‘The Hazards of Interference’: British fears of rebellion and sati as a potential site of conflict, 1829-1857.

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Despite revisionist historian Eric Stokes’ warning that interpretations of unrest in 1857 must ‘touch upon a deeper level than the vague disturbance of the popular mind by fears for religion and caste, springing from British interference with customs like widow burning and widow remarriage or British enforcement of the intermingling of castes through common messing in gaols and the common carriage of passengers by the railway’,¹ these sorts of explanations continue to be influential.² Such interpretations reflect a post-1857 agenda concerned with reasserting the ideological basis of colonial rule by representing the uprising as the result of ‘irrational’ religious fanaticism among ‘simple, superstitious, credulous sepoys.’³ They are also embedded in a pre-existing orientalist discourse about Indian religion and the hazards of interference in Indian ‘superstition.’ Although immediate British reactions to the uprising were fractured and multivalent, after the revolt a consensus began to emerge in imperialist historiography that blamed the uprising on self-interested, reactionary Indian elites who feared the impact that the imposition of ‘colonial modernity’ would have on their status and authority.⁴ In particular, social and religious reforms, from the prohibition of sati in 1829 onwards, were portrayed as cumulative sites of contest that provoked Indian fears of religious erosion and even forcible or duplicitous conversion. Such interpretations, though exhibiting surprising longevity,⁵

² Stokes himself commented that the principle obstacle he had faced was ‘folk memory’ of the ‘Mutiny’, suggesting that a responsible rewriting of 1857 must struggle constantly against these deeply traced ‘lines of interpretation’. Stokes, E., The Peasant Armed.
⁴ See Embree
⁵ In 1958 Hugh Tinker complained that the many British works on 1857, whether commemorative or apologetic, had produced few significant reassessments of the ‘Mutiny’, instead reiterating, slightly modified, the judgements of Victorian writers. Hugh Tinker, ‘1857 and 1957: The Mutiny and Modern India’ in International Affairs, Vol. 34:1, 1958, p. 58. More recently, in The Peasant Armed, published posthumously in 1986, Eric Stokes commented that the principle obstacle he had faced was ‘folk
obfuscated the complex matrixes of social, economic, political and religious concerns that prompted the uprising\textsuperscript{6} and obscured the real patterns of causality between specific religious issues and unrest.

Whether depicted as the unfounded paranoia of a superstitious people or the justified consternation of a community under social, religious and cultural siege, the primacy of religious and caste issues in motivating and mobilising dissent has consistently informed popular British accounts of the uprising, from Sir John Kaye to William Dalrymple. Despite, or perhaps because of its widespread acceptance, interpreting the role of religion in 1857 remains problematic. This is not to suggest that religious issues and identities were not significant in 1857, of course, but any attempt to understand patterns of causality between religious issues and popular unrest must first disentangle the ‘reality’ of religious grievance from a totalising colonial discourse that represents all British interventions in social and religious issues as having a cumulative causal effect, regardless of the paucity of tangible, empirical evidence for their involvement.\textsuperscript{7}

Encounters between the colonial state, indigenous population and Indian religion were usually regionally, socially and culturally specific and their relationship to unrest equally diverse. There was no pan-Indian experience of colonial incursions into the sacred; different issues might be sites of contest for different communities at different times. Attempts ascribe the north/central Indian insurrection of 1857 to a general sense of growing religious unease are destabilised when patterns of causality between individual reforms and the events of 1857 are seriously interrogated, revealing the complicity of such explanations with a broader orientalist discourse that ignores significant dislocations between event and reaction and submerges the specificities of individual issues in a monolithic discourse on the role of religion. In order to understand the complex nature of socio-religious grievances as sites of contest, we must look critically at the relationship between specific reforms and unrest, questioning both the plausibility of their supposed causality and the possible agendas behind their incorporation into the colonial discourse on 1857.

\footnote{See Stokes, Bhadra etc}
\footnote{See, for example, Sir William Lee-Warner \textit{Life of the Marquis of Dalhousie} (1904) ‘The abolition of sati, the abolition of infanticide, the introduction of vaccination, the law to legalise the remarriage of Hindu widows…were pressed upon the attention of the army and the masses as so many deliberate attacks on the outworks of both Mahommedanism and Hinduism. And the simple, superstitious, credulous sepoys were told that the time was rapidly approaching when by some piece of jadu (magic) the Christians would…uncaste the whole Hindu population and outrage all their traditions and feelings.’ Cited in Chattopadhyaya, \textit{The Sepoy Mutiny 1857}, p 32. More recently James, L., \textit{Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India}, (London: Softback Preview, 1998), p. 235.}
This paper will look in detail at the relationship between one specific religious ‘grievance’, the prohibition of sati, and popular unrest in 1857. As the first major British intervention in Indian religion, the prohibition of sati in 1829 is repeatedly cited in British historiography as a precursor of unrest in 1857. The connection is endemic in popular British histories of India: Wolpert, Spiers, Keay and James, among others, all explicitly cite the prohibition of sati as one of the causes of discontent that led to the insurrection. To give one more, recent, but controversial, example, Niall Fergusson, in *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, published in 2003, concludes his discussion of Bentinck’s reform by quoting a stark warning issued by Lt Col Playfaire in 1828 that

