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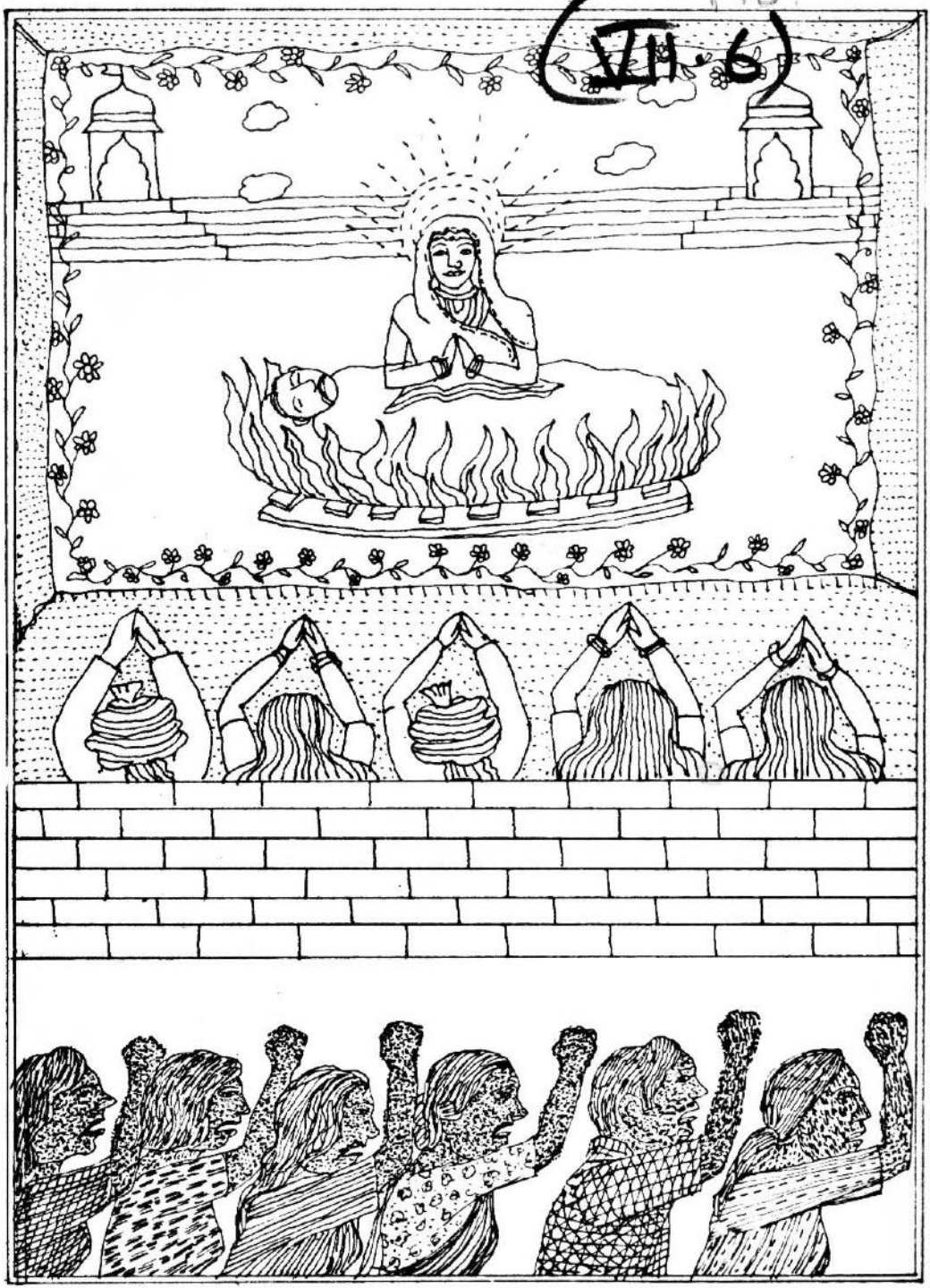

TRIAL BY FIRE

A REPORT ON ROOP KANWAR'S DEATH

THE WOMEN and Media Committee of the Bombay Union of Journalists (BUJ) sent a three-member fact-finding team comprising Meena Menon, Geeta Seshu and Sujata Anandan to Deorala village in Rajasthan to investigate the *sati* of 18-year-old Roop Kanwar on September 4, 1987. What follows is their report.

Sati, or the practice of a widow burning herself or being burnt on the funeral pyre of her dead husband, largely prevalent in Rajasthan, was banned by law in 1829. But since Independence, there has been an alarming resurgence of *sati* in Rajasthan, that committed by Roop Kanwar being the 38th. The September 4 incident once again brought into focus the belief, deeply entrenched in the Rajput psyche, that committing *sati* is the highest glory a woman can achieve.

The team visited Jaipur, Deorala and Sikar between September 24 and 30. Its objectives were:

1) To examine the sequence of events that led to the *sati* and obtain a clear perspective on the debate on whether or not there was an element of coercion in the act.
2) To document the aftermath of the incident and the impact it has had on Deorala village, with special reference to the action taken by the police, women's organisations, the government and the judiciary.
3) To discuss the communal overtones the incident has assumed.
4) To delineate the socio-cultural influence of *sati* in the region, especially among the Rajputs.
5) To analyse the manner in which the incident has been covered by the press.

A report in a local daily in Jaipur on September 5, headlined, "*Akhir Roop Kanwar Sati Ho Hi Gayi*" (Roop Kanwar did finally became a sati) was the first indication of the 18-year-old Rajput girl's death the previous day.

Born into a well-to-do Rajput family based in Ranchi, Roop Kanwar was educated up to the 10th standard. She married Maal Singh, 24, a graduate and the eldest son of a school teacher, Sumer Singh, from Deorala village on January 17, 1987.

Roop Kanwar spent most of her time with her parents; in the eight months of her marriage she lived with her husband for barely 20 days immediately after her marriage and a few days before their deaths.

On September 3, Maal Singh complained of a stomach ache, had a bout of vomitting and was rushed to Sikar Hospital. He died the next morning. According to initial reports, the cause of his death was gastroenteritis. The body was brought back to Deorala by 9.30 a.m. and preparations for his funeral began.

According to early reports, Roop, after the first shock had worn off, became very calm and reportedly told her father-in-law that she wished to commit *sati*. Press reports say that she decked herself in bridal finery and, in keeping with the tradition, led the funeral procession to the cremation ground in the centre of the village. She then ascended the pyre and placed her husband's head in her lap. Blessing the crowd assembled there and chanting the *gayatri mantra*, she slowly burnt to death on the pyre. News of the *sati* soon spread to neighbouring

villages and people flocked to Deorala with offerings of coconuts for the *sati mata*.

This unprecedented rush for coconuts alerted a revenue official, who then informed the police. A head constable, Chand Ram Rathi, along with two other policemen, arrived at the village at around 2.30 p.m. and saw the burning pyre. There were more than 200 people present at the spot, according to a First Information Report (FIR) filed by the head constable of the Thoi police chowki.

Early on the morning of September 5, Bal Singh Rathore, Roop Kanwar's father, learnt of his daughter's *sati* from newspaper reports. At first, the family suspected foul play but, on visiting Deorala and speaking to their relatives, they were convinced that their daughter had committed *sati* voluntarily.

The making of a myth

The fact-finding team's first impression was that there was a conspiracy of silence in Deorala. Not a single villager admitted to seeing the *sati*. There were a large number of people at the *sati sthal* (the site where Roop Kanwar was burnt) and villagers poured in by bus, taxi and camel cart. The rest of the village appeared strangely deserted. No one seemed to belong to Deorala: "*Hum is gaon ke nahin hain, door se aaye hain*" (we are not from this village we have came from far away) was the stock reply to queries.

The *sati sthal* comprised a raised, brick platform with a saffron canopy over it. In the centre was a *trishul* with a red and gold *chunri* draped over it, curiously resembling the figure of a woman. Seven Rajput youth carrying rusty swords circled the site day and night in two-hour shifts. They shouted slogans like, "*Ek do teen char, Roop Kanwar ki jay jaykar*" (One, two, three, four, let us hail Roop Kanwar), "*Jab tak suraj chand rahega, Roop Kanwar ka naam rahega*" (As long as there is the sun and moon, Roop Kanwar's name will also live), "*Sati ke pati ki jai*" (Glory to the husband of the *sati*). The path to the site was lined with hawkers selling eatables, ribbons, toys, *agarbattis*, coconuts and framed photographs of Roop Kanwar and Maal Singh on the funeral pyre.

The crudely superimposed photographs, showing a smiling Roop Kanwar with her dead husband on the pyre, the wedding photograph of the couple, the stories being woven about countless people being cured of polio, eye problems and other diseases after a pilgrimage to the *sati sthal*, are all part of an organised effort to create the myth of *sati mata* Roop Kanwar.

The room in which she stayed in her in-laws' house was adorned with huge photographs of various gods. The darkened room, lit by a single lamp in its centre, has became a shrine. Visitors peered in through a window and placed money as a token offering. A gold-bordered red and green *chunri* hung on the wall which, said a bystander, Roop Kanwar wore before her death. Curiously, there was a television set in one corner of the room. Deliberately or otherwise, the room reflected the myth that is in the making – that Roop Kanwar was a 'modern woman but also a god-fearing and devoted Hindu wife'.

From the outside, the house seemed deserted. We were told by the villagers standing outside that no one was allowed in and

that only Maal Singh's ailing mother was in. When we went in, nevertheless, a man appeared from the inner room and told us firmly to leave at once. No photographs would be allowed, he warned. We insisted that we had come only to meet the mother. We were told that she was lying inside and had not eaten since the arrest of her sons, especially nine-year-old Bhupendra Singh, and their father. Some women who emerged from the inner quarters, said that *sati* had occurred in the past in the village – it is not uncommon. But the families of the women had never been harassed by the government. "*Sarkar ne humko bahut dukhi kiya hai*" (The government has given us a lot of trouble).

Strangely, the women refused to identify themselves, only saying that they were relatives. Further on in the village, two women in a house invited us in. They were friendly and welcoming. In contrast, however, the man of the house told us, in menacing tones, "You have come to worship *sati mata*, please leave after that. There is no work for you here."

Other women spoke of the drought in the area and the fact that the influx of villagers to the *sati sthal* had put pressure on the village's water supply. Talking about the *sati* in tones of obvious admiration, they said, "How would you react if you were just singed while making *rotis*? This girl actually sat on the pyre to burn along with her husband." Before we could talk further, they were called away by their husbands.

The biggest – and the most crucial – myth of all has been built around the manner in which she committed *sati*. The villagers, who do not admit to seeing the *sati* and attribute their account to others, give graphic descriptions of the events leading up to the act.

The girl, they say, acquired *sat* – a supernatural power which is akin to a trance-like state where the woman's body burns to the touch and her eyes redden and glow. No one dared dissuade her for fear of being cursed by *sati mata*. She is said to have led the procession, chanted the *gayatri mantra* and blessed people. Roop Kanwar, they say, had only raised her hands and the pyre lit itself.

It is not only the villagers who believe that Roop attained *sat* and obtained the supernatural strength to make the pyre light itself. This view is shared by powerful Rajput politicians, her family and even the police.

State Janata Party President, Kalyan Singh Kalvi, is actively opposing the 'interference' of the government in what he considers a religious rite. He narrated to the team how Roop prepared for the event. When she attained *sat*, he said, she became oblivious to all around her and, when her aunt tried to touch her, she was almost scorched by the burning heat of Roop's *sat*. He said that even Roop's brothers-in-law did not know she was going to commit *sati* until she emerged from the room in her bridal finery.

Kalvi said a number of his relatives were in the village at the time. One of his own nephews, on seeing Roop lead the procession and realising what was happening, immediately took up a sword and stationed himself behind her. By the time the procession

reached the cremation ground, about five to seven Rajput youths joined Kalvi's nephew in keeping guard over Roop.

Kalvi's nephew kept close to Roop and witnessed the entire incident (Kalvi said this with great emphasis to impress upon us that his rendition was possibly the most accurate). There was a shortage of firewood – logs were hurriedly stacked on the pyre. As the girl climbed on to the pyre, she is said to have told her father-in-law that her only regret was that she could not serve him. She then began reciting the *gayatri mantra* and asked those who had assembled there to repeat it after her.

