



# The practice of 'Sati' in Medieval India: An enquiry through the accounts of foreign visitors

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## Abstract

This article explores the practice of Sati in medieval India by examining the accounts of foreign travelers like Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo, François Bernier, and Niccolao Manucci. It delves into their portrayals of the ritual, emphasizing aspects such as consent, social context, and regional differences. Although these narratives offer valuable insights into the ceremonial and symbolic dimensions of Sati, they are influenced by cultural bias, misunderstandings, and exaggerations. The study contends that foreign accounts should be critically assessed alongside indigenous sources to comprehend Sati as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon rather than a uniform or universally accepted tradition.

**Keywords:** Sati, Foreign Travelers, Medieval India, Battuta, Marco Polo, François Bernier

## 1. Introduction

The custom of "Sati," often recognized as a widow's act of self-immolation on her deceased husband's funeral pyre, stands as one of the most contentious traditions in Indian history. While its roots can be traced back to earlier times, it gained prominence during the medieval period in India (circa 1200-1800 CE). This practice was neither universally practiced nor uniformly accepted, yet it carried significant symbolic importance in certain regions and communities. Accounts from foreign travelers offer a crucial perspective on Sati. Visitors like IBN Battuta, Marco Polo, François Bernier, and Niccolao Manucci documented Indian society and provided varying levels of detail about this custom. These narratives serve as valuable historical sources, offering descriptive and sometimes firsthand evidence. However, they were also influenced by cultural biases, religious beliefs, and the expectations of foreign audiences. This article explores the practice of Sati through these accounts, contending that while they provide valuable insights into the ritual and its social context, they must be critically interpreted due to their inherent limitations and biases.

## 2. Objectives of the study

- To explore the practice of Sati in medieval India

through the descriptive accounts of foreign travelers.

- To analyze the portrayals of Sati in travel narratives concerning ritual practices, consent, and social context.
- To assess the reliability and limitations of foreign accounts in understanding Sati as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

## 3. Research question

- How do foreign travelers' descriptive accounts portray the practice of Sati in medieval India, particularly regarding ritual practices and social context?
- To what extent do travel narratives reflect the issue of consent in the depiction of Sati rituals?
- What are the reliability and limitations of foreign travelers' accounts in understanding Sati as a socio-cultural phenomenon in medieval India?

## 4. Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on Sati have evolved over time. Colonial writers often depicted it as a barbaric and widespread custom to justify intervention in Indian society. However, modern historians challenge this perspective and emphasize its limited and region-specific nature. Lata Mani (1998) [6] examined how colonial discourse constructed Sati while neglecting women's voices. Ashis Nandy (1998) [7]

interpreted it within the framework of gender and violence. Romila Thapar stressed the importance of distinguishing between textual references and actual practices. Studies based on foreign travel accounts provide useful descriptions but are often influenced by bias and misunderstanding. Recent scholarship adopts a balanced approach by combining foreign and indigenous sources to interpret Sati as a complex socio-cultural practice.

## 5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and descriptive research approach based on secondary sources. It primarily analyzes foreign travel accounts such as those of Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo, François Bernier, and Niccolao Manucci. A comparative method is used to identify similarities and differences in their descriptions. Simultaneously, a critical analytical approach is applied to evaluate the bias, reliability, and limitations of these narratives. Secondary scholarly works are also consulted to support interpretation and ensure a balanced understanding.

## 6. Historical Background of Sati

### 6.1 Origin and Meaning

The word Sati is derived from Sanskrit, signifying a "loyal" or "virtuous" wife. It represented the ideal of supreme devotion, where a widow opted to die alongside her husband. Early mentions can be found in certain Puranic and literary texts, although they do not indicate a widespread practice. Religious beliefs linked Sati with spiritual merit and purity, suggesting it brought salvation to both the widow and her spouse. However, these notions were not universally embraced.

### 6.2 Development in medieval period

During medieval times in India, Sati became more prominent, especially among the elite. In Rajasthan, it was tied to Rajput honor and valor. In Bengal, it also emerged but with regional differences. The practice was largely confined to upper-caste and elite groups, reflecting social and political influences rather than being a universal custom.

## 7. Foreign Travelers as Sources

### 7.1 Major Travelers

Foreign travelers like IBN Battuta, Marco Polo, François Bernier, and Niccolao Manucci recorded Sati in their writings. Their accounts offer significant insights into Indian society and customs. These travelers often described Sati with a mixture of fascination and moral judgment, reflecting their own cultural perspectives. Their narratives provide valuable ethnographic details, though sometimes colored by exoticism or misunderstanding. Collectively, their accounts contribute to a multifaceted historical record of the practice and its social implications.

