

Two Kinds of Values: Eternal & Transitory

By Seema Burman

Recently, 65-year-old Kuttu Bai of Madhya Pradesh immolated herself on her husband's pyre, sending shock waves across the country. There were a few, however, who remained unmoved. Was sati really a part of Hindu religion, as is claimed by some?

Parvati, Shiva's consort, is often referred to as 'Sati'. Once, she went uninvited to attend a yagna her father was conducting. On hearing him speak derogatorily of Shiva, an upset and angry Parvati jumped into the fire. In another story, 'Sati' Savitri, a princess whose husband died barely a year after they got married, confronted Yamraj, the God of Death. Because of sheer persistence, Savitri managed to extract from him a boon of longevity for her husband. In return, she offered to follow Yamraj to his abode. However, there is no scriptural evidence of any woman committing sati on her dead husband's pyre.

In the Vedic age, women led a life of dignity and importance; they, too, were proficient in the Vedas. A widow's remarriage was accepted. Often, she was encouraged to marry her dead husband's brother merely for convenience — but marriage with outsiders was also allowed. Times changed. The status of women, too, underwent a change. Deprived of higher learning, women progressively faced curbs on their freedom. The practice of burning widows along with the dead bodies of their husbands became widespread, even among Indo-Germanic races in Asia and Europe. Vishnu Smriti (100 AD) records that the "widow can go the way of the departed soul by dying after him". Smritis, however, were not a true reflection of society. Brahmin authors wrote what they thought was desirable for society.

Common sense must prevail over religious injunctions. Swami Ranganathananda says: "We have two aspects of dharma in our tradition: *sanatana dharma* or ever-existing religion and *yuga dharma* or manmade religion. A dharma for a particular time is called

yuga dharma; this changes with time. But within all this, there is one universal dharma, *sanatana*, which never changes."

There are eternal values and values that are valid in a particular time. With new thoughts, circumstances and new economies, values change. But even in the midst of change, eternal values remain unchanged. The importance of truth, peace and honesty, for instance, never changes. Our inner nature is permanent bliss and that is eternal. Eternal values can be found in works like the Upanishads and the Vedas. *Yuga dharma* is found in Smritis or Puranas.

Changing customs cannot threaten a religion or a culture. With time, more rules that are not eternal will be changed. The wise should educate others not to get hysterical or upset about it. These are part of inevitable socio-economic changes. The

Bhagavad Gita says, "You are that *sanatana purusa*, eternal person, who protects this world, who protects the spirituality of the world. You are the protector of the

Eternal Religion. You are the protector of this *sasvata dharma*, going on ages after ages." (11.18) There is a Divine Being that protects *sasvata (sanatana) dharma*. A distinction must be made between eternal and *yuga dharma*.

Explains Swami Ranganathananda: "Eternal dharma must control *yuga dharma*. Every religion has different rules for different times but if they do not make the distinction, then religion becomes politicised. *Yuga dharmas* are always in conflict with one other whereas *sanatana dharma* is not contradictory to any religion — neither Islamic nor Christian. Every religion has both *sanatana dharma* and *yuga dharma*. But it is *sanatana dharma* that remains because it deals with Truth about living beings." The wise abandoned the practice of sati with changing times. But for some, it is one more way of inflicting injustice on women.

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