About 4,000 to 5,000 people watched the event. A lot of *gulal* (coloured powder) was thrown in the air and people shouted '*Sati mata ki jai*', (long live *sati mata*) Kalvi said. His nephew also said that the girl did fall down at one stage but caught hold of a log to steady herself. At another stage, the pyre had to be relit since there was not enough firewood or *ghee*.

There in much discussion on what Roop Kanwar's last words were. Kalvi's version, that her last words were words of regret to her father-in-law, contradicts the statements made by her own father.

A disturbed Bal Singh Rathore and his wife, Sneh Kanwar, told the team that their daughter was heard shouting, 'Mummy, Papa'. Their relatives in the village told them that Roop said, "Tell my parents I am sorry I could not take their leave." Police officer Karan Singh, stationed at Deorala, confirmed that Roop Kanwar did shout, 'Mummy, Papa' but added that he did not interpret it as a cry of distress as she was a 'modern' girl and was in the habit of calling even her in-laws by those terms.

Roop's family in Jaipur, barely two hours away from Deorala, were not informed of either Maal Singh's death or their daughter's decision to commit *sati*. Rathore, when asked about this, remained silent. His son, Gopal Singh, now a vocal member of the Rajput Sabha and of the newly-formed Sati Dharam Raksha Samiti, (now renamed the Dharam Raksha Samiti) said Roop's in-laws did send word but it did not reach Jaipur in time. Sneh Kanwar feebly adds, 'The vehicle broke down', but contradicts herself by saying mournfully, "How could they think of sending us a message? Their eldest son had died and the entire family must have been too upset to think of doing so."

Both her parents said that it was only 'by the grace of god' that one becomes a *sati*. Even as a child, Roop had been very religious; played with idols rather than toys and often visited the Rani Sati temple at Jhunjhunu, her mother said, adding that she was a very religious person herself. Her brother emphasised '*Padhai mein tez nahin thi*' (she was not a bright student).

In direct contrast to all this, the team gathered from eyewitness accounts which emerged in bits and pieces from the villagers, that, far from being voluntary, Roop Kanwar's *sati* was, in fact, the result of a combination of events and actions which indicate the helplessness of the teenaged girl.

An important account was rendered by a Congress Party worker in Deorala (he was not present at the time of the *sati* but his relatives vouch for the

account). He said preparations for the *sati* began immediately after Maal Singh's body was brought to the village at about 9 a.m. Roop Kanwar, who got an inkling of this, escaped from the house and hid in one of the *dhanis* (barns) in the surrounding fields. The preparations had to be stalled as a search was made for her. Roop, finally found cowering in the barn, was forcibly dragged to the house and put on the pyre at around 1.30 p.m. She is said to have screamed and struggled to get out when the pyre was lit, but Rajput youths with swords surrounding her made escape impossible.

A young boy admitted to a journalist, Manimala of the **Navbharat Times**, that he had seen the *sati*. The girl, he said, was swaying from side to side as she came out of the house and walked to the cremation ground. She was surrounded by Rajput youths till the end. Another boy, who claimed to have watched the entire incident, said Roop was frothing at the mouth.

Eyewitnesses questioned by the police said they heard her shout, '*bachao*'. She cried for help and struggled to get out but the coconuts and the heavy logs of firewood buried her.

"The sight was ghastly and, because of the *gulal* in the air and crowds craning to get a glimpse, we could not see the pyre properly," they said in their evidence.

Another account said Roop Kanwar flailed her arms in the air. But this was interpreted by the villagers, not as a sign of her struggling to get out, but of her showering blessings on them.

It is absurd to debate upon whether Roop Kanwar lit the pyre herself or not. In the FIR, it is clearly stated that the pyre was lit by Pushpendra Singh, the 15-year-old brother of Maal Singh. Even Kalvi, much as he would like to believe that Roop Kanwar lit it herself, told us, "*Koyi chamatkar nahin hua*" (it was no miracle). Since you are from the press, I will not tell you who lit it, but somebody definitely did."

While this statement indicates clearly enough that Roop was murdered, even the various, highly-coloured versions of the incident have a few common features which are significant. In the first place, there were Rajput youths with swords surrounding Roop, ostensibly to guard her but in fact making escape impossible. Secondly, she fell from the pyre at least once and there was a need to relight the funeral pyre, which shows how hurriedly the entire incident was arranged. The third and most significant factor is the lack of an adequate explanation for Roop's parents not being informed, given the proximity of Deorala and Jaipur.

Police investigations

The most notable feature recorded in the FIR of case no. 108, filed on September 4, after the *sati* was committed, is that no one had tried to dissuade Roop Kanwar from committing *sati* nor had anyone informed the police. The FIR also named six persons as the accused. – Sumer Singh, Pushpendra Singh, Bhupendra Singh (Sumer Singh's nine-year-old son), Manger Singh (Sumer Singh's

brother), his son Ranjit Singh and a relative. Charges under Sections 302 (murder) and 306 (abetment to suicide) under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) were levelled against them.

While top police officials have almost all been unanimous in declaring that the offenders in the *sati* incident would be severely dealt with and punished for murder, they all viewed the continuing practice of *sati* in a different light: Not all of them considered it a crime as such, but rather the result of a distorted, 'conservative' attitude.

Inspector General of Police (Crime branch) Rajendra Kumar Baijal debunked all theories of '*devi ka chamatkar*' (miracle wrought by the goddess). His various remarks deriding the practice of *sati* are noteworthy. "*Sati* is committed in this region because the economic gains from *sati* are tremendous – people living here are willing to part with their money. No woman should be allowed to commit it even if there is no provision in the law against it. Otherwise, there will come a day when there will be no women left in the country. One thing is apparent – people supporting it are living in past glory. Although educated, they have lost their reason." Baijal contended that people responsible for such cases are not really criminals, they are just highly conservative.

M.M. Meherishi of the CID (Vigilance branch), presently investigating the case, is clear that *sati* as it is being termed by all and sundry, is a crime and must be investigated as such. "The burning alive of a woman is a crime, whether it is conducted with religious backing or not. A girl has been burnt alive and that is what I am concerned with," he said.

The Abolition of Sati Act is an East India Company regulation and has not been incorporated in the Indian Penal Code (IPC). All the police officers are agreed that not having a specific law to prevent *sati* has hampered them considerably. "We are the law enforcing agencies but what can we do if there is no law?" they complain.

M.M. Meherishi stated that the case was handed over to the CID 18 days after the incident, thus hampering the collection of valuable on-the-spot evidence. Moreover, a few villagers were not prepared to come forward with evidence, for fear of being arrested as abettors to the crime. "But some facts are being ascertained, and some leads indicate that the death of Maal Singh appears to be suspicious." Doctors at the Sikar Hospital are unable to pinpoint the exact cause of his death and though initial reports described it as gastroenteritis, his medical records diagnosed his condition as 'acute abdominal pain', said Meherishi.

M.M. Atre, Deputy Superintendent of Police, Sikar division, said that it was unclear why Maal Singh was taken to Sikar rather than Jaipur, which is nearer Deorala. Maal Singh was brought to the hospital in a state of shock with low blood pressure. He was suffering from shock and depression and was under treatment in Jaipur a few months before his death. He had failed twice in his pre-medical tests, the results of which came a fortnight before his death. His mother had been mentally ill for a long time, a fact which led the authorities to believe that there was a possible history of mental illness in the family. This was later confirmed

by Maal Singh's neuropsychiatrist in Jaipur, Dr. K.G. Thanvi. When Maal Singh died, the chief medical officer at Sikar Hospital, who had diagnosed his condition as pancreatitis felt that there was no need for a post mortem.

Dr. Thanvi toid the team that Maal Singh had been under his treatment from June 5 to July 1 this year. The latter had complained of having lost interest in life and was suffering from androgenous depression. An out-patient, he was prescribed the usual anti-depressants. Dr. Thanvi admitted that though Maal Singh was fully cured, a relapse was possible. He added, "I did not follow up the case, I only realised that he was my patient when some journalist rang me up in connection with the *sati*."

While Dr. Thanvi's account formed a crucial part of the CID's investigations, the police are also investigating the involvement of Dr. Magan Singh, the doctor in the village who treated Maal Singh and accompanied the family to Sikar. A government appointee, Dr. Magan Singh is currently absconding. Police believe that the doctor could have injected drugs into Roop Kanwar, leading to her trance-like state at the time of her *sati*.

Another aspect to be borne in mind is the fact that Roop Kanwar had brought with her 40 *tolas* of gold and fixed deposits worth Rs. 30,000 in her name, as dowry. In addition, she had brought a colour TV, a cooking range and a refrigerator. According to Rajput custom, when a man dies without heirs, his widow can return to her parent's house along with her dowry. Thus, the police infer that Roop Kanwar's continued existence could have been undesirable to her in-laws.

The aftermath of the incident

The *sati* on September 4 provoked sharp criticism from women's organisations in Rajasthan, who sent a delegation of representatives to Chief Minister Harideo Joshi on September 6 to demand action against the offenders and to stop the *chunri mahotsav*, scheduled for the 13th day after the incident, from taking place.

All attempts to secure a response from the state government having failed, the women's organisations filed a writ petition in the High Court seeking a ban on the function. This unprecedented move resulted in an order on September 14 which directed the state government to prevent the glorification of *sati* in the form of any public function.

By this time, the state was polarised into groups opposing and supporting *sati*. The *chunri mahotsav* was held on September 16 on a lavish scale, two hours ahead of schedule, to pre-empt any police action. The precaution was, however, unnecessary since police action was confined to distributing pamphlets informing people of the High Court's ban order.

On September 17, the Union Minister of State for Home, P. Chidambaram's arrival in Jaipur and his condemnation of the event, galvanised the state government into action. On September 19, six persons were arrested in connection with the

incident, including Sumer Singh and his two sons.

This, coupled with the court ban, agitated the Rajput lobby which began mobilising popular sentiment in favour of *sati*. The Dharam Raksha Samiti, formed a few days later, sought to combat any legislation to ban *sati* and its glorification.

Role of women's organisations

Organised protests by women's organisations catapulted the issue into public focus. Hemlata Prabhu, general secretary of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, PUCL (Rajasthan), and former principal of Canodia College, Jaipur, said, "Seven of us from various women's organisations went to meet the CM on September 6. He was indifferent to what we told him and was rather brusque. When we inquired whether any arrests would be made, he merely said, '*Main behes nahin karna chahata hoon*' (I don't want to debate on this), and rang the bell to call the next delegation in." The women's organisations sent telegrams to the prime minister and Minister of State for Women's Welfare, Margaret Alva, who later promised to intervene in the matter.

The women's organisations were the only ones to raise a voice of protest against the incident. "There was complete unanimity amongst both the opposition and the ruling party that the matter should be ignored. We felt totally isolated in our opposition to the act," said Prabhu. They then decided to lead a procession to the Secretariat. Nearly 300 women from 11 different organisations led a *morcha* (protest demonstration) on September 14.

"The CM," said Prabhu, "was in town but not in his office. The home minister was out of town. Not a single minister or deputy minister was present in the Secretariat. It seemed as if everyone had run away. We waited for half an hour before the CM's secretary turned up and then handed in our memorandum."

In view of the government's apathetic attitude, the women's organisations decided to go to court. Following a public interest writ filed by Dr. Renuka Pamecha, a division bench of the Rajasthan High Court ordered that 'the state government must ensure that no public function is held which may have the effect of glorifying the institution of *sati*.' The order was delivered on September 14 and amounted to a virtual ban on the *chunri mahotsav* scheduled for September 16.

Prabhu avered that it was only after the arrival of Union Minister Chidambaram and the chairperson of the Central Social Welfare Board, Sasmita Srivastava, that people in political circles began speaking out against *sati*. Despite the 'sympathetic hearing' that Chidambaram gave the women's organisations, his lack of understanding of the situation in Deorala was obvious from his criticism of women's organisations for not having visited Deorala immediately after the *sati* took place.

In fact, this criticism has been echoed by different sections. Prabhu said that at the time, the situation was a law and order one and not one which voluntary organisations could or should have tackled. The state government consistently buckled under pressure from the Rajput lobby. The ban order for the *chunri mahotsav* could have

been made far more effective by the simple expedient of imposing section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code and sealing entry and exit points into and out of the village.