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distinct backgrounds and beliefs. Their narratives provide valuable ethnographic details, though sometimes colored by exoticism or misunderstanding, which can influence the accuracy and interpretation of the practice. Collectively, their accounts contribute to a multifaceted historical record of the practice and its social implications, revealing both the complexities of cultural encounter and the evolving attitudes toward Sati over time.

## 7.3 Nature and Limitations

Although these travelogues provide valuable observations, they also have limitations. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and religious biases often influenced their interpretations. Moreover, their narratives were sometimes exaggerated to captivate foreign audiences.

## 8. Accounts of Sati

### 8.1 Description of Ritual

Travelers depicted Sati as a ceremonial and public event. The widow would ascend the funeral pyre after engaging in religious rites. The occasion often involved priests, music, and large gatherings. The practice symbolized ultimate devotion and purity, believed to ensure the widow's union with her husband in the afterlife. It was both a spiritual act and a social ritual, reinforcing community values and religious beliefs. Despite its ceremonial nature, Sati was often subject to controversy and debate throughout history.

### 8.2 Consent vs Coercion

Some narratives depict Sati as a voluntary act, emphasizing the widow's dedication. Conversely, other accounts suggest that coercion, through societal pressure or family influence, was involved. This points to a complex reality. This duality reflects the broader societal tensions surrounding Sati, where personal agency and oppressive traditions intersected. Historical records and oral histories reveal variations in how these acts were experienced and interpreted by the widows themselves. Understanding this complexity is essential to grasp the multifaceted nature of Sati within its cultural and historical contexts.

### 8.3 Social and Regional Aspects

Sati was more prevalent among the upper classes and differed across regions, indicating that it was not a uniform practice. Its practice was often linked to notions of honor and social status, reinforcing hierarchical structures within society. Regional variations reflected differing cultural, religious, and economic influences that shaped how and when sati was performed. Consequently, the practice cannot be understood without considering these social and regional complexities.

### 8.4 Travelers' Reactions

Reactions ranged from admiration to disapproval. Some travelers viewed it as a brave act, while others condemned it as brutal and inhumane. Others expressed concern about the ethical implications, questioning whether such actions could be justified under any circumstances. The polarized responses highlighted the complexity of public opinion surrounding the event. This division also sparked broader debates on morality, justice, and cultural perspectives.

## 9. Comparative Analysis

Comparing various accounts reveals common themes such as ritual, sacrifice, and honor. However, interpretations vary depending on the travelers' backgrounds, highlighting the subjective nature of these narratives.

## 10. Critical Interpretation

### 10.1 Gender and Society

Sati reflects patriarchal values, underscoring female loyalty and dependence. Widows often faced social and economic hardships, which influenced their decisions. These hardships often left widows vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization within their communities. The practice of sati, therefore, can be seen as both a reflection of societal expectations and a response to the limited options available to widowed women. Consequently, the ritual reinforced the existing gender hierarchy by valorizing female sacrifice and obedience.

### 10.2 Bias in Foreign Accounts

Foreign narratives often exhibit an Orientalist perspective, exaggerating practices like Sati. Nonetheless, they remain valuable when critically examined. These accounts often reflect the biases and agendas of their authors, necessitating careful interpretation. Understanding the socio-political context in which these narratives were produced helps to mitigate misrepresentations. Consequently, a balanced analysis requires integrating indigenous perspectives alongside foreign observations.

## 11. Educational Implications

This study fosters critical thinking by demonstrating how historical sources can be biased. It encourages students to compare multiple viewpoints and grasp the complexity of social practices. It also raises awareness of gender issues and social justice, linking historical analysis with contemporary concerns. Thus, it enhances analytical and interpretative skills essential for academic learning. By engaging with diverse perspectives, students develop empathy and a deeper understanding of historical narratives. This approach also promotes critical evaluation of sources, encouraging learners to question authenticity and bias. Ultimately, it prepares students to apply these analytical skills beyond history, fostering informed citizenship and responsible decision-making.

## 12. Conclusion

The practice of Sati in medieval India was complex and varied, shaped by social, cultural, and regional factors. Foreign travelers provide valuable insights, but their accounts are influenced by bias and misunderstanding. Therefore, these sources must be used critically alongside indigenous evidence. A balanced interpretation shows that Sati was not a universal practice but a historically specific phenomenon requiring careful analysis.

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