AT THE EDGE OF PSYCHOLOGY

Essays in Politics & Culture

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PREFACE

This book includes new incarnations of six essays I wrote during 1972–7. I now disagree with many of the things they say. Many specific interpretations, too, are now a part of my prehistory. But, on the whole, they mark out a vantage ground from which I began to examine contemporary Indian political consciousness and — I cannot avoid the expression — unconsciousness.

Being directly concerned with the relationships between the private and the public in politics, these essays at one plane define the outlines of a cultural psychology of Indian politics. However, somewhere along the way, I seem to have ignored the separation between the person and his politics and begun to see the inner self of the person, too, as a political fact and as a normative statement. Perhaps this was inevitable. Not only must politics work with — and work out — the contradictions in human subjectivity, that subjectivity in turn concretizes, perhaps better than any action, the state of politics in a society.

Four themes run through the essays. First, all of them deal with the creation, persistence, remaking, death and rebirth of political traditions. Now, tradition is a matter of the mind; its embedment in history may be useful but not necessary in a society which refuses to dissociate history from myth. India is one society which has made full use of its plural culture by interpreting and reinterpreting its myriad pasts. And this tradition of using traditions continues. That is why I shall not grudge it if some enterprising reviewer finds unconvincing history in the following pages, as long as he finds in them convincing myths. In the culture from within which these essays on political culture are written, the past is not always a history which must be worked with or reversed. It could also be an open allegory which widens human choices and humanizes politics.

Second, these essays see politics as participation in, and defiance of, intersecting systems of authority. All of them are concerned with the way authority has been defined and redefined in Indian society during the colonial and post-colonial periods, both by individuals and by groups. It is this which accounts for the

fact that each of these essays is in a way concerned with the role of femininity in Indian politics and culture. As one of the essays argues, no understanding of the structures of Indian authority is possible without understanding the close symbolic links between power, legitimate authority and gender. The magic of power and the power of magic converge in the Indian context in the social constructions of womanhood. This convergence, especially as it involves normative components in social interventions and social goals, has been examined directly or indirectly in these pages.

Third, the essays examine the psychological assumptions of some of the major models of social change generated in recent Indian history. From Rammohun Roy's articulate theology of social change to Indira Gandhi's confused design of pure politics, many concepts of social intervention have been thrown up in India during the last two hundred years which have implicit models of human nature built into them. These models have often been evaluated in terms of their social and political content but almost never in terms of the shared consciousness they represent.

Finally, while most of the essays deal with the sources of democratic politics and plural political traditions in India, some also indirectly deal with the cultural sources of authoritarianism in the society. The last two essays, particularly, have this concern as their main focus. Both are indirect products of the Emergency and the press censorship of 1975–7 and both try to link the culture of Indian politics to its pathology during the Emergency and to authoritarianism in India in general. The first of the two was originally written as a review of a book published twenty-five years earlier. The second is a revised version of an essay published soon after the Emergency was revoked. That essay, in turn, was based on a few articles published during the Emergency, articles which had successfully slipped past the censors and, I regret to add, many readers, too. I hope readers of this volume will forgive me if they find that I have reacted by making things a little too 'obvious' in these revised versions. The second essay also suffers from the naive belief that in political psychology there can be last words. As I write this preface in 1980, the Indian electorate in its wisdom has virtually turned my analysis into an *obiter dictum*. The onus is now on the subject of my analysis to keep it so. As I have already said, the past in this society is open-ended; probably more so than the future.

Many persons have helped me in different ways in preparing this book. I must particularly mention the editors who published earlier versions of these essays in *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India, Psychoanalytic Review, Daedalus, Encounter, Indian Journal of Psychology* and *The Times of India.* I am also grateful to my colleagues, Giri Deshingkar and D. L. Sheth, for their numerous suggestions. The essay on Gandhi would not have been possible but for the translations from Marathi that Ajay Patwardhan and Mohan M. Trivedi specially did for me.

