

['Glorification of Sati' Outlawed in India](#)

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On September 4th, 1987, 18-year-old Roop Kanwar calmly followed her dead husband to the Deorala village's cremation ground, sat beside him upon his funeral pyre and burned to death, thus gaining near-divine status as a sati. There was immediate outrage across India and considerable embarrassment when the incident received worldwide press coverage. Refusing to accept the villagers' story that she died willing, police arrested several of her relatives on charges of murder, including her father and father-in-law. Rajasthan state, where the village is located, immediately outlawed all "glorification of sati,"

The arrests and new law brought a strong backlash from the local villagers. Who have always honored satis and consider it a great act of sacrifice on the part of a wife India's national government stepped in and passed a law similar to Rajasthan's. It calls for the death sentence or life imprisonment for anyone aiding a sati, and makes "glorification of sati" a crime.

Thus was the stage set for two major incident this fall in Rajasthan, home of over one-hundred sati temples. One of these, the Rani Sati temple in Jhunjhunu, annually attracts 300,000 people to three days of ceremonies in honor of Rani Sati Narayani Devi, a women who died in 1295 upon the funeral pyre of her husband, Tandhan Das.

India's Supreme Court issued a restraining order barring the Rani Sati temple from holding the usual mela (fair) in conjunction with the annual celebration. The court seriously considered forbidding puja altogether at the temple.

The restraining order put quite a damper on the commemoration. All money collected by the temple (US\$12,000, a sizeable drop from normal) was seized by the government. Still, 50,000 people, including several prominent politicians,

attended the ceremonies.

Possibly emboldened by the partial success of the Rani Sati anniversary, the villagers in Deorala announced a gathering of 3,000 people on September 22nd, the anniversary (by the Hindu calendar) of Roop's death. The principal organizers of the event were Roop Kanwar's father, Mal Singh and father-in-law, Sumer Singh, who apparently are no longer charged with her murder. Billed as a recital of the Bhagavad Gita, the event was carefully planned (with the help of several politicians and reportedly even the Rajasthan State Law Department) to skirt the anti-sati glorification act. Even so, 45 persons were arrested.

These two incidents, the Rani Sati temple gathering and the Deorala affair, brought into sharp focus several of the principal snags the government faces in attempting to control ceremonies honoring satis. In the case of the Rani Sati temple, the celebration has gone on for nearly 700 years. Under a strict enforcement of the law, the temple should be close down. Yet, how are the devotees to ignore generations of honor bestowed for what they consider a supremely courageous act?

Few question the rightness of legislation to prevent future satis, as coercion is always a strong possibility. But prevention of all "glorification of sati" has opened a Pandora's box of problems.

On the positive side, the sati outcry has spurred the Rajasthan government to take solid action to alleviate the miserable situation of many widows in India. Dread of living as a widow is often pointed to as a motive for sati. The government's ten-point program calls for subsidized education programs, affirmative action hiring policies and low-cost loans for women in business.