

The Burning of Roop Kanwar

Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita

On 4 September 1987, eighteen-year-old Roop Kanwar was burnt to death on her husband's pyre in village Deorala, Sikar district, Rajasthan. In one sense, there is not much difference between the death of Roop Kanwar and the deaths of thousands of women burnt alive in their own home in many parts of the country.

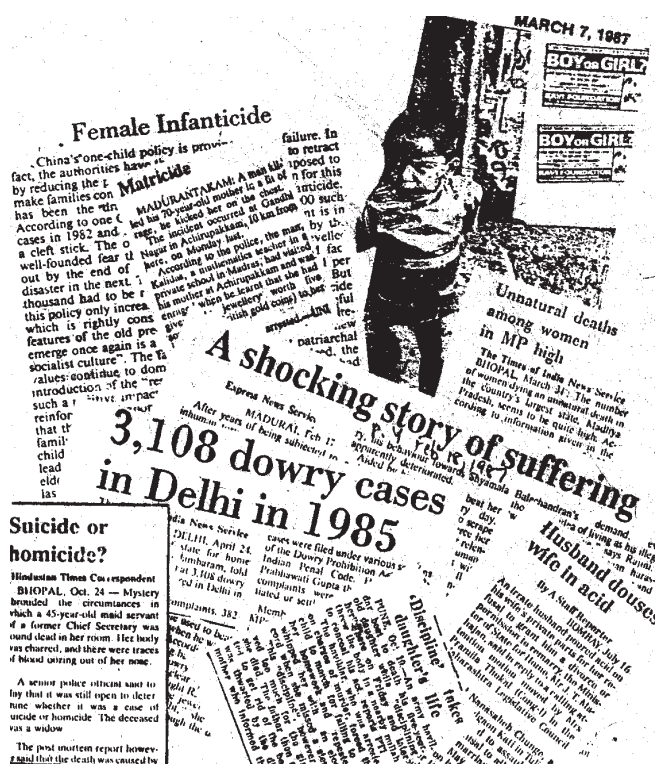
disapproval. Therefore, it is perpetrated secretly, behind locked doors. The woman's husband and in-laws invariably claim that her death was a regrettable suicide or accident, and that they made every attempt to save her.

Modern day sati, on the other hand, though rare, is a public spectacle,

the low value set on women's lives, the public burning to death of a woman is an open endorsement of that devaluation.

When parents advise their daughters to endure maltreatment by a husband and in-laws, and to 'adjust' at all costs in the marital home, they too are endorsing the norm that a woman's life is worthless except as an object of use or abuse by her husband. In this context, the reaction of Roop Kanwar's natal family to her death is not very surprising. When we met her brother in Jaipur, he said that though their family was mourning her death, they had no complaints regarding the manner of her death. Although Roop Kanwar was burnt in the presence of thousands of people from around Deorala, her family, who live in Jaipur, a mere two hours drive away, were not informed that she was about to become a sati. Yet, they condoned her being burnt alive and say she has brought honour to them.

In most ordinary wife-murder cases, the husband and in-laws of the woman try to defame her after her death, as an unstable woman with suicidal tendencies or a bad character. But Roop Kanwar's past is being recreated to mythologize her as an embodiment of the best womanly and wifely virtues. In a culture where a woman is considered a burden, easily dispensable and replaceable it is a rare woman who is honoured in her death. No wonder, then, that so many women are awe-inspired by the new sati cult.



But her death was significantly different in its social and cultural resonance.

Wife-burning, like many other acts of violence, occurs with the tacit consent of society, but it incurs public

conducted with the approval and applause of the local community. It is this aspect that is particularly alarming. If the widespread implicit acceptance of wife-murder in our society today expresses

Roop Kanwar's glorification may even appear some sort of acknowledgement, however bizarre, of the many unrewarded sacrifices women make in everyday life for the husband and family.

The Roop Kanwar case has sharply polarized public opinion. Those who are glorifying her death are trying to project it as part of a 'glorious tradition' of Rajput and Hindu culture. Unfortunately, those opposed to it have inadvertently strengthened this myth by their inaccurate descriptions of the phenomenon and the forces behind it.

