

‘Sati Memorial Stones of Vijayanagara Period—A Study

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Abstract

Sati sahaamana (self immolation) is an ancient Indian custom by which the Hindu wife follows her husband to his death by ascending his pyre or ascending one of her own shortly after the death of her husband, thereby it was believed winning merit for her family as well as wiping out all its sins. A sati stone is a memorial commemorating the faithful wife who had become sati. Sati or sahaamana (immolation) was widely accomplished social custom in Vijayanagara kingdom. A sati stone is a commemorative plaque usually erected at the place where the faithful wife performed sahaamana; such a stone is known in Karnataka as a satikal. At Vijayanagara sahaamana have been described in detail by many foreign visitors like Barbosa, Nuniz, Caesar Frederick, Linschoten, Barradas, and Pietro Dellervelle. The performance of sati in Vijayanagara period was commemorated by the erection of satikal or mastikal (mahasatikal) or sati stone on which sculptural representations of the women or woman who committed a sati were carved, also to be seen in the site of Vijayanagara is the sati virakal, a composite tables which commemorates both the wife or wives who performed sati and the heroic action of the husbands which brought on his death. In addition to the sati stones and sati hero stones that give evidence of his practice were also found in the site. Present study focus on the Sati memorial stones during vijayanagara period, here both primary and secondary sources are used to collect the data.

Key Words: foreign travellers, Kamalapura, mastikals, Sati kal, Vijayanagara,

Introduction

Vijayanagar Empire which ruled South India and Karnataka was established in 1336 AD, by Harihara and Bukka, of Sangama dynasty, the social conditions presented the picture of existence of the sati system in Vijayanagara period. Those who died heroically were greatly venerated and memorial stones were erected in their honour some such stones mainly slabs with relief carvings are found vijayanagara cities. The act of self-immolation by cutting one's head or by entering the fire or through some other means was also accepted as a heroic deed. So memorials were erected to such people to commemorate their death. The performance of sati was glorified by the erection of numerous sati-stones or mastikal or Maha satikals at important places. These glorious incidents were shown symbolically in many sculptures. In the sculptures the representation of a widow or widows who committed Sati carved on stone memorials along the with the dead husband can be seen. Generally these stones are sculptured with a pointed pillar or post, from which projects a woman's right arm, bent upwards at the elbow. The hand is raised with fingers erect, and a lime fruit is usually shown placed between the thumb and forefinger. Some of them were accompanied with elaborate inscriptions. Even to this day the group of Sati memorials are situated on the western side of the main road to Hampi and outside the small temple of Uddana Veerabadhra close to krishnapura, a Vaishnavapura of the Vijayanagara City

There are three main types of memorial stones

- Sati-stones
- Sati-kals or mastikal
- Sati and hero stones called sati-virakal and hero stones or virakal

Sati kals commemorate the death of a brave wife who perished usually by fire at the death of her husband. The sati-Virakals are composite slabs celebrating the heroic death of a man and the sati performed by his wife or wives. Virakals keep alive the memory of a dead hero who may be considered as divinity, but a sati is invariably raised to the status of minor goddesses whether the dead hero is deified or not the virakal is alleged as the abode of the sacred incidence. Satikals can be classified into number of types. Many satikals depicts a man and his sati wife, while others have a man and two sati wives or a man with three sati wives are

seen of whom only one is a sati. Finally there are those mastikals in which the sati is represented only by the raised right hand attached to a pillar.

Antiquity

Sati is not sanctioned in Vedic rituals although certain hints in the representation connected with funerals came very near it and in a manner foreshadows it. Early smriti literature allows it but in general does not strongly advocate it; sati is nevertheless, a custom of great antiquity. At the time of Alexander's invasion the Greeks found its surveillance in the Punjab. Eran sati stone pillar inscription of Bhanugupta corpus inscription indicarum vol III written in Sanskrit dated in year 191 of the Gupta era (510-11 CE) .This inscription mentions that Bhanugupta who might not be a supreme ruler but some minor king of the Guptas family. And mentions that in company of Bhanugupta his chiefton Goparaja came to Eran and fought a battle with the Maitras and that Goparaja was killed and that his wife accompanied him, by immolating herself on his funeral pyre, apparently near the place where the pillar was set up. This is in all probability the earliest record of sati tradition, some of the earliest Sanskrit authors like Dandin in Dasakumaracharitam and Banabatta in Harshacharita mentions about the sati. In Harshacharita, Harsha's sister Rajyashri try to self immolate after the death of her husband. The custom of sati gained momentum in the medieval period. Numerous memorial sati stones appear 11th century onwards and the largest collections are found in Rajasthan and sati was prevailing in Karnataka in pre-vijayanagara period and vijayanagara times.

