

## Critiquing the Politics of Outrage: Ashis Nandy and his Reading of *Sati*

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### ABSTRACT

Ashis Nandy formulates interesting discursive strategies to resist a formulaic reading of cultures. In his critique of modernity, there is a relentless attempt at dismantling the monolith of Eurocentric discourse which in the wake of colonial occupation monopolised the idea of progress and the supplementary discourse of development. Such a discourse, as Nandy observes, importunately demands a sweeping homogenization of cultures and traditions in the light of European civilization. In order to be seen as 'developed' and 'progressive' as opposed to being stunted and primitive, the pliant peoples of the world are made to disregard and gradually marginalize native cultures, values, and unique demands of local history, geography and tradition. Nandy observes that modern India's responses to myriad social issues are often mediated by colonial assumptions and understanding of reality. However, the colonial, slavish assumptions are often expressed as responses of a 'liberal', 'secular' and 'modern' mind. In his study of the quintessentially-Hindu rite, Sati, Ashis Nandy has uncovered the convoluted nature of these assumptions which over the years have tailored Indian responses to it. In this article I try to show how in Ashis Nandy's reading of Sati there is a constant attempt at denuding the crypto-colonial politics that permeates the urban-middleclass interpretation of Sati and the concomitant rage generated by it amongst the modern Indian literati. In this paper, I try to show how Nandy's re-reading of the rite and his deconstruction of urban-middleclass fury aimed at it, may be seen as a postcolonial critique of Indian modernity and a textual/intellectual strategy formulated to decolonise the mind.

**KEYWORDS:** Sati, Postcolonial, Urban middle-class, Western Hegemony, Deorala, Roop Kanwar

'Sati', as a rite, has invited unreserved criticism from all quarters of the modern world. It has been looked upon as an atavistic and barbaric Hindu tradition that sanctions murder of women with impunity. Here, Nandy notes that the sharpness or vitriol which largely tempers the outrage against Sati, is derived not as much from the death or the manner of death of women, as it is from the element of religion that seems to dictate terms of this essentially Hindu rite. Nandy's basic argument is that the practice of 'Sati' was neither a tradition nor was it ever celebrated by the Hindu religious texts, which constitute the gravamen of the religion.

Ashis Nandy observes that Sati was prevalent among the upper castes only and that it was never a standard practice. He argues that had it been so, there would be no widows left in the country. Second, and most importantly, the ancient Hindu texts did sanction widow-remarriage. Had the texts celebrated Sati, there would be no need to talk about respectable social rehabilitation of women after their attainment of widowhood. Therefore, in spite of being an essentially Hindu rite, Sati could never have claimed divine provenance for itself.

Ashis Nandy's comments in this regard are self-explanatory: "Occasional sati is one thing, but sati as a social custom or practice has never existed in India, except in times of major social upheavals. Otherwise, widows would not have survived in the country." [1] Nandy records that Sati saw a sharp decline in its popularity after the middle-ages and by the seventeenth century it had almost become voluntary. However, towards the end of the eighteenth century, Sati "came to acquire the popularity of a legitimate orgy" in Bengal. [2]