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SATI
A Nineteenth-Century Tale of Women, Violence and Protest

Authority and Defiance

There are superstitions, and superstitions about superstitions. For over 150 years, the legal abolition in 1829 of sati, the Hindu rite of widows committing suicide after the death of their husbands, has been considered the first victory of the modern world over Hindu obscurantism and primitivism. I contend in this essay that the epidemic of sati in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries was mainly a product of British colonial intrusion into Indian society; that the popularity of the rite and its abolition in response to a reform movement were two phases in Indian society's attempt to cope with large-scale environmental and cultural changes; and that both these changes involved the invalidation and distortion of traditional attitudes to woman and femininity. I also contend that Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), who led the movement against the rite and partly on that ground is known as the father of modern India, represented society's attempt to work through its ambivalences towards the rite, towards traditional concepts of womanhood and women, and towards the sexual identities the colonial culture was helping to crystallize.

This alternative interpretation of sati assumes that to walk the razor's edge between makeshift adjustments and total surrender to its changing environment, a civilization constantly needs to generate new concepts, symbols and structures of authority and to renegotiate terms with its older gods. It is this social need which defines the importance of the person who evolves new sources of legitimacy and designs alternative controls of transgression, and yet makes his innovations reflect the unique history and genius of his people. If society helps such a person to take care of his private conflicts, gives him the chance to relate his world view to the needs of his contemporaries, and appreciates his interpretation of traditions as authoritative, a creative anastomosis between man and society is established. Social change then comes

to mean not only changes in rites, rituals and practices, but also a changed relationship between cultural symbols and individual motives.

Starting from such an assumption I shall explore in this essay the relationship between the reform of sati and the world of Rammohun Roy to illustrate how a person's private conflicts with the immediate authorities can get intertwined with aggregate responses to public issues, how older controls of transgression can become a threat and a challenge to the person, and how a person's personal ethics and private symbols can become valid tools of social intervention. I shall do so in two stages. First, I shall examine the culture of sati in historical and psychological terms and show how the ritual became a battleground between the old and the new, the indigenous and the imported, and the Brahmanic and the folk. I shall try to show that these three intersecting conflicts were given meaning by the central conflict between traditional concepts of womanhood and the emerging man–nature system, political authority and social organization. In the second stage I shall try to show how Rammohun Roy subverted the rite of sati by introducing his society to alternative symbols of authority which constituted not merely the first serious reinterpretation of Hinduism in modern times, but also carried the intimations of a new life style and new principles of masculinity and femininity more compatible with the large-scale industrial, social and economic changes then taking place in Indian society.[1]

To sharpen the analysis, I shall avoid details of the history of the reform and Rammohun's public and private lives. Instead, I shall emphasise only some lesser known aspects of Roy's early interpersonal experiences which provide important clues to his theory of reform and to the 'inner' meaning for him of the crises of his people and his time. It was this meaning which influenced Roy's private responses to the older symbols of authority involved in the rite of sati, and his public struggle to introduce new authority symbols more congruent with the emerging psychological and cultural realities in his community. To the extent he succeeded in his historical role, it was again this meaning which cut across numerous levels and sectors of human behaviour, offsetting private history against collective self-definition and personal synthesis against a diffused collective response to environmental change.

The Logic of a Ritual

Sati, literally a virtuous wife, was the practice of widows burning themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands (though sometimes the wives took poison or were buried alive). The rite had been prevalent among upper-caste Indians for at least two thousand years without ever becoming a standard practice.

It is not clear when and how the rite first gained a place in Indian culture. A number of studies show that widow remarriage was definitely sanctioned by ancient Hindu laws and the most venerated sacred texts were, if not actually hostile, certainly not well-disposed towards sati. The earlier law-givers, such as Manu and Yajnavalkya, had only recommended a chaste life for widows; others, such as Kautilya, allowed widows to remarry under certain circumstances. It was in the second or third century A.D. that sati was first recommended in *Vishnu Dharma Samhita* and it was in medieval India that the rite began to gain a new legitimacy.[2] At that time, in some small areas of the country ruled by Hindu princelings and under military, political and social pressures from the Muslim rulers of India — sati became frequent and sometimes even broke out as an epidemic. There are many popular stories about how courageous Hindu widows in the middle ages committed *jauhar* or mass sati after the death of their husbands in battle. However, there is also evidence that it was not entirely a matter of courage. Contrary to folklore, even in *jauhar* there was a strong element of compulsion.