Most reformers have attributed the Deorala episode to the 'ignorance and illiteracy' of the rural masses that they describe as prone to 'blind superstitiousness and excessive religiosity'. The phenomenon is seen as an indication of 'how backwardness and primitiveness has been preserved in India's villages.'

This kind of characterization of the Deorala episode assumes that it is a tradition of the masses to which the modern and the educated, supposedly stand opposed. But the fact of the matter is that Deorala is not a neglected village, nor are its inhabitants illiterate rustics. Nor are leaders of the pro-sati campaign mainly rural-based people. They are in large part urban-based politicians, who are not excessively religious but excessively greedy for power of a very 'modern' kind.

Thus, what was essentially a women's rights issue has been distorted into an issue of 'tradition' versus 'modernity', a struggle of the religious majority against an irreligious minority.

The People of Deorala

In failing to recognize that the Roop Kanwar's sati is a thoroughly 'modern' phenomenon in its political, economic and social moorings, the reformers have played into the hands of the pro-sati camp. The Roop Kanwar case has as little to do with tradition, as Ramanand Sagar's Sita has to do with Valmiki's Sita. In an attempt to understand the context of

Roop Kanwar's death and the forces behind its subsequent glorification, we visited Deorala and Jaipur in the last week of October, 1987.

Deorala is about two hours drive from Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, and about five hours drive from Delhi, by another route. It is an advanced prosperous village by Rajasthani and even by all-India standards. Its initial prosperity may have been based on agriculture because this part of the state is well-irrigated by private tubewells.

But, today, its prosperity is

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entrenched in its intimate connections with employment in the urban sector. Almost every family in Deorala has one or more male members who has a job in nearby towns. Most of these men are in government employment. A large majority of them are in the police or the army.

Deorala has many schools, a very high literacy rate (about 70 per cent) and has produced many matriculates and graduates. Roop Kanwar was a city-educated girl, her husband a science graduate, her father-in-law a school teacher and her brothers well-educated men, running a prosperous transport business in Jaipur.

The village has a population of about 10,000, the dominant castes being Rajputs and Brahmins. Almost all the houses are brick and cement structures. There is a market where a wide variety of consumer goods are available; the village has electricity and tap water. Many people own TV sets, cycles and motorcycles.

We saw hardly any visibly poverty-stricken people. The villagers looked well-fed. Most of the young people were dressed in fashionably tailored outfits of mill-made cloth. The men all wore western dress—trousers and shirts. The

young women wore Punjabi or Rajasthani dress, tailored in an urban style, clearly influenced by Hindi films.

The Sati Sthal

The Sati Sthal (the sati site) is situated at one end of the village, in an open ground. It is a temporary structure, a platform topped by a pavilion. When we reached there, four schoolboys, who appeared as aged between seven and fifteen years old, were walking round and round it, with sticks in their hands, chanting slogans. They wore shirts and shorts with outsize turbans perched

incongruously on their heads.

Nearby, a group of young men were selling coconuts and other offerings, and distributing *prasad*. At a little distance, another group of young men were selling reprints of the now famous photo-collage showing a beatific Roop Kanwar on the pyre with her husband's head in her lap.

Clusters of women sat around talking, among them a number of schoolgirls. They were very different from the filmy stereotype of the village woman, as a shy secluded belle. They assumed that we were journalists and kept staring at us with overt hostility for about 45 minutes. Since we refrained from asking any journalistic questions or taking photos, they finally called us and began cross-examining us with great confidence. Their hostility melted into the warmth and hospitality characteristic of an Indian village only after they were somewhat assured that we were not seeking to extract any statements from them. None of the women were veiled and they talked, joked, teased and laughed unabashedly in the presence of men.

Religion or Politics?

Most of the slogans being shouted at the Sati Sthal were clearly modelled



on electoral slogans and had not the remotest connection to any kind of religious chant. One boy would shout the first line and the others would then shout the second line, in the manner that slogans are raised at political rallies:

Sati ho to kaisi ho?

Roop Kanwar ke jaisi ho.

Model: Desh ha neta kaisa ho

Rajiv Gandhi (X, Y, Z) jaisa ho.

“Jab tak suraj chand rahega

Roop Kanwar tera naam rahega.”

Model: Jab tak suraj chand rahega

Indira tera naam rahega.