Iconography

The basic element in Pan-Indian iconography of sati is upright open right arm and hand bent at the elbow and clearly showing bangles intact. The bangles symbolises the married status and the ritual movement when a wife breaks her bangles signals her entry into widowhood that these bangles remain on the wrist bear witness to the continuation of her wifely status demonstrating denial that she has been detached from her husband . Certain other elements are generally present on a sati stone namely the sun and moon indicated eternity of immortalising the women whose fame would last as long as the sun and moon. The raised arm of the sati bent at the elbow with the palm facing forward in abhaya mudra and with the bangles adorning the wrists is the indispensable feature in all satikals. Usually the women who committed sati are fully shown accompanied by her husband, who has hands in anjali mudra,. In few satikals only the right ornamented arm of the sati is carved as if emerging from pillar

emphasizing the importance of the arm rose in blessing. The sati blessed the people with her right hand before entering the fire and she continues to bless her devotees. The left hand of the sati in all the mastikals are extended downwards. A lemon or a pot is sometimes grasped in this hand. In a sati and hero stone at Anegondi the sati holds a mirror as well as a lemon. The custom of the women about to commit sati carrying a mirror has been highlighted by both Nuiz and Caesar Frederick; both also refer to pot of oil used in the sati ceremony.

Satikals or sati stones

The custom of sati was widely prevalent in pre Vijayanagara period. During the Vijayanagara period the common method of performing the sahagamana (self immolation) was through the fire. However among the Virashaivism sati by burial was also practised. Unlike all other types of sculptures, the memorial stones are far more numerous in the museum than *in situ*. Most of the sati stones are in the nature of carved stone slabs that were installed in the open, with fairly large uncarved portion being buried. Many of the sati sculptures that were scattered were gathered in extensive numbers in the 1950s and were finally installed in the archaeological museum at Kamalapura.

A sati stone at Vijayanagara may have only one panel on it, or it may be divided into two or even three panels. In the first type, the sati is depicted alone or along with the husband. If there are two panels, in the lower ones are the sati and the husband while in the upper one is representation of abode of siva, symbolised by a linga, Nandi and so on: sometimes the man alone or with wife are also shown to be in abode of Siva. In the three panels variety in the topmost one is a depiction of sun and crescent moon, in the middle one the man alone or accompanied by his sati wife/wives worshipping the Siva linga and in the lower panel the man and the sati are engraved. There is another panel in which the man and the sati are engraved. There is another form of sati depiction in which the women herself is not shown, but only the right arm, bent at the elbow, hand in abhaya and wrist adorned with bangles, emerges from a post or pillar.

Figure 1 sati kal in Kamalapura museum



The above sculpture under study is one of the finest satikals at Vijayanagara is found within the urban core of the city, presently in the Kamalapura museum. In the lower register are depicted the man with his sati wife. Both have their hair tied into large knot to one side. Their finely draped costumes and jewellery are carefully rendered. Man is standing with his hands in anjali posture, women with her raised hands with bangles intact indicates the symbol of married women and continuation of married women status. The top position of the slab shows the couple in abode of Siva and presence of Siva linga. Before it is the crouching Nandhi and an imposing pujari waving an arati lamp, the sun and moon depicts the immortality of sati.

Figure 2 sati stone in Uddana Veerabadhra temple Vijayanagara period



In the temple of Uddana Veerabadhra, believed to be constructed by a Vijayanagara General Delavayi Jangamayya in 1545, inside this temple, there is a carved sati-stone depicting the general Jangamayya with his three wives. In the courtyard of the Uddhana Virabadhara temple is a partly broken sati-kal consisting of two panels. One the lower one is a seated man with hands in anjali two sati to his left and one to his right, all four sporting elaborate

coiffures. In the top panel the man is shown seated before a linga, accompanied by a Nandi. The crescent moon is etched above, but the sun which must have been carved in the portion that is now broken and is lost.

Figure 3 sati stone in the Archaeological museum



The above sculpture under study is divided in to two panels, the lower panel represents three people two women and a man, the man in the centre is in standing posture with anjali mudra, one woman has raised her hands to display her bangles as continuation of her marital status even after her death. All the three have their hair tied into large knot to one side. Here one woman may not be sati, who has not raised her hand. The upper panel Shiva linga sun and moon is sculptured. Linga at top may be they belonged to the Shaiva cult. Sun and moon are carved to immortalise her.

