MY TURN
Category : September 1988
Published by Anonymous on Sep. 01, 1988

MY TURN

Sati; No Vedic Injunction

Daiya, Motilal P. The views offered by Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani to explain the practice of sati [Hinduism Today, Vol. 10/#7] are debatable and need not be taken as those representing the lofty values of Hinduism. The issue is fairly subtle and involves not only the ancient Hindu scriptures but also our history, tradition, usage and, above all, sentiment.

With due respect to Meenakshi Devi's views, it could be said that she seeks to emphasize just one aspect: the sanctity of Hindu practices and, in the process, the modern man's failure to view them in proper perspective. To drive home her point, she employs the simile of the looking glass effect and tries to affirm that as a result of looking from the wrong end of the telescope, the modern man gets a distorted view of the object. The comparison, one is afraid, is misplaced and leads to a wrong conclusion.

Here, it is not the Vedic man who is viewing things; it is the modern man, brought up in an age of reason and high technology, who is striving to examine with a magnifying glass and to check how far some of our ancient concepts are relevant or have any scriptural authority.

It is fallacious to contend that sati is a "part of warp and woof of Hinduism." Madri's and Padmini's are isolated cases - different in context - and are not to be construed as illustrative or representative of any compliance with any Vedic injunction. At the most, these were customs permitted but not mandatory.

The pertinent point is: do any of our scriptures specifically enjoin upon a Hindu wife to practice sati? If it were so, our ancient history would be replete with cases testifying to the cause. None of King Dasharatha's three wives mounted the funeral pyre of their late husband, yet they were no less committed on that account. Another point is that in the south of India, where Hinduism is still widely practiced, no case has been reported in the long memory lane of history.

Padmini's case is much simpler to understand. During the time of foreign invaders, many practices originated out of sheer exigencies of situation, what is called the apad dharma among the Rajputs. When faced with defeat, their womenfolk entered the raging fires boldly and willingly to save their honor [conquerors often defiled women]. During these periods, many such customs arose which, though relevant then, are now obsolete.

Manusmriti, the honored Hindu Code of Life, is explicit when it says that the Hindu woman has to live under the benign care of her father when a maiden, of her husband when married, and of her sons when she is a widow. As the general custom goes, a widow does not court death; she only adopts a simpler lifestyle - head shaved, hands without bangles and forehead bearing no bindi. The dress is all white. Do we observe even these simple practices? Then why pride ourselves on sati?

All this sums up in unmistakable terms that sati was not the only, or even the most exalted, course for a widow. Any departure from the conventional course may have had its own validity at one time. But to perpetuate that course and to seek sanction for it from scriptures is nothing short of ignorance or exploitation, howsoever unintended.

And finally, the human aspect. A person is born with a destined purpose in the cycle of life. No one has a right to shorten that destined period in the name of a custom or a practice. The very idea of ending one's life - suicide if voluntary and homicide when forced - is abhorred by all faiths. It is criminal. No civilized society could commit or permit an act which militates against the spirit of human decency.