

# Sati: women, widow immolation and British imperial reform



**'S**ati' is the name of an incarnation of the goddess Parvarti, who threw herself on the sacrificial fire to protest an affront to her husband, Siva. Popular Hindu usage lent it the additional meaning of a 'virtuous woman'. For the British, what they called 'suttee' referred to the practice of burning the widow on her husband's funeral pyre.

Brig. E. P. Wilson.  
33<sup>d</sup> Regiment.  
Nagpurabad.  
13<sup>th</sup> Decr. 1828.

States that altho' he has resided thirty two years chiefly in Western Hindoostan, he has neither seen nor heard of a Sutte in the neighbourhood. Considers that the attachment of the Sepoys to be not so strong now as formerly. Deprecates extremely any open prohibition of the Rite. Sepoys are not easily reasoned with when once in a state of excitement. Cannot venture a direct opinion as to what might follow a direct and sudden prohibition. Interference of Magistrates might produce the desired effect. Tumults may arise at Benares, Gya and the like places.

In his reply to Bentinck's investigation into sati, Brigadier EP Wilson strongly advised against a sudden ban on the rite as he considered "...that the attachment of the Sepoys to be not so strong now as formerly." Wilson had not come across an instance of sati during his 32 years in India, but he recognised that in places such as Benares [Varanasi] and Gya [Gaya] where it was more common, there was a strong possibility of resistance. Papers of Lord William H Cavendish Bentinck (1774–1839), Pw Jf 2605/16.

Criticism of widow burning can be traced back to Mughal rule in northern India. From the early 19th century, Hindu reformers and Christian missionaries campaigned together to ban the practice. In 1828, Bentinck commissioned a report of all British district administrators, asking about the prevalence of 'suttee' in their districts and the risks of banning the practice. Responses varied dramatically. Some believed the abolition of 'suttee' would lead to the break-down of trust between upper-caste Hindus and the British administration. Others saw banning 'suttee' as a moral imperative.

The Hindu reformer, Ram Mohan Roy, supported the ban but also advised wider education on the subject. Yet despite a vigorous and long-lasting debate on sati, the people most likely to be affected by the practice were never consulted. Across the records, the perspectives and voices of women are notably absent.

Woman of Hindostan  
As depicted in *A geographical present* by Mary Anne Venning,  
Briggs Collection LT210.G/V4.



*Threads of Empire*  
Rule and resistance in colonial India

1842 Statement showing the Number of Suttees at Benares from Jan<sup>y</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> 1820 to Jan<sup>y</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> 1829.

Year	Number Suttees	Number Suttees	Age	Remarks
1820	11	3	70	20
1821	12	1	85	20
1822	10	4	80	30
1823	13	2	85	22
1824	16	2	80	24
1825	17	5	61	25
1826	15	4	75	22
1827	16	2	75	25
1828	11	5	85	10
1829	125	27		

R. H. Cavendish  
Gov<sup>r</sup> of Benares

Above: Statement showing the Number of Suttees at Benares [Varanasi] from January 1 1820 to January 1 1829, from the papers of Lord William Bentinck, Governor-General of India from 1828 to 1835. The rate of sati in this region was low but stable. Bentinck undertook sweeping social, economic and political reforms including making sati illegal in British India, under the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829. Papers of Lord William H Cavendish Bentinck (1774–1839), Pw Jf 2608/5

In 1829, Bentinck's administration made the 'practice of suttee' a criminal offence in Bengal, culminating in a national ban under Queen Victoria in 1861. Yet the practice continued throughout the 20th century, leading to the Sati Prevention Act in 1988.