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The Sati System In Tripura: Cultural Influence & Abolition

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Abstract

Sati is a Hindu custom of self-immolation by the burning pyre of widow woman. The practice of Sati has existed in India for centuries. This evil practice was prevalent throughout India since the Vedic period. The practice of self-immolation continued during the Mughal era, which was opposed by emperors Akbar and Jahangir. Sati was a Hindu practice prevalent in Tripura as well as other parts of India. In the 16th century the Sati was practiced in the royal family. In 1829 at the instigation of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lord William Bentinck declared that the practice of Sati was prohibited in India. Despite this, this evil practice continued in Tripura for almost six decades.

Keywords: Self-immolation, Cremated, Chastity, Delusion, Superstition

INTRODUCTION:

Tripura is a princely state located in North-Eastern part of India. Tripura is as rich in cultural beauty as it is in mixed culture. The people of Tripura have been carrying the Tribal-Bengali mixed culture since ancient times. One notable example of Hindu culture is the practice of self-immolation called Sati. Although the practice of sati in the royal family of the state Tripura, it later spread to the common people. A lot of information about the practice of Sati is available in the historical book of tripura 'Sri Rajmala'.

Beginning of Sati System in Tripura:

It is not known whether the practice of Sati was prevalent in Tripura before the 16th century. But in the early 16th century, Sati was prevalent mainly in the royal family in Tripura. The first known incident in the royal family in 1515 was the Queen of the Maharaja Dhanya Manikya, Kamala Devi committed Sati on the pyre of her husband. Then gradually this practice of sati spread to the next generation of the royal family. Then the practice of Sati was adopted as a common practice by the Hindu Tribal community of Tripura.

Continuation of Sati ritual in Royal Family:

After Dhanya Manikya, the Queen of his youngest son Deva Manikya, the mother of Vijay Manikya, became a Sati after the death of her husband. After Deva Manikya, his son Vijay Manikya ascended the throne in 1532. After the death of Vijay Manikya, it is known that his several queens became Sati. Then after the death of Vijay Manikya's son Anant Manikya, his Queen Jaya Mahadevi wanted to become a Sati with her husband. But this was not possible as Queen Jaya Mahadevi's father Gopi Prasad prevented her.

In 1577, Maharaja Amar Manikya ascended the throne. After Amar Manikya's death in 1587, Queen Amaravati committed suicide by jumping into her husband's pyre on the banks of the Manu River. Then when Maharaja Govinda Manikya's grandson Mukunda Manikya died in 1738, his Queen Prabhavati Devi immolated herself on her husband's pyre. During the reign of Maharaja Krishna Manikya, his younger brother prince Harimani's second wife Ratnamala voluntarily Committed self-immolation. This is probably the last case of Sati in the royal family of Tripura. But the various cases of Sati during the reign of different king's indicate that no queen was forced to become Sati, they would voluntarily sacrifice themselves on the pyre with their husbands as per their beliefs.

Spread of Sati system in the Tribal Community:

Tripura has always been a state rich in culture, with a mix of tribes and non-tribes. Like the royal family of tripura, the tribal people were also Hindus. Therefore, it was the Tribal community who mainly adopted the practice of Sati inspired by the royal family. However there is no evidence to suggest that this practice was prevalent among the Bengali community of Tripura.

But according to a letter sent by Maharaja to the English officer, it is known that this practice of sati was prevalent among the hill tribes of Tripura. Again according to the letter of Umakanta Das to the Political Agent of Tripura, the women of Jamatia tribes used to commit Sati with their deceased husband. He mentioned the relevant name in his letter--

1. About 3years ago, the wife of the Charan Senapati of Burmacherra, became self-immolated with her husband.
2. Before last Baishakh, the wife of Gangamohan Senapati of Falilangcherra, became sati with her husband.
3. Around last Magha (the end of january), the wife of Milaram Burma of Hantarai Chowdhuripara, Tuirupacherra, became Sati.

(Sri Rajmala/Kaliprasanna Sen)

Causes behind the Sati ritual:

The Indian practice of Sati is very ancient. The ritual of Sati has been practiced in India since the Vedic period. It is also mentioned in the Mahabharata. It has been said in various Puranas that all women who do not accompany their husbands, whether for any reason, such as lust, anger, fear or delusion, are pure. Some women became Sati to maintain this purity, while others were forced to do so under the pressure of society and family. Although it is mentioned in the Samhita and Puranas, that it is the duty of a wife to accompany her deceased husband, there are also opposing views in the scriptures.

