Co., Ltd.; Madras: Higginbotham & Co., London: W. Thacker and Co., 1881), p. 92.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷William Staughton, *The Baptist Mission in India: Containing a Narrative of Its Rise, Progress, and Present Condition, A Statement of the Physical and Moral Character of the Hindoos, Their Cruelties, Tortures and Burnings, With a Very Interesting Description of Bengal* (Philadelphia: Hellings and Aitken, 1811), pp. 150-51;

The earliest recorded western account of eastern *sati* appears in Diodorus of Sicily, a Greek author of the first century BCE.¹⁸ Diodorus wrote about the Greeks encountering an Indian *sati* in the late fourth century BCE after the death of an Indian military leader in the army of Alexander the Great. Diodorus described a suttee in Punjab, northwest India, and from a western perspective, he introduced the narrative with a key phrase, “Then, an event occurred contrary to opinion and very different from the customs among the Greeks.”¹⁹ The Greek word, παράδοξον, translated here as “contrary to opinion” conveys that which is a paradox or contradiction; in moral terms, such an act would be detestable and its customary practice viewed as immoral or unlawful by outsiders.

Connections between widow burning and the Hindu goddess Sati may occur. The goddess Sati was the daughter of Daksha and the wife of Shiva. Sati died by “retreating into an irreversible yogic coma as a [her] protest against an insult” from her father to her husband Shiva.²⁰ These religious overtones of the practice of suttee have colored and influenced the debate between west and east since the eighteenth century. Despite the view that many westerners saw suttee as a Hindu religious ceremony of devotion, some Brahmin scholars in Calcutta during the early nineteenth century disputed that assertion. One particular Hindu scholar, Mrityoonjuy, argued that the Hindu shastras (i.e., scriptures) clearly affirmed that

William Ward, “To Miss HOPE—On the state of female society in India,” in *Farewell Letters to a Few Friends in Britain and America, on Returning to Bengal in 1821* (Lexington, Kentucky: Thomas T. Skillman, 1822), p. 67.

¹⁸ Diodorus of Sicily *The Library of History* 19.32.3 – 19.34.6.

¹⁹ ἔνθα δὴ συνέβη γενέσθαι πράγμα παράδοξον καὶ πολὺ τῶν παρ’ Ἑλλήσι νομίμων ἐξηλλαγμένον, Diodorus of Sicily *The Library of History* 19.32.3.

²⁰ Fisch, “Dying for the Dead: *Sati* in Universal Context,” pp. 293-325.

“binding the widow to the corpse , and all the other acts now practiced to secure her death, are absolutely forbidden.”²¹

The earliest Sanskrit reference to the practice of suttee appears in the *Mahabharata*, compiled around 400 CE, and stone memorials to the widows who burned are evident throughout India. The earliest stones date to the early sixth century CE. During the Muslim period in India of the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, the warlike tribe in north India, the Rajputs, practiced suttee to protect their women from rape, which they considered as being worse than death. In Bengal beginning in the twelfth century, the Brahmins’ system of law said widows would receive the husband’s inheritance, and this may have been a factor contributing to the practice of suttee. During the Mughal era of the sixteenth century when Muslims controlled Bengal, the emperor Akbar took measures to try and prohibit suttee. Later, when the British came to dominate Bengal through the East India Company, the Company tolerated suttee as a native custom.

There are many examples of suttee in the European travel narratives and missionary essays from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²² William Carey, a missionary leader in India from 1793-1834, wrote the following narrative about suttee.

. . . As I was returning from Calcutta, I saw the *Sahamoron*, or a woman burning herself with the corpse of her husband, for the first time in my life. We were near the village of Noya Serai; (Rennell, in his Chart of the Hoogly river, spells it Niaserai.) As it was evening, we got out of the boat to walk, when we saw a number of people assembled on the river side. I asked them, for what they were met? and they told me, to burn the body of a dead man. I enquired, whether his wife would die with him? they answered, yes; and pointed to the woman. She was standing by the pile, which was made of large billets of wood; about two and a-half feet high, four feet long, and two wide; on the top of which

²¹“Art. V.—On the criminality of burning Widows alive, with a brief View of what has been already published on this subject,” *The Friend of India*, p. 260.