Others were victory chants of an inappropriate, even meaningless kind:

“Ek do teen char

Sati Mata ki jai jaikar”

“Sati Mata ki jai

Deorala Gaon ki jai

Sati ke pati ki jai,”

A couple of slogans had a pretence of religiosity but were linked to a

The Sati Sthal—controlled by young educated men

generalized term denoting god, not to any specific cult associated with sati:

Hari Om nam karega par

Sati Mata ki jai jaikar.

The most interesting slogan, clearly an offshoot of cow protection slogans popularized by political organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, was:

Desh dharam ka nata hai

Sati hamari mata hai.

The entire exercise had the flavour of a political rally, a show of strength *vis-a-vis* a political adversary rather than devotion to a deity.

We also attended the daily evening worship. The ground was floodlit. The schoolboys were replaced by young men with naked swords in hand. The *arti* sung was *Om Jai Jagdish Hare*, an *arti* of recent origin in modern Hindi which has

been popularized by Bombay cinema to the extent that it has now assumed the status of a sort of national *arti*, sung indiscriminately on all occasions. It has nothing at all to do with sati, and certainly is not of Rajput or Rajasthani origin.

A majority of those gathered at the worship were young men and women, most of them educated. That the *arti* was a recent imposition on village culture was evident from the fact that most of those who sang it had no notion of the tune and only a few of them knew the words, with the result that the rendering was ragged and unintelligible. The *arti* was performed by educated youths whose idea of religious ritual seemed more influenced by Hindi films than by any local religious tradition.

The fascination with the sati cult has been attributed to the superstitious ignorance of illiterate village women, but it is noteworthy that the entire cult being

created at Deorala is in the hands of educated men. Women participate by standing at a respectable distance, and joining in the singing.

Urban-based Campaign

The pro-sati campaign is not an indigenous product of Deorala. It is based in Jaipur. Its leaders are urban, educated men in their twenties and thirties. These men have landed property and family connections in rural areas so

Rajawat, is an educated man in his thirties, running a prosperous leather export business. His wife seemed in most ways to go along with the politics of the Samiti, although she has no official post in it. She is in her late twenties, a product of Lady Shri Ram College, one of Delhi's leading elite colleges for women. Even though she admitted being habituated to wearing modern western clothes as also the fashionable salwar kameez, the

elite is far removed from any traditional rustic lifestyle. It has little understanding of tradition. This was evident from the phoney ritualism that surrounds the Sati Sthal in Deorala. Several Rajputs from traditional families told us that satīs in the past were never worshipped in the fashion that is being institutionalized at Deorala today. There was no tradition of offering *Prasad* and singing *artis* to worship a sati. People would silently fold their hands before a Sati Sthal. Families, who had a sati in their ancestry would invoke her blessings but there was no big ceremonial cult around the satīs.

Another example of how a newfangled cult is being created today is the *chunri mahotsav* held after Roop Kanwar's death, which we saw notified in handbills on the walls at Deorala. The leaders of the Sati Dharm Raksha Samiti and Roop Kanwar's brother pointed out that the *chunri rasam* is a ceremony performed for any deceased woman and



Chunri Mahotsav—like a victory celebration

their influence extends over both urban and rural areas. Some of them have government jobs, others have political Power. The two networks are closely connected through kinship ties and with contacts in New Delhi also.

Thus, they constitute a powerful regional elite. They project themselves as representatives of rural India. In fact, they have no more claim to such a position than most urban dwellers, including many anti-sati campaigners, who have an ancestral village that they visit from time to time.

The secretary of the newly-founded Dharm Raksha Samiti (original name Sati Dharm Raksha Samiti, changed after the ordinance was passed forbidding glorification of sati), Mr Narendra Singh

day she met us she was wearing traditional Rajasthani *ghagra choli*, as though ready to go to a fancy dress party or a ceremonial occasion like a wedding. By contrast, none of the village women we met wore anything as exotic as that.

We met a well-educated, young Rajput man in Deorala, who said he had rushed there from Delhi as soon as he had heard of the sati, and had been camping in Deorala ever since, helping organize the pro-sati campaign. He admitted to having played a prominent part in organizing the pro-sati rally in Jaipur. It was this man and his ilk who kept claiming that miraculous cures had been effected by the Sati Mata's powers.

