

The Attitude And Policies Of Mughal Rulers Towards Sati

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“Sati” in Medieval India, had become a normal feature of the social organism in the eyes of both Hindu and Muslim and was more or less prevalent in almost all parts of the country. The Mughals who could perhaps have taken a more detached and healthier view of the situation found no particular cause for complaint in the suppression of human personality through this glaring social evil. The practice was so widely prevalent, as not to escape the eyes of the foreign travelers who poured into India in great numbers, during this period. Hence naturally, considering the view of poets and historians from Mughal’s Court to be biased, in search for an unbiased opinion our much of the knowledge of “Sati” during this period depends on the accounts of these travelers. One cannot but shudders in horror to learn that sometimes very young girls fell prey to this wicked unmerciful practice. Nicholas Whittington cited a case where girl was of 10 years of age. Jahangir

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As to the number of wives being burnt with the dead husband, Teixeira writes in 1611 “when I was in India, on the death of the Naique of Madure, a country situated between that of Malabar and that of choromandel, four hundred wives of his burned themselves along with him.”

A very fundamental question regarding this practice of “Sati” in Medieval India is; whether it was voluntary or obligatory, whether the wives willingly sacrificed themselves or were forced to do so. The contradictory evidence furnished by foreign travelers makes it a bit difficult for us to pronounce a definite answer on this point. On the whole we can agree on Abu’lFazl who divides “Sati” into different categories– “those who out of sheer love for husband consign themselves into flames; others who from fear of reproach surrendered to be burnt; others who were swayed by family considerations and customs; and finally who were actually forced to burn themselves alive with their deceased husbands”.

To a critical observes the most fundamental question regarding the rite of Sati is the reason behind it. The most important factor which urged a woman to embrace the funeral flames, ungrudgingly on most occasions, was the extreme misery of the widow in the then society. Secondly, there was the tremendous and almost irresistible inducement of religion and tradition which gave stimulus to the institution of sati. Thirdly, the question of family prestige and personal glory also weighted heavily in the mind of a widow and induced her to perish in the funeral flames of her husband. Perhaps that was the reason why some times force was restored to, as has been noted earlier, by her own family /relatives against unwilling widow.

Among Mughals, it was actually, the second Mughal Emperor Humayun who took a bold step against sati and tried to extirpate it altogether. He extended on absolute prohibition to all cases when a widow had past the age of child – bearing, even if she offered herself willingly¹. Curiously enough, the Hindus made no violent protest or demonstration against this, but it is strange that the monarch soon cancelled his order after a second thought. Probably, he feared that interference and forcible prevention of the “hollowed custom and religious practice” of the Hindus was sure to arouse the wrath of God and bring about the downfall of his dynasty and perhaps even his own death. On analyzing the facts related to “Sati” at time of Humayun, suggests that “Humayun cancelled his order, keeping in mind the opinion of his ruled mass”². However, the ordinary rule; the system of official’s permission for burning widow remained in force. Sidi Ali Reis reports “officers of the Padishah were present on such occasion to prevent any act of violence”³. On analyzing the above facts it can be said that “May, the number of forceful “Sati” have decreased during that period but practice remained prevalent.

Akbar endeavored to prevent forceful “Sati” in his kingdom. His edict banning sati run thus, “If a Hindu woman wished to be burnt with her husband, they should not be prevented; but she should not be forced against her will”⁴. In the “Ain”, we find his instructions to the kotwal, “He about not let a woman suffer and to be burnt against her inclination”. The stance of Akbar on the plight of “Sati” can be understood though his statement in “Ibadatkhana” on 3rd October 1578, “their woman , after being deprived of the happiness of their

husband for a long time, also adopt their own death along with the death of their husband”⁵ .