Many reasons for the gradual legitimization of the rite are mentioned: deliberate mistranslation of the sacred texts by the Brahmans; the difficulty of protecting women in times of war, particularly in the middle ages; the decline of Buddhism and its rationalist–pacifist influence; contact with some tribal and other cognate cultures which believed that the comfort of a dead man in his after-life could be ensured by burying with him his wives, jewellery, slaves and other favourite possessions.[3] Whatever be the reasons, the popularity of sati declined again after the middle ages. We know that by the seventeenth century the practice had become mainly voluntary and took place generally during times of war when it became difficult to protect women. In fact, by the beginning of the eighteenth century it had become a rare occurrence.

It was only towards the end of the eighteenth century and in Bengal that the rite suddenly came to acquire the popularity of a legitimate orgy.[4] Soon widows were being drugged, tied to the bodies of their dead husbands, and forced down with bamboo sticks on the burning pyres. And, this time, the practice mobilized support from many more areas of social life. For instance, on the cultural plane, the burning was invariably preceded by Kali puja and, otherwise, too, had distinctly Shakta features.[5] Again, on the political plane, the lack of self-confidence of the British colonial power and its social non-interventionism during the first phase of the Raj seemed for many a direct endorsement of the practice. In other words, to understand the reform of sati, one must first understand the gestalt of the cultural and institutional factors which might have helped popularize sati in a given region at a given time.

Let me argue the economic historian's case first. There is no doubt that the rite was partly a primitive Malthusian means of population control in famine-ridden Bengal. Previously, high mortality rates and the prohibition of widow remarriage had helped society to limit the number of mothers to below the level of available fertile women. However, in times of scarcity, these controls became inadequate and, in times of anomia, widows at certain levels of consciousness seemed useless drags on resources — particularly amongst the upper and middle classes in which women played no direct and manifest economic role.

Eighteenth-century Bengal had both the scarcity and the anomia. After about 150 years of relatively famine-free existence, from 1770 onwards and at short intervals, large-scale scarcities challenged the traditional Bengali concept of benevolent mother deities presiding over a benevolent nature. In 1770 alone about two-fifths of all Bengalis died in a famine; most of these famines were also accompanied by major epidemics. Anomia too was widespread in the expanding urban world of Greater Calcutta, particularly among the upper caste Bengali gentry, the Bhadralok. The colonial system had generated in them a sense of rudderlessness by forcing them to maintain their traditional social dominance on almost entirely new grounds.[6] For example, the new land settlement system was displacing the landed Bhadralok aristocracy with a group of Bhadralok who had defied their caste identity to enter commerce—a profession which in Bengal was typical of the

lower castes. These new landlords were merely investing in land the money they had earned from business in the cities, and they derived social status not from traditional social relations, but from British patronage. As if this was not enough, both groups of Bhadraloks found that the fast pace of monetization, by eroding caste obligations, was depriving them of the historical allegiance of artisans, the service castes and the peasantry. The various caste groups now had to work increasingly within the framework of impersonal, contractual, social relations.[7] Finally, though the new system favoured Brahmanic skills for the growing tertiary sector, for the upper castes this became a competitively acquired advantage rather than an inherited asset.

So while constituting about 11 per cent of the population of Bengali Hindus, the upper castes accounted for about 55 per cent of the cases of sati, whereas the lower castes, constituting 89 per cent of Bengali Hindus, contributed about 45 per cent of the victims. This 45 per cent came mainly from the upwardly mobile, Sanskritizing sectors of the lower castes.[8] In other words, the rite was becoming popular not among the rural poor or the small peasantry, but amongst the urban *nouveaux riches* who had lost part of their allegiance to older norms and had no alternative commitments with which to fill the void.