Women activists also questioned the reluctance of the police to open fire against the assembled crowds – an excuse cited time and again as a reason for not stopping people who flocked to the village. However, in several other instances in the past, police have not hesitated to resort to indiscriminate firing to disperse people. The activists conclude that the reluctance of the police was partisan and reflected an unhealthy bias.

According to most people in Jaipur, including journalists, officials and politicians, the strong protest by women's organisations had blown the issue out of all proportion. Police felt that the matter was a routine crime and would be investigated as such. Officials and politicians felt that the High Court ban would only serve to antagonise the Rajput lobby and compound the problem.

Not surprisingly, the harshest criticism of the role of women's organisations came from the Rajput lobby. Addressing a crowd of about 2,000 Rajputs in Deorala on September 27, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Om Prakash Gupta referred to the women activists as *bazaari aurate* (street women) who were unmarried and would remain so. "How could these women know about *pativrata* or the desire to commit *sati?*" he asked.

The activists have also been accusingly labelled as women with no respect for the Hindu religion, with 'Western' ideologies and loose morals who frequented clubs, drank, and lived in Jaipur in air-conditioned houses. "They could barely tolerate the heat of the sun; how would they then stand near a pyre, let alone experience the burning of a woman committing *sati?*" asked Gupta.

These sentiments were echoed by other Rajput leaders in more or less the same terms. The effects of this vicious slander campaign were more than evident in Deorala where there was great hostility towards women activists. The team was repeatedly asked whether it represented any women's organisation.

The most telling evidence of this hostility was the reaction of a section of women who *gheraoed* two members of the team. They insisted that the members were participants of a procession in Delhi opposed to *sati*. "We saw you on television. Why do you come repeatedly to our village and take photographs?" they questioned angrily. Later, they spoke contemptuously of *'sheherki aurate'* (city women) who, they said, had no morals. "*Hum sheher ki auraton ko pani bhi nahi denge,*" (We won't give city women anything, not even water) they said.

While there are many women activists who would like to go to the village and mobilise opinion among women against *sati*, it would be a mammoth task to break this barrier of hostility and propaganda. Apart from the fact that the men in the village simply won't allow anyone from 'outside' to talk to the women, there is also an alarming amount or pressure being exerted on the women's organisations by the state government. A number of women's organisations work on projects funded by the government or are teaching in various colleges

in the state. There is an unspoken threat that more vociferous action on the issue of *sati* will effectively jeopardise other projects – for instance, the Rajasthan University Women's Association which tackles the issue of dowry deaths and complaints of harassment.

State inaction

It was only after various women's organisations filed a writ in the Rajasthan High Court seeking a ban on the *chunri mahotsav* that Chief Minister Harideo Joshi made an appearance on television to condemn the incident. This statement, made 11 days after the incident, was the first public condemnation of the *sati* to be made by any politician, from either the ruling party or the opposition.

Until then, to all events and purposes, *sati*, for the government, was a normal occurrence and its glorification was part of Rajput culture. In fact, the Rajput lobby was already gathering support against the ban and the arrests of the accused in connection with the incident. The state government's policy of indifference was actually a feeble attempt at self-preservation and the only 'official' reaction to the incident was the appointment of a magisterial inquiry.

What confused people even more was the CM's statement that Roop Kanwar committed *sati* voluntarily. Whether it was an attempt to condone the murder of Roop Kanwar is another matter, but officials believe that the CM had obtained some confidential information indicating that the *sati* was voluntary.

However, when our team met Joshi on September 29, he denied ever having said that the *sati* was voluntary. "Naresh Chandra Chaturvedi has put words into my mouth," he said, referring to the All India Congress Committee (Indira) [AICC(I)] general secretary's statement. "It is not right for me to comment on whether the *sati* was voluntary or not," he added. "The system of *sati* was a barbaric one and is out-moded. We don't approve of it," he declared.

His second-in-command in the ministry, Home Minister Gulab Singh Shekawat was touring drought-affected areas at the time of the incident. He claimed that he received information about the incident on September 7/8 and immediately ordered an investigation.

In contrast to the criticism voiced by Union Minister Chidambaram of the government's stand on *sati* and its inept handling of the situation, AICC(I) general secretary Naresh Chandra Chaturvedi maintained that there was no way the *chunri mahotsav* could be stopped in deference to the High Court ban. "Rajput sentiments are very strong and must be changed. From the prime minister right down to the smallest Congress worker, all are against the practice," he said.

What Chaturvedi did not mention was that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi responded to the incident only on September 27, in the form of a letter to the Rajasthan CM. Union Minister for Civil Aviation Jagdish Tytler, who is the minister-in-charge of Rajasthan, is yet to make any statement on the

issue. Likewise, Sikar and Jhunjhunu Parliamentary representatives, Lok Sabha Speaker Balram Jakhar (Sikar constituency) and Union Home Minister Buta Singh (Jhunjhunu).

Chaturvedi stressed that there was no moral compulsion on CM Harideo Joshi to resign from his post and took great pains to clarify that no Congress MLA had gone to Deorala for a *darshan*, as was reported in the local papers. Law Secretary S.R. Bansal said that the Abolition of Sati Act, 1829, banning *sati* was only a regulation passed by the East India Company. It could not apply in the present case, he said. Nevertheless, the accused in the present instance were booked under Section 302 and 306 of the IPC.

Speaking of the possible ban on the construction of temples commemorating *satis*, Bansal was sceptical. "How can the government enforce a ban against this when the government itself is a party to it? The state's biggest *sati* temple built in memory of Rani Sati, a widow of the Agarwal caste who is said to have committed *sati* in the 14th century is in Jhunjhunu. People come from all over the area and the government has stalls in the *mela* (fair) held every August. The government also declares a holiday on those days and collects taxes from the sale of goods in the stalls and government transport is provided to and from Jhunjhunu," he explained.

Another official maintained, "It would be difficult for the government to pretend that it is above such religious rites and rituals. After all, isn't it the same government which held a *havan* (religious ceremony) at a cost of thousands of rupees to invoke rains and bring relief to the drought-affected? Needless to add, the rains failed once again in Rajasthan."

An official spokesperson for the Rajasthan Government told the team that there were three factors which helped blow the issue out of all proportion. The first, was the media, particularly **The Times of India** and **Navbharat Times,** both new newspapers in Jaipur and keen to boost their circulation figures. The papers, he felt, went into great and unnecessary detail about the preparations for the *chunri mahotsav*. The second reason was the influence of former Union Finance and Defence Minister, V.P. Singh, who was attempting to make inroads into Rajasthan. The state had been free of communal disharmony and during his tour of the state, V.P. Singh had been unsuccessful in creating a base. The Rajputs in the state belonged to the BJP, the Janata Party, the Congress(I) and Lok Dal – a need was felt to unite them. This incident of *sati* (considered a religious Rajput rite and any action against it being deemed as interference) was an ideal opportunity to unite the Rajputs. He also pointed out that V.P. Singh, himself a Rajput, has yet to make a statement condemning *sati*.

The third factor that contributed to aggravating the issue was the action taken by the High Court in banning the *chunri* ceremony. The spokesperson felt that the judiciary is 'publicity oriented'. Other officials said that the adverse publicity in the foreign media which portrayed Rajasthan as a 'barbaric' state, was a matter of concern. A political bureaucrat commented, "*Sati* will not stop because media attention is received or

High Court orders banning *mahotsavs* are delivered."

It is pertinent that Raj Kumar, an Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officer, appointed by the state government to investigate the matter, had not commenced work much after the appointment. Kumar, who told the team that he was expected to deliver his report by the end of October, replied in the negative when asked if he would meet Roop Kanwar's family or her in-laws.

The terms of reference of his inquiry are limited to ascertaining the following: Did the district administration and police have prior information of the incident? Did they take adequate measures to prevent it? Did any district officials fail to inform the police about it? Could the incident have been prevented if the district administration had taken timely measures? And finally, suggestions that could be implemented to ensure the prevention of such incidents in the future.

Kumar's inquiry has been viewed with great scepticism in the government and public circles of Rajasthan. A member of the ruling party observed, "Kumar's inquiry will whitewash the entire episode. These officers sign any papers put in front of them. So what kind of investigation will he conduct?"

There has been considerable criticism about the inaction of the police in enforcing the ban on the *chunri mahotsav*. There was quite simply a lacuna, deliberate or otherwise, in the law enforcers' understanding of the ban order. DSP Atre in Sikar said that the order was delivered to the police headquarters only on September 15. "By that time, at least 15,000 people had already gathered at the site. In addition, the High Court order was not really a ban on the ceremony; it only instructed the state government to discourage any glorification of *sati*. All we could do was to dissuade people from going to Deorala on September 16," he said.

Rajput fundamentalism

The divisions between the Rajputs supporting the *sati* and the women's organisations and others opposing it came into sharp focus on September 14. That is when a 300-strong *morcha* of women marched first to the Rajasthan Secretariat and then to the High Court, where they filed a writ petition seeking a ban on the *chunri mahotsav*.

The courtroom that day was full of Rajputs and the atmosphere was charged with tension. While the ban order enraged the Rajput lobby, what added fuel to the fire were the arrests of Roop Kanwar's father-in-law and brothers-in-law. Prominent leaders of the Rajput community spoke out against the ban and arrests: "How can the High Court ban a ceremony which is purely a family rite?" they asked. "Roop Kanwar committed *sati* voluntarily; why should her family be arrested? This is total interference in our religious rites," they claimed.

In the eyes of the Rajput Sabha, *sati* is a courageous act and an intrinsic part of Rajput culture. The procession of 1,000 sword-wielding Rajput youth who marched to Raj Bhavan during Union Minister P Chidambaram's visit was aimed at stating clearly

that *sati* is a religious ritual, that they had the freedom to practise it and to build temples to commemmorate it, that no one could stop them.

Members of the Rajput lobby state that women from other communities, too, have committed *sati*. But the incidence of *sati* amongst Rajputs is much greater than that in other communities. The force of Rajput sentiment on this issue was obvious from the first public meeting of the Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti – at Deorala on September 27.

Members of the Samiti, the convenor of which is Narendra Singh Rajawat, include leading members of the Rajput community and prominent leaders of political parties.

The most prominent of them is Kalvi, who made conflicting statements on the issue. "I am against *sati* as a practice. It should be punished as suicide. But, once it is done, what is the point of harassing innocent people? Again, once it is committed, there are certain rites which must be done. No one can interfere with these rites," he said.

In Kalvi's opinion, there is no law to prevent *sati* and since there have been, according to him, only 22 incidents of *sati* since Independence, there is no need for legislation to prevent it.

BJP Leader Hukum Singh and Lok Dal leaders Jai Singh and Chan Singh Pradhan spoke in glowing terms of the tradition of *sati* at the meeting in Deorala, and termed as 'police atrocities' the arrests of villagers as witnesses to the crime. They also expressed their determination to go ahead with plans to build a temple at the site. The views of other leaders also illustrate the prevailing Rajput sentiment:

Om Prakash Gupta (BJP): A *sati* temple will be built at the site. It will be elaborate and beautiful. Any disruption in our plans to build a temple will be an insult to the Hindu religion. Raja Rammohun Roy opposed forcible *sati*. In this case, it was a manifestation of the goddess. Roop Kanwar was a woman of extraordinary powers. She could not be stopped.

Bhagirath Singh Shekawat (High Court advocate): Which law prevents *sati* in this country? The Indian Penal Code talks of suicide or murder. This falls in neither category. Deorala is no longer a village. It has become a *devgaon* (village of god). Every village should have a *sati* and a temple to commemorate it. The government cannot afford to antagonise the Rajputs. If they do so, they will turn 80 per cent of the country's armed forces against them. As it is, the Sikhs have revolted. We will create a Punjab-like situation in Rajasthan if the Government interferes any further. Repeat these slogans after me, *Desh dharm ka nata hai, sati hamari mata hai.* (It is a relation between the state and religion, *sati* is our mother.)

Thakur Omkar Singh (IAS Officer): There have been no complaints by Rajput women about *sati*. In fact, they worship *sati mata*. Why is there so much noise about it now? In Rajasthan, there is no case for the abolition of *sati*, because there have been only 22 cases

of *sati* since Independence. If you want to discourage women from committing *sati*, educate them. But there are instances of educated women committing *sati*, too. A lecturer in Bhilwara committed *sati*. In my opinion, the problem is a minor one. In any case, just one instance of *sati* has gone up to the High Court stage, since people are not prepared to give evidence. In Rajasthan, there is rich poetry and literature in praise of *sati*. I think people would be interested.