²²See *A New Universal Collection of Authentic and Entertaining Voyages and Travels* (London: J. Cooke, 1768).

lay the dead body of her husband. Her nearest relation stood by her, and near her was a small basket of sweet-meats called kivy. I asked them, if this were the woman's choice, or whether she were brought to it by any improper influence? They answered that it was perfectly voluntary. I talked till reasoning was of no use, and then began to exclaim with all my might against what they were doing, *telling them that it was a shocking murder* [italics mine]. They told me it was a great act of holiness, and added in a very surly manner, that if I did not like to see it, I might go further off, and desired me to go. I told them that I would not go; that *I was determined to stay and see the murder* [italics mine], and that I should certainly bear witness of it at the tribunal of God. I exhorted the woman not to throw away her life, to fear nothing, for no evil would follow her refusal to burn. But she in the calmest manner mounted the pile, and danced on it, with her hands extended, as if in the utmost tranquility of spirit. Previous to her mounting the pile, the relation whose office it was to set fire to it, led her six times round it, at two intervals; that is, thrice at each circumambulation. As she went round, she scattered the sweet-meats above mentioned among the people, who picked them up, and ate them as very holy things. This being ended, and she having mounted the pile and danced as above mentioned, (which appeared only designed to shew us her contempt of death, and to prove to us that her dying was voluntary) she then lay down by the corpse, and put one arm under its neck, and the other over it; when a quantity of dry cocoa leaves and other substances, were heaped over them to a considerable height; and then ghee, or melted, preserved butter, poured on the top. Two bamboos were then put over them, and held fast down, and fire put to the pile, which immediately blazed very fiercely, owing to the dry and combustible materials of which it was composed. No sooner was the fire kindled, than all the people set up a great shout, "Hurree Bol, Hurree Bol!" which is a common shout of joy, and an invocation of Hurree, the wife of Hur or Seeb. It was impossible to have heard the woman, had she groaned, or even cried aloud, on account of the mad noise of the people, and it was impossible for her to stir or struggle, on account of the bamboos which were held down on them like the levers of a press. We made much objection to their using these bamboos, and insisted that it was using force to prevent the woman getting up when the fire burnt her. But they declared that it was only done to keep the pile from falling down. We could not bear to see more, but left them, exclaiming loudly against the *murder* [italics mine], and full of horror at what we had seen." . . .²³

. . . In the evening I went to a village, called Chattera, accompanied with brother Ward. I preached to an assembly in the street; but just as I was concluding, all the people ran away. On enquiring the cause, I was informed that a man had died, and his widow, a *fine young woman of the age of fourteen* [italics mine], was going to be burnt with him. I entreated her to desist, and remonstrated with the brammhans from their own shasters, but in vain. We left the place with horror, and she suffered soon afterwards. . . .²⁴

²³William Carey, "Letter to Dr. Ryland, April 1, 1799, in *Periodical Accounts Relative to the Baptist Missionary Society*, vol. II (Clipstone: Printed by J. W. Morris, Sold by Button, London; and May be Had of the Baptist Ministers in Most of the Principal Towns in the Kingdom, 1801), pp. 26-27. A transcript of this letter appears in the Baptist Missionary Society Microfilm Collection, 1792-1914, reel 36, Center for Study of the Life and Work of William Carey, D.D. (1761-1834), William Carey University, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA.

²⁴William Carey, "Letter to Dr. Ryland, August 30, 1800, in *Periodical Accounts Relative to the Baptist Missionary Society*, vol. II (Clipstone: Printed by J. W. Morris, Sold by Button, London; and May be Had of the

In 1815, William Ward, a Christian missionary at Serampore, recorded his description of suttee as follows:

When the husband is directed by the physician to be carried to the river side, there being no hopes of his recovery, the wife declares her resolution to be burnt with him. In this case, she is treated with great respect by her neighbours, who bring her delicate food, &c. and when the husband is dead, she again declares her resolution to be burnt with his body. Having broken a small branch from the mango tree, she takes it with her, and proceeds to the body, where she sits down. The barber then paints her feet red; after which she bathes, and puts on new clothes. During these preparations, the drum beats a sound, by which it is known, that a widow is about to be burnt with the corpse of her husband. On hearing this all the village assembles. The son, or if there be no son, a relation, or the head man of the village, provides the articles necessary for the ceremony. A hole is first dug in the ground, round which stakes are driven into the earth, and thick green stakes laid across to form a kind of bed; and upon these are laid, in abundance, dry faggots, hemp, clarified butter, pitch, &c. The officiating brahmin now causes the widow to repeat the formulas, in which she prays, that ‘as long as fourteen Indrus reign, or as many years as there are hairs on her head, she may abide in heaven with her husband; that the heavenly dancers during this time may wait on her and her husband, and that by this act of merit all the ancestors of her father, mother, and husband, may ascend heaven.’ She now presents her ornaments to her friends, ties some red cotton on both wrists, puts two new combs in her hair, paints her forehead, and takes into the end of the cloth that she wears some parched rice and kourees. While this is going forward, the dead body is anointed with clarified butter and bathed, prayers are repeated over it, and it is dressed in new clothes. The son next takes a handful of boiled rice, prepared for the purpose, and, repeating an incantation, offers it in the name of the deceased father. Ropes and another piece of cloth are spread upon the wood, and the dead body is laid upon the pile. The widow then walks around the pile seven times, strewing parched rice and kourees as she goes, which some of the spectators endeavour to catch, under the idea they will cure diseases. The widow now ascends the fatal pile, or rather throws herself down upon it by the side of the dead body. A few female ornaments having been laid over her; the ropes are drawn over the bodies which are tied together, and faggots placed upon them. The son, then, averting his head, puts fire to the face of his father, and at the same moment several persons light the pile at different sides, when women, relations, &c. set up a cry: more faggots are now thrown upon the pile with haste, and two bamboo levers are brought over the whole, to hold down the bodies and the pile. Several persons are employed in holding down these levers, and others in throwing water upon them, that they may not be scorched. While the fire is burning, more clarified butter, pitch, and faggots, are thrown into it, till the bodies are consumed. It may take about two hours