In their simple way some Christian missionaries at the time did relate the growing anomia amongst the elite to the spread of sati. Though they also linked sati to Hindu orthodoxy, the missionaries never lost sight of the class background of sati. Marshman, for instance, felt that 'the increasing luxury of the high and middling classes, . . . and their expensive imitation of European habits' made them eager to avoid the cost of maintaining widows.[9] Rammohun Roy, too, considered economic gain to be a crucial explanation of the rite.[10]

Secondly, sati helped manipulate the distribution of property in a society that had rigid property rules. Under the *dayabhaga* system of Hindu law operating only in Bengal and some parts of eastern India, the right to property did not arise at the birth of a male co-sharer, but on religious efficacy. Also, a son had the right to separate or dispose of his property before partition and a widow succeeded to her husband's property on his death without a male issue even if the family was undivided.[11] This relatively liberal attitude to women in Bengal was mainly derived from the

region's institutional flexibility, its non-Brahmanic (mainly tribal and Buddhist) traditions and the greater emphasis which the regional culture placed on the feminine principle in the godhead.[12] All this gave women a legitimate right to property as wives as well as mothers who could influence the decision of their children–copartners. But these were dangerous privileges to have in a culture where survival was not easy and where there was a high chance that a widow would inherit property or use it for bargaining purposes within the family. Inducing her to commit suicide was an efficient way of checking this.[13]

Thirdly, in families seduced away from the path of traditional virtue by the new colonial culture, sati became a means of securing social status and renown for virtue. We have already noted that the rite enjoyed some popularity among the upwardly mobile sectors of Bengali society and that they found in sati a new means of Sanskritization. Important parts of urban Bengal accepted this new means as legitimate: even when the family of the suicide was prosecuted, there was no loss of caste, infamy or disgrace; the family in fact gained in social stature and were 'backed with applause and honour'.[14] The duress exerted on the prospective sati was seen as a test of the piety of a family. Taking advantage of this social sanction, the practitioners of the rite were most ruthless with the widow who, after making the fatal decision to commit sati, later wavered.

A part of the status acquired through sati attached to the suicide herself. This was a powerful incentive in a society where humiliation and bullying were generally the widow's lot. Economic freedom for her was virtually out of the question; it could be bought only through prostitution or other such extra-social ventures. In addition, there were taboos on her attendance at festive and religious occasions and severe restrictions on food, decorative dress and adornment. Thus, the sheer misery of a widow's life partly negated the prospective suicide's fear of death. Such a future seemed even worse because of childhood prejudices and fantasies about the widow being a bad omen and an evil presence.

Fourthly, a large number of Bengali Brahmans *did* claim sacred sanctions for sati; indeed, sati was seen by many observers of Indian society as a conspiracy of Brahmans.[15] It went unnoticed by most of these observers that the Bengali Brahmans, unlike Brahmans 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. Also, they were the caste most exposed to Westernization and the growing conflict between the old and the new.[16] As already noted, in the new set-up many had to maintain their traditional status on the grounds of a new set of values and not on the grounds of their older, more internally consistent, life style. As a result, material and status gains were often associated with moral anxiety and some free-floating rage at adaptive problems. And they began to see all restrictions on ritualized expression of these feelings as further threats to their life style. The opposition to sati constituted such a threat for them. In their desperate defence of the rite they were also trying to defend their traditional self-esteem and self-definition.[17]

But underlying these causes of sati were other causes, even less amenable to conscious control and less accessible to contemporary consciousness. It is with these that this analysis is mainly concerned.

First, to reword in psychological terms what we have already said, the rite became popular in groups made psychologically marginal by their exposure to Western impact. These groups felt the pressure to demonstrate, to others as well as to themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture. To many sati became an important proof of conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky within.[18] Nineteenth-century policy-makers, chroniclers and social analysts sensed this. For instance, the first Governor General of British India, Warren Hastings, attributed the increase in sati in 1821 'to the fanatic spirit roused by the divided state of feeling among the Hindus'.[19] And Collet, too, in saying that the rite was prevalent among passive people and not among the 'bold and manly' type,[20] indirectly draws attention to the difference between the exposed easterners, feeling increasingly impotent ritually, and the unexposed northern and western parts of India, still mainly outside the areas of direct British rule and yet undisturbed in their traditional life style. Others also noticed that there had been only one instance of the wife of a dead Indian soldier of the colonial army committing sati,[21] and that the incidence of sati was highest in the urban areas,

among high and upwardly mobile castes, and in areas more exposed to Western impact.[22] In other words, sati may have involved Hindu traditions, but it was not a manifestation of hard-core Hindu orthodoxy.