Narendra Singh Rajawat (convenor of the Samiti): It is the press which is responsible for trying to degrade this. It has forced the government to get really active in this matter. *Sati* is a practice derived from Lord Shiva. In Rajasthan, it was never a practice, never forced. There are very rare cases when the *sat* came to a woman. What is *sat?* It is a supernatural force which comes out of dedication, devotion and attachment in absolute terms. It is not like *nirvana* but close to it. It implies total attachment. There are instances of even mothers committing *sati* on the pyres of their sons. The Samiti will be looking into various aspects of *sati* and will be in the forefront of all arrangements regarding the manner in which the temple must be built and the proceeds towards it managed.

Sati among the Rajputs

Rajputs believe that *sati* is not a *pratha* (practice) in Rajasthan. In Deorala, Rajputs who congregated at the *sati sthal* stressed that *sati* was forced on women in Bengal. Raja Rammohun Roy had to start a movement to abolish forced *sati* but, in their state, *sat* was a voluntary act, performed by women who possessed great courage and valour.

Rajputs draw allegories between the deaths of their soldier-sons on the battlefield and the deaths of Rajput women on their husbands' funeral pyres. Death on the battlefield is considered very glorious for a Rajput male; and a woman, considered lower caste, can attain salvation and be born a Rajput male in her next birth if she attains the glorious death of a *sati*.

The practice of *sati* is not confined to Rajasthan. Recent instances have been recorded in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh earlier. In fact, the earliest *sati* memorial is in Eran, near Sagar in Madhya Pradesh, which carries a date corresponding to 510 A.D. The Kachchawa ruler who came there in the tenth century A.D. followed the custom of the Minas who ruled the area before that time. The Minas trace their descent from the King of Virat and his brother-in-law, Kichaka, who, on making advances to Draupadi, was killed by Bhima (one of the five Pandavas). Kichaka's wives committed *sati* and the incident is recorded in the **Mahabharata.**

The Rajputs also quote the example of Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva, who immolated herself in a fit of anger while her husband was alive.

There are numerous instances of *sati* committed by the wives of the rulers of Jai-

pur and Amber. The Chittor *satis*, most notably Padmini, have become legends. There is one recorded instance of a male committing *sata*, when Vir Bhan Nazir, the attendant of Sawai Jagat Singh, ruler of Jaipur, died on the funeral pyre of his master on December 21, 1819.

When the British East India Company regulation, the Abolition of Sati Act, 1829, was passed in Bengal, attempts were made to adopt the regulation in other states. But given the political configurations of the time, with the native states fiercely protecting their customs, little headway was made in this direction. The first princely state to adopt the regulation was Jaipur. Other states followed in 1844, Mewar held out till 1860. The practice persisted but only declined in frequency. While it slowly died out in other parts of Rajasthan, the Shekawati region continued to record instances of *sati* in the early 20th century leading to Independence but, in the last 40 years, there has been an alarming increase in the incidence of *sati* in this region.

The Shekawati region comprises three districts: Churu, Sikar and Jhunjhunu. Notified as a backward area, it is predominantly desert land, receives little rainfall and it has no industries (major or minor). The majority of the population is Rajput. The land is divided into small *jagirs* given to soldiers and local chieftains by grateful rulers. Shekawat Rajputs do not follow the principle of primogeniture; land is therefore divided amongst all the sons. Pre- and post-Independence India saw a further breakup of these *jagirs* as poverty forced Rajputs to sell their land.

There are now more than 36,000 small *jagirdars* who have been reduced to dire poverty. Lack of employment in the region has contributed to mass migration. Recruitment into the armed forces from these districts continues to be among the highest in the country.

This is also the region from where owners of some of India's big business houses hail. The Goenkas, Birlas, Somanis, Pittis, Modis, Jains, Podars and others come from this area. Business houses have reportedly ploughed large sums of money into the Rani Sati temple which collects more than Rs one lakh per month and an estimated Rs 50 lakh in August, during the *melas*. Significantly, the temple was built only after Independence, though the *sati* it commemmorates dates back to the 14th century.

Elaborate explanations are given for the phenomenon of *sat* which is supposed to be attained by a woman before she becomes a *sati*. *Sat* is believed to be a supernatural force which sends the woman into a trance-like state: her eyes bulge, her body burns to the touch. No woman in this state should be dissuaded from her chosen path, say villagers fervently. They believe that if they do she may curse them. A woman in this state is considered very powerful and capable of destroying anyone in her path.

In the case of Roop Kanwar, [illegible] say that a police party [illegible] reach the village [illegible] to stop the event because the girl's *sat* resulted in the police vehicle having an

accident en route. We found that the accident happened to the vehicle which brought Maal Singh's body back to Deorala, not to the police jeep.

A paper, entitled *Sati: An Unchanging Practice In A Changing World*, by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, investigates the incident of the *sati* of Om Kanwar in Jhadli Village in August 1980. The two *satis* of Om and Roop Kanwar reveal interesting parallels. Om, a 16-year-old Shekawat Rajput, was married to Ram Singh, a truck driver in Bombay. On his death six months after marriage, the girl took a sudden decision to commit *sati*. The entire village participated and the event was witnessed by thousands from surrounding areas. Although the police were informed, they reached the place too late to stop the *sati*. The ashes were guarded for 13 days by armed volunteers, the *chunri mahotsav* was performed, and a trust was formed to build a temple and *dharamshala* at a site carefully chosen so that it is accessible by road. The authors made pertinent observations about the fall-out of the incident. Om Kanwar's father-in-law, Richpal Singh, feels completely neglected by the committee formed to manage the temple to be built in Om's memory. The village catapulted to fame following the incident and witnessed immediate prosperity. Annual *melas* held in Jhadli net good revenue for the villagers.

In Deorala, also, the village is witness to the same kind of prosperity. According to reports, usually for one year following the incident, a great deal of money pours in. In Sikar district, there has been an average of one *sati* a year. Three *sati* attempts have been made since 1981 but they were all prevented by the police. In one such instance, a woman in Devipura, barely two kilometres away from Deorala, tried to commit *sati* after her husband died. On hearing of it a police officer rushed to the spot. A crowd had already assembled and there seemed no way she could be stopped. The officer then told the woman and villagers that, by custom, a woman sets herself on fire automatically and that no one must help her or light the pyre for her.

She was put on the pyre and the village waited for two hours for the 'miracle' to occur. At the end of the two hours, the police officer made her descend the pyre and took her into custody. Let off after a warning, the woman now lives in a makeshift temple in Devipura and is revered by all as a *zinda sati* (living *sati*). She lives on fruits and honey only and her very life is considered a miracle!

At the root of traditions such as *sati* is the question of the status of women. The treatment meted out to widows in Rajasthan is a major factor underlying the phenomenon of *sati*. Sudha Raina, general secretary of the Mahila Congress, explained that for a Rajput widow, life was as good as over. Widows are expected to sleep on the floor, avoid eating meat and eschew dressing in certain colours. They must be up before the family and sit away from everyone at all functions. They have to tolerate advances from male members of

the family and, if a relationship develops, it has to be entirely clandestine.

The high rate of illiteracy has also been a factor in the perpetuation of tradition. Rajasthan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the country. Although Rajput women are now being allowed to attend school, they are pulled out if any incident takes place which elders feel might corrupt them.

According to Mamta Jaitley, a worker with the Information Development and Resource Agency for Women, atrocities on women, specially within the family, are rarely reported. She is of the opinion that an atmosphere must be created where the free discussion of such issues is possible.

Conclusions

In the ongoing uproar over Roop Kanwar's *sati*, two or three points are constantly debated: whether or not it was a 'voluntary' *sati*, whether or not *sati* is sanctioned by religion and therefore protected by the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution, and whether or not the state has a right and/or a responsibility to prevent the commission and/or glorification of *sati*.

In our view, the debate over whether Roop Kanwar's death by *sati* was voluntary or not is both specious and irrelevant. Even if it is ultimately proved beyond doubt (as it has not been so far) that she herself expressed a desire to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband and that she went to her death willingly, without the use of force by anyone else, it must be remembered that she was a product of the society in which she grew up and lived.

In that society, and in much of Indian society, the status of women is so low that there is very little question of women exercising their free will in any aspect of their lives. As a university professor from Rajasthan, interviewed in a television programme on *sati*, pointed out, would Roop Kanwar or any other 18-year-old girl like her have been allowed to 'voluntarily' choose her own husband or elect to work or opt for remarriage?

Indeed, are the majority of women in India free to choose what they will do from day to day, whether or not to study, whether or not to get married, whether or not to seek employment, whether or not to have children, whether or not to give birth to female children, whether or not to shoulder the entire burden of domestic work singlehandedly, whether or not their daughters will go to school? Seen in this context, the arguments put forward by defenders of this practice of a woman's right to exercise her own free will to commit *sati* stand exposed.

In addition to the general oppression of women and their lack of choice in most aspects of their lives, there is the factor of the cruel treatment meted out to widows in many parts of the country—this is certainly so in Rajasthan and in the Rajput community. The pathetic status of widows and the special tortures (psychological and physical) devised to torment them for the rest of their lives have their roots in the belief that a woman can

have no life unless she is attached to a man; after marriage, this man is the husband and when he dies, she is as good as dead, whether or not she remains alive.

Under the circumstances, if a woman thinks that immediate death by *sati* is preferable to a prolonged absence of life, and acts upon this conviction, it can hardly be seen as an exercise of free will. A choice can be made only between viable alternatives; for many widows and, indeed, for many women, there are no alternatives.

Sati must also be seen in the context of all the other traditions, attitudes and practices which continue to oppress women in 20th century India. Ghastly and barbaric as it is, the practice of *sati* must be seen in its place at one end of a continuum of oppression.

The gruesome aspect of this particular crime against women has aroused public sentiment against the practice, just as another particularly nauseating form of violence against women, bride burning, has received public attention and condemnation. But it must be remembered that female foeticide (encouraged by new medical technology), the criminal neglect of female children (which often leads to fatal under-nourishment), the neglect of women's health throughout their lives, the inhuman over-burdening of women with the hard labour of so-called domestic work, the widespread incidence of domestic violence, the increasing number of female-headed households, an increasing number of which are impoverished and so on, are equally important and serious issues, with tragic consequences for women and society.

Apart from all this, even from a strictly legalistic point of view, Roop Kanwar did not kill herself. As a legal activist has pointed out, her death cannot be described as a case of suicide because when a person commits suicide, it is generally done in private and in solitude. Certainly nobody helps him or her do the deed and anybody who does is culpable under law—being guilty either of murder or of abetment to murder or of abetment to suicide.

In Roop Kanwar's case, hundreds of people actively took part in arranging for her death and then watched her die without trying to save her, without even informing the police, who may have been able to prevent her death. And, certainly, someone lit the pyre. In our view, therefore, Roop Kanwar was murdered.

The inaction of the police deserves special mention. Even though they arrived on the scene when the pyre was still burning, they refrained from doing anything more than register a First Information Report (FIR). They made no attempt to collect on-the-spot, eye-witness accounts. Their failure to do so has complicated the task of establishing what exactly happened.

The indifference of the state and central governments must also be placed on record. Not only did the authorities in Rajasthan ignore the incident for several days, but they did not go out of their way to see that the High Court order banning the *chunri mahotsav* was effectively executed.

Intimidated, obviously, by

the powerful Rajput lobby, the government has failed to check its rapidly pro-*sati* stance. It has also been singularly inactive about preventing worship at the *sati sthal* (site of the *sati*)—merely and belatedly rounding up a number of hawkers and imposing prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code around the village.

The rapid transfers of several local district officials, including the Collector, contributed to the breakdown of the administrative machinery and enabled the villagers to cash in on the situation.

We are convinced that the State—the government, the administration and the police—failed to carry out their duty in this matter. Further, politicians (belonging to both the ruling and the opposition parties, in Rajasthan as well as at the Centre), keeping a gimlet eye on electoral gains and losses, either steered clear of the whole issue as long as they could (e.g. Rajiv Gandhi, Harideo Joshi) or actively participated in ceremonies glorifying *sati* (e.g. Kalyan Singh Kalvi) and made provocative pronouncements about the freedom of religion and sanctity of religious practices.