Baptist Ministers in Most of the Principal Towns in the Kingdom, 1801), p. 78. A transcript of this letter appears in the Baptist Missionary Society Microfilm Collection, 1792-1914, reel 36, Center for Study of the Life and Work of William Carey, D.D. (1761-1834), William Carey University, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA.

before the whole is burnt, but I conceive the woman must be dead in a few minutes after the fire has been kindled.²⁵

In the early nineteenth century, various East India Company officials, Christian missionaries, and liberal Indian reformers, such as Rammohun Roy,²⁶ pressed the Company, the British Governors, and the British Parliament to abolish the practice.

In 1805, a reference was made by Lord Wellesley to the Nizamat Adaulat [colonial criminal court] to ascertain, whether, in the opinion of the judges, the practice might not be authoritatively suppressed; and their reply stated, that they considered the immediate abolition highly inexpedient, although they thought it might be gradually effected, and at no distant period; suggesting at the same time the enactment of provisions for preventing the illegal, unwarrantable and criminal abuses, which were known to occur in the performance of the rite. These suggestions do not appear to have been adopted; and it was not until the beginning of 1813 that any interposition of authority was sanctioned.²⁷

Roy's arguments against suttee referred to it as "abhorrent to all the feelings of nature."²⁸ And, Wellesley was a bit self-congratulatory as he said, "the preamble of this reference to the judges declared it to be one of the fundamental principles of the British Government to consult the religious opinions of the natives, '*consistently with the principles of morality, reason, and humanity.*'"²⁹ In theory, the British thought this procedure would reduce the number of suttees,

²⁵William Ward, *A View of the History, Literature, and Religion of the Hindoos: Including a Minute Description of their Manners and Customs, and Translations from Their Principal Works*, The Second Edition, Carefully Abridged, and Greatly Improved, Volume II (Serampore: Printed at the Mission Press, 1815), pp. 300-301.

²⁶Ram Mohun Roy, "Address to Governor William Bentinck," and "Anti-Suttee Petition," in *The English Works of Raja Ram Mohun Roy*, ed. Jogendra Chundra Ghose, compiled and published by Eshan Chunder Bose, vol. I (Calcutta: Bhowanipore, Oriental Press, 1885), pp. 483-86, 487-88. Roy (p. 488) said, "your petitioners cannot permit themselves to suppose that such a practice, abhorrent to all the feelings of nature, the obligations of society, and the principles of good government, will receive the sanction of your Honourable House, much less that, having been abolished, the British name and character will be dishonoured by its re-establishment."

²⁷James Mill and Horace Hayman Wilson, *The History of British India, From 1805-1835*, vol. III (London: James Madden, 1858), p. 266.

²⁸Roy, "Anti-Suttee Petition," p. 488.

²⁹George Smith, *The Life of William Carey, Shoemaker and Missionary* (London: John Murray, 1885), p. 285.

but some historians argue, however, that this practice only increased the number.³⁰ The figures for the total number of suttees in the Bengal Presidency, 1815-1823, stood at 5425³¹ with 3379 (62.28%) of those in the Calcutta division. By 1829, the numbers had risen to 8134 with 5224 (63%) in the Calcutta region.³² One problem with these numbers is that the British excluded non-Bengal suttees. For example, suttees in Rajasthan, a northern district in India, later received widely publicized attention.³³ After a public campaign of speeches and countless essays and books on the topic by Christian missionaries, liberal Indian social reformers, and western travelers to India, the British Governor General William Bentinck outlawed suttee on December 4, 1829, which William Carey translated for the Bengali people.³⁴ The reasons given for the outlawing include the following legal rhetoric:

³⁰Mill and Wilson, *The History of British India*, pp. 185-186. Cf. Smith, *The Life of Williams Carey*, p. 285.

