

The Role of Missionaries in abolition of sati custom in India with special reference to Serampore Missionary

Dr. Ameeta Singh

Professor of History Govt. Maharani Laxmi Bai Girls PG (Auto) College, Bhopal Madhya Pradesh

The abolition of sati in 1829 owes much to the efforts of the Christian missionaries. They worked against the British government, which was hesitant to take any action against this custom. They sent investigators collected data, compiled statistics of the victims, and they preached and published books and pamphlets against the rite, and thus helped to create in Britain an anti sati public opinion. These works forced British parliament to prohibit this practice. This article is an attempt to analyze the role of missionaries in abolition of sati.

William Carey of Baptist missionary was the first man who led the campaign for abolishing the sati custom in Calcutta. The first formal British law was imposed in 1798, in the city of Calcutta only but the practice continued in surrounding regions. In the beginning of the 19th century, the evangelical church in Britain, and its members in India, had started campaigns against sati. Leaders of these campaigns included the trio of Serampore William Carey and Marshman and Ward. In November 1793 William Carey of the Baptist Mission arrived at Calcutta. After nearly six years in the spring of 1799, he saw widow burning one evening. It was in a place thirty miles away from Calcutta. He tried to stop the ceremony and to reason with the widow and the Brahmin priests. "I talked till reasoning was of no use, and then began to exclaim with all my might against what they were doing; telling them it was shocking murder. They told me it was a great act of holiness." Carey was greatly agitated, and decided to take action against this barbarous act of sati. He sent careful investigators to every village within a radius of thirty miles of Calcutta, to learn how many widows had been immolated there in the previous twelve months, and their ages, and the children they had left behind them.

The missionaries also approached Hindu theologians, who opined that the practice was encouraged, rather than enjoined by the Holy Scriptures. Carey started his mission in Danish colony because The East India Company did not accept Christian missionary activity within their domains. In 1813, in a speech to the House of Commons, William Wilberforce, with particular reference to the statistics on sati collected by Carey and the other Serampore missionaries, forced the Government to ban the social evils like sati.

The Serampore trio joined with Indian social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy to fight with traditional Hindu group. In 1799 the Serampur Christian missionary headed by William Carey had started a movement for the abolition of sati. The Christian missionaries argued before the British Government that the Sati system is not an essential part of Hindu religion and it must be abolished. William Carey launched a plan for movement against the sati. He prepared a statistical record of widow burning and wrote many sati accounts that he witnessed. They sought the help of Hindu Pandits to know whether the sati practice has religious sanction. He organized open discussion on the subject and arranged a debate in 1803 at Fort William College, Calcutta. Both Indians and Europeans attended this meeting. Raja Rammohan Roy also visited the Serampur missionaries in 1816 and discussed the subject of sati in Hinduism in detail. William Carey requested the government in 1817 to enquire of the well known Hindu scholar Pandit Mrantunjay Vidhyalankar, whether the main Hindu scriptures sanctioned the sati. Pandit Vidhyalankar gave his opinion that there is no sanction of sati in Hindu religious literature. On the contrary, the Hindu widows were to keep alive the memories of their deceased husbands in their hearts and practice Brahmcharya, countenance, sacrifice and human welfare till the last days of their lives- this was the ideal for Hindu widowhood.

This statement strengthened the movement for the abolition of sati. The Serampur mission had started two news papers the friend of India (now statesman) and Samachar Darpan (in Bengali) these news papers played a significant role in the abolition of sati. In 1829 the Serampore mission submitted two petitions to Lord William Bentinck to take effort to abolish this custom. Carey consulted Sanskrit pundits in Fort William College about the prescriptions of Hindu sashtras on Sati.

William Ward (1769–1823) was an English pioneer Baptist missionary, author, printer and translator. In India Ward's time was chiefly occupied in superintending the printing press, by means of which the scriptures, translated into Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, and twenty-three other languages, were disseminated throughout India. Numerous philological works were also issued. Ward found time, however, to keep a copious diary and to preach the gospel to the natives. Until 1806 he made frequent tours among the towns and villages of the province. He wrote two major works on Hindu customs "Account of the Writings, Religion, and Manners of

the Hindoos,' (Serampúr, 1811, 4 vols.) and 'Farewell Letters in Britain and America on returning to Bengal in 1821,' both writings raised voice against the custom of sati in Bengal. His farewell letters gave detailed account on widow burning in Bengal .His account is a typical example of missionary writing on sati, on the status of Hindu women more generally and was designed for British readers. He used his writing as a tool in raising fund for missionary enterprise.