Even the minister who holds the women's portfolio in the union government, Margaret Alva, was conspicuous by her absence in Rajasthan at a time when a burning women's issue was the talk of the state; she did not even issue any major statements on the subject. In fact, P Chidambaram, the union minister for home, who was sent to Rajasthan rather late in the day on a fact-finding mission, was the first central government spokesperson to speak out unequivocally against what happened in Deorala. Few have joined him since. Even though several union ministers, including Sheila Dixit and Rajendra Kumari Bajpai, came to Jaipur on the day of the anti-*sati* demonstrations in the city, they did not march with the demonstrators.

Does the state have a right and/or responsibility to get embroiled in matters of religion? As far as we are concerned, there are two answers to this question. First of all, historical and scriptural scholars are divided on the issue of whether *sati* has any origins in religion or is even sanctioned by religion. For every person who can quote the scriptures to support the practice, there is another who can produce scriptural and historical evidence to establish that it has no basis in religion and that opposition to *sati* does not imply criticism of any religion.

Secondly, no practice that is so cruel and inhuman can be defended on the ground that it has religious sanction; in such cases the sanctioning authority is irrelevant. For instance, the perpetrators of the Manwat murders claimed that their acts were sanctioned by religion—can we condone the killings on that ground? *Sati* is, without question, an abominable practice and a ghastly form of violence against women. And, whether or not it has its roots in religion, it must be effectively and totally abolished—as should other oppressive practices that may have the sanction of other religions.

The incident at Deorala and

its aftermath must be seen against the background of the rise of fundamentalism in India. The political scene in the country is increasingly being dominated and determined by fundamentalist forces in a variety of guises, who are constantly on the look-out for issues around which they can whip up public sentiment and thus garner support for their narrow causes and ends. *Sati* has provided Rajputs seeking to militantly reassert their community's identity with an ideal rallying cry—charged with emotion, laced with tradition and surrounded by religious mystique.

We think it is imperative to delink the issue of *sati* from religion so that women are not sacrificed at the altar of communalism, as they have been in the past. It is necessary to ask why women must pay—often with their lives—for their communities' search for identities.

Two further points need to be made. First, the fact that a *sati* can be used, as it has in the case of Roop Kanwar's *sati*, to generate a great deal of money and to revitalise the economy of a village or a district (a sum of over Rs 30 lakh was collected shortly after Roop Kanwar's death for the construction of a temple in her memory which will, in turn, generate more money) is cause for concern.

The sudden prosperity witnessed by Deorala after the incident could trigger off a dangerous trend, with more women being 'allowed' or 'persuaded' to commit *sati* for the greater glory and profitability of their villages and families. Such a conclusion is not as far-fetched as it may appear. Already, there has been a report of a woman in Hardas Ka Bas village, near Deorala, being persuaded to immolate herself. This happened on September 24 and she was reportedly told: "*Apne gaon mein abhi tak sati nahin hui. Tum sati ban jao.*" (So far there has been no *sati* in our village. You become a *sati.*")

At a meeting of the Dharam Raksha Samiti in Deorala, a leading member of the Rajput community said that every village must have a *sati* and a temple to commemorate it. One of the most disturbing fall-outs of the incident has been the revival of *sati* as an honourable tradition by very strong, vocal segments of the Rajput community, led by prominent religious and political leaders.

Second, since it has been repeatedly said that education holds the key to the solution of such problems, we feel it is necessary to question whether the kind of 'education' being purveyed by our formal system of schooling can bring about or even contribute to real social change. The evidence suggests that the general contention that incidents of this sort occur because of lack of education in the formal sense of the term is baseless.

In this case, for example, Roop Kanwar was educated, city-bred and affluent; her husband, his father and several members of his family are also educated. The village is a prosperous one—it has two schools, including one for girls, and an adult education cell. Many houses boast television sets and radios. On the other hand, female literacy in the state is about 11 per cent

and, in the rural areas, it is just four per cent. In the Rajput milieu, although women are allowed to go to school, the *purdah* system still prevails and the parametres of women's freedom, such as it is, are clearly laid out. They are certainly not allowed to work and widow remarriage is not permitted.

In such a situation, it is significant that at a meeting of rural women, organised by women's organisations at the Sikar district headquarters on September 27, village women stated emphatically that they do not believe in *sati*. They categorically said that they had no wish to burn themselves alive under any circumstances.

However, the experiences of women's organisations in Deorala draw attention to the kind of hostility, antagonism and sheer fanaticism that is awakened when any issue which concerns women and is, at the same time, even slightly religious in nature is sought to be touched upon. The task of separating religious tradition from a social evil is a mammoth one and often diverts attention from the basic problem at hand.

The press has played an important role, both in positive and negative ways, in its coverage of the incident. Our analysis of the reportage connected with Roop Kanwar's death and its aftermath is presented in the section on the media.

Review of Press Coverage

The media has played a major role not only in the reporting of the Deorala incident but also in generating and sustaining debate on the issue. The first reports of the incident appeared in the Hindi dailies of Rajasthan, *Rajasthan Patrika* and *Rashtradoot*. Within days of Rook Kanwar's gruesome death, the issue had become something of a cause celebre for the Rajput community, a touchstone for strengthening their communal identity and extending their political influence. And this development cut across political affiliations as well as all levels of government.

Not surprisingly, media reports are a confusing mixture—facts are interspersed with folklore, and myth and reality often merge. And the focus of the issue, which is the burning alive of a woman on the funeral pyre of her husband, has tended to get blurred. The question is not whether a religion sanctions the act or not, but how this act reflects the status of women.

The Women and Media Committee views the issue primarily as a women's issue and hence a human rights issue. We have reviewed media reporting of Roop Kanwar's *sati* and its aftermath from this perspective.

Specifically, we have examined the coverage by the English, Hindi and the Marathi press.

English Language Press

This section deals with the following English language papers: *The Times of India, The Indian Express, Free Press Journal, The Indian Post, The Daily*

(all from Bombay). Of those published outside Bombay, we monitored *The Hindustan Times*, *The Statesman* (Calcutta), *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), *The Hindu* (Madras) and *Deccan Herald* (Bangalore).

The first reports of the event began to appear within the week. Among the earliest to carry detailed feature reports was *The Telegraph* (September 11). Later came reports in *The Indian Post*, (September 13/15), *Indian Express*, *The Times of India* (September 17). Papers from the south in general, gave very poor coverage to the events, most of them carrying agency reports. The earliest photograph to appear in this section of the press was of a smiling Roop Kanwar, as a bride. All of these carried editorials on the event. But curiously, although the event became a public issue after the Rajasthan women went in a procession to the chief minister (after their futile attempts to persuade him to arrest the culprits and condemn the event), none of the papers reported the event at length. Media coverage really began to build up at about the time of the *chunari* ceremony. The manner in which this event which took place despite a Rajasthan high court order forbidding it, has been reported in the media reveals its inherent biases. Again, while all papers carried reports originating from Deorala, generally a mish-mash of descriptions, speculations about what really happened on September 4 and villagers' reactions, there were comparatively few reports about the protests following the event.

The media also devoted a lot of space to generating discussion on two issues related to the incident of *sati* whether Roop Kanwar committed *sati* voluntarily or not, and whether *sati* was sanctioned by the scriptures. We consider both these as being peripheral to the issue in so far as they have no bearing on our standpoint which is that the event is yet another atrocity perpetrated on women. And yet, these two debates do have some relevance in mobilising opinion on the matter.

Head Lines and Layouts

These two aspects of media coverage play an important role in opinion formation among readers. Headlines get quoted in general conversation and, because of constant repetition, became the means of crystallising social consciousness about happenings.

Moreover in the day-to-day reporting it is often impossible, and certainly difficult to comment on any event in the course of a report. The headline and the layout play an important role in conveying the comment and the perspective on the report.

The Telegraph feature report on *sati* sported large two-column headline simply entitled '*sati*'. The report also carried a photograph of Roop Kanwar and her husband on their wedding day. The report appeared on September 11, when the atmosphere was already growing tense and the process of glorification had already begun. In the circumstances, it is questionable whether a non-committal headline such as this is really so, especially when the report itself, as most others of the time, carries one version of the account of what actually happened on September 4 and a short conversation with Roop's father.

A reputed morninger like *The Times of India*, enjoying a wide circulation, carried its first news-report on its front page on

September 17 under the apparently innocuous headline 'sati rituals observed'. This newspaper, which otherwise carried minimal details of the incident in terms of news and information carried two subsequent reports dated September 20 and October 13 respectively, headlined: 'Deorala finds place on the religious map' and 'Steps Against Sati in Deorala Unwise'. Both these headlines just cannot be seen as neutral, or non-commital, especially when read with the reports that follow. But even read by themselves, both create an immediate impact of a certain kind on the minds of the reader and hence the motive cannot be seen as being above board.

One more example in the same publication of this kind of headline is the one that appeared on October 3, 'Suicide by Roop's husband suspected'. Even a cursory reading reveals how an insignificant detail contained in the report finds a mention in the heading. A large part of the report deals with the progress of the police investigation following the *sati* and the lead they are following; important pieces of information not having received much publicity before are listed such as the fact that the police inquiry has conclusively established that Roop Kanwar did try to escape and that were logs of wood stacked up to her neck, that the police are trying to find out why Roop left her husband on the evening of September 3 and returned to Deorala, driven by Dr Magan Singh; that the police were investigating the possibility of Magan Singh having administered a drug to Roop on September 4; the evasive attitude of the father-in-law, and so on. All this is contained in the same report. Why then the rather sensational headline?

At this point we would again like to stress the almost total silence in this section of the media about the Rajasthan women's efforts to get the government to publicly condemn the event. On September 14 *The Telegraph* carried a one column short news item titled 'Rajasthan orders probe into *sati*' which mentions the statements of the women's groups, but the main focus of the report is on the probe ordered and on the prime minister's statements.

This is a typical reaction of the press—to give greater weightage to what the government (or the judiciary) or the establishment says, rather than to actions and statements of people's groups/movements, unless, of course, they have become big enough for the government to have noticed them.

All the three outstation papers that we monitored—*The Statesman*, *The Telegraph* and *The Hindustan Times* used headlines which were either non-commital or mildly condemnatory of the *chunari* ceremony. *The Hindustan Times*, for instance, stated '*Festive Chunari* veils monstrous deed' in a four column headline. *The Telegraph*, again carrying a photograph of Roop in her wedding attire, displayed a four-column headline, '*Sati's* village defies govt., 2 lakh at function'. While the HT headline immediately conjures up a picture of the horrifying cover-up of a crime by festivities, *The Telegraph* is less categorical. It may be argued that there is a general, if understated admiration for acts that defy a government directive. The headline, in a sense, expresses his sneaking sympathy and admiration for those who defied the government orders.

The prize for the non-commital headline must surely go to *The Hindu* which, on September 30,

carried a long report commenting on the incident and the aftermath, titled 'Clumsy Handling of a Grave Situation'. This is a paper which had generally *played down* the incident. There is no indication in the headline of what the grave situation is and it is hardly enough to say that the government handling was merely clumsy. It was much worse.

The most effective and sharp headlines were in *Indian Express* and *The Indian Post*—'Making a Carnival of Murder' and 'Sati Gets New Life as Government Dithers' respectively on September 15. However, *The Indian Post* carried a report headlined, 'Village to Hail Sati'. The opening paragraph reads: "Roop Kanwar (who burnt herself in bridal make-up) has become a legend after committing *sati*, with an unending stream of devotees visiting the spot".

It is in the reporting of the protests against the event and people's reaction that the media's biases and entrenched opinions become very clear. Only on September 15 did *The Hindustan Times* carry a report entitled 'Plea to Ban 'Chunari Mahotsava', a one-column story fairly well-displayed, alongside a three-column story dubiously entitled 'Profitable Mela at Sati Spot'.