The lifestyle of this urban-based

is the counterpart of the *pagri rasam* for men. It is a solemn ritual, held in the days of mourning. They were trying to say that ordinary ceremonies like this one should not have been objected to even by opponents of sati. But they could not explain why the ceremony had been termed a *chunri mahotsav* when no one would traditionally hold a *mahotsav* (festival) after a death, or why the ceremony became a militant celebration, a show of strength.

The pro-sati rally in Jaipur was another example of departure from tradition. It totally lacked the solemnity that would befit a procession connected with a death. The bulk of the demonstrators were young, educated men. Contingents of Rajput young men had come from many cities all over India. They shouted slogans in a militant fashion, posturing and dancing as if part of a victory celebration. In contrast, the

anti-sati rally by women in Jaipur was an absolutely silent procession.

The sati cult in its present day form is primarily the product of a phoney religiosity that is the accompaniment of newfound prosperity, harnessed by political leaders for their own vested interests. This religio-political combine is being imported into villages from cities. It is not really a traditional residue from the rural backwaters of the country.

It is commonly found in many parts of the world, that as groups become more prosperous, they become more institutionally and ostentatiously religious and begin to spend money on building temples and promoting rituals. It is no coincidence that the largest number of new temples are springing up in cities, built by big businessmen. The

The real leaders of the pro Sati campaign—educated young men, making a jubilant celebration of the pro Sati rally, Jaipur

dozen or so big sati temples in urban and semi-urban areas that have become centres of a cult have been built in the last decade by the rich Marwari businessmen and not the Rajput community.

Hindu Custom?

Proponents and opponents of sati have embarked on an examination of ancient texts to establish whether or not these texts 'sanction' sati. This search for a sanction or prohibition of various practices is an empty exercise that nineteenth century British administrators began and that Indian social reformers picked up.

The British assumed that every religion, like Christianity, would have one book which all believers would accept as the 'gospel truth', and began a search for such a book for Hinduism. The search is a futile one because Hinduism is not a closed body of doctrines nor does it treat any text or set of texts as the final truth.

In different times and places, different Hindu communities follow widely different social and religious practices. Many of these practices are not mentioned in any text, but are nonetheless rigorously followed. Many practices sanctioned in texts are never practised and would be viewed with horror if proposed—for example, the practice of *niyoga* whereby unmarried persons may, at prescribed times, cohabit for the purpose of bearing children and satisfying their desires.

No society has one, single-track tradition. A whole range of ideas and beliefs, many of them contradictory, coexist and are handed down by each generation. In the process, they are continually transformed. Particular sections of community leadership pick up and glorify different traditions at different times. Therefore, we must enquire what forces are at work at a particular time and place to create an aura





of legitimacy around an event, and why they choose to do so.

In Rajasthan, women who became satis were not the only ones traditionally glorified and revered by Rajputs or by Rajasthanis in general. Mirabai too was a Rajput woman (born circa AD 1512) who has been deeply revered over the centuries and whose songs continue to be sung today with love and devotion by Rajput and other Rajasthanis women and men. She did not spend her life serving her husband, let alone giving up her life for him. Her songs openly proclaim her determination to undertake a spiritual quest, resisting the opposition of her husband and in-laws. In one song, she addresses her husband thus:

Ranaji, you cannot stop me now
I love to be among the wise
I throw off the veil of modesty...
Take your necklaces and jewels
I tear and fling your finery...
Mira wanders, a mad woman,
Her hair flies free.

(Ranaji, Ab no rahoongi tori hatki)

She lived a highly unconventional life, breaking out of seclusion, travelling widely with a following of women, and singing and dancing in temples. In

Religious leaders at the rally— figureheads, not organisers.

many songs, she stressed her defiance of social opinion:

Mira dances with bells on her feet...
'Mira is mad' people say
'Destroyer of family' kindred call me
Mira dances with bells on her feet...
(Pag ghungroo bandh,...)

In one song she even states:

I will sing of Girdhar
I will not be a Sati
(Girdhar gasya, Sati na hosya)

Mira continues to have a powerful grip over people's imagination in Rajasthan. One evidence of this is that over the centuries, more and more songs have been added to the body of her work, and scholars have difficulty sifting them. Women add to and change the songs as they sing them. Her songs are in Rajasthanis, the people's own language, unlike the songs being sung in worship of Roop Kanwar today.