Further, as Akbarnama informs, vigilant and truthful men were appointed by Akbar in every city and district in order that the two classes of cases might be continually kept distinct and that the forcible burning might not be permitted. The emperor was reported to have interfered personally in some cases and stopped widow from burning themselves. But based on these few cases were Akbar interfered possibly more on personal grounds than any other, it is difficult to infer that he pursued a general policy of total prohibition of sati. According to AnnemorieSchimmel, the Mughal Emperor Akbar was averse to the practice of sati; however, he expressed his admiration for “widow who wished to be cremated with their deceased husbands”. According to M.RezaPirbhi, a professor of south Asian and world history, it is unclear if a prohibition on sati was issued by Akbar, and other than a claim of ban by Monserrate upon his insistence, not other primary sources mention an actual ban.

We come across an incident when, one day Akbar heard that one of his wife’s cousin sister was being forced to commit sati by her son on the death of her husband. The lady in question was Rani Damayanti the daughter of Mota Raja Uadi Singh of Jodhpur and Rani Jasvant. Her husband was, one of the officers of Akbar, Raja Jaimal of Mertha who died in 1583. Rani Damayanti refused to be burnt on her husband funeral pyre but her sons and relatives were forcing her as they felt it was against their honor to allow their mother to live as a widow. Akbar got this news from his harem and rode all the way from Agra to

Ranathambore to save this lady from being forced to commit sati on her husband's funeral pyre.

On the practice of "Sati" Abu'IFazl writes "Among Hindus this was not mandatory, but was encouraged"⁶. "The family, in which the woman of the family adopted sati, was given regards". "If the woman did not committed sati, she was given hoarse cloth to wear and was treated as on outcast in the society"⁷. These facts, from Abu'IFazl indicate that the widows used to resort to sati to avoid these inhuman behaviors. After studying the facts on sati during Akbar's regime it is clear that "Akbar had appointed supervisors at city and district level to stop forceful sati incidents"⁸. It appears that the steps taken by Akbar had shown very little impact on the events of sati, because after observing the events of that duration, we get to see many such incidents in the society of that time. Akbar too had said "some wives do adopt sati very honestly but others do it for glory"⁹. Observation of the above fact makes clear that Akbar was full of praise for women who choose to commit sati on her own will.

Upon looking through the facts related to the practice of Sati, it is clear that "Akbar certainly condemned husbands who spread false rumours of their deaths and get their wives killed."¹⁰. On inspecting the facts related to the practice of Sati, it is clear that Akbar had said that some husbands spread false rumours of their death to have their wife killed through sati practice; this has been severely criticized by Akbar. While explaining the evidence associated with the practice of sati in Akbar's time, we hereby come across one another reason which seems obviously responsible for the spread of sati practice in

Mughal Indian society and that is - To get one's wife killed after spreading false rumours of husband's death. This tooled to the rapid spread of the tradition of Sati in the Mughal period.

On observing the facts related to the practice of Sati, we can clearly understand Akbar's thoughts and views on the practice of Sati. In 1570, the Jesuits recorded that Akbar himself had observed sati rituals and during one such ritual was heard saying that "the endurance of the widow who was being sati can only be by the grace of Allah"¹¹. An underlying fact associated with this fact is also that, how abundant the incidence of sati was in Indian society. Because the emperor himself has mentioned that some sati incidents were witnessed by the emperor himself. Which meant that the practice of sati was so strong in Akbar's time, that the king himself did not had the courage to stop this practice and the process of this criminal tendency continued in the society, which is historically confirmed from the above facts. The change in Akbar's stance on the controversy related to the practice of Sati is seen after the incident of 1583 when Akbar saved the widowed wife of one of his officer "Jaimal" from being forced to commit sati after the death Jaimal¹². Giving details of the incident of sati, Abu'lFazl writes that Akbar had appointed honest examiners in every city and district who had to ensure that the widows who voluntarily committed sati were allowed to commit sati while the ban on forceful sati could be successfully observed¹³. An inspection of the facts related to the practice of Sati makes it clear that in the Ain-i-Akbari, Kotwals had been ordered in this context¹⁴. On observing the facts related to the Mughal ruler's attitude & policies towards Sati system, we get Sati evidence

from the account of Badayuni, an Akbarian historian and critic. Badayuni writes that the first decree on the practice of sati was issued in 1579 that read- "The widows of Hindus who had not established a marital relationship with their husbands should not be subjected to sati, but if the Hindus do not come to digest it, then no interference should be done in their case"¹⁵.