Vaishnava memorial sati stone

A fine sati-stone is seen on the Tungabhadra along the path of the Vittala temple it is divided into two panels. In the lower one are carved two satis and husband with an elephant and diminutive attendant in front. The presence of the elephant suggests the elevated social status of the family. In the top panel the man with two sati wives stand with joined hands in the bode of Vishnu represented by the chakra and shanka flanked by Garuda and Hanuman. This is only Vaishnava memorial stone in the entire city. In all others sectarian symbols are always Shaiva usually the linga and Nandi.

Among the other satikals on the site is that of a sati by herself, west of the Hemakuta hill. The woman is shown beautifully dressed with well draped saree elaborate coiffure and heavily jewellery. Another sati-stone on which is sculptured a sati holding a lemon in her left hand and accompanied by her husband. In the north west of the Virupaksha complex is another satikal, an inscription gives the name of a widow portrayed as a Viramma, and the daughter of Viranna she holds a pitcher in her left hand. To the east of the car street of the Tiruvengalanatha temple there is a group of four satikals, two carved on a boulder and two on stone slabs. One of those on the boulder is particularly striking, in it the sati is represented in the form of a pillar from which emerges the hand raised in benediction. To the north east of the Narashima temple on the south band there is a narrow slab depicting sati. A study of these satikal also proves that not all co-wives committed sati at the death of their husband.

The satikals follow a general pattern the slab being divided into two panels. In the lower panels are seen the women or woman, never more than four generally with the husband. In the upper panel they are shown in abode of Siva. Thus not only was the women committing sati is liberated but also her family and in particular her dead husband. Linga occasionally flanked by Nandhi or a pujari are depicted in the top panel of a few examples. Majority of the sati stones of vijayanagara period is in Kamalapura Archaeological museum

Sati virakals

In mastikals the husband is portrayed either standing or seated with hand joined in anjali mudra. He may or may have not died in the course of gallant action. In sati virakals the man is represented in a gallant pose while the sati stand with raised right hand. The simplest type of sati-virakals consists of a single panel on which are sculptured the hero and his consort. The more elaborate are divided into two or three panels. In a two panelled sati-virakal, the hero rides horse, brandishing a dagger an umbrella held over him denotes his importance.

A fine sati-virakal the lowest most panels depicts two riders engaged in combat. The central panel shows the hero and his wife seated with hands in anjali mudra before Siva linga. The woman is depicted near a sati pillar indicating that she has committed sati. Sun moon and a linga are carved on the top panel

Mastikal

A mastikal was invariably considered a goddess, but the deification was not individualised, for the women was not worshipped as a goddess in her own name, but as part of the generalised sati goddess.

Foreign travellers account

The custom of sati or self-immolation was widely prevalent in medieval Vijayanagara society. Almost all the foreign travellers like Barbosa, Nuniz, Caesar Frederick, Linschoten, Barradas, and Pietro Dellerville have left behind a detailed account of the performance of Sati. Indigenous accounts and epigraphs also bear evidence to this practice. In south India. Sati existed prior to the Vijayanagar

Nicoloconti

Nicoloconti was the first foreigner to visit the site and leave an account of it. According to him the inhabitants of this region marry as many wives as they please, who are burnt with their dead husband. He goes on to say that the king wedded as many as 12000 wives out of whom 2000 or 3000 were selected as his wives on condition that at his death they would immolate themselves, which is measured to be a great honour for them. A careful reading of this account reveals that Nicoloconti was not an eye witness of self immolation and his statements seem to be based on either idle talk or what he understands of the local customs since it is unlikely that he knew any of the languages spoken at Vijayanagara.

Durate Barbosa

A Portuguese who also visited Vijayanagara claims that the custom of sahamana was accomplished by the wives of warriors or soldiers the women are bound by very ancient custom when their husband die to burn themselves alive with their corpses. Poor women would usually perform sati on her husband's pyre, but women of high rank after her husband's rites would engage herself in feasting with relatives and friends. Thereafter she would dress herself richly, bestow the remaining property among her sons and relatives and friends and be taken in a traditional procession on horseback to the place where her husband had been burnt. Here after a fire had been arranged in the pit she could climb on a scaffold and give away all her jewels and clothing except a small garment worn from the waist down.

Then taking a decanter of oil and placing it on her head she would first throw the pot on the flames and then plunge into to the fire herself. Immediately those gathered around would add more oil butter and wood to fuel the fire. Nowhere in his account does Barbosa state that he had actually been present at the ceremony of self immolation which may have been largely based on gossip and hearsay. The practise of sati became so customary that when the king died four or five hundred women burnt themselves. Barbosa and others explain how they were burnt. But all the four to five hundred women were not the queens. But they were the female servants in the harem. Because of respect they cherished to the king and queen they performed this mass sati.