…any order of government prohibiting the practice would create a most alarming sensation throughout the native army, they would consider it an interference with their customs and religion amounting to an abandonment of those principles which have hitherto guided government in its conduct towards them. Such a feeling once excited, there is no possibility of predicting what might happen. It might break out in some parts of the army in open rebellion, certainly, in all it would produce distrust and disaffection.9

He uses this quotation to move directly into a discussion of 1857, saying ‘such concerns were premature…but…far from groundless…A reaction against the imposition of British culture on India was indeed brewing’,10 implying that the prohibition of sati was directly causally connected to unrest in 1857. This paper will explore British fears of rebellion prior to the prohibition of sati in 1829 and their experience of sati as a site of contest between 1829 and 1857, arguing that sati was at best a marginal issue during the revolt. It will then go on to look at the influence that British assumptions about the dangers of religious interference that crystallised during the sati debate had in determining how the uprising of 1857 was interpreted, suggesting that the incorporation of sati into later explanations for the uprising reflects both the power of pre-existing orientalist discourses and the discursive expediencies that accompanied the re-establishment of colonial rule.

Sati, the immolation of a Hindu widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, was outlawed in British India, after two decades of intense debate, by Lord William Bentinck in December 1829. Although the practice never affected more than a tiny proportion of widows, the rite achieved a disproportionate prominence in the

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10 Fergusson, *Empire*, p. 144.
colonial imagination, becoming an icon for Hindu ‘otherness’. Its eventual prohibition represented both a formative moment in the construction of the moral terrain of imperialism and a shift in the nature of British power in India. As Lata Mani has shown, the British debate on sati was about much more than the ethics of burning women. By intervening in what they perceived to be a religious issue, the British were renegotiating the parameters of colonial control, moving away from previous policies of non-intervention in religious issues. Throughout the debate, those who opposed intervention on sati argued that it would represent an infringement of the avowed colonial policy of religious neutrality and might consequently provoke instability and conflict. This fear effectively stayed the hand of successive Governor Generals before Bentinck, who thought as Mountstuart Elphinstone did, that ‘if we succeed we save 100 or 1000 victims from voluntary immolation, if we fail we involve sixty millions in all the horrors of war and revolution…’

Fear of potential rebellion underpinned official policy on sati throughout the early nineteenth century, reappearing recurrently as an excuse for government inaction. Embedded within the early colonial conviction about the desirability of ruling through Indian structures, arguments about the ‘hazards of interference’ also drew their power from a wider orientalist discourse that represented Hindus as ‘…unreflective practitioners of their faith, but nonetheless jealous of it and prone to rebellion at the threat of its infringement.’ If a volatile religious fanaticism was characteristic of Muslims, Hindus evinced thraldom to religious injunction that elided rational agency. ‘An Hindoo no more thinks of evading the customary rites of religion,’ commented Rev William Tennent in 1803, ‘than an European thinks of evading the unerring stroke of death. Its dictates appear to him the call of invincible necessity, to which he submits without reluctance, because unavoidable; and without choice, because ordered by the Brahmins.’

Ostensible colonial adherence to Enlightenment principles of religious toleration was thus reinforced by underlying fears that intervention in even the most heinous religious customs would result in instability and unrest. R.B. Gardiner, the Magistrate for Behar, for example, commented of sati in 1818

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11 For more on the various contours of the sati debate see Major, Pious Flames.
12 See Mani, M., Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, 1780-1833 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
14 Mani, Contentious Traditions, p. 20.
15 Tennent, Indian Recreations, p.191.
Much as I would wish to see the total abolition of a practice so repugnant to the feelings of humanity, I should consider the prohibition by law of a ceremony which is encouraged by the Shaster, as an infringement of that system of complete toleration in matters of religion, declared to be a fundamental principle of the British government in India, which might tend to shake the confidence at present reposed in it by all classes of its native subjects, and be eventually productive of dangerous consequences.  