³¹*Hindoo Widows Immolated, Abstract Number of Hindoo Widows, Immolated on the Piles of their Husbands, 1815-1823*, Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed, 1 July 1825, p. 4. Various sources cause different numbers to appear; for example, Benoy Bhusan Roy, *Socioeconomic Impact of Sati in Bengal and the Role of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1987), pp. 146-47, reports a number of 5388 with 1769 (32.83%) of those in the two districts of Hooghly and Calcutta. Roy took his numbers from the Parliamentary Papers of the British House of Commons and the India Office of the British Library.

William Ward, early nineteenth century British Baptist missionary at Serampore, also gave estimates of *suttee*. In his *Account of the Writings, Religion, and Manners of the Hindoos: Including Translations from their Principal Works in Four Volumes*, vol. II (Serampore: Printed at the Mission Press, 1811), pp. 563-64, Ward recorded that 438 widows were burnt in the area surrounding Calcutta in 1803, and for 1804, Ward said the number was “between TWO AND THREE HUNDRED” (pp. 563-64).

Four years later in *A View of the History, Literature, and Religion of the Hindoos: Including a Minute Description of their Manners and Customs, and Translations from Their Principal Works*, The Second Edition, *Carefully Abridged, and Greatly Improved*, vol. II (Serampore: Printed at the Mission Press, 1815), p. 322, Ward estimated that 5,000 widows were burnt annually in Hindostan.

³²Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on SATI in Colonial India,” *Cultural Critique*, 7 (Autumn, 1987):119.

³³The state of Rajasthan in northwest India was the location for various occurrences of suttee after the British abolished it in Bengal, 1829. The incident of Roop Kanwar’s death in 1987 also occurred in Rajasthan.

³⁴According to the James Culross, *William Carey* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1881), p. 117, Carey said, “No church for me to-day. If I delay an hour to translate and publish this, many a widow's life may be sacrificed.”

The practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, *is revolting to the feelings of human nature; it is nowhere enjoined by the religion of the Hindus as an imperative duty; on the contrary a life of purity and retirement on the part of the widow is more especially and preferably inculcated, and by a vast majority of that people throughout India the practice is not kept up, nor observed: in some extensive districts it does not exist: in those in which it has been most frequent it is notorious that in many instances acts of atrocity have been perpetrated which have been shocking to the Hindus themselves, and in their eyes unlawful and wicked* [italics mine]. The measures hitherto adopted to discourage and prevent such acts have failed of success, and the governor-general in council is deeply impressed with the conviction that the abuses in question cannot be effectually put an end to without abolishing the practice altogether. Actuated by these considerations the governor general in council, without intending to depart from one of the first and most important principles of the system of British government in India, that all classes of the people be secure in the observance of their religious usages, so long as that system can be adhered to without violation of the paramount dictates of justice and humanity, has deemed it right to establish the following rules, which are hereby enacted to be in force from the time of their promulgation throughout the territories immediately subject to the presidency of Fort William.

II. The practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is hereby declared illegal, and punishable by the criminal courts.³⁵

On this law, an Indian legal scholar remarked that

This Statute, therefore, rendered the practice of Practice rendered *sati*, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, illegal and punishable by the criminal courts, and every person aiding and abetting the same was declared liable to punishment. It was further ordained that all . . . proprietors of land are responsible for the immediate communication to the officers of the nearest police stations of any intended case of *sati*, and in case of neglect they were declared liable to a fine.³⁶

After the outlawing of suttee in Bengal in 1829, other states within India followed suit during the nineteenth century, but isolated examples of the act continued. Rajasthan state in northwest India had ongoing cases of suttee, which lead up to the highly controversial suttee of Roop Kamwar in Deorala, Rajasthan, on September 4, 1987. Roop Kanwar was eighteen years old when she burned along with her husband's corpse on the funeral pyre. Her husband Mal Singh Shekhawat was a professional driver killed in an automobile accident. According to

³⁵Lord William Bentinck, *Sati Regulation XVII, A. D. 1829 of the Bengal Code*: 4 December 1829.

³⁶Trailokyanath Mitra, *The Law Relating to the Hindu Widow*, Tagore Law Lectures—1879 (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, and Co.; Bombay: Thacker & Co., Ltd.; Madras: Higginbotham & Co., London: W. Thacker and Co., 1881), p. 95.

