

## Self-Immolation by Fire versus Legitimate Violence in the Hindu Context

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**I**n India, the practice of self-immolation by fire as a form of protest has developed to the extent that it now appears to be standard practice in the political realm. Though its present form is new, relying on the presence of the media, self-immolation is also part of a wider cultural heritage related to sacrifice. I will first explore the latter, and highlight the logic behind self-sacrifice and sacrifice, and their interrelations as parallel, complementary or conflicting paths, by basing my reflection on widely known myths.<sup>1</sup> I will then compare this material with modern practices in order to address the question at the origin of this special issue of *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* as to whether self-immolation is of a religious or political nature?

In the Hindu tradition where, as Sylvain Lévi said, "all reality is in the form of sacrifice," mythology attributes the creation of the universe and society to the self-sacrifice of Puruṣa, the primordial being. Brahmanic sacrifice is conceived of as a repetition of Puruṣa's creative action. Yet, since the principle of the sacrificer's self-sacrifice is not literally reproducible in a generalised manner, it gave birth to two surrogate forms: the substitution of the sacrificer by another victim on the one hand, and the substitution of effective killing by a symbolic one, on the other.

The first trend has evolved from animal to vegetal substitutes, and blood sacrifices are now rare in India where many states have banned the practice. The second trend, consisting of substituting actual killing with symbolic death, has given birth to renunciation by which the individual leaves the world, incorporates his sacrificial fire, and ceases any activity.<sup>2</sup> This process nullifies his physical death which, again, is symbolically denied. Yet, as in the case of the first trend where there was a substitution of the substitute, renunciation, which used to be the fourth stage in the life of any Brahmin, has been glob-

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<sup>1</sup> The same expression, *balidān*, designates both sacrifice and self-sacrifice throughout northern India and Nepal (in modern Hindi, Bengali and Nepali).

<sup>2</sup> See M. Biardeau and Ch. Malamoud, *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris: PUF, 1976.

ally replaced by home-based ascetic practices. In many respects, these two trends born from a single model have therefore merged, and led to turning the priests of the sacrifice or the ascetics which the Brahmins initially were, into mundane ritual specialists strictly kept away from blood sacrifice and, more generally, from any killing (of animals, but also of themselves by others and of others by themselves).

Parallel to these two Brahmanic models on which most studies on the Hindu sacrifice are based,<sup>3</sup> radically different forms developed in relation to the Goddess, particularly in Bengal and Nepal. In the *śakta* context,<sup>4</sup> and in whatever form it takes, sacrifice does not obey a reflexive logic, but it is directed against another party. It is conceived of as a circulation of forces aimed at weakening the enemy, and at strengthening one's own camp, which is set in motion by offering *bali* (a term which derives from *bal*, force) in order to receive in return *śakti* (which designates the goddess' divine energy, the power to act, and more specifically, political power). The *bali* force behind *śakti* redistribution is the killing of an animal victim which does not substitute the sacrificer but an opposing party. Cases of self-sacrifice with the same offensive purpose do exist, *but* only in myths relating to hopeless circumstances and as a last resort, when the usual mechanisms are no longer available. Yet, even in these cases, the logic behind self-sacrifice is not reflexive, as it is then conceived of as an offering of oneself to the Goddess.

The offensive *śakta* sacrifice indeed does not reproduce Puruṣa's self-sacrifice but the actions of the Goddess. In Nepal, which represents a particularly interesting context for studying such practices, for the country has never been colonised and mass sacrifices are still performed, the Goddess' deeds are ritually recited every year in public. They exert considerable influence for they are the only texts recited throughout the country. The *Caṇḍī Paṭh*, which is read during the Dasain festival (the Nepalese name for Durgāpūjā or Dashera), describes how the warlike goddess Durgā came forth from the anger of the gods who were unable to overcome a buffalo-demon. Each god gave her one of his weapons, turning the Goddess into their destructive instrument. Durgā killed the buffalo-demon, and then turned herself under the effect of her own anger into a more fearsome form, Kālī, in order to destroy another more powerful demon. Following the reading of her deeds, men mimic the Goddess' gesture by sacrificing buffaloes. They then renew all the positions of power among