Nandy here calls for a special attention to the spatiotemporal dimension of this historical fact. He examines the role, if any, that the geographical space and the particular time in history might have had in augmenting the popularity of this rite. What is striking is the fact that Bengal in the early years of the Raj happened to be one of those places where women enjoyed greater economic privileges than in any other part of the country. Bengal's proximity to the British brought about palpable cultural transformation in the province. Moreover, the elitist class or the "bhadroloke samaj" of Bengal around this time of history came closest to the coloniser. So much so, that the "Bengali poets in the early stages of this cultural transformation found no inconsistency in singing the praises of Bengal and Britannia at the same time." [3] It was the same elitist class that soon got imbued with a deeply commercialized and monetised view of life and in the mad rush to maintain the tinsel glow of high class in a restructured depersonalised colonial world, formulated dark strategies, reoriented traditional values and doctored holy texts only to meet its narrow ends. It is indeed true that the Brahmins of Bengal did claim to have discovered religious sanction for burning women as Sati but we must not lose sight of the fact that "the Bengali Brahmins, unlike Brahmins in some other parts of India, were not merely religious leaders and interpreters of texts, traditions and rites but major landholders and financiers who were increasingly co-opted by the colonial system." [4] Gradual commercialisation was of course accompanied by gradual "deculturation" that led this section of the Bengal-society to fashion new ways of holding on to its cherished forms of expensive western lifestyle in a highly competitive world. This almost necessitated a systematic elimination of the most vulnerable but nonetheless, valid claimants of property, which naturally exposed women to the pathological designs of pelf-hungry men. But visceral greed was soon adorned with high-flying nationalistic and religious rhetoric and camouflaged-death was marketed as 'Hindu religious tradition'. Sudipta Kaviraj rightly observes how "Under a thin disguise of worshipping Bengal, the Bengali elite worshipped themselves in splendid isolation from all other Indians, in cosy proximity to their British benefactors." [5] Thus, it becomes very clear from Nandy's arguments that it was distortion and manipulation of religion, triggered by crass commercial considerations, which granted the practice of 'Sati' a hallowed space within the broad religious discourse of Hinduism. Modernity, mediated and espoused by colonial worldview, however, ironed out the distorted fissures and hidden agendas and made it look like a standard Hindu practice ratified by the divine scriptures of Hinduism. Ashis Nandy has also observed that as "a policy of social non-intervention" in the early years of colonial occupation, the British did not vocally criticise or ban the practise of Sati which "seemed for many a direct endorsement of the practice." [6] Here, Nandy uncharacteristically seems lenient to the British, willing to give the Raj a benefit of doubt. But silence can often be as political as speech. My contention is that while the stoicism displayed by the Raj in this matter may not be "a direct endorsement of the practice" but it was certainly a well-considered, politically motivated choice aimed at justifying the professed colonial project of 'civilising' the world as part of the "White Man's Burden". Allowance of latitude to the practise, enabled Sati to flourish which in turn fed the constructed image of a 'gruesome land of cultural anarchy and barbarism' urgently in need of the civilizing touch of colonialism. This was a perfect coloniser's ploy to vindicate its forceful occupation of a land. Therefore, the proscription of 'Sati' by the British ("an interference in social customs by political authority without historical precedent in India" [7]), although largely precipitated by the relentless effort put by the Reformists (with Rammohan Roy at its forefront), was at a certain level seen as a victory of 'Western Civilisation' and its grand narratives of 'Secularism' and 'Modernity' over 'Eastern barbarism'.

Ashis Nandy's reading of Sati stands out as a counter-narrative to the secularist and modernist reading of Sati that largely demonises Indian tradition and culture in general and