The Telegraph carried a report on the women's reaction to the *Jansatta* editorial, 'Women Protest Editoral on Sati', a short single column item. Even more strangely, only *The Hindustan Times* of September 22, published an item, 'Cops Cane Women in Anti-Sati Protest'. The report ran in two columns with the headline in fourlines single column. While there was mention of the incident, no paper carried a separate report or thought it deserved to be highlighted. Again it was *The Hindustan Times* which gave considerable prominence to the statements of the Joint Action Committee protesting against the *sati* in a four-column headline, 'Government Inaction on *Sati* Condemned' (September 20). This paper was also the only one which highlighted the activities of the fact-finding team of the joint action committee to Deorala and gave it a three column headline 'Abortive Mission to Deorala'. *The Hindustan Times* headlined a news item 'Pro-sati Youths Burn HT Copies', when the copies of the paper containing Sandhya Jain's reports casting doubts one whether the sati had been a voluntary act, were publicly burnt.

It is also interesting to note the manner in which statements by religious leaders, by ministers and politicians and by the governments were reported. We need to keep in mind here that most statements condemning the event issued by government and political leaders were after the *chunari* ceremony. *The Statesman* of September 26, carried a two-column headline 'Role of Press in Sati incident criticised'; which reported on comments by Congress(I) legislators about the women's protest and the role of the press in publicising the issue. The October 14 news item—a UNI report, is one example. Titled 'Rajasthan Orders Probe Into Sati' the five-paragraph report leads with the belated action taken by the state government, but its last three paragraphs are about protests by women activists. The report could well have had a different headline, especially given the fact that so little coverage had at that time been given to the significant role played by the Rajasthan women.

Similarly, *The Telegraph* of September 28 states 'PM: Sati National Shame' and carries a

PTI report on the statement. But, perhaps, the worst example of giving prominence to statements justifying *sati* is the one in *The Statesman* rephrasing a report originating from UNI, 'Puri Sankaracharya against anti-sati ordinance' under a four-column headline. Such prominence to statements by religious leaders is wholly unwarranted and misleading. There has, of course, been the inevitable debate in the press about the religious sanctions given to *sati*, particularly in the 'Letters' columns of various newspapers. Whatever the relevance of that, highlighting such statements by religious leaders who have a considerable following is to be criticised. While it is necessary to report statements, whether for or against, it is in the respective treatment they receive in the press which reflects the attitude of the press as well as contributes to the impact of that particular news item. In this case, none of the other papers, including *The Hindu* which, incidentally, devoted columns and columns earlier to the activities of the Kanchi Sankaracharaya, gave much importance to this statement. A headline which dwells on the 'who' rather than on the 'what' automatically gives importance to the 'who' rather than the 'what'. In other words, it is the obscurantist views of the religious head which should have been appropriately brought into focus.

Significantly, not one of the headlines even obliquely referred to this as a women's issue. Interestingly, an obscure newspaper with a very local readership like *The Indian Nation* headlined a UNI report which many other dailies had also incorporated in their reports thus: 'Sati System is Anti-Woman'.

Content of the Reports

It is the lead paragraph, together with the headline, which sets the tone of a news report. A comparison of the reporting of two incidents by different newspapers is telling.

The lead in the *Hindustan Times* of September 17: "Notwithstanding the directive of the Rajasthan High Court and the largescale protest of women's organisations, lakhs of people converged here to witness the *chunari* ceremony of 'Maha Sati' Roop Kanwar".

In *The Telegraph* of the same date: "At least two lakh men and women today witnessed the *chunari* ceremony of Roop Kanwar here, despite a high court ban order asking the State government not to permit any public function which may have the effect of "glorifying the institution of *sati*". Eighteen year old Roop, a higher secondary graduate who had married only eight months ago, performed *sati* in full view of hundreds of chanting, frenzied villagers here on September 4".

In striking contrast is this lead in *The Times of India* report of September 17 "Roop Kanwar joined the hallowed band of *satis* as her four brothers this morning offered bridal clothes at the *sati sthal*..." This is followed by a highly glamourised description of the entire ritual that amounts to nothing short of blatant glorification, with the use of phrases like Roop Kanwar "walking undaunted", "moving *chunari* ceremony" and the "significant last tribute of the brother to the sister's memory".

The differential impact of these reports hardly needs elaboration. In a situation so fraught with emotion, where the event is being rapidly communalised, it is im-

perative that the press take a committed stand on the issue. It is shocking that a national paper should carry a report which subtly glorified the event. It is, at the same time, highly commendable that the other dailies did report in the manner they did, reflecting an uncompromisingly condemnatory attitude.

The press has been guilty of 'glorifying' the event and the *chunari* ceremony, especially the *chunari* event perhaps unconsciously. For instance, the *The Hindustan Times* report of September 17, although it is headlined to convey horror at the event being allowed to take place, contains elements of 'glorification'. While it refers to the event as a 'macabre ceremony' which it was, the report also goes into some detail over descriptions of the event. The first impression it makes on a casual reader is that the scene, however macabre, was, in fact, grandly performed. Whether and to what extent the unseemly details of the ceremony should have been reported is open to question.

The report also illustrates the perhaps unconscious confusion between reporting events and conveying the myths surrounding them. For instance, the HT report states at one point after the description of the processsion: "It is said that the flames rose to kiss the *chunari*, without burning it. However, nothing was visible at a distance as the crowds had reached uncontrollable proportions". Quite clearly, this conveys the impression that because of the crowd the reporter could not check out the myth! Reporting the belief about the ceremony without pointing out the absurdity amounts to a reiteration and perpetuation of blind beliefs.

The Indian Express, Bombay, was the only publication among the dailies that saw the occasion fit and the issue serious enough to carry three editorials on September 14 and 19 and October 10. *The Times of India* was the only paper which did not carry on editorial until October 3.

Sunday Magazine Supplements

The distinction of making the first comment on *sati* in *The Times of India* pages went to Anees Jung in her article 'Risen From the Ashes of The Past' which appeared in the *Sunday Review* of September 27.

Jung appears to have let rhetoric take over at the expense of analysis. For instance, never does she even once speculate on whether Roop Kanwar committed *sati* on her own volition: "Roop Kanwar ceased being a mere Rajput girl. She was acclaimed a Goddess. Her husband had died. And she had chosen to burn herself with him, rise to being a *sati*".

Jung then went to quote a former Rajput prince on *sati*: "One cannot interpret it logically, but one does accept it as a supernatural force', he says. In his eyes I see more belief than disbelief... A true *sati* is one who died of her own volition. If the poor girl is doped or forced into the fire she is no *sati*. If she had power inside her, I would appreciate and commend it. It's not so easy to give up one's life..."

The prince's statements are presented to the reader without any qualifications or even attempts by the writer to present another point of view on the subject. If anything, her persuasive and somnolent prose could have had the effect of robbing readers of their critical faculties. We know for a fact that several otherwise discerning readers found the

article extremely good, and therein lay its harm.

Two weeks later, Jung was back with her 'Theme Song' (*Sunday Review*, October 11), bearing the title, 'Brief, Bright Burnings'. "If the ability to renounce is the state of *sati*, isn't every average woman in this country a *sati*? Living through the fires of her condition doesn't she understand the nature of life, learning the gift of giving and giving up? Shouldn't *sati* then be defined as saint in woman, one who is master of life, who has fulfilled her life's purpose, physical and spiritual, recognised life's totality in the process of bearing and rearing children and then chose the path of renunciation? For such physical immolation on the pyre of her husband is only one small aspect of renunciation. . ."

This strikes one as the most overt attempt to glorifying *sati* to appear in the English press even if her intentions were only to 'spiritualise' the miserable lives that many of her countrywomen lead. And one may add that writing such as this is just as damaging, as some of the reports that appeared in local Rajasthani newspapers glorifying sati. Perhaps even more so, because it has the veneer of sophisticated philosophising.

Inquiries at *The Times of India* revealed that the Delhi edition of the paper had carried Nikhil Chakravarthy's sharply-worded attack on the practice, but it was pulled out from the Bombay editions to make space for advertisements. For 3.1 lakh readers of the Bombay editions, it was indeed unfortunate that the better analysis was scuttled. One can only be grateful that, subsequently, the Sunday Review carried a report filed by Namita Sinha from Deorala (October 4) in which the writer took the effort to interview an activist of the Rajasthan University Women's Association and Kumkum Sangati's pertient critique of Rajput society—'There Is No Such Things As Voluntary Sati' (October 25).

At least two other Sunday magazines ran articles which came as a welcome contrast to Anees Jung's ramblings. *The Postscript* carried Smita Gupta's 'Widows Are Not For Burning' on October 4 and the *Express Magazine* of the same date had Kaplana Sharma's 'Sati Savitri Lives On'.

The Eveningers

Anmong the English eveningers printed from Bombay, *The Free Press Bulletin*, in a double centrespread on the incident on September 23, carried two interviews with Sumer Singh, Roop's father-in-law, and the Rajasthan Janata Party chief, Kalyan Singh Kalvi, under the headline, 'How could We Stop Her? The Spirit of Sati had Entered her' and 'The Law Cannot Ignore the Religious Sentiment of the People'.

Though the introduction to the first interview states that the father-in-law does not regret being part of the *chunari* ceremony and agreed to answer questions put by Mahesh Dagga only after he had been assured that he had come to pay homage to 'Mahasati Roop Kanwar', the interview itself does not deal in sufficient detail with why Roop's in-laws did not make a concerted effort to inform her parents of both the deaths.

In the course of the interview with Kalvi, it is clearly stated that he is one of the many politicians who violated party directives to attend the *chunari* ceremony. Not only does Kalvi clearly say that he would have attended the cere-

mony even if he were the state CM, but adds, "The law cannot go against the religious sentiment of the people". A feature published in the same publication bears the headline, 'Murder by Consent?'

Midday, another eveninger with minimal coverage on the entire issue and the aftermath, on September 18 carried a front page box (PTI) with the headline "Sati Homage Continues". The report that follows does not contain a single comment against the ugly glorification of the gruesome incident through the *chunari mahotsav* but, on the contrary, gives details about the belief that desires are fulfilled after a *darshan* of *sati* or a visit to the pyre.

In the coverage of the incident in *The Afternoon Despatch and Courier*, another eveninger from Bombay, a detailed news report of September 16 bears the headline 'Thousands gather for sati ceremony', with the following line 'Despite High Court Directive'. Another report in the same paper on September 17 goes under the headline 'Roop Kanwar turned into Mahasati'.

The eveninger also attempted to 'pretty-up' the issue as for example on September 18. The title, in flaming red to 'match' the colour pictures of Roop Kanwar (some of them manufactured by a clever photographer at Deorala) puns on the phrase "Dying Tradition". While writing her copy, the writer throws the restraint that marked her earlier reports to the wind. She was one of the few women reporters who were present at Deorala during the *chunari* ceremony and the mela-like ambience of this event seems to have robbed the writer of her own sense of balance. After describing the ceremony in a manner more suited to a tourist brochure, she ends her piece with a teaser about how she smuggled the colour photographs out of Deorala, despite attempts to stop her. This treatment reduces a story with such important social implications to routine human interest one.

How the Magazines Portrayed the Incident

THE magazine surveyed in this brief analysis included *Chitralekha; The Illustrated Weekly of India; Dharmayug; Dinman; Sunday; The Week; Eve's Weekly; Femina; Flair; Savvy; Women's Era; The Economic & Political Weekly.*

This list of magazine is by no means a comprehensive one. They are all published from urban centres—from Delhi and Bombay, to be precise. Regrettably, magazines published from Rajasthan didn't figure in our list. However, the Sunday magazine of the *Rajasthan Patrika*, dated September 20, entitled 'Ek Parikrama Sati-sthal Ki', with its blown-up photographs of Roop Kanwar and the sati sthal gave one an indication of local magazine coverage. Again, unfortunately, magazines in regional languages from the south and east did not figure in the list. It would have been interesting to find out how an issue that had lead story/cover story status in the north was presented to non-English speaking readers in, say, Cuttack or Trivandrum.

By its very nature, magazine journalism thrives on 'highlighting' issues. Editors can do this in various ways, and not just by using colours judiciously or laying out striking visuals. They have the advantage of having more space at their disposal and relatively more time to evolve a 'perspective' on the issue and/or

commission capable writers to contribute to their magazines. There is the added advantage that a magazine has a longer shelf-life than a newspaper. At the same time, since the story has already appeared and is appearing on a day-to-day basis in the newspapers, magazine editors have to come out with something *more*, something different.

In a number of instances, it is the pressure of the latter demand that results in the 'prettying up' of horrible incidents like the one that took place in Deorala.

