



Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India

Lata Mani

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Contentious Traditions analyzes the debate on *sati*, or widow burning, in colonial India. Though the prohibition of widow burning in 1829 was heralded as a key step forward for women's emancipation in modern India, Lata Mani argues that the women who were burned were marginal to the debate and that the controversy was over definitions of Hindu tradition, the place of ritual in religious worship, the civilizing missions of colonialism and evangelism, and the proper role of the colonial state. Mani radically revises colonialist as well as nationalist historiography on the social reform of women's status in the colonial period and clarifies the complex and contradictory character of missionary writings on India.

The history of widow burning is one of paradox. While the chief players in the debate argued over the religious basis of *sati* and the fine points of scriptural interpretation, the testimonials of women at the funeral pyres consistently addressed the material hardships and societal expectations attached to widowhood. And although historiography has traditionally emphasized the colonial horror of *sati*, a fascinated ambivalence toward the practice suffused official discussions. The debate normalized the violence of *sati* and supported the misconception that it was a voluntary act of wifely devotion.

Mani brilliantly illustrates how situated feminism and discourse analysis compel a rewriting of history, thus destabilizing the ways we are accustomed to look at women and men, at "tradition," custom, and modernity.

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