

**POLITICS OF SATI – MEMORIALS****Swati Detha**

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An ideology can be ingrained into individuals by multiple ways. The people in society are usually made to internalize certain values through the mediation of beautiful architectural structures that are orderly and intelligibly erected. A transparent analysis of the sati – memorials of Rajasthan, makes us believe that society is a huge web of power politics. ‘The structure is successful because it creates truth, and it is in this recognition that individuals can succeed.’¹ These memorials ingrain certain trends in society conforming to the Rajput definition of pride and honor, which in turn serve as strong pillars supporting the state edifice.

The simplest form of sati memorials found in Rajasthan consists of carved outlines of the hand prints left on walls by *satis* before their deaths² – an expression of the common folk belief that super-natural power is contained in the palm of a woman about to become a *sati*. Pillars, sometimes square, but more generally rectangular, are the principal form of free-standing memorials, and may be found standing alone, in rows, or on platforms reached by steps. In the form of the *linga*, there are also round pillars, which we found only in cenotaphs. The most elaborate memorials, typically located near bodies of water, consist of pillars inside cenotaphs (*chhatris*) surmounted by one of several styles of roofs. With the exception of a more specialized system with Nandi, centered *linga*, and square memorial (aligned from east to west), the memorial pillars in these cenotaphs are typically located at their exact centers. The earlier memorials and cenotaphs for the nobility were mostly made of red sandstone, but white marble dominates in later examples. Most cenotaphs reflect later Islamic architectural influences such as the dome, but some earlier ones have multifaceted peaked roofs with sides resembling steps. Curved eaves and curved cornices, structural forms probably derived from

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Vintage, New York, 1977., p. 98.

² G.N. Sharma, *Rajasthan ki Sanskritik Itihas*, Rajasthan Hindi Granth Academy, Jaipur, 1995., p. 128.

Bengali folk architecture, also surmount some of the cenotaphs in Rajasthan. More rarely, cenotaph roofs assume the form of *sikharas*.³

The principal human figures carved on memorials are the deceased male and the woman or women (both wives and concubines) who became *satis* with him. Attendants, musicians, and dancers may be portrayed as well. The male figure is often represented as a Rajput warrior, with turban and mustache. Some males are standing, and may then be in the *namaskar* (two palms together) pose. It was also a common practice to depict the Rajput male on a horse. Standing or mounted males might hold a sword and, less frequently, a shield as well. If the memorial is a royal one, an umbrella is often placed over him, and it may be held by a servant. An alternate depiction of one or two servants standing nearby with a whisk and umbrella (both being emblems of royalty) also occurs.

The female figures are most often in the *namaskar* pose, which expresses devotion to the attainment of a spiritual after-life and devotion to one's husband. Free-standing statues of *satis* with their right hand raised in blessing also exist, but only in temples. A distinctive type of representation found in both Rajasthan and Gujarat shows the *sati* wife holding her deceased husband in her arms.⁴ This may be a symbolic representation of the immortal wife, now a goddess, bearing her husband to the supernatural realm. But it could simply be a depiction of the devoted wife, sacrificing her life out of a desire to be with her husband, and then bearing him to the super-natural realm.

The iconographic conventions of *sati* memorialization in Rajasthan are characterized by symbolism and motifs that are widespread in Hindu culture, and which have thrived elsewhere as well. Thus 'the umbrella, which is both carved on pillars and structurally repeated in the cenotaph roofs protecting memorials, has a long history as a symbol of royalty and the sacred.'⁵ While the utilitarian advantage of shade provided by these roofs is obvious, their added symbolic dimension is no less important.

Another symbol found in the *sati* memorials of Rajasthan is the *linga*, the phallic emblem associated with Shiva. Some *lingas* have four faces carved into their sides, facing the four quadrants, and thus symbolize the all-seeing Siva who is at the center of all things. Other *lingas*, which are modified miniature *sikharas*, surmount square memorials whose sides face

³ William A. Noble and Ram Sankhyan. 'Signs of Divine: Sati Memorials and Sati Worship in Rajasthan', in Karine Schomer, Deryck O. Lodrick and Lloyd I. Rudolph. (eds), in *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity*, Vol. I, New Delhi, Manohar, 1994, p. 346.