The *Dinman* cover of October 24 a case in point. It had one of those fabricated colour photographs of Roop Kanwar with her husband's head on her lap superimposed on a background of flames. The highlight on the cover, which read, *Vidhwa Daah* (Window Burning), by being value neutral, in no way clarified the magazine's stand on the issue. In contrast, the story on the inside pages was more clearly headlined: *Roop Kanwar Ki Hatya* (Roop Kanwar's Murder).

Three other magazines we came across carried cover stories on the incident—*Chitralekha* of September 28; *The Week* of October 11 and *Dharmyug* of November 1. *The Week* and *Chitralekha* were the first to react to the incident. While their cover highlights did not take a strong position against the practice, the stories carried on the inside pages did. *Chitralekha* compared *sati* to bride-burning, while *The Week* had a good critique by Dev Dutt entitled, 'Custom-made Murder'. This was somewhat marred by a counterfeit photograph of a woman on a pyre bearing the offensive caption—'Soul-searing Act. A sati'.

The *Dharmyug* cover of November 1 had a photograph of an anti*sati* demonstration staged by the Lok Dal. The cover highlight read, 'Sati, Society, Sarkar: Kaun Kitna Zimedar?' (Sati, society, government: who bears how much responsibility?). Dharmyug had earlier, in its October 11 issue, carried two reports on the incident with a comment by Mrinal Gore severely condemning *sati*. Its November 1 cover feature, which included interviews with Karan Singh, Ashapoorna Devi, Vijayaraje Scindia and Sheila Dixit, had a strong anti-*sati* slant. Yet the editor felt constrained to lay out a 'pleasing' spread of colour pictures including the offensive, fabricated one that appeared on the *Dinman* cover (although, thankfully, the captions were in no way sensational). Also included were views of godmen, in favour of *sati*.

Here, a question arises: should this need to be 'fair' to both sides of an issue, traditionally seen as an important component of 'objective' journalism, figure in an issue like *sati*?

It would be pertinent here to refer to a highly self-contradictory interview with state Janata Party leader Kalyan Singh Kalvi that appeared in an otherwise good report on Rajput militancy filed by Inderjit Badhwar in *India Today* of October 31. We are not saying that such interviews should not be carried, or that the Shankaracharya's views should not be aired. But such interviews should be conducted so as to expose the speaker for what he is. Kalyan Singh Kalvi seemed to get away too easily with making outrageous statements in the interview with Inderjit Badhwar. We carry the last three questions and answers here to illustrate this point:

Q: You worship nari, but what if she is burned forcibly? Isn't that an assault on her?

A: Absolutely. We would consider someone forcing a woman to commit sati a heinous crime.
Q: But windows are mistreated and neglected.
A: I've always worked for the upliftment of women and have fought against the dowry system. I've supported women's education and widow welfare schemes.
Q: And, what about sati?
A: Beliefs are hard to kill. Some worship trees, others dogs as an avatar of Bahronji, rats in temples, and even donkeys.

It's hard to see why such an interview, which fails to confront Kalvi with the dire consequences of the issue at hand, was carried, even if it was done in the interests of 'fair' journalism.

A typical stylistic device that constantly set one's teeth on edge was the liberal use of puns. Time and again, terms like 'dying tradition'; "fiery end"; "burning issue", "glowing embers" crop up. Such expressions indicated how the people at the editorial desk worked to 'dress up' the incident in their attempts to make the feature more 'enjoyable' reading.

Similarly, one constantly came across references to Roop Kanwar's youth and beauty. Take these two examples. The first appeared in *The Week* of October 11: "They have trekked, travelled by buses, camel-carts or cars to a homage to a beautiful woman who once painted her fingernails...". The second, in Khushwant Singh's syndicated column, which appears in several magazines—'With Malice Towards One and All', of September 27: "And hang those who were a party to the gory demise of the lovely 18-year-old Roop Kanwar."

The problem with such portrayals is that they could elicit response like this (an authentic one, incidentally): "I feel the outrage of this incident more because Roop Kanwar was so young and beautiful." Implicit in this reaction is the statement that if the woman was old the crime would have been less heinous.

When the focus shifts from the issue of *sati* to Roop Kanwar herself, either through descriptions like these or through the over-utilisation of photographs of Roop Kanwar, the feature is in danger of falling into this trap: In *The Week's* cover story on *sati*, Roop Kanwar's photographs showing her in bridal attire appeared eight times, nearly once on every page, and seven times in the *Dinam* cover story of October 24.

Similarly, one noticed the liberal use of the words 'heroic', especially passages which document the history of sati. By hailing it as having once been 'heroic', one is just a step away from the viewpoint of the apologists of this horrible practice, who see it as part of a great and glorious tradition. Mention must be made here of Khushwant Singh's columns. In his 'Malice' column of September 27, he roundly called for the hanging of all widow burners. The same writer in his exclusive column for *Sunday*, 'Gossip, Sweet And Sour' (October 11) allows himself to luxuriate in legends. He wrote, "Even I, who condemns sati as a remnant of medieval barbarity, feel a glow of pride when I read of Rajput women committing jauhar rather then surrending themselves to a victorious enemy." He concluded, "The self-immolation by widows will continue because reverence for them is too deep-rooted in our psyche to be completely eradicated." One may add especially if 'intellectuals' like Khushwant Singh continue to feel that "glow of pride". The 'Gossip Sweet And Sour'

item seemed a bit grotesque, coming as it did in an issue which carried a very well-researched analysis of media coverage entitled, 'Glorifying Sati', written by Kuldip Kumar.

Then there were those writers who seemed to exploit this incident to propel their own political viewpoints. Notable among them was M J Akbar. In his column, 'Byline', which appeared in *Sunday* dated October 18, he launched a very valid broadside against V P Singh for sitting on the fence over the issue. What was disturbing was that Akbar, after some ritual finger-wagging at the prime minister and Harideo Joshi, lets them off. For the prime minister he even has a pat on his back:" "But let us accept this much that after the initial sin of procrastination, he, Rajiv Gandhi, moved in the right direction. Home minister Chidambaram took personal charge." What is this if it isn't condoning the time-serving and lackadaisical manner in which the government handled the incident. The issue of *sati* hadn't figured even once in the Rajasthan assembly when Akbar wrote his column—for that we had to wait until November 2, two months after the event.

Perceiving Women's Role

Considering the fact that *sati* was one of the most important stories involving women, which raised vital questions about the status of women in India today, women's magazines, by and large, neglected to give it the prominence it deserved. Both *Flair* (October and November issues) and *Women's Era* (October 1) dismissed it with editorial comments. *Savvy* ignored it completely in its October issue. While *Femina* carried a delineation of the event and its repercussions on women along with a hastily put together 'protest poll' (October 8); *Eve's Weekly* had a brief 'On Record' item on it (September 26) followed by a rather skimpy analysis from the social and historical point of view.

Surprisingly, editors of these magazines didn't seem to think that it was important enough to interview the women who moved the courts and went out on the streets demanding that Roop Kanwar's murderers be punished. In fact, as in the case of newspapers, many general magazines too played down the women's role. Few attempted to link the issue with the various other practices debasing women which characterise the oppression they face.

In what was otherwise an excellent analysis of the socio-economic and political background against which practices like *sati* occur, AM in a serious and respected magazine like *The Economic And Political Weekly* (Calcutta Diary, October 10) felt it necessary to launch a wild and utterly unwarranted attack on the Indian women's movement. "For a while, activists in the so-called women's movement will of course have a field day. They will organise meetings and morchas; draft statements, write furious pieces in national and international journals. None of this will make the least difference... The activists in the women's movement will discover their cause, they will expend some more passion against the abstract male chauvinism; exhausted, they will re-read passages from Simone de Beauvoir and be filled with new thoughts." AM seems to have forgotten that Roop Kanwar's *sati* would have been consigned to the silence that marked the 28 other satis, which

were reported to have taken place in Rajasthan since Independence, if it were not for some concerned and committed women activists. It would have been a silence which he would have shared.

Magazine Journalism

The manner in which this story was laid out in some publications to make it more 'saleable' and the stylistic devices employed to make the features carried more "enjoyable" reading must be condemned. This contributed a great deal to sensationalising the issues. We feel that there should be some basic norms followed in writing, visually portraying and laying out a story like this.

Another point that was noted is the myth of 'objective journalism'. By trying to give equal treatment to unequally placed sections of society (in this case, women pitted against the forces of religious obscurantism and political power wielders), one only ends up perpetuating those very same inequalities and supporting the status quo. For instance, just juxtaposing pro-*sati* viewpoints with those opposing is not right. There has to be a clearly defined perspective attacking the system that gives rise to customs like *sati*, if the feature is to be socially relevant.

This brings us to another point—the lack of perspective. It was felt that most magazines, despite having the time and resources to evolve a perspective on *sati*, failed to do so. This failure manifested itself in several ways: a) Through discrepancies between the cover and the content of the features (as in the case of *Dinman* dated October 24). b) Through consistencies in the way a developing story was tackled from issue to issue. For instance, the fact that *Sunday Review* carried pieces like Anees Jung's and three week's later an article as important as Kumkum Sangari's revealed this inconsistency. c) In the way the issue was superficially handled in some magazines, for the sake of appearances almost, and subsequently forgotten. Its coverage in some of the women's magazines indicated this. d) Similarly, although attempts were made to trace the sati incident to rising Rajput chauvinism and Hindu revivalism, there was no real effort to trace it to the key issue—the growing forces of communalism that beset the nation today and the consequent rise in the number of atrocities committed in the name of religion.

Coverage in the Rajasthan Press and National Hindi Press

LONG before, the English press awoke to the event, local dailies including the largest-selling *Rajasthan Patrika*, the *Dainik Navjot* (published simultaneously from Jaipur, Ajmer and Kota, claiming to be the oldest Hindi daily in the state) and *Rashtradoot* that boast of a combined circulation of about 1.5 lakh, splashed sensational accounts of the *sati* on their front pages. Interviews with Roop Kanwar's father-in-law, parents, details of the wedding and of how she had been 'pious and devout' since childhood adorned the columns. But not one of these papers condemned the act or questioned why the police did not try and stop the woman from immolating herself.

Rashtradoot carried the news of Roop Kanwar's *sati* as a front page, three-column report on September 5 (the day after the incident). The next day, it carried a five-column item on its back

page, along with two photographs of the site of the *sati* showing sword-wielding Rajput youths guarding it and 'devotees' offering prayers. The lead paragraph of the story read: "By sacrificing her life, an 18-year old woman, Roop Kanwar, has re-enacted the spectacle of *sati*, a tradition written in golden letters in the history of virtuous Rajput women devoted to their husbands. Steeped in the glorious Rajput tradition, this brave girl has moved the common people by following the Indian cultural tradition of *sati* even 40 years after Independence". The report went on to describe how she had worshipped her husband, treating him like a god, how she had been inspired by divine forces to become a sati and leaped into the flames with a smile on her face.

The impact of such blatant glorification of an event that reduces a woman to a mere chattel bound to her husband even in death needs no elaboration. What requires specific mention, however, is that none of the aforementioned publications saw fit to immediately comment editorially the event. Eight days afterwards, on September 12, *Navbharat Times* became the first newspaper to write an editorial, entitled *Deorala ki Roop Kanwar*, denouncing the *sati* and calling it a barbaric act of the medieval era.

Some local papers carried edits openly supporting the *sati*, like *Navjoti* (September 22). Titled *Atmahatya ka adhikar* (the right to suicide), the editorial viewed *sati* simply as suicide and said there were moves to legitimise suicide in many countries. If abortion had obtained legal sanction in India, why not suicide, it asked.

On September 8, *Rashtradoot* once again published a four-column box item on its back page quoting Roop Kanwar's father, Bal Singh Rathore, as saying that he felt no sorrow at his daughter committing *sati*. A new report under the headline 'I have pride in my great daughter: Bal Singh' appeared in the *Rajasthan Patrika* of September 17. The same Bal Singh has been quoted in *Ravivar*, a Hindi national weekly magazine, as saying that had he been informed by Roop Kanwar's in-laws in time, he would have tried to dissuade his daughter.

On September 14, *Rashtradoot* published a five-column report on its back page with the screaming headline: 'Will the *Chunari* Disappear In the Sky or Embrace the Trishl?' Another six-column report on the front page of the paper on September 20 detailed the protests made by some Rajputs to the Union Minister of State for Home P Chidambaram, that the government had no business to interfere with their religious beliefs. The Rajputs had taken out a procession of 1,000 men brandishing swords in Jaipur.