Indian reports, his death had suspicion surrounding it, and Roop's death may not have been voluntary.³⁷ Her parents who lived two hours away by car read about Roop's suttee in a local Hindi newspaper.³⁸ People in the Deorala area seem to have profited from her death, since the site of her death has received over 300,000 pilgrims, and some critics point to this profit motive as a contributing factor to her possible murder.³⁹ Groups throughout India defended Kanwar's suttee, and other groups, including secular feminists, condemned her death as a murder aided and abetted by local people.⁴⁰ In addition to Roop Kanwar, there are forty recorded suttee deaths in India between 1947 and 1987.⁴¹

Suttee and Universal Morality

The lecture sub-title, "*Sati* and Universal Morality," addresses the larger philosophical question, namely the relation of the practice of an individual, faithful, and virtuous woman becoming a *sati* over against the larger, universal human experience. How does "the one" *sati* relate to "the many" cultural and individual examples of *non-sati*? To address these questions, a review and critique of cultural relativism seems appropriate.

In moral philosophy, the phrase "cultural relativism" refers to the view that what is right or wrong in one particular culture has no bearing on a different culture. Eminent anthropologists

³⁷"Uproar Over Rajput 'Sati,'" *Hinduism Today* (December 1987); online, internet, <<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1987/12/1987-12-04.shtml>> accessed October 23, 2007.

³⁸Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "The Roop Kanwar Case: Feminist Responses," *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.101.

³⁹Ashis Nandy, "Sati as Profit Versus Sati as a Spectacle: The Public Debate on Roop Kanwar's Death," in *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 138.

⁴⁰Oldenburg, "The Roop Kanwar Case: Feminist Responses," pp. 106 ff. "Aiding and abetting a suttee" was a crime punishable under colonial British edict from 1805-1829.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 101.

such as William Graham Sumner, Ruth Benedict, and Melville Herskovits have affirmed this view.⁴² Sumner said, “‘immoral’ never means anything but [that which is] contrary to the mores of the time and place. . . .there is no permanent or universal standard by which right and truth . . . can be established.”⁴³ Benedict agreed by saying, “Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits.”⁴⁴

Related to suttee, a cultural relativism argument would proceed in this manner:

Premise 1: Various Indian cultures venerate and practice suttee as a noble and voluntary act of sacrifice.

Premise 2: Western cultures and various Indian cultures abhor and do not practice suttee because it reflects the murder and suffering of an innocent.

Conclusion: Therefore, suttee is neither objectively or universally moral nor immoral; it is a matter of opinion.

Many people adopt this argument without thinking about the truth of the premises or the lack of a valid connection between the premises and the conclusion. In traditional logic, a valid argument must have true premises and a tight connection between the premises and the conclusion. Most people know the traditional argument that is valid: All people are mortal; Socrates is a person. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

An analysis of the suttee argument above yields a twofold description. First, the premises describe empirical facts of reality, and the conclusion describes a belief or thought process about matters of opinion. The argument is invalid because categories have been confused. Second, the premises might be related to belief systems about suttee, while the conclusion states an objective assertion of reality (i.e., suttee *is* neither objectively moral nor immoral). Neither analysis of the

⁴²William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*, intro. William Lyon Phelps (New York: Mentor Books, 1960); reprint ed. 1906; Ruth Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 10 (1934):59-79; Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1934); Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948), ch. 5.

⁴³Sumner, *Folkways*, p. 355.

⁴⁴Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” p. 73.

argument yields a valid conclusion, yet people continue to affirm cultural relativism *via* an invalid argument. If the cultural relativism argument fails, it seems that suttee is either morally permissible or immoral for all cultures, rather than being moral for Indians and immoral for everyone else. Cultural relativists reject or consider as naïve the disjunctive logic of the traditional *either . . . or*.

Aside from the illogical nature of the cultural relativism argument, there are other ethical considerations in dealing with *sati* and universal morality.

1. Are customs morally obligatory?—From the short, previous review of the practice of suttee, one could not go wrong in saying that it was and is a custom of particular Indian cultures. An immediate problem occurs with the term “custom.” Customary behaviors often are obligatory, but in an Enlightenment-based representative democracy, custom does not necessarily imply obligation. Varying levels of custom exist in all cultures. In rural American south, it is customary to wave at everyone who passes in a vehicle; whereas, in the urban areas, waving might be considered an affront or unwelcome gesture. Such inherently amoral behaviors have significant customary function, and offer social variation among different groups of people.⁴⁵ Further, those customary behaviors often include moral sanction.