⁴ Ibid., p. 347.

⁵ G. N. Sharma, *op.cit.*, p. 129.

the four quadrants.⁶ The principal significance of this iconographic feature is related to the fact that, as a symbol, the *linga* functions as an *axis mundi* (an axis through which the world is thought to be centered) where the earthly and secular realm is linked to the supernatural, divine realm. However, the *linga* has other complex symbolic associations as well. ‘Conjoined with its female counterpart, the *yoni*, it commemorates men and their *satis* through the union of the male and female principles, and is linked to the Hindu system of opposites. It is also a symbol of creation and, as a representation of Shiva, is associated with universal creation and destruction.

Most memorial pillars in Rajasthan, as elsewhere in India, have carved on their upper section representations of the sun and the moon. The sun may be shown with distinctive rays, and occasionally has a human face, while the moon may be represented either full or crescent-shaped and recumbent. The two may also be represented together, the sun’s orb either large or as small as a dot in the hollow of the recumbent moon.⁷ Symbolically, the moon in its recumbent form represents the essence of femaleness, the womb, while the sun, the prime giver of light and warmth, is the fertilizer and nurturer and, when symbolizing the *bindu* (center) of the Hindus, is the ultimate and eternal supernatural center of creation and destruction. ‘As sun and moon symbolism is frequently associated with sacred pillars, mountains, and trees’,⁸ the presence on *sati* memorials further reinforces the concept of these memorials functioning as *axes mundi*.

Among the secondary symbolic motifs used in *sati* memorialization are footprints, a pan-Indian way of representing the departed’s last connection with the earth. Lotuses, as traditional emblems of enlightenment, and swastikas, representing the extension of cosmic evolution from a fixed center to the four quadrants, also occur.

Vegetation, in the form of trees and plants, is also present, signifying association with the tree of life, the most common and universal representation of the *axis mundi*. Another symbol, more frequent as a ritual object in *sati* temples than carved on memorials, is the *trisol* (trident). It too functions as an *axis mundi*, and represents the conduit through which the earthly existence is transformed into the supernatural and through which *sakti* (female energy) flows. All these, and other motifs such as coconuts, eyes, head-cloths, and sari lengths, are pan-Indian, but are combined in ways that reflect regional patterns characteristic of *sati* memorialization in Rajasthan.

⁶ Ibid, p. 131.

⁷ William A. Noble and Ad Ram Sankhyan, *op.cit.*,p. 34.

⁸ Ibid., p. 350.

We can well imagine the role of instructive features of Hinduism in arousing a sense of devotion for sati. Almost the entire gamut of regional philosophical objects have been exploited to enslave the mentality of people. The exhibition in the form of the *sati* memorial is a highly visible mode of controlling the collective mentality. The art in the service of power is a perfect image of instrumentation.

The ultimate institutional base of power is humans beings. Unless the authority is given by people themselves, no system can hegimonize itself on the subjects. In order to gain legitimacy in true form, it is necessary to make people believe in an ideology. It is belief not just by their minds, but by the core of their hearts. The people should not just put their hearts into anything but actually live the beliefs. Once the masses start living a thought, it takes up a structural form, which in turn completes the cycle of a self replicating system. The system moves on without any external aid and people are enmeshed into it. They forget the ways to think or act otherwise. All this, can just support a particular form of state structure. Though once the cycle is complete, the state or the people in command also get enmeshed in this intricate network. Disciplinary power is an impersonal apparatus which ensnares all who are involved in it. Nobody is outside it. This apparatus has emerged as an effect of the coming together of a wide range of disparate historical currents. Also, this form of power builds from bottom up. It is because of the disciplinary control of the individuals at the ground level that the state is powerful, not vice versa.