On observing the above facts related to the practice of Sati, it is clear that during Akbar's regime even such a widow who has not even established a marital-life with her husband, were too, had to follow the custom of sati. If we seriously inspect the evidence of Badayuni, then we get two elements in it. Firstly, in Indian society, even such a married widow had to be a sati who had not even started a married life with her husband. In fact, this evidence contains in itself one another fact – Practice of child marriage, As a result of which, "Akbar later determined an age for marriage, in which the age of the boy was 16 years and that of the girl was 14 years"¹⁶. The second fact in Badayuni's evidence is that Akbar was not following this rule in its entirety. In view of the opposition in the society, at some places this rule was taken with its liberal approach. This indicates that the rule was not fully adhered, which too can be established historically.

On studying the facts related to the practice of sati, it is clear that Akbar's growing disagreement over the question of sati compelled him to consider the status of widows, "in 1587 he allowed widow-remarriage"¹⁷. Akbar made the rule of widow remarriage, as an effect to which we do find evidence of remarriage of widowed women in the society during Akbar's regime which historically confirms this rule of Akbar. Akbar's decision made the position of

widowed women respectable. Earlier, the widow was considered a curse in the society, but as a result of Akbar's rule, this orthodox ideology must have decreased. After which widows started getting re-married. This decisive decision made by Akbar for widowed women must have reduced the spread of Sati practice, this could be established historically.

After observing the facts related to the attitudes and policies of the Mughal rulers towards the practice of sati, it is clear that Akbar took a number of decisions to take control over the practice of sati, which must have reduced the incidence of sati. Akbar had asked the “officials concerned” to Sati to be vigilant in this regard, which resulted in the "Governor having the right to give a certificate to the woman who was voluntarily getting Sati, and for which the family of the woman going to commit Sati had to pay a hefty amount as fees"¹⁸, And because this piece of money was very large, the payment of which was difficult for an ordinary families, it would have been possible to control the tradition of sati through this decision.

Jahangir not only followed in the footsteps of his father, but went further. In Tuzuk-i-jahangiri we find an order which not only prohibited sati and infanticide but even enjoined punishment for their infraction. But as the accounts of foreign travelers refers to many “Sati” in Jahangir’s India, it seems that the prohibition was only on paper and never strictly enforced, though however, as in previous regime, no sati could be burnt without royal permission. The governors as Pelsaert informs us, were not permitted by king’s order to refuse permission. Yet they endeavored by various means, sometimes even by offer of “enticing promise” to prevent self –immolation by

widows, but in most cases only in vain. Even Jahangir himself, as Hawkins tells us, was reluctantly compelled to give leave for burning a widow in Agra.

Shah Jahan pursued faithfully the policy of his predecessors' towards sati. "The Mughals", informs Peter Mundy "hath almost abolished that custom, so that it may not be done without special license from the King, or governor of the place where they dwell". These governors, as Tavernier points out, "who being a Mhumedan and abhorring that execrable custom of self murder, is very shy to permit them". Shah Jahan is even credited with prohibiting women with children from burning themselves, who were commanded to live for the education of children.

Aurangzeb, if Manucci is taken into confidence, issued an order after his return from Kashmir in 1663, prohibiting totally sacrifice of widows in Mughal Empire. Though this humanitarian rule is not found in the formal histories of the regime, it is mentioned in official guide book of the reign. But in spite of his order, as evidence of travelers indicate, Aurangzeb hardly succeeded in suppressing sati altogether. Yet this much is certain that through orders to his governors to employ all their efforts in suppressing that abuse, he made performance of sati difficult and thus saved great many women from the utter tragedy. Thevnot and Careri testify to the strong vigilance employed by his governors to prevent the large scale slaughter of women at the altar of their dear husband.