What this call for unity portends can be gauged from the fact that burning a woman to death has become the symbol of this unity.

The urge towards self-definition and freedom that Mira represents is more integrally a part of Rajasthanis traditions relating to women than is the cult being created around Roop Kanwar today. That the new self-proclaimed leaders should choose a Roop Kanwar rather than a Mira as a symbol of Rajasthanis womanhood indicates what they believe of woman's place, but it is not evidence that a major section of Rajasthanis women have chosen that ideal for themselves.

Many politicians used the Deorala episode as a pretext to attempt to unite the internally divided Rajput community and capture it as a vote-bank. Many other leaders of Hindu revivalist organizations are trying to use the issue as a symbol of Hindu unity.

The call to boycott Diwali celebrations if government did not release those arrested at Deorala was first issued to Rajputs, but later extended to 'all Hindus'. At the rally organized by the Dharm Raksha Samiti in Jaipur, the call to save religion was issued in nasty, communal terms. What this portends can be gauged from the fact that burning a woman to death has become the symbol of this unity.

A number of saffron robed religious figures were collected, and seated on the platform at the pro-sati rally. However, they were not the organizers of the campaign. The campaign was not led by religious leaders, but by politicians under the facade of newly floated organizations like the Dharm Raksha Samiti.

These politicians pretend to be ordinary non-political religious Rajputs. For instance, we met Rajendra Singh Rathore, an ex-Yuva Janata student leader. Asked about his affiliations, he said, 'Here, I am just a member of the Dharm Raksha Samiti. I am not a political person.' But, a little later, he gloatingly remarked that V.P. Singh had lost Rajput

hearts and votes by issuing a statement against the Deorala sati. It was clear that he was enjoying his new found power as a Rajput leader able to mobilize the votes of sections of his community.

Fortunately, the diversity of Hindu society still lends it strength and sanity. The sati symbol is not likely to carry much weight beyond certain parts of the Hindi belt. In fact, the symbol has further divided Hindu opinion. For example, the Shankaracharya of Puri's pro-sati pronouncements have not convinced even Hindus in south India, let alone in Bengal or Gujarat, the North-East or the Arya Samaji, Radhaswami and other Hindu sects in the north.

It is important to remember that many Rajputs are also totally opposed to sati. Several Rajput women and men were active in the protests against Roop Kanwar's death. A Rajput man was one of the advocates involved in filing petitions against the proponents of sati. Those who took a public stand had to face considerable hostility. Rani Chuhrawat, a well-known public figure, expressed her opposition to sati on public platforms. She was *gheraoed* and abused and is being defamed by many pro-sati elements in an attempt to silence her.

She pointed out that sati cannot be equated with the right to suicide because even where the right to suicide exists in law, suicide is not a socially encouraged act. One's family members would try their best to dissuade one from committing suicide and would certainly not help in any way. If one still wanted to commit suicide, one would do it privately, in solitude, not as a public spectacle. Even technically, sati is not suicide since someone else lights the pyre, not the woman herself.

Second, and most important, she asked how many women have the right to decide anything voluntarily?

If a woman does not have the right to decide whether she wants to marry, and when, and whom, how far she wants



to take a particular job or not—how is it that she suddenly gets the right to take such a major decision as to whether she wants to die? Why is it that her family meekly acquiesces in her decision, when in the normal course, they would not scruple to overrule decisions she made of which they did not approve? Given women's general powerlessness, lack of control over their own lives, and definition of their status by their relationship to men (as daughters, wives, widows, mothers), can any decision of theirs, particularly such a momentous decision, really be called voluntary and self-chosen?

Women's groups in Rajasthan made an effort to work as a concerted lobby. They conducted a public debate on the issue, and mobilized women from different strata of society to protest the Deorala incident. A large rally was held in Jaipur. Many organizations from outside Rajasthan supported these efforts in various ways. These were positive developments.

