

FROM THE EDITOR

SANS THE GLAMOUR OF HISTORY: THE OTHER EVENT

We did not know that there were so many progressive people in this country until the eighteen year old graduate girl of Rajasthan became a Sati. Innumerable articles on the incident have claimed acres of space in the newspapers, national and regional. All have, understandably, condemned the Sati, some having gone into the psychology of the custom and some having delved into the genesis of the practice, giving history a new lease of life—or—to put it more realistically, imparting furious deathblows to an institution of history without a scratch on their own fists.

Of course, we cannot kill history. We can leave it in peace engaging ourselves in making the history of our own time a little more purposeful.

It is not given to many to understand the past, for we who cannot identify ourselves with our current neighbours can hardly identify ourselves with the mind of a remote age. The age in which the institution of Sati arose was also an age when women had an amazingly free status in the society, when a princess could choose her husband (which in all probability she had already done) in a Swayamvara. We cannot possibly challenge even Queen Samyukta's decision to perform Johar at the death of her husband Prithviraj Chauhan (with whom she had so dramatically eloped) in the 12th century or the still more famous deed of Queen Padmini in the 13th century.

The sensible course for us will be to remain content with tackling the present and not inviting a confrontation with the whole past, which is too formidable for the kind of reformers we are.

Tackling the present, in such cases, is not easy, but there is no alternative to facing a difficult situation. The common people have to be explained that while most of our traditions were lofty in their original shape, what is practised is their perversion. Sati, as a status-symbol, even as a ritual, is not a homage but an insult to the spirit of the tradition. Every lasting institution has a truth and a form. The truth remains; the form changes. Swadharma (one's right, aptitude and capacity) and the ancient division of the Varnas were closely associated. The division, degraded into the later-day caste-system, lost its validity as a form, but the truth of Swadharma remains. The philosophy of the first generation of Satis (which perhaps had much to do with their faith in the immortality of souls) is lost to us, but we know that for Samyukta and Padmini, it was their mode of revenge against the lusty invaders, and protecting the dignity of their persons. Their attitude has not lost its truth, but the society has provided for new avenues and safe-guards today for the same.

Either we glorify the past, or we condemn it. In our text-books the episodes of the past are just glorified and left at that. How their essence is to be received in a changed time is not stressed. It is a deficiency in the quality of our text-books. Perhaps it is time to think of a common syllabus at the primary levels for the whole country, giving proper interpretations (for teachers) of all the topics.

Coming back to the uproar made by reporters and columnists on the event of Sati, may I be pardoned for raising another question. Sometime ago in a town bearing an impressive religious name, an old woman, obviously stranger to the town, asked a little boy the way to the bus-stop. She was chased as a witch who wanted to kidnap the boy. She was stoned to a coma. The dutiful members of the crowd contributed to the fund for buying a tin of kerosene which was poured on her and she was burnt alive.

I believe, this was a far more grotesque incident than the Sati of Roop Kanwar. The witch-burning takes place more frequently than the incidents of Sati; it has no pretention to any lofty tradition, it is a manifestation of ignorance, intolerance and inhumanity in the most crude form.

But it was only reported in newspapers, it created no reformist upheaval. Is it because the incident lacks the glamour of history? I hope, all feeling deeply concerned on the Sati, the women's organisations included, will ask themselves this question.

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

A FOND WISH ON THE JNU CAMPUS

During my two days of stay in the capital on my way to the Himalayas, in the second week of October, I read two reports, one in a national daily and the other in a local evening daily, that the election campaign for the Students' Union of the Jawaharlal Nehru University lacked enthusiasm. There was an element of lament in the headlines and the texts.

I stopped in the capital again, on my way back from the mountains. It was the day of the election and the local paper repeated its lament.

I was away from my Guest house for the whole day, attending to engagements one after another. Back in the evening, I was told by the receptionists that a group of students from the JNU, expecting me to return to my guest house for lunch, had waited there for nearly two hours. They had left a note, informing me that their Literary Association desires to arrange a talk by me and that they will come to meet me once again the next day in the morning. I was pleasantly surprised that they should have so much time to spare and patience to look for me on that exciting day!

My first appointment for the next day, breakfast with the veteran litterateur Jai Ratan, an asset to THE HERITAGE as our readers know, had been fixed for 8.30 and his house was quite far. I was to leave Delhi the same evening and there would be no time for a programme at the JNU. But I must stop the students from coming all the way to the guest house to learn this much from a note left for them. The leader of the group, my former student, had left her address. I drove into the hostel complex of the, JNU and parked my car in front of the Ganga Hostel and sent for her.

A procession of young men and women was heading towards me. "Car hatao! Car hatao!" said a middle-aged vendor with some anxiety. He had obviously weathered many a procession in the city. A bevy of girls in their early winter woollens flowed out of the gate and greeted the processionists. My driver had no time to move the car. In any case there was no need for it. It was a decent, dignified procession. Gently it gave the car the not-too-wide berth it needed and passed by. They were the victors and their supporters in the election and their slogans were modest.

My enquiry showed that there had been enough enthusiasm for the election, the kind of enthusiasm we should expect on the campus — intellectual and academic.

For the press, "Enthusiasm" was an euphemism for hullabaloo, I am afraid. I remembered Orwell, who as a Police Officer at the head of a mob in Burma, was once obliged to kill an innocent elephant for a reason which people often do not understand, but he understood. "I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward irresistibly."

Silently I congratulated the JNU students for not being pressed forward irresistibly by the expectation of the press or politicians. I wished many similar disappointments for the press in the future.