Significant logical and definitional differences exist between what “custom” is and what “law” is in an Enlightenment and progressive context of law-making. The classical origins of the terms “custom,” “ethics,” and “law” yield some interesting issues. In classical Greek, the word νομός could refer to that which is assigned such as a grazing pasture or food for cattle, but more importantly, νομός could refer to “custom,” “convention,” “authoritative statute,” “law,” or even

⁴⁵A classic statement of these variations is William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*, intro. William Lyon Phelps (New York: Mentor Books, 1960); reprint ed. (1934).

“funeral rites.”⁴⁶ Herodotus used the term νομός when he quoted Pindar (522-438 BCE) as saying, “of all things, custom [law?] is king” (καὶ ὀρθῶς μοι δοκέει Πίνδαρος ποιῆσαι νόμον πάντων βασιλέα φήσας εἶναι).⁴⁷ Some relativists use this text to substantiate their arguments; however, one problem is that Herodotus used the term to refer to the funerary rites of the Greeks vs. the Indian Callatians, not first order moral problems such as the loss of life in a suttee. From the classical period onward, “custom” refers to that which changes with social or tribal preference, whereas “law” is that which is obligatory on all persons within a particular period of time and place

The English term “ethics” derives from the Greek adjective ἠθικός, which referred to that which was “moral,” “ethical,” or “expressive of character.”⁴⁸ One of Aristotle’s books has the title τὰ ἠθικά, “The Ethics.” While there was a clear demarcation between νομός and ἠθικός in the Greek world, the English use of “custom,” “convention,” “law,” and “moral” is not as clear. Some customs are legal in various periods of history—note the example of suttee between 1805 and 1829—but the morality of certain customs is problematic. Furthermore, the ever-changing nature of customs implies the temporary nature of that which people consider moral, and ideally, changes in what is considered moral should be changes for moral improvement.

2. *Should the British have intervened in the lives of Indians who practiced suttee?*—

Cross-cultural intervention is one the most controversial aspects about this issue. Post-colonialists, feminists, and others argue that the west should stay out of the culture of the east. In his jeremiad on the moral collapse of American higher education and college students’ moral

⁴⁶Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th ed., rev. and aug., Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. “νομός.”

⁴⁷Herodotus *The History* 38.4.

⁴⁸Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “ἠθικός.”

relativism, Allan Bloom told a story about a favorite question he often put to students. Bloom asked his students, “If you had been a British administrator in India, would you have let the natives under your governance burn the widow at the funeral of a man who had died?”⁴⁹ Bloom went on to say that his students “either remain silent or reply that the British should never have been there in the first place.”⁵⁰ The irony of Bloom’s question and book published in 1987 was the fact that Roop Kanwar’s highly controversial suttee occurred on September 4, 1987, in Deorala, India. The British struggle with suttee in the colonial period and the ongoing Indian struggle with suttee in the twentieth century reveals the difference between first and second order ethics. Those who debate the morality of suttee do second order ethics; those who engage in the practice or its opposition do first order ethics. First order ethics seems the more appropriate way to deal with suttee, especially since the issue concerns the lives of innocent and vulnerable people.

Rejecting the validity of cultural relativism carries with it the responsibility of indicating *how* a westerner might respond to the Indian practice of suttee. First, only the naïve think that “the other culture” is too far away or too different to influence one’s own culture. Travel, cross-cultural exchange and communication, and globalization have advanced at a rapid pace in the last 500 years. The collision between west and east was inevitable. Encountering a new culture necessarily results in a contrast of custom, values, and law, and hopefully, each learns from the other in ways that can be mutually beneficial. Suttee seems no different.

⁴⁹Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*, foreword Saul Bellow (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1987), p. 26.

⁵⁰Ibid.

“*Should* westerners have intervened in the lives of Indians who practiced suttee?” is not the question. Historical events led to the cultural collision between west and east. Is it realistic to think that Europeans intentionally should not have ventured into the sub-continent? Should one rewind history and say to Alexander, “you and your armies may not cross into the Indus River Valley, or you will surely die?” Or one could have said, “British East India Company, you may not go into the sub-continent for trading purposes?” How ludicrous are such proposals. Rather, the question should be “*How* will westerners interact in the lives of Indians?”

Though suttee continued after the British decision to outlaw it in 1829, the Indian response has been overwhelming in favor of the British decision. Of their free will, the Indian people have rejected suttee as murderous immorality, and have codified it in their laws. The 1829 British decision only set the course for the later Indian position that concurs with western moral values. One could view the 1829 decision as imperialistic intervention, but *was the imposition of British law the moral thing to do once the cultural collision had occurred?* Occasional *sati* has occurred throughout India, but it is not the norm by any estimation. In retrospect, the British decision of 1829 was the right thing to do in the context of first order ethics.