State Action

However, it is unfortunate that opposition to sati took mainly the form of seeking government intervention. Our government, by its skilful use of

One very important initiative taken against Sati was the march by Hindu religious leaders, led by Swami Agnivesh from Delhi towards Deorala

progressive rhetoric, has convinced reformers that even though it has a consistent track record of being both dishonest and ineffective, it is ultimately on the side of progress. Reformers seem to accept the government's own evaluation of itself rather than going by its abysmally poor record.

In fact, our government machinery, far from being progressive, is not even neutral. It is controlled by politicians, for whom considerations of power and profit are far more important than human rights. The machinery is not only corrupt but often outright murderous. Witness the Indian police record of atrocities, ranging from the Arwal massacre, to innumerable rapes in custody, to the recent PAC killings in cold blood of arrested Muslims in Meerut.

In Deorala, too, the police is living up to its own traditions. The village has become a police camp. The police is actively obstructing journalists and anti-sati campaigners from investigating the case.



Sita's fire ordeal, 17th century painting from Malwa

It is likely that the actual facts of the case—whether it was murder or suicide—would have come out, were it not for the heavy police presence in the village. Under the Ordinance, anyone who admits to having witnessed the sati is liable to prosecution. Most villagers are afraid to say anything for fear of being implicated by the police. Those who are determinedly pro-sati are camping at the

Sati Sthal under police protection.

Any attempts to challenge the cult are prevented by the police. The march by anti-sati Hindu religious leaders, led by Swami Agnivesh, from Delhi to Deorala, was prevented from entering Deorala, and the marchers arrested. Women activists of Jaipur also say they are not allowed to enter the village in groups. The facts of the case are being suppressed and the cult built up under police protection.

About two kilometers from the village, a police picket stopped us, saying no journalist was allowed further. In Deorala, most of the policemen were in plainclothes. They mingled with the local people in a very friendly manner. It was hard to know who was a villager and who a policeman. When we tried to take photos, some men aggressively forbade us. We thought they were villagers but they turned out to be plainclothes policemen. We were told there were 'orders' forbidding photography at the site but no one could explain why.

The ostensible reason for the police being there was to implement the Ordinance forbidding glorification of sati. But they were making no attempt at all to do so. They were quite as involved in the worship as other villagers. One policeman reminded us to take off our shoes when approaching the Sati Sthal, and another cheerfully advised us to attend the *arti* at 7 p.m. We saw many jeeps and matadors (vans) full of worshippers from other areas coming to the village. Not one was stopped by the police.

Yet, the villagers claim the police victimized them. They claim that press publicity has led to police repression and that indiscriminate arrests have been made. Scores of persons had been arrested from Deorala, most of whom have been released in subsequent months. The villagers we met claimed most of those arrested were innocent bystanders.

The people of Deorala, whom we met, young and old alike, were highly suspicious and hostile towards the press and anyone who looked like a journalist. The police seemed to share this hostility. Whenever we began talking to any one villager, many others would immediately gather around and suspiciously demand: 'What are they asking? What are you telling them?' So effective was this mutual policing of each other by the villagers that we ended up answering more questions than they did.

This mutual policing within the community, hostility to outsiders, particularly journalists, and the mingling

of the police with the people they are accused of repressing, was highly reminiscent of the situation we encountered in those parts of Meerut, which had witnessed mass burnings and the death of Muslims during the recent riots.

Role of Government

The government and the police failed to prevent Roop Kanwar's death in an area that is teeming with government servants and police personnel. There was no way local government and police personnel could have been unaware of what was about to occur. There was a two-hour gap between the announcement that Roop was to become sati and the actual immolation. People gathered from surrounding to witness it, and it took place in broad daylight.

No special anti-sati law was needed to prevent Roop Kanwar's death. The existing law was perfectly adequate. Both murder and suicide are illegal, punishable offences under the Indian Penal Code. The police is duty-bound to prevent their commission. A policeman

who knows that a murder or suicide is about to occur, and neglects to intervene, also commits a serious offence.

Where a whole community chose to collude in a woman's being murdered or pressured to submit to immolation, the local government and police, which are not after all a separate species but a part of the same society, also colluded in the crime. The upper levels of government, at the State and Central levels, reacted with delaying and evasive tactics, succumbing to different pressure groups, and did not investigate the crucial question of why the local police had not intervened. Instead, that same local police was posted in the village to create an intimidating atmosphere to prevent proper investigation. It remains to be seen whether Roop Kanwar's in-laws' prosecution actually proceeds effectively.