On studying the facts related to the practice of Sati during the regime of Jahangir and Aurangzeb, it reflects that the Mughal ruler Jahangir followed his

predecessor, Akbar. Jahangir had instructed to stop the practice, "no woman who happens to be a mother of children should not be allowed to be Sati even if she wishes to be Sati"¹⁹. His intention behind this decision was that her children's are responsible for care of that women or that woman have children of whom she is to take care of, which will lead her way out from the state of impunity & despair and for this reason the woman should be prevented from being sati. This order had indication meant for young widows.

After Jahangir's rule, the rules of Akbar and Jahangir continued to be followed during Shah Jahan regime. On observing the facts related to the attitudes and policies of the Mughal rulers towards the practice of Sati, we find that the foreign travelers who came during the Mughal period have thrown light on the situation of sati practice during those duration. Bernier, a foreign traveler who came under the reign of Shah Jahan, writes that "a widow woman could not be sati without the permission from the Muslim ruler"²⁰. But on studying other evidences related to sati as discussed by Bernier, it becomes difficult to understand Bernier's statement. In another context, Bernier writes that "I have seen the terrible sight of Sati so many times that now I am fearful of it"²¹.

Bernier was simultaneously presenting two types of evidence for that time. An inspection of Bernier's evidence makes it clear that Bernier concluded that the rules of Akbar and Jahangir were applicable during the time of Shah Jahan in the context of the Mughals' preventing Sati incidents. Some incidents in which there were forced sati in place of voluntary sati and in which the widow had children were been prevented from becoming sati. But from other evidence it

is clear that the incidence of sati was in abundance, which seems very much true for that of the then society.

Aurangzeb too, like his predecessor rulers, focused his attention on sati and issued orders regarding sati. "In 1663, Aurangzeb ordered the abolition of the practice of sati, yet widows who did not have children were allowed to commit sati"²². During the reign of Aurangzeb, the order of Jahangir's reign continued to be followed, which was helpful in attempts to control the Sati system. The steps taken by the Mughal government to stop the practice of Sati are also highlighted by foreign travelers who came during Aurangzeb's reign. We have read Manucci's writings above, as per which Manucci writes that Aurangzeb's instruction was "that no widow should be allowed to commit sati anywhere in the Mughal territory"²³. Discussing one another incident of sati, Manucci writes that "the chief queen of a Rajput king was allowed to be a sati because she had no children"²⁴. It is clear from the above fact that in the reign of Mughal ruler Aurangzeb, a childless widow were being allowed to commit sati. A joint study of both the proofs of Manucci makes it clear that the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb attempted to stop the practice of sati, although the practice of sati was not completely controlled and the incidence of sati was in abundant.

The incidence of sati in the Mughal period can also be gauged from the fact that foreign traveller Pelsaert writes that "Sati is practiced in banias and khattris and that happen to occur 2 or 3 times per week in Agra"²⁵. While Ovington, a foreign traveller who came in the early 1690s, assert that "the incidents of sati were rarely heard, sometimes the wives of some kings were

sati. Other than that, those only were able to gain order for sati who were capable of giving valuable gifts to the Governor”²⁶.

It was difficult for Muslim to remain “without being influenced for long by the custom or the attitude which fostered it. But it should be noted that cases of direct influence are too few to emphasis the point. However it can be asserted that the influence of sati was limited to those who had an aristocratic Hindu descent or had a pre-dominantly Hindu environment. Jahangir found the rite prevalent among the Muslims of Rajaur who were originally Hindus and converted into Islam by Sultan Firoz. Ibn-e-Batuta tells us that on the rumor of Ain-ul-mulk’s death, a rebel against Muhammad bin Tughluq his wife expressed her desire to be burnt like a Hindu widow.

An inspection of the facts related to the attitude and policies of the Mughal rulers towards the practice of Sati makes it clear that the Mughal ruler Humayun was the first among Mughals who took steps to stop the practice of Sati, while Akbar supervised widow remarriage, age determination for marriage and Appointment of Kotwals for such purpose, such tasks were helpful in preventing Sati. State law of Jahangir and Aurangzeb too played a meaningful role by which “practice of sati” could be reduced to some extent.

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