Secondly, sati expressed the culture's deepest fears of — and hatred towards — woman and womanhood. The earliest available myth about sati speaks of a Rajput wife who poisoned her husband. From this 'crime', Diodorus Siculus said in 314 B.C., the 'institution took its rise'.[23] One does not know how popular the myth has been in different periods of history and in different parts of India, but it does summarise the intense fears of aggression and annihilation and deep longings for nurture and benevolent mothering that had always been associated with Indian, and particularly Bengali, concepts of womanhood.

As in most peasant cultures, the dominant image of authority in the peasant cosmology of Bengal had always been feminine. It was that of a mother goddess who was the original or basic power, *Adyashakti*, and the ultimate principle of nature and activity, *Prakriti*. The personification of this principle was Chandi, the traditional goddess of the region. Though apparently associated with only the Shakti cult, a cult in turn associated with the elite castes in Bengal, the mother goddess constituted the basic irreducible elements in Bengali cosmology.[24]

One of the most striking features of the rise in the popularity of sati was that it coincided with a gradual bifurcation of the Chandi image. Why did this coincidence occur? Why was the bifurcation necessary at that point of time? Perhaps frequent natural calamities and the new colonial culture, which constantly invalidated the older assumptions of living, created the need for a new psycho-ecological balance in which the aggressive aspect of cosmic motherhood would be better recognized. Perhaps some crucial sections of Bengali society had lost faith in the sustaining feminine principle in the environment and, in reaction, built a more powerful symbol of womanly betrayal, punishment and rage.[25]

In any case, by the end of the eighteenth century, the sacred authority image of Bengal came to be clearly defined by two co-ordinates: Durga, the demon-killing protective mother as well as the giver of food and nurture, and Kali, the unpredictable, punitive mother, till then the goddess of a few marginal groups like dacoits, thieves, thugs, prostitutes and now — increasingly and revealingly

— of the exposed elites and quasi-elites of greater Calcutta, the babus.[26] Durga, an unknown goddess only a few decades earlier, now became the most popular deity and made Durga Puja the most popular religious and social festival of the region. Kali became the new symbol of a treacherous cosmic mother, eager to betray and prone to aggression. She also came to be associated with almost all the other major rituals generally cited as instances of the cultural decadence of the age, and against each of which Rammohun Roy and almost every other reformer of the region fought.

It was this new psychological environment which mothered the folk theory of sati, that the husband's death was due to the wife's poor ritual performance and was her self-created fate. The theory imputed that the wife brought about the death of the man under her protection, by her weak ritual potency and by deliberately not using or failing to maintain her latent womanly ability to manipulate natural events and fate.[27] An important part of the cultural identity of women in India had always been the mythological figure of Savitri, the wife who through her tenacious piety brought her husband back from death. It was this identity which widows seemed to defy. All widows consequently seemed to be failures in propitiation and instances of homicidal wishes magically coming true.

This demonology was associated with two major rationalizations of the rite. The first was expressed in the fear that, without the authoritarian control of the husband, the widow would stray from the path of virtue; the second in the imputation that women were virtuous only because of external rewards and punishments and not because they had internalized social norms. The contemporary pro-sati literature repeatedly mentions the frailty of women, their 'subjection to passion', lack of understanding and quarrelsomeness, and their 'want of virtuous knowledge'. All three allegedly made them untrustworthy and fickle.[28]

Sati was therefore an enforced penance, a death penalty through which the widow expiated her responsibility for her husband's death. Simultaneously, it reduced the sense of guilt in those confronted with their rage against all women. Punishment by authority became, in an infantile morality, a proof of culpability.[29] It perpetuated the fantasy of feminine aggression towards the husband, bound anxiety by giving substance to vague fears of