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<sup>3</sup> See Sylvain Lévi, *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brâhmanas*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1898; Madeleine Biarreau and Charles Malamoud, 1976, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *Śakta* religion or Shaktism is a devotional branch of Hinduism that focuses on the Goddess.

themselves with the Goddess' blessings, and thus reinvigorated, they finally enact war.<sup>5</sup>

This festival takes place at temples, the most sacred of which are the *piṭha*, or places where parts of the goddess' body fell on earth after she set herself on fire in the guise of Satī. The climax of the Dasain festival on the night of the 8th day, when crowds of people are suddenly possessed and a frightening sacrifice takes place by a holy fire burning in a pit, is also associated with Satī's self-immolation, showing the unity of the Goddess in her different forms and the interrelationship between sacrifice and self-sacrifice.

Satī's self-sacrifice forms a second model, incorporated within the sacrificial one. Indeed, her self-immolation took place during the sacrificial ceremony of her own father, Dakṣa. The latter was the father of the thirty-three million goddesses, each married to a god. He invited all his daughters and son-in-laws to a large sacrifice, except for Satī who was married to Śiva, whom Dakṣa disliked. Satī and Śiva learned of the snub, but although Śiva remained indifferent, it deeply affected Satī who made her way to her father's ceremony. In the Nepali version of the myth, found in the *Swasthānītoratakathā*, Satī addresses her father Dakṣa and reproaches him for not having treated her like a daughter. She tells him that without her husband present, his sacrifice will not be complete. Dakṣa tries to comfort Satī, by telling her that he has nothing against her, but only against her husband, whom he finds repugnant, going around naked and covered in ash. At these words, Satī becomes furious: her eyes turn red, she blows out a long breath like that of a snake, she stands up, strikes the ground with her heel, beats her breast, saying, "Śiva, Śiva" and jumps into her father's sacrificial fire. Witnessing the scene, the gods assembled exclaim "What nonsense! (*anartha*)" while a terrible storm brews, destroying everything and plunging the world into darkness. Learning the news of his wife's suicide, Śiva flies into a terrible rage from which Vīrabhadra, a giant monster, is born. Accompanied by the latter, Kālī, and Śiva's horde of demons, set out to the ceremony. They ruin Dakṣa's sacrifice, behead both Dakṣa and the goat he was about to sacrifice, then throw the animal's body and Dakṣa's head into the fire, while the severed head of the sacrificial goat is placed on Dakṣa's body. Śiva finally seizes his wife's corpse and wanders through the world, until, with the gods' intervention, Satī's corpse falls apart, creating the holy *piṭha* on earth.

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<sup>5</sup> On the Dasain festival, see G. Krauskopff and M. Lecomte-Tilouine (eds), *Célébrer le pouvoir. Dasai, une fête royale au Népal*. Paris: MSH/CNRS, 1996.

These two myths about the Goddess and the sacrifices they depict pervert the Brahmanical sacrificial model, Durgā's sacrifice of the enemy, as it introduces a strict distinction between sacrificer and victim, and Satī's self-immolation, because it fully combines these two functions, without resorting to any substitution. In the first case, the apparent shape of the Brahmanical sacrifice remains intact, except that in involving a female sacrificer and a male victim, a clear distinction between the sacrificer and the victim is introduced. In the second case, the literal treatment of sacrifice as self-sacrifice is fully transgressive and destructive. Like Durgā, Satī challenges the rule that the sacrificer and his substitute, the victim, must be male, because they repeat the sacrifice of Puruṣa, whose name means male human. But, whereas Durgā's sacrifice of the buffalo-demon results from the will of the gods, Satī's self-immolation is her own initiative in reaction to the standard sacrificial order reigning among them. Indeed, Dakṣa's sacrifice which is meant to strengthen their society around a respectable male elder causes its disintegration with Satī's intrusion. She not only challenges the legitimacy of her father's endeavour, but her immolation is such a disruptive action that the elements react to it and the assembly of gods can find no other words but "what nonsense!" Satī's self-sacrifice leads to a perversion of the Brahmanical sacrifice in that it creates a division between two parties, as in the sacrifice of the enemy, yet in a totally different way, which is reminiscent of contemporary political self-immolations and the movement of violence against the government that triggers off such deaths. In a similar way, Satī's self-immolation sparks off mass violence against the very system on which Brahmanical sacrifice is based. Her self-sacrifice leads her party to treat the Brahmanical sacrifice literally,<sup>6</sup> and to unravel its meaning through the horrific half-sacrificer, half-victim chimeras, one of which, the animal body and Dakṣa's head, is thrown into the fire while the other, Dakṣa with his goat head, remains, but essentially as a goat.<sup>7</sup> The reciprocity of the substitution is thus