It was the lack of will on the government's part, not the lack of a law, that resulted in its failure to intervene. Yet, the anti-sati campaigners assumed that a stringent law was all that was

needed to solve the problem. If sati is just a cover used to get away with hounding a woman to death why is a special law needed to deal with such incidents? Does this not amount to conceding to the view that sati constitutes a special category distinct from murder or suicide?

Our government has perfected the art of passing draconian laws which it then uses not to solve problems but to acquire additional arbitrary powers and then uses these powers to intimidate the citizenry even further. For example, the Anti Terrorist Act has not resulted in an end to terrorism but is used as a new weapon by policemen to threaten ordinary people and petty offenders and extract even larger bribes.

The anti-sati Ordinance passed by the Rajasthan government, with its vague definition of 'abetment of sati' as including presence at the site as a participant, has ample scope for misuse.

The photo collage being sold at Deorala, of a beatific Roop Kanwar on the pyre



The police can easily pick up any person from the area whom they wish to harass. It is alleged that they have already arrested several innocent people from Deorala. A person has to prove that he or she was not present at the site since the Ordinance, in violation of the principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty, lays the burden of proof on the accused.

The Ordinance also prescribes the death sentence of abetment of sati. At a time when most countries are considering abolition of the death sentence, as it has proven futile as a way of reducing the murder rate, that we should be introducing it for more offences is a singular irony. The Ordinance also has a ridiculous provision for punishing the victim. A woman who attempts sati is to be imprisoned for one to five years and fined Rs 5,000 to Rs 20,000. Central legislation along the same lines is now being drafted.

What Went Wrong?

Somewhere along the way, the anti-sati campaign became somewhat counter-productive. The campaigners became characterized as a handful of anti-Hindu, anti-Rajput, anti-religion, pro-government, anti-masses, urban, educated, westernized people, and the pro-sati lobby as those sensitive to the sentiments of the rural, traditional poor. This completely false polarization occurred because:

1. The reformers wrongly characterized the Deorala episode as the product of illiteracy and backwardness among the rural poor, whereas it was the product of a modernized, developed, prosperous combine of local people.
2. The reformers saw the Deorala episode as the product of an old tradition, whereas in its present form it is a newly-created cult, organized primarily by political, not by religious leaders.
3. The reformers entered into a debate on the religiosity or otherwise of the Deorala Sati. It is important that we demystify it and see it as a case of a woman being hounded to death



The new Sati cult—a product of modern forces. A film poster for a film glorifying a Sati uses the same iconography as the Roop Kanwar photo collage.

under a specious religious cover, and of her death being made a symbol by certain power-groups to demonstrate their clout.

4. The main thrust of the anti-sati campaign took the form of petitions to government authorities asking for more stringent laws. This gave government the opportunity to pose as progressive by introducing a repressive law, and let the government off the hook for its complicity in Roop Kanwar's death.
5. The reformers asked that the police be used as an agent of social reform, forgetting that the police is incapable of performing this role. The police acquired more powers which it used to aid and abet pro-sati forces and to prevent the reformers and the press from purveying information about the

case. In addition, it made a lot of money on the side.

What Might Help

We have to consider what course of action could create a state of affairs wherein people would not be able to justify and escape retribution for burning a woman to death in public. To prevent any more such incidents from occurring must be our main concern. Any course of action that has the negative, unintended consequence of heightening the aura around the Deorala episode and of arming with more arbitrary powers those who colluded in Roop Kanwar's death— namely, the local government

and police—should be avoided.

When we consider the question of what is to be done, we have to bear in mind that not everyone in every part of the country can be equally effective in acting on every issue. Where we are placed inevitably affects our sphere of influence and effective activity.