3. *Why was (and is) the 1829 British decision the morally right thing to do?*—The answer to this particular question goes beyond the political interests and context of the early 19th century. The universal morality of the decision is what concerns this lecture, not the historical political advantages or disadvantages, though those issues certainly help reveal what happened.

In forming a judgment about the universal morality⁵¹ of the British 1829 decision, there are plausible reasons for such a claim against those who argue that the west had and has no right for political or rhetorical intrusion.

First, the diversity of cultural experience throughout the world causes some people to shrink back from engaging in divisive moral questions related to the difference with “the other.” Such an approach appears illogical and a confusion of categories. The “is” of real life does not necessarily relate to the “ought” of life.⁵² Diversity in questions of morality does not mean that all are right, all are wrong, or all views are unsubstantiated opinions regarding matters of taste. One perspective might be more right than opposing views, or one view may be right and others wrong. The basic standard of honesty in verbal discourse demands that opposing viewpoints should be aired so that various sides of a particular view can learn from “the other.” The voice of all views must speak, and the voice that often has not been heard in relation to suttee has been that of the *sati* herself.⁵³ A major problem in this regard is the fact that there are so few Indian narratives of suttee, much less that of an Indian *sati* narrative. Notwithstanding these problems, hearing all voices does not mean the lack of moral decision-making; rather, it means that moral decision-making is better informed. In short, diversity of culture and diversity of opinion do not substitute or validate failure to make moral claims or decisions that may offend “the other” or may improve one’s own moral perspective and behavior. Cultural diversity turns on *what*

⁵¹The tenor of this section opposes the presupposition of some who argue that there is no universal foundation for morality. For such a view to some extent, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003); reprint ed., 1968. For a more full statement against universal morality, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313.

⁵²On the naturalistic fallacy, see G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), ch. 1.

⁵³Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), argues that the voice of the *sati* has been repressed as a result of the colonial discourse. See also Spivak and Said above.

behaviors exist, whereas universal morality turns on *what ought to occur*. Related to suttee, the fact of its existence does not imply that it was or is a moral practice, but in the moment of deciding its morality (the first order problem) one takes a universal stance by advocating it or denying its morality.

Secondly, suttee seems to be a classic example of the suffering and unjustified death of those most innocent and vulnerable within a society. In Indian culture, the rights and privileges of women had their meaning only in relation to their husband. In fact, one European observed that “the birth of a female in a Hindoo family [is] an unwelcome event.”⁵⁴ Polygamy frequently occurred, and each wife—whether a child-wife or an adult wife—had stringent obligations to her husband. Here are a few examples of this late eighteenth and early nineteenth century stringency:

A woman has no other god on earth than her husband. The most excellent of all the good works she can perform is to gratify him with the strictest obedience. This should be her only devotion. . . .

In every stage of her life, a woman is created to obey. . . . During her life, she can never be under her own controul [*sic*]. . . .

Sweetly let her words distil from her mouth; and more and more to please her husband be her only aim. . . .

If a man keep two wives, the one shall in no wise intermeddle with the other, nor speak good or evil respecting her companion. . . .

When in the presence of her husband, a woman must not look on one side and the other. She must keep her eyes on her master to be ready to receive his commands. . . .

A woman has no true enjoyment but through her husband.⁵⁵

From a western perspective, such statements are clear violations of the basic humanity of women. While these gender-based rules are still evident in some cultures throughout the world, one issue is whether there is any grounding for such rules other than cultural practice. These rules may help form and organize the culture in which these women live, but are these women

⁵⁴Ward, “To Miss HOPE—On the state of female society in India,” p. 61.

⁵⁵Abbé J. A. Dubois, “Rules and Precepts for the Conduct of Married Women,” in *Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India; and of their Institutions, Religious and Civil*, translated from the French Manuscript (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1817), pp. 229-34.

persons under such rules? Should one view and accept woman only as objects of male pleasure, obedience, and reproduction? Where is the woman's mind? Her psyche? Her feelings? Her contribution to moral improvement? Does such a system allow any sympathy of heart? If such moral customs or laws are the basis of society, what kind of society might result?

If such rules were not enough, suttee also developed in that culture as a manner through which a woman would honor her husband. Though not required by the Hindu religious texts,⁵⁶ suttee became the traditional manner in which a woman made the ultimate identifying act as an extension of her husband's self. Through these dual practices of the traditional female role and the suttee, the woman became a *not-self*, or more specifically, the woman became part of her husband's self. Patriarchal value consumed the woman's individuality and person; she is *not-she*, for she has become part of him without regard to *herself*.