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<sup>6</sup> Analysing this myth, B.K. Smith and W. Doniger ("Sacrifice and Substitution," *Numen*, 36 (2), 1989, pp. 189-224) suggest that it "lifts the curtain of liturgy" and denounces the substitution behind the sacrifice as being a subterfuge (p. 211). The myth may also be read as a reaffirmation that the sacrificial substitution is a bilateral relation, which engages the sacrificer in a dangerous process, likely to affect him in return. Whatever the case, the paternal figure of Dakṣa is also atypical and transgressive: he is inauspicious for having a multitude of daughters but no son and for performing a sacrificial ceremony without the supreme god Śiva. The destruction of his ceremony may thus represent a re-establishment of Dharma.

<sup>7</sup> If we are to believe the *Tales of the Vampire* (Somadeva, *Contes du vampire*, translated from Sanskrit by Louis Renou. Paris: Gallimard-Unesco, 1985) or a folktale from Nepal which also deals with this question. In this collection of enigmatic tales, a woman accidentally connects her brother's head to her husband's body and

stressed by the reversal of its artificial unilateral orientation, which results in the sacrificer being sacrificed and the victim becoming his surrogate.

The prototypical Hindu myth of self-immolation by fire thus depicts the end of the Brahmanical sacrifice, embodied in the end of Dakṣa, while Satī's death is creative with the subsequent *pīṭha*, on the one hand, and her immediate rebirth as Pārvatī, on the other.

Satī's death was also creative in many other ways: it gave birth to numerous rituals and practices, the most famous being the tradition of widow-burning, which derived from this myth while at the same time also perverting it in another way. Her death also seems perpetuated through the frequent use of fire as a method of suicide in India, particularly among young married women.

Committing suicide by setting oneself on fire indeed has represented about 11% of suicides in India over the past fifteen years, which is about 20 times higher than the rates in Western Europe, and the American continent. Remarkably, two thirds of those who choose this method are women, who, for the most part are younger than 30 (53.5% in 1997, 49.75% in 2009) and over 80% of them below 45. Indian statistics, which have been providing accurate figures since 1967, also show that far from being the remnant of an archaic practice on the decline, cases of suicide by fire are on the rise,<sup>8</sup> and today more than 10,000 people set themselves on fire each year in India.<sup>9</sup>

We have no equivalent statistics for Nepal, but a study of 151 cases of self-immolation carried out between 2004 and 2008 at Bir Hospital in Kathmandu shows that they represent one third of patients admitted for burns and that among them, 82.8% are women. The method used in more than 90% of cases is to pour kerosene over the body and set light to it.<sup>10</sup>

The accessibility of such products is obviously essential in the recent development of self-immolation. The fast, yet not instantaneous, and irreversible character of the method, also lends all its power to self-immolation as a form of public protest that even the most authoritarian regimes have no control over. There is reason to believe that the method was already being used in nineteenth-century India and

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vice versa, and the answer to the question as to which of them she shall consider her husband, is the person bearing her husband's head since the head is the essential part.

<sup>8</sup> The rate of suicides by fire has more than doubled in the space of fifteen years, from 5.18% of the total number of suicides in 1968 to 11.20% in 1993. National Crime Records Bureau, <http://ncrb.gov.in/adsi/main.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> See National Crime Records Bureau, <http://ncrb.gov.in/adsi/main.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> See Narayan Prasad Sharma, "Case Study on Suicidal Burn Patients at Bir Hospital-Kathmandu." [http://tribhuvan.academia.edu/NarayanPrasadSharma/Papers/145949/Case\\_Study\\_of\\_Suicidal\\_Burnt\\_Patients\\_at\\_Bir\\_Hospital\\_Nepal](http://tribhuvan.academia.edu/NarayanPrasadSharma/Papers/145949/Case_Study_of_Suicidal_Burnt_Patients_at_Bir_Hospital_Nepal).