However in the case of Tripura, the queens of the royal family would voluntarily commit Sati by burning themselves with their dead husbands. The queens considered it as their duty and a process of maintaining their chastity. They were not forced to commit Sati.

(Sri Rajmala/Kaliprasanna Sen)

Contribution of Sri Rajmala:

Sri Rajmala, written by Kaliprasanna Sen, is a Royal Chronicle of Tripura. Sri Rajmala contains all the events of the royal family of Tripura. There is a lot of information about the practice of Sati in Tripura. The custom of Sati was first practiced in the state of Tripura in the 16th century. In 1490, Dhanya Manikya ascended the royal throne of Tripura. After a long reign when Dhanya Manikya died in 1515, his consort Maharani Kamala Devi was cremated with her husband. This was the first incident of Sati in the royal family of Tripura. Since then, incidents of self-immolation with husbands have continued in the royal family.

Sources other than Sri Rajmala:

During the Manikya period, the Ahom Kingdom had very close relations with Tripura. The writings of the Ahom Rajdutas also reveal the practice of Sati in Tripura. During the reign of Ratna Manikya, Ratnakandali Sharma and Arjundas Vairagi visited Tripura as envoys of the king Swargadev Rudra Singha. They visited Tripura three times between 1709 and 1715. During that time, they observed the Tripura Kingdom, its capital and the royal family closely and recorded them. They described the practice of Sati prevalent in the royal family during the reign of Ratna Manikya-II. From the descriptions of the Ahom envoys, it is understood that the practice of Sati was prevalent in Tripura during the Mughal period.

Abolition of Sati system in Tripura:

Lord William Bentinck through the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, declared the practice of Sati to be banned in India in 1829. But the practice continued in the state of Tripura for almost 60 more years. Then through the efforts of the British authorities, Maharaja of Tripura, Bir Chandra Manikya and Umakanta Das, the painful practice of Sati was stopped.

■ Contribution of British Officers:

The first Political Agent was appointed in Tripura in 1871 during the reign of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya. The practice of Sati was still not stopped in Tripura, Therefore from then on, the British Government started putting pressure on the king of Tripura to stop the practice of Sati. In 1888, the British Commissioner of Chittagong Mr. D.R. Lyall gave the responsibility of this matter to Assistant Political Agent Umakanta Das and asked him to take appropriate measures.

(Tripura Files/Nanigopal Debnath)

■ Contribution of Umakanta Das:

Umakanta Das was the Assistant Political Agent of Tripura during the reign of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya. Mr. D. R. Lyall assigned Umakanta Das to take appropriate measures to stop the practice of Sati, and he drew the attention of the Maharaja to This matter. He wrote a letter to the Foreign office of Tripura on 11 June. In the Letter he wrote about Sati incidents that had occurred in Tripura various times. This was the first letter from the British government on this prevention of Sati.

■ Role of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya:

In response to the letter of the British authorities, a letter was written from the Royal Court of Tripura on 3 September 1888. The Maharaja said in the letter- *“the custom of Sati is a very old custom of this state and the subjects consider it sacred. The hill tribes among whom this custom is prevalent are uneducated and conservative, so any interference from the Royal Court could create unrest in the state. This custom has been declining especially in the last 10 years. Moreover women are not forced to become Sati in this state, the Sati women voluntarily accompany their husbands. And the Royal Court will keep an eye on this so that women are not oppressed to become Sati in the future.”*

The British authorities were not at all satisfied with this response to the letter, this could not be expected from a well-educated person like the Maharaja. The commissioner of Chittagong, Mr. D.R. Lyall said in a polite manner that the practice was not prohibited, but permitted. If the practice of Sati, banned by India 60 years ago, was not effectively banned in Tripura, then the Royal Court would have to suffer the consequences. Finally under great pressure, Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya declared the practice of Sati to be prohibited in 1889 and issued a Royal decree.(Tripura Files/Nanigopal Debnath)

Conclusion:

Although the practice of Sati was considered religious in conservative society, it was painful for women. Therefore educated people have always opposed it. But six decades after the practice of Sati was banned in India, this practice was prevalent in Tripura. Although women were not forced to become sati, this practice was inhumane. Therefore the British authorities demanded from the Maharaja to free Tripura from this superstition. But the Maharaja was not in favour of banning the practice of Sati at first. The Royal Court was of

the opinion that this practice would go away on its own. But the British authorities didn't agree to this. Finally under strong pressure from the British Commissioner, Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya declared the practice of Sati banned in Tripura

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