Fernao Nuiz

Nuniz states that the women had the custom of burning themselves when their husbands died and held it an honour to do so. The method of practising it differed from class to class. Various methods were followed by different women in performing this practice. In the lower classes, the wife went to the burial ground sitting on an ordinary horse along with the husband's dead body. When the corpse was laid down in the pit and began to burn, then she threw herself into the midst of the fire, of her own free will and the bodies were reduced to ashes. Whereas in the case of a rich woman, she was taken to the burning ground on a decorated horse along along with the husband's corpse and the corpse was burnt with much sandalwood when she wept greatly and jumped herself in the funeral fire. Both Barbosa and Nuniz speak in detail about this custom in their accounts.

Nuiz a horse dealer who spent three years at Vijayanagar has mentioned in his account that the women of the kingdom of Bisnagar followed the custom of burning themselves when their husbands died the wife was advised by her relatives to immolate herself in order to save herself and the family from disgrace. After the husband's body had been burnt the wife washed her feet and a Brahmin performed certain ceremonies, the women discarded her good clothes, covered herself with yellow clothes disseminated her jewels among her close sons, if she had any to her closest relatives. She went around the pit three times and then mounted on the steps of the scaffold. She held a mat in front of her which prevented her from seeing the fire. A piece of cloth rice and another required betel leaves, mirror and comb were thrown in the fire, so that the women could adorn her when she was with her husband again. Finally the women placed a pot of oil on her head and cast her into the fire.

Nuniz also testify to the fact that the woman who committed sati did it of her own will. Women go with pleasure to the pit, inside which were made two seats of earth, one for the dead and other for her, and they placed each one in the respective seats and covered them little by little till they were covered up and so the wife died with the husband

Caesar Frederick

Of the foreign travellers who have described the custom of self immolation, only Caesar Frederick claims to be a bystander of the actual act. He was in vijayanagara for seven months according to his own account in ad 1567 and he claimed that he had seen many instances of sati because his house was near the gate from where people participating in the ceremony went out to the place of flaming by the side of river. According to him the women immolated herself a month or even two or three months after the death of her husband. On the day of the self immolation ceremony she would be occupied out on horseback or on an elephant or a small stage borne by eighteen, dressed like a bride and decorated with flowers and jewels. She carried a looking glass in her left hand and an arrow in her right hand and with passionate merriment was taken around the city and finally to the riverside to the place where the ablaze of women took place. There, in a great square cave, dry wood was piled. When the fire was kindled the women would remove her jewels and fine clothes, bathe in the river, then drape herself in a yellow cloth and climb to the high point of the cave, where a mat had been set so that the ferocity of the fire could not be seen. According to this visitor, when a great man died his wife along with all his slave concubines burnt themselves together with him

Linschoten,

According to him in the society all women did not commit sati. There are instances of women who refused to commit sati. The traveller Linschoten says that every widowed might not commit Sati. He says that any women who refused to burnt with her husband they cut the hair clean off from her head, and while she lived and thereafter she never wore any jewels and she was despised and accounted for a dishonest woman. Most likely this social censure and disapproval might have resulted in many more forced deaths in the society. About the non-performers of sati it is said that their kindred were held in dishonour and considered it as a shame to their families. They even shaved their heads in disgrace; sometimes women were

buried only up to throat and then the Brahmins wringed her neck and strangled her to death and then covered the body with earth.

Observation

The study confirms that sati was unquestionably a significant social practice at Vijayanagara and the women who became satis were greatly flattered. However the incidence and predominance of sahaamana was not nearly as common or widespread as the travel accounts would have told us. It would have been elimination rather than the rule among the Vijayanagara women whose husbands predeceased them. Yet the references to the practise of sati in the travel accounts, though overstress, should not be dismissed as useless, for they do provide some valuable insights on this practise, at that the same time they should not be relied upon in segregation, but considered together with the dedicatory plaque stones which also provide relevant information on sati. These two type of sources one literary and the other monumental correct complement and even substantiate each other. These travel account reveal that the practice was highly sacred but not binding; differences recorded by these visitors may reflect variations in the customs of diverse social groups or changes with the passage of time.

Conclusion

This system at first originated among the noble casts of Rajas of northern India. Later on it spread to the other casts. There was unanimous opinion among the foreign visitors that Sati was neither obligatory nor compulsory, but all seem to have differences of opinion regarding the pattern in which this sati was performed. There is an epigraph dated 1509 which says that when Harur Gauda's son Bomma Gauda went to svarga, his wife Bommi Gauda sitting in the tomb went to svarga. The women who wished to commit Sati was entombed along with her husband

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