became very common in the first half of the twentieth century, as shown, for example, by Alexandra David-Néel: "to saturate one's clothes with oil and set it on fire is in fact, horrible as it is, a suicide method willingly adopted by those Indian women, (...) who want to leave this world."<sup>11</sup>

To my knowledge, the first case of protest self-immolation by fire to have had a strong impact on Indian society occurred in 1914. Yet, perhaps because this mobilisation concerned the women's cause, its example seems to have almost been forgotten. In January 1914, in Calcutta, Snehalatā, a 14-year-old Brahmin girl, on seeing her father ready to sell his house to provide her with a dowry, "having dressed herself in her best... climbed to the roof of the house, soaked her clothes in kerosene, and setting fire to them stood there burning in full view of all the neighbourhood."<sup>12</sup> Her action aroused intense emotion in Bengal and the rest of India and was followed by the self-immolation of other girls for the same cause. This was commented on throughout the Indian press and even the *New York Times* devoted a small article to "the epidemic" it triggered. Many poems and pamphlets glorified Snehalatā as a martyr, *śahīd*, and her action as martyrdom or as "noble sacrifice." Yet a minority condemned the method she used, advocating suffragette activism instead.<sup>13</sup> Snehalatā's biography appeared three weeks after her death and was so successful that it was reprinted two months later. Written by one of Snehalatā's father's relatives, it contains many details showing the religious dimension of her death. Prior to immolating herself, Snehalatā purified her body by drinking water from the Ganges; she then donned a white cloth and had her feet painted red. Surprisingly, it is the priest from the Kālī temple near her home who first saw her in flames and came to her rescue. While en route to the hospital, the girl continued to sing hymns and to invoke the name of Kālī until her death. The movement she started also inspired new kinds of sacrificial forms. Along with ceremonies in which personalities and politicians from Calcutta took part, new rituals were organised at which young men were to publicly vow not to accept a dowry, while standing in front of a fire. James Bissett Pratt also reports that a football championship was launched called "the Snehalatā Cup," on which a picture of Snehalatā in flames as well as a vow not to be party to a

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from *L'Inde, hier, aujourd'hui, demain*. Paris: Plon, 1951, p. 117 (our translation.)

<sup>12</sup> James Bissett Pratt, *India and its Faiths. A Traveller's Record*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915, p. 176.

<sup>13</sup> See the noteworthy pages devoted to Snehalatā in Rochona Majumdar, *Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, pp. 70-88.

wedding dowry were engraved. Young men had to take the vow in order to take part in the game. An Anti-Marriage-Dowry league was set up. Globally, as Rochona Majumdar reports,<sup>14</sup> mobilisation against the practice chose the example of Snehalatā in order to stir emotion rather than engaging on a legal path, and not a single voice was raised to defend the dowry after that. In her suicide note addressed to her father,<sup>15</sup> Snehalatā makes use of many registers: she first presents her action as a desperate attempt to defend a cause that no one has embraced. Quoting the many humanitarian movements that have been set up or the boycott of foreign products, she makes the accusation: "But is there no one among them to feel for their own people?" She then shifts to a religious register and explains that she took her resolution in the following circumstances: "Last night I dreamt a dream, father, which made me take my vow. To the enthralling strains of a music unheard before, and amid a blaze of light as never was on land or sea, I saw the Divine Mother Durgā, with benignant smile, beckoning me to the abode of the blest, up above..." She then presents her gesture as a sacrifice aimed at saving her father from ruin, but Snehalatā's intention is ultimately of a particularly offensive and broad nature as indicated by her very last words: "May the conflagration I shall kindle set the whole country on fire."<sup>16</sup>