Alternative courses of action that are being pursued, but unfortunately, with much less vigour than the course of demanding more legislation and more police, are:

1. Indicting the local police for not having intervened to save Roop Kanwar. All the local police officers who failed to stop the burning should be treated as abettors of Roop Kanwar's murder, immediately suspended, and tried under the Indian Penal Code. This is one way to ensure that other policemen know what the consequences will be of condoning any other such deaths.
2. Monitoring the case against Roop Kanwar's in-laws to see that all the facts are uncovered, that it is not quietly dropped for 'lack of evidence' as too many wife-murder cases routinely are; following it up consistently to see that the accused are exposed, prosecuted and convicted.
3. Instead of relying on ordinances, stay orders and the police to prevent glorification of the Deorala episode and the construction of a temple, it would be better if local human rights and women's organizations mobilized all concerned persons to offer indefinite *satyagraha* at Deorala to facilitate dialogue and debate with those involved in the sati cult. Outside activists might be permitted to join in on a relay basis. This could have been done better if Deorala had not been converted into a police camp. But it should still be possible, though it will now involve fighting the government for the citizens' right to protest the murder and its subsequent glorification.
4. Some laudable attempts have been made to engage the wider public in a

debate that goes beyond the newspaper pages. One such attempt was a *yatra* from Delhi to Deorala, led by Arya Sarnaj *sanyasis*. This is an important symbolic statement that anti-women forces do not have a monopoly on defining Hindu traditions and do not represent all Hindus.

The Women's Development Programme and other social work organizations in Ajmer district, Rajasthan, have organized a *padayatra* through villages, with plays and songs that raise questions of concern to people including the drought, women's issues, and sati.

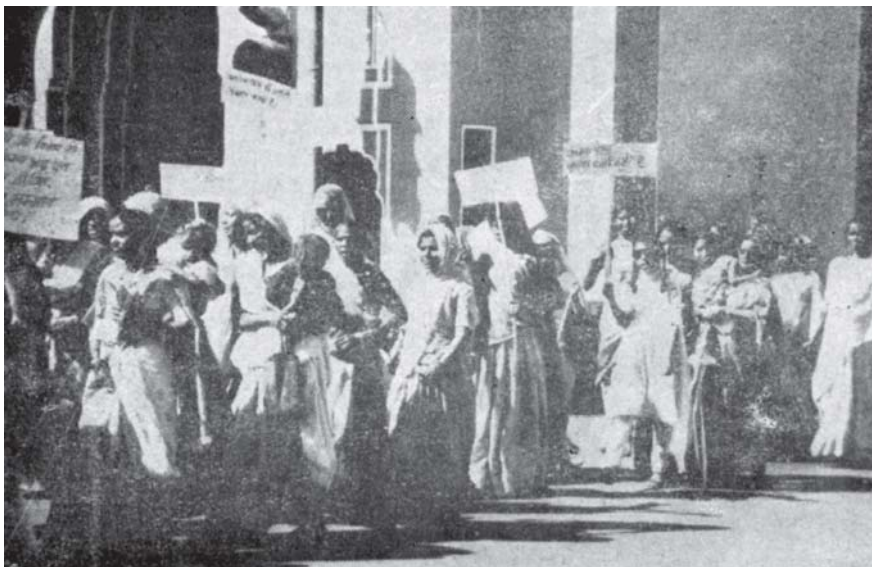
More such efforts could mobilize a broader social consensus in Rajasthan against maltreatment of women, and

women, any number of repressive laws and policemen are not likely to preserve women's lives.

Update on Roop Kanwar, 1998

After a great deal of pressure and agitation by women's organizations and human rights groups all over the country, the government of Rajasthan filed a case in the court of Additional District Judge, Neem Ka Thana. The case dragged on for years at the level of the lower court. In the meantime, all the witnesses had turned hostile, further weakening the case. Finally on 11 October 1996, a judgement was delivered acquitting all the accused.

There were a number of protest demonstrations in Rajasthan against this judgement, including a siege of the secretariat. All this to pressure the



Women's rally in Jaipur protesting Roop Kanwar's death and its subsequent glorification

provide an atmosphere conducive to expression of dissent from amongst local communities themselves.

That a woman could be burnt to death in public is a stark indication of women's vulnerability in our social system. Roop Kanwar's death: was only one expression of the general devaluation of women's lives. Unless the consensus within our society changes in favour of a more dignified and self-sustaining life for

Rajasthan government to file an appeal in the High Court—something it should have done on its own initiative. The case has not even been listed for hearing since then.

It is noteworthy that the anti-sati Ordinance passed in response to Roop Kanwar's sati, cannot be appealed to in this case (except for preventing glorification of sati) since the law came into effect after her death. □