Hinduism in particular. Ashis Nandy, therefore, convincingly argues that by vitiating a culture with mercantile values, modernism/colonialism played a pivotal role in popularising the practice of 'Sati'. However, such a holistic understanding of history, as Nandy sees it, seems to have eluded the popular understanding of, and response to the practice of Sati. This became all the more evident in the immediate aftermath of the "infamous" twentieth century incident of 'Sati' that took place in a small village called "Deorala", in the state of Rajasthan on September 4, 1987. It was the case of a seventeen year old girl-Roop Kanwar who committed 'Sati' after the death of her husband-Maal Singh. This immediately drew unmitigated blows of castigation from almost the entire middle/upper classes of the country. Nandy engages with this incident in his essay "Sati in Kali Yuga" where he is "concerned not with the empirical reality of the sati at Deorala but with the certitudes of middle-class commentators on that reality." [8] Nandy further observes that "In the last fifty years...there have been about 47 satis in India. Whereas, in the case of bride-burning or dowry deaths, at one time, the going rate was something like 150 deaths in Delhi every year. Now it is a little less, but it is, even now, certainly more than 47 per year. But these deaths do not attract a fraction of the attention a single sati gets, because they seem to be the result of greed and pathology in the modernized, urban, middle class. Whereas sati, despite all the talk of it being pure and simple murder, is seen as a religious ritual practised by superstitious, backward, rustic Indians." [9] Nandy, here, strongly objects to selective outrage that marks the response of the westernised elite. Nandy, however, does not belittle Roop's tragic end or, discount the possibility of direct or indirect collusion of both sides of Roop's family in her death. He believes that no philosophy or institution can be immune to the buffeting tides of greed and pathology of mind in any age. Swami Vivekananda's illuminating observation on social maladies is relevant enough to be quoted here: "The truth is that in this country parents and relatives can ruthlessly sacrifice the best interests of their children and others for their own selfish ends to save themselves by compromise to society...". [10] He further observes that while Sati as a "ghatana (event)" may be condemned for the violent death that it gratuitously precipitates but the same vitriol cannot be applied to interpret the philosophy of Sati "which symbolized the reaffirmation of the purity, self-sacrifice, power, and dignity of women and the superiority of the feminine principle in the cosmos." [11] Nandy substantiates his point by arguing that Rabindranath Tagore who was one of the fiercest critics of Sati as a practice in historical times was, however, deeply respectful of Sati in mythical times which essentially exuded a reverential attitude to women. He offers instances of great Indian thinkers (like Rammohun Roy "who ridiculed Krishna for killing Putana", Tagore who "criticized the way Sumitra was treated in the Ramayana", or, Madhusudan Dutt who "made Rama the villain of his epic" [12]) who "viciously attacked aspects of tradition that did not fit in with their concept of *yugadharma*, ethics appropriate to their age" and were still listened to with reverence only "because they understood and respected the values enshrined in tradition...". [13] Nandy finds the criticism of Sati entirely legitimate when done from within the native Indian culture which is unmistakably respectful of the rich Indian tradition-religious or, otherwise. Critiquing Sati by seeking cultural asylum from the patronising colonialist discourse that celebrates the "grand western ideas such as Science, Rationality, Development, Nation-State", as pointed out by Ziauddin Sardar [14], seems to Nandy inauthentic, motivated and even at times, mischievous. Speaking about an essentially Indian rite in dismissive terms from within the premise of an adopted and largely brutalizing culture only befits "Those decultured, ill-informed Indians who (unlike rooted Indian thinkers) view classical or mythological instances of sati as instances of the degradation of women...". [15] While such an adopted, second-hand discourse feigns to hold cudgels for the wellbeing of India and her culture, it essentially advances the colonialist cause by perpetuating the diabolical myth of the 'Modern Civilized' West and the "primitive, barbaric" East. Such a

secularised western discourse in its professed attempt to purge the native culture of its evils and degrading attributes radically alters and eventually mutates the native culture altogether thereby, replacing it with an apparently more kosher, scientific, but imported culture. In its zealous attempt to expunge the perceived evils from the native tradition, it expunges the entire native tradition thereby throwing the baby, as it were, out with the bathwater. This, as Nandy observes, is intentional and a smart political move made by a deeply imperialistic discourse, that is gradually and inexorably encroaching on our ancient civilisation and culture. This becomes a seamless process once a psychological construct, that fosters a powerful self-flagellating sense of inadequacy is propped up. Nandy challenges the validity of this construct and pooh-poohs its apparent invincibility by dismissing the Eurocentric discourse of progress and modernity. He emphatically calls into question the West's self-given right to define. He persuasively argues that such a social discourse which lamely offers West the right to describe and define is just an extension of western hegemony. Such a discourse fosters a reductionist approach and impels one to make qualitative assessments of cultures, histories and societies of the ex-colonised in light of the ideals held high by the colonising cultures of the world. He discards the western definition of 'modernity' and its easy equation with everything good and positive. Nandy's alternative model of the 'good and the positive' that informs his writing radically alters the truistic assumptions about the 'third' world and its diverse cultural traditions. It engineers a thoroughgoing hierarchical-adjustment of thoughts and assumptions about modernity.

Ashis Nandy does not engage with just the history of Sati but also the history of the responses to Sati. He shows how the popular response to it has always been heavily tempered by the colonialist assumptions of modernity and how such a response is found grossly inadequate when set against the indigenous parameters of virtue offered by the subject civilization. "Nandy has argued that of the two aspects of colonialism, physical and intellectual, the intellectual has been more damaging, because the demise of colonialism has not meant the end of the colonialism of mind." [16] Nandy contends that it is the same "colonialism of mind" that has shaped the stock elitist responses to Sati.

Thus, Ashis Nandy's reading of Sati may justly be seen as a postcolonial critique of modernity which not only reshuffles institutionalized assumptions about modernity but also realigns cultural priorities thereby exacting a paradigm shift in response to this quintessentially Hindu rite.

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[12] *ibid*, 43

[13] *ibid*

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