The case of Snehalatā is interesting in that it lies at the border between tradition and modernity, and that it raises the question as to why this particular case aroused such a strong reaction at the time. The religious setting of her suicide certainly contributed to associating her gesture with godly models. Her visible self-immolation on the rooftop combined with her profession of faith also had the power to move people, in the sense that she accused them all of inaction and therefore made them all guilty of her death. A death which, as a Brahmin girl, was also particularly significant, by combining all the attributes of purity, innocence and sacredness. Indeed, suicide is a powerful weapon when used by Brahmins, the killing of whom is regarded as a great sin. In the case of the abuse of power by someone or by the authorities, Brahmins could make them bear the brunt of the crime of a Brahmin (*brahmahatyā*) by committing suicide. This had the effect of causing the guilty person to commit suicide or of driving them crazy. The spirits of such Brahmins traditionally give birth to evil spirits whose harmful power threatens society at large. The fear of being the indirect cause of a Brahmin's suicide, even unknowingly,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Published in Chinmoy (no first name given) "The Bridegroom's Price," *The Open Court*: Vol. 1914, Iss. 7, Article 5. Available at: <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/oj/vol1914/iss7/5>.

<sup>16</sup> James Bissett Pratt 1915, *op. cit.*

was so great for rulers that in some regions of India, officials were sent out to inquire about any Brahmins on a hunger strike in order to remedy their situation before they died. Women and children whose killing is also a sin, used this technique as well, but their power to harm was less developed. Snehalatā, for her part, combined the qualities of all those whom it is traditionally a sacrilege to kill, along with the position of an innocent victim of what was already viewed by many as an evil social practice—the dowry.

This suggests that self-immolation's political effectiveness is related to its setting within a larger pseudo-sacrificial context, in which a person representing the victim's party enacts his or her actual sacrifice and expresses social violence in the most horrific form of physical violence. Yet, self-immolation not only emerges from a sacrificial context, but it also contributes to creating it and to generating new sacrificial forms.

The latest wave of political self-immolations in India, in favour of the creation of the state of Telangana, in Andhra Pradesh, follows the same pattern. In this ongoing movement which finds little echo in the international press, self-sacrifices are said to manifest the fact that Telangana people are sacrificed by authorities, in the same manner that high-caste students saw themselves as the innocent victims of the Indian government during the massive wave of self-immolations which occurred during the anti-Mandal protests in 1990.<sup>17</sup> Political self-immolation altogether highlights and contributes to creating a global sacrificial context which assigns the role of sacrificer to those who act against their cause. In India, where sacrifice is a fundamental idiom expressed in a multitude of ways, sacrifice and self-sacrifice are closely interlinked and used as both destructive and creative power. Their use provokes intense sacrificial activity which spreads in various directions: parallel to the epidemic of protest suicides for Telangana, leaders of the movement organise great fire sacrifices for the creation of the new state and activists display symbolic sacrifices of a very offensive type, by burning realistic effigies of their political

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<sup>17</sup> Over two hundred students immolated themselves to protest against the introduction of a higher percentage of reservation for backward castes fixed by the Mandal Commission. In this context, students verbally attacked the Prime Minister VP Singh at the time of their death, while in the ongoing movement the formula used is *Jai Telangana*, "Long Live Telangana." One might consider that the first movement is only directly offensive. However, we have seen that offensive sacrifice sets in motion a circulation of energy, which may have an indirect effect. In the myth, Satī who did not curse Daśha but invoked Śiva at the time of her death, nevertheless caused his destruction, by mobilising his 'party.' The anti-Mandal immolations also led to the resignation of the Prime Minister, but the Telangana movement has not yet proven effective.



opponents. They then produce images where fiction and reality, self-immolation and immolation are powerfully intertwined.

To conclude, we have seen that while self-immolation in India seems to reconfigure political struggles in religious terms and to mobilise an ancient religious heritage, they also generate new sacrificial forms. These in turn have a direct influence on how ancient heritage is perceived. So, in modern images of Satī's self-immolation, the fire pit, as essential as it is in Brahmanic tradition, is absent, and the flames come straight out of the goddess's body. In this manner, contemporary practices of self-immolation, while largely in keeping with the myth of Satī, have contributed to highlighting a particular aspect of its polysemous content. While, for centuries, it had been turned into the model of a mandatory custom associated with the despair of married women whose lives were considered to have ended with their husband's death, Satī's self-immolation now tends to become an image of an offensive method for rallying action and acquiring power in order to transform the world.<sup>18</sup>



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<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to Bernadette Sellers (UPR 299, CNRS), who revised my English.