Since polygamy occurred, there are various accounts of multiple wives—up to fifty—⁵⁷ simultaneously committing suttee on the corpse of their husband. Which wife had the right to lie upon the corpse was a matter of the brahmins' interpretation. In one case, the older wife took precedence over the younger, more beautiful woman, but in the end, both committed suttee.⁵⁸

More morally repugnant than an adult suttee was the widespread occurrence of child widows committing suttee, or, rather being forced to commit suttee. Because of the strong patriarchal value system in traditional Indian culture, one of the greatest fears of many Indians

⁵⁶This issue is highly controversial. Various people read the texts in different ways. The leading Brahmin pundit at Fort William College, Mrityoonjuy, disputed the view that the Hindu shasters advocated or recommended suttee. See [N.A.], "Art. V.—On the criminality of burning Widows alive, with a brief View of what has been already published on this subject," *The Friend of India*, Quarterly Series, No. VI, Published in September 1822 (Serampore: Printed at the Mission Press, 1822), pp. 259-63.

⁵⁷ Ward, "To Miss HOPE—On the state of female society in India," p. 65.

⁵⁸See Dubois, "Of the Custom of Women Allowing Themselves to be Burned with the Corpses of Their Husbands," in *Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India; and of their Institutions, Religious and Civil*, translated from the French Manuscript (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1817), pp. 239-40.

was the failure to find a husband for a daughter. This fear provoked fathers to have their young daughters married to older men in order to ensure their daughters' proper place within the patriarchal structure. Often, this meant that children became wives, and this in turn provoked those same children dying through suttee. In an 1827 document of 161 oversized pages, the British kept a log of every known suttee between 1823 and 1827 in particular districts of British India. In this list, the British Parliamentary papers describe each *sati* by name, age, social caste, name and caste of the husband, profession and financial circumstance of the husband, date of the suttee, the police jurisdiction in which the suttee occurred, and most interesting of all, the "remarks" about the suttee. In this document, there are occasional examples of child widows (ages 9, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17).⁵⁹ These child widow suttees seem to contradict the Brahmin requirement for a widow's intentional decision-making process, and these events were nothing short of child abuse followed by cruel and inhumane murder. Of special note, however, is the fact that the British—by legal edict—*allowed* these events to occur until Governor-General William Bentinck outlawed suttee in 1829.

Finally, the ongoing Indian admission of the immorality of suttee appears to demonstrate the common notion of moral progress. This point is very slippery in moral philosophy, but it is a valid one. Humanity seems to have devolved in the twentieth century with all of its novel, yet evil, ways to murder millions of people. Some put the estimate at close to two hundred million

⁵⁹See *Hindoo Widows, Copies of Extracts of All Communications and Correspondence, Relative to the Burning of Widows on the Funeral Piles of their Husbands; With Such Proceedings as May Have Been Had Thereon, in the Court of Directors since the 5th July 1825; With a Detailed Statement of the Number of Suttees since the Year 1825; With Copies of All Reports, Statements, or Other Documents, upon the Subject; Which May Have Been Received in India, or by the East India Company, Which Have Not Already Been Presented* (London: House of Commons, 1827), pp. 63, 77, 81, 102, 110, 117, 119, 120, 122.

people for worldwide deaths as a result of war, massacre, and oppression.⁶⁰ There is plenty of guilt for every nation and culture, however, guilt does not affect the issue of suttee's immorality.

Moral philosophers incline to believe that there is such a possibility of *moral progress* as the result of information, argumentation, and the display of moral nerve in difficult circumstances (i.e., Ghandi's position of non-violence). It seems a given that all of humanity needs moral improvement, but if that premise is denied, any behavior seems acceptable in some context. The eventual decline and outlawing of suttee by the British in 1829 and by the Indian government in the twentieth century conveys the idea that the practice indeed is immoral, which yields its illegality. If cultural relativism were true, there would be no need to engage in discussion of moral progress. Rather, the acceptance of traditional morality, whatever it is at the time, would become status quo. The facts of history, however, are that some aspects of traditional morality are wrong, immoral, and in need of societal revision. Those who speak *against* various practices serve society by reminding us that traditional values may be detrimental to the enhancement of life. In relation to suttee, whether that opposing speaker is a Moslem, a liberal Indian, a Christian missionary, or a secular Indian feminist, the value attached to suttee does not concur with a theory of moral progress or universal morality.

So, with Kipling, the English bard of British India, I affirm, "*there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, // When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!*"⁶¹

⁶⁰For a non-academic's estimates based on public information, see Matthew White, "30 Worst Atrocities of the 20th Century," online, internet, <<http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/atrox.htm>> accessed November 5, 2007.

⁶¹Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West," in *Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, p. 3