Another missionary James Pegg published a text titled "Suttee's cry to Britain" which roused a lot of sympathy for Indian widows. James Pegg in 1828 also set up the society for the abolition of Human sacrifice in India.

The missionary placed all these documents together with the statistics of sati they had already compiled in the hands of George Undey – A member of supreme council and an ardent abolitionist of this custom. Undeys submission on sati was a first official notice regarding female immolation.

Reginold Heber the protestant Bishop of Calcutta also took an interest in abolition of sati. One day while returning from Calcutta he saw a funeral pyre on which a widow was just burnt with her dead husband. He wrote "I felt very sick at heart and regretted, I had not been half an hour sooner".

Abbe J.A. Dubois or **Jean-Antoine Dubois** (January 1765 – 17 February 1848) was a French Catholic missionary in India, He was at first attached to the Pondicherry mission, and worked in the southern districts of the Madras Presidency. His most notable record was " Hindu manners, customs and ceremonies." He abjured European society, adopted the native style of clothing, and made himself in habit and costume as much like a Hindu as he could. He used to go around in the garb of sanyasi and abstained from eating meat for many years. He was popularly called as Dodda Swamiyuru. He described sati in detail in this work and gave reasons for this superstition.

The Christian missionary tried to mold the public opinion against the sati in both India & Britain. In Britain Claudius Buchanan's widely read Christian researcher in India (1811) gave a number of widow burnt on the funeral pyre of their husbands, and William Wilberforce quoted the statistic of saties which the Baptist missionaries compiled, in the House of common on June 22, 1813. He mentioned that in the radius 13 miles around Calcutta 130 widows burnt in 6 months. He also mentioned an incident of sati witnessed by Marshman.

William Yates a missionary of Britain wrote many eyewitness accounts. He raised the voice for orphans left behind by Saties."We have seen the fatherless around the burning pile, weeping and waiting the loss of their parents." William Johns (1816) published a pamphlets a collection of facts and opinion relative to the burning of widows with their husbands. He was the doctor at Serampore in India between 1812-1813. He also wrote an eyewitness account of Ann Chaffin the first women missionary nurse. According to her, "sati is an everyday practice in Bengal".

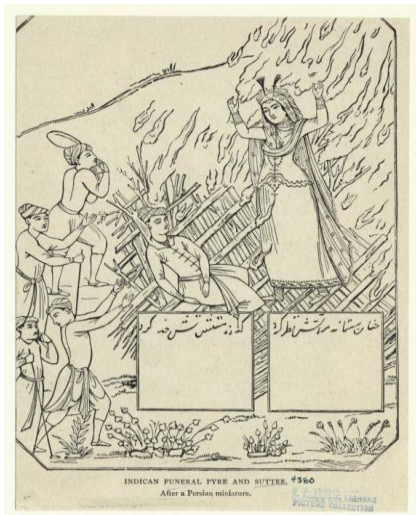
The missionaries gained vital support from the Thomas Fowell Buxton (leader of evangelical group). He initiated the first parliament debate on the sati custom in 1823. From 1823-1830 a total 107 petitions against sati were presented to the House of Commons.



They also appealed for the fund to save the Indian women. Aladies association was founded in England . In 1814 south walk ladies association raised fund to help the missionaries of India. Jemina Thomson's memoires of British female missionary (1841) has its front page a picture of the burning of the slaves of Raja Ranjeet singh in 1839. She encouraged English women to become missionaries to save their sisters of India.

Jemina Thomson's memoir was kind of manifesto promoting female missionary endeavor in India. The plight of the poor children left orphaned by the saties was also evoked in female missionaries' propaganda. A hymn written by Ann Taylor Gilbert on sati's children sung by British children in Exter Hall London in Children's missionary

meetings. Between 13 Feb 1829 to 29 March 1830 a total 15 separate groups of women from around the England sent petitions to parliament for prohibition of sati.



"Ah! my dear miss hope! shall I not hear after my return to India that the females of Britain and America have united to make the cause of their sex in India a common cause..... will you not follow in footsteps of Mrs. Julias, and deliver these females, doomed to horrible death..... will you not become the guardian of these ten thousand orphans surrounding these funeral piles. By an official statement it appears that every year more than seven hundred women are burned or buried alive in Bengal presidency of Bengal alone.." "The death of the mother deprives the children of their natural guardian" - Farewell letters by William Ward

The missionary's movement against the sati custom became popular in England and received the attention of English women. The Missionary register a widely read journal promoted this mission among the British women.