Days before the *chunari* mohotsav, on September 13, the *Rajasthan Patrika* carried a three-column front-page report headlined: 'The Police Will Remain Quiet Until the *Chunari* Ceremony of the *Sati* Takes Place' A tiny strapline announcing the magisterial enquiry ordered by the state government barely takes away from the rapturous tone of the report which says 'great' preparations are afoot in Deorala for this ceremony where even the house of Roop Kanwar's in-laws has become 'a place of worship', with offerings of coconuts and flowers pouring in. The report goes on to quote police officials as saying that though Pushpendra Singh, the minor brother-in-law of Roop Kanawar had been arrested, any other action would

follow after the completion of the ceremony.

The Navbharat Times also carried a front-page report on September 16, a day before the headlined 'Fear of Trouble, Stoppage of Ceremony Difficult'. It said a tense situation prevailed in Deorala following the state government's directive prohibiting a public ceremony in connection with the *sati*, but went on to add that the situation in Deorala was such that it would take place. In defiance of the High Court directive banning the ceremony militant Rajput youths had proclaimed that it would take place, the report added.

Reports of the *chunari mohotsav* itself in the local dailies, was nothing short of reprehensible. Right from the piece carried in the *Rajasthan Patrika* under the triumphant headline 'Lakhs Throng to Chunari Mahotsav, State Ban Ineffectual', to a *Navbharat Times* report of the same day, entitled, 'The Government Beat Its Drums in Warning, But Did not Work'. The papers seemed to experience a sense of victory in the state's reluctance and inability to stop the *chunari* ceremony.

The introductory paragraph, in *The Patrika*, setting the tone for the entire report, stated that despite the state directive, people in their hundreds of thousands poured into Deorala, "demonstrating their true feelings". In a similar vein, the *Navabharat Times* report on the same day opened with the lines, "The Rajasthan High Court ban had no effect as, today, lakhs from far and near converged at Deorala and this site became a mini *kumbh mela*. None of the arrangements made by the police or the PAC could stop the crowds", Detailed descriptions of the ritual followed. Towards the end of the report, the thrust becomes dangerously clear, "Till September 4, Deorala was unknown on the map of Rajasthan. Though in the thinking of the administration, Roop Kanawar is a law-breaker, in the minds of the common person she has achieved greatness and is worthy of worship". The report ends on an ominous note: "It is to be seen how far the state will go in achieving its so-called objectives. And how the people will manifest their sentiments".

What is disturbing about both these reports is that they begin and end on a note of victory. Worse still, they deify the victim of *sati*, a conveninent way of bypassing the grave issues at hand. And last, but not the least, they appeal, subtly but surely, to the religious sentiments of the people.

The Rajasthan Patrika continued this style of reporting, with a prominent piece on September 19 titled "What is the use of stopping the *chunari* ceremony after the *sati* is over? Likening the *chunari* ceremony to any other form of obsequies, the report condemns, in passing, the practice of *sati* on the one hand but, on the other, argues that the more the reaction against evils like *sati*, child marriage and dowry deaths, the more such practices will flourish and continue.

A report in the same paper on September 20, is the final straw. A box feature on the front page with a photograph of a smiling Roop Kanwar as a bride, began by stating that Deorala had become a place of hope and pilgrimage after the self-immolation of Roop Kanwar. It categorically stated that no force at all was used on Roop Kanwar; that, for the first time, she herself removed her *ghunghat* (veil) in front of her in-laws and proclaimed her resolve to commit *sati*; that no one could,

or dared stop her as 'divine power' had entered her. It goes on to 'quote' her words to her husband when his body was brought home: "What, will you leave me alone? I will go with you." Then follows a detailed account of how she dressed herself in her bridal attire and immolated herself. Describing the performance of the *chunari* ceremony 13 days later by her brothers, the report comments:

"The government tried to stop it... but what is the force or strength of the government in the face of the aspirations and imagination of the people?"

It concludes, with satisfaction, that it was a unique spectacle with five lakh people, including some from Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and New Delhi, witnessing it. The reverent tone was maintained by the *Navabharat Times* report of September 21, headlined "Possible case against photographer for carrying contrived photo of sati eipsode." The report revealed that 50,000 copies (of the superimposed photographs of Roop Kanwar sitting on the pyre with her husband's body) had been sold at Rs. 6 to Rs. 10 each.

The *Rajasthan Patrika* also carried scores of letters and articles on the *sati*, including the history of *sati* and how it was an ancient, worldwide phenomenon, prevalent in Egypt, Uganda and among Red Indian tribe of Comanche, plus interviews with other women who were unsuccessful in their attempt to commit *sati*.

The *Navbharat Times*, after running several objectionable reports, carried editorials which, with some inconsistency, express anger over the incident.

Its editorial of September 19, was titled 'Cowardice—Inhuman and Shameless' and asked: Will those who are today quoting religious texts and traditions to justify the Deorala *sati* incident stand against any form of injustice or inequality? Those encouraging such attitudes are fascists: to support *sati* is to believe that a woman has no independent right to exist."

This brings us to the most significant and regrettable feature of the media coverage in general and the Hindi press in particular—a glaring inconsistency in attitude and policy on the incident and the aftermath. The publication that carried sensationalised accounts, with headlines and photographs conveying the 'greatness' of the act and had a trimphant comment on the failure of the state to stop the *chunari* ceremony, thereafter carried strongly-worded pieces on its editorial pages, condemning the act and the state's inaction.

The *Navbharat Times* carried another edit that severely took the government, the Congress(I) and the opposition to task for being inert and the latter for not even issuing a condemnatory statement. It described *sati* as a mental illness of the medieval ages, and commented that the encouragement of such a deed is the act of self-seeking males interested in keeping women oppressed. In an article in the paper on Septemberr 27, titled 'Sati—Goddess or A Symbol of Women's Oppression?' the writer Umrilla Rungta, pointed out that history also has the example of Rani Laxmibai and Rani Durgawati who, on being widowed, instead of committing *sati*, took to arms and fought the enemy. "Should not these women be examples for emulation?" she asked.

A [illegible] piece written from a progressive standpoint in the *Navbharat Times* was by Mrinal Pande, titled 'Roop Kanwar, a

Pretext To Raise a Debate on Religious Equality'. The writer treated *sati* as both illegal and inhuman and criticised in sharp tones the "hypocrisy of Hindu society" which did not so much as shed a tear for the confinement of a young widow and looked down upon a woman who sought economic independence, was ready to worship her the moment she prepared to burn herself alive. It also points to irony of the fact that while no one has time or money to contribute grain to the severely affected (drought) people of Rajasthan, there seems to be no dirth of money to carry Roop Kanwar's name and the *sati* tradition into history.

Such inconsistencies in the print media reveals two diametrically opposed attitudes and policies behind front-page newsreports and editorial comment. Was this deliberate? Or was it merely a reflection of a general lack of professionalism? One can only surmise from this that the press has treated the incident as a relatively unimportant issue that does not merit determined and consistent coverage. At worst, it could be a calculated move to achieve both ends and not be at the receiving end of criticism. Meaning, that while the front pages can cheerfully carry reports and photographs that would meet the 'popular' requirements of the people, the editorial pages could contain stringent criticism that keeps the publication on the right side of the intellegentsia.

Mention must be made in this section to the objectionable, to say the very least, editorial of September 18 in the widely circulating Hindi daily *Jansatta*, a publication of the *Indian Express* group, that raised a storm of protest by women activists in New Delhi and Bombay. Titled 'What We Have to Say', the edit began by stating that two lakh people gathered at Deorala for the *chunari mahaotsav* despite the High Court ban and the state government directive. "The incident (sati) is one of the innumerable contradictions of our country, where millions of people think in a way that is radically different from that of a handful of those who man the courts and government." The editorial ignored the fact that a teenaged girl was burnt alive merely because her husband died and viewed the barbaric practice as another illustration of India tradition and a 'westernised' concept of modernity. Stating that one in a million widows make this 'honourable' vow, the edit argued that it cannot, therefore, be termed either as an issue of women's civil rights or of discrimination between men and women. "It is merely a question of a society's religious and social beliefs." Linking what is indisputably a women's issue with religion, it said that none of the scriptures glorified *sati*, in fact advocating widow re-marriage, adding, "*Sati* has been viewed with pride and reverence in our society".

Thereafter, the edit makes the point that a custom such as *sati* can never be understood by those persons, alienated from true Indian tradition and reality who "consider this birth as the beginning and the end of everything and who derive the greatest happiness from their own personal pleasures".

Continuing to say that *sati* was born of a society that does not consider death as the end of life, but treats it as a means to proceed from one life towards another, the edit goes on to state that only such a society (that is one that believes in life after death, etc) has any right to conduct any meaningful discussion on whether *sati*

is justified or not—"but those who do not understand the faith and beliefs of the common Indian people have no right to take part in the discussion". And the final threat "If such people give any verdict, it will be torn to pieces in the same way as the verdict of the Rajasthan High Court and the order of the state government were in Deorala."

This editorial provoked a series of protests from women activists in New Delhi on September 19. Prominent Hindi writers and journalists issued a statement condemning the paper's stand and declared that they would not cooperate with the paper in future.

Seemingly undaunted, *Jansatta* carried a report on September 19, titled 'Roop Kanwar Now Part of Folklore and Tradition of Rajasthan'. But in an editorial on September 25, it stated that the *sati* at Deorala pointed to the fact that reformists had a long way ahead of them. It argued for a 'strong political will' which alone could prevent the occurrence of such incidents, and said that unless firm steps were taken to prevent mass congregations of the sort witnessed at the *chunari mahotsav*, "The faith of the masses in such beliefs cannot be shaken." The editorial also criticised national political leaders of several parties for not taking action against state-level leaders who participated in the *chunari mahotsav*.

Only the *Navbharat Times* of September 15, carried a prominent, three-column report on the women's protest in Jaipur on September 13, followed by a write petition field in the Rajasthan High Court. Other publications including the *Patrika* and *Jansatta* confined their coverage of these events to the minimum.

It is, therefore, evident from a scrutiny of the local and Hindi press coverage that, far from criticising the *sati*, newsreports and features sensationalised and glorified the event, giving religious overtones. It is unfortunate and distressing that they did not see the need to come out strongly against the event or its aftermath. On the contrary news reports in these publications prior to the *chunari mahotsav* created the impression that the police had no intention of, and in any way, dared not stop this ceremony.

Conclusions

MOST papers did not have a definite viewpoint on sati and hence the headlines and the content of the report varied and differed in their respective perspectives.

Second, reports of people's action regarding the event received very poor coverage. While the statements of ministers and the government have been adequately reported—the tone and slant depending on the political affiliation of the paper—very little space was given to the various protest or demand statements. This is an attitude typical of the press and must be questioned critically.

Thirdly, none of the papers viewed the *sati* as primarily a women's issue. While many drew attention to the status of women as one of the contributory factors towards the continued social importance given to *sati*, especially in some regions, they did not see the incident as a reflection of the social oppression of women. Nor did they generally draw attention to the fact that processes of modernisation, in terms of education, television etc, have had little impact on the socio-religious psyche of the people, primarily because these process have not af-

fected the status of the women. In fact, the references to education and to the fact that Roop was educated have been in the context of her willingness to commit *sati*, despite this. Even if not stated, this often becomes apparent in the reporting. Thus, the basic stereotype of the Hindu woman has remained in tact, no matter what the criticism of the event itself.

Fourthly, and most importantly, the English press has by and large not contributed to the communalising of the issue. We use the term here merely to mean that the issue has not been highlighted in terms of its religious or casteist overtones. In fact, these have been underplayed, and the attitude/tendency/trend of reports generally has been one of ridding the religion of such barbaric and anachronistic practices. *The Times of India*, however, stands out from the rest of the English press in favouring a 'glorification' of the event. That it did not see the necessity for an editorial on the matter is itself a comment on the paper's policy on the issue. However, it is pertinent here to mention that some of the English newspapers have taken a highly communal stand on other matters (as, for instance, in the reporting of riots, on the Muslim Women's Bill). Why the September 4 event and after has been treated differently requires a wider and more in-depth analysis of press coverage on all these issues.

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