The Quiver (1861–1926) is yet another of these idiosyncratic journals. It was established in 1861 by John Cassell. (An illustrated Magazine) this magazine gave a detail account of sati.

"it is calculated that 70,000 widows have been sacrificed in India since the year 1756. Banaras as being "the holy city" was a principal scene of these rites. In the division of Calcutta not less than 365 were annually sacrificed." This magazine produce a picture of sati which is taken from an ancient Persian miniature painting, convey an idea of entire acquiesces on the part of victim and of admiration and delight on the part of the spectators.

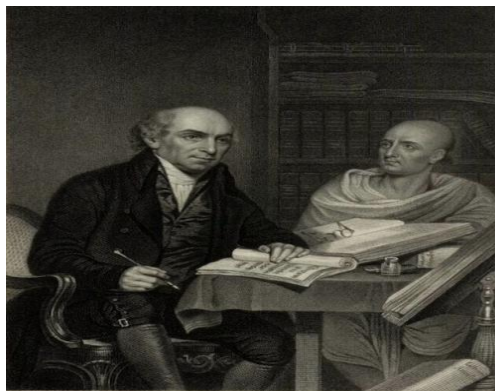
Missionary literature on Suttee;

- Friends of India founded in 1817 by Serampur missionaries and this news paper gave many accounts on the burning of widows, These articles are the typical example of missionary propaganda against sati.
- Missionary register – vol. 19 page 326, 1831 measures which led to the abolition of suttees.
- India's cry to British humanity relative to the suttee infanticide by J. Peggs 1830 London
- The congregational magazine, London 1830
- Friend of India - "on female immolation" quarterly volume no. 3 March 1821.
- "Sketches of popular ideas relative to the Burning of widows, Shradhdhas or funeral feast, taken from recent occurrences.
- Friend of India - "on female immolation" quarterly volume no. 9, 1825.
- Missionary register Hindu superstitions of cruelties, July 1819
- Missionary register on the burning women in India, June 1813
- William Wilberforce, speech to the House of Commons, June 22, 1813 parliamentary debates vol. 26
- Missionary register, wards account on burning of widows alive 1811 vol. 2
- Review of a pamphlet on burning widows 1819 vol. 2 Serampur press.
- Letter to court of directors by Serampur mission – Suttee or the burning of widows in India

The regulation XVII of 1829 abolished the sati rite with minor protest of the orthodox Hindu groups and as Marshman wrote, "for the first time during twenty centuries ...the Ganga flowed unblooded to the sea." Lord Bentinck got his credit for the abolition, but somehow missionaries were not mentioned much about their contribution to the reform. Bentinck did not mention them in his minute on sati. But we cannot over looked their contribution. It was the missionaries who kept the issue alive in India and Britain. It was they who helped indirectly to organize a Hindu response for its abolition.



William Ward



William Carey with a Hindu Pandit

End Notes :

- [1]. Marshman Jhon Clark, The story of Carey, Marshman and ward; The serampur missionaries; London 1864 pg. 353-354
- [2]. Chandrababu B.S., Thilagavathi; Women her history and her struggle for emancipation, page 325 Bharti Pustakalaya Chennai-2009
- [3]. Sharma Arvind; Sati Historical and phenomenological essays p.62 New Delhi 1988
- [4]. Missionary Register-Volume 19 page no. 226; London 1831
- [5]. Edward Irving Carlyle Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 59
- [6]. ward William ,Letter iv, to Mrs.Hope of Liverpool from the Hercules at sea 31st march1821,in farewell letters to a few friends of Britain and America on returning to Bengal in 1821 ,published in London 1821
- [7]. Whitely William Thomas – A Baptist Bibliography, p. 162 Zurich
- [8]. Pegg Jams, India's cry to British Humanity, relative to the suttee, p.1-50 infanticide Seeley and son, London
- [9]. 1813
- [10]. ibid
- [11]. Yates William,Memoirs of William Yates,D.D. of Calcutta p.81 London1847
- [12]. Clare Midgley; Feminism and empire: Women activist in imperial Britain 1790-1865 p 107 USA
- [13]. Clare Midgley; Feminism and empire: Women activist in imperial Britain 1790-1865 p.78
- [14]. ibid p.65
- [15]. ibid p.71
- [16]. The Quiver, page no. 148, November 1865,
- [17]. Sharma Arvind;Sati Historical and phenomenological essays p.65