Similarly, J. Masters, the Magistrate for Dacca, believed that ‘…the government has always stressed its policy of toleration and has tried to…impress upon their minds how decidedly such an interference was objected to. Here then would be a direct violation of such protestations, and the Hindoo would, with justice, continue distrustful of every future act of the legislature.’

Concerns that tackling the sati issue would lead to ‘dangerous consequences’ were not universally held, of course; many anti-sati campaigners and officials believed that the rite could be abolished quite safely. The government, however, remained wary. Even Bentinck was unwilling to act until he had gauged official opinion on the potential impact of prohibition, especially on the army. On arriving in India in 1828 he issued a circular to local magistrates and military officers:

But the point on which His Lordship is most anxious to consult you, and perhaps it is the most important feature in the whole consideration, is, the effect of any declared intention of the government whether of immediate or gradual abolition might have upon the minds of the native army…Would debarring the practice of suttee create any sensation among the native officers and sepoys of the Hindu persuasion likely to evince itself in tumult or revolt, or actual opposition to the measures enacted for its abolition? Would they consider the suppression of this particular rite such a hardship, as to cause among them manifestations of disgust or irritation, or ill will and disaffection to the state? Supposing actual opposition of manifestations of feelings of a serious and unpleasant nature to be in your opinion improbable would interference in the matter of suttee to the extent of a total abolition of the usage, create anxiety and alarm among the sepoys, under the apprehension of other innovations, or excite a dread that this was only the first step towards a more general attack on their customs and religion; or would such an interference be deemed by them an abandonment of our professed desire to abstain from invading their customs? Notwithstanding an apparent passive submission to an edict for the discontinuance of suttee, would the effect of such a measure be to create sullenness amongst the men, or any distrust

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16 PP. 18, R. B. Gardiner, Behar, to W. Ewer, Lower Provinces, 30th Dec 1818, p. 240.
17 PP. 18, J. Masters, Dacca, to W. Ewer, Lower Provinces, 12th Dec 1818, p. 240.
of our motives; or would it be likely to generate and diffuse among the native soldiers the slightest aversion to our rule and authority?^{18}

The language of the circular is significant, foreshadowing as it does explanations for Indian grievance given by the British after 1857. In fact, of the forty-nine responses received from British military officials, the vast majority felt that the prohibition of sati was entirely safe.^{19} The existence of concerns about its impact on the loyalty of the army and the ‘prophetic’ warnings of military commanders like Lt Col Playfaire, however, have leant weight to subsequent arguments for a connection between the prohibition of sati and the unrest in 1857, despite significant dislocations between the social and geographic impact of the reform and the sites of conflict in 1857.

There is little doubt that during two decades before and for some years after prohibition, sati represented a site of ideological contest within the colonial polity. There is, however, little evidence to substantiate later assertions that its prohibition caused a major outcry across India. Jorg Fisch, in his comprehensive study of sati claims that the prohibition actually amounted to abolition, the success of which surpassed Britain’s ‘wildest expectations’.^{20} Certainly the British at the time believed the legislation had been successful. The predicted violent backlash did not transpire and William Bentinck himself commented in 1833 that ‘It is a matter of astonishment to me that it [the question of sati] should so long have continued to be the bugbear that it was.’^{21} Indeed, I would argue that estimates of both the intensity and social and geographical scope of the controversy were inflated post-1857, as assumptions of Indian opposition to benevolent British reforms that informed mutiny discourses were projected onto earlier events.^{22} It is also misleading to characterise the sati debate as a confrontation between a reforming colonial state and reactionary Indian population. Divisions between reforming and orthodox elements of the Bengali elite and between orientalist/non-interventionist and Anglicist/Utilitarian/Evangelical British groups were as significant as divisions of race in determining the framework of the sati debate. Indian opposition to

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^{19} Of the 49 experienced British officers approached on the issue, five advised no action at all, twelve favoured abolition, but not by direct prohibition by government regulation, 8 supported suppression by direct intervention of magistrates and twenty-four urged complete, immediate and public suppression by the government. Philips, Correspondence, p. xxvii.

^{20} Fisch, Burning Women, p. 432. While I would not go that far, my own findings from the incomplete archive that exists suggests that the level of outcry and conflict caused have been significantly inflated post 1857.


^{22} See for example…
Bentinck’s regulation against sati was primarily confined to a small, but highly articulate, orthodox elite in Calcutta. At this level there certainly was discontent. Two petitions against the regulation were presented, with just over one thousand signatures between them. When these proved unsuccessful, the Dharma Sabha was formed to ‘protect Hindu religion’ and raise money for an ultimately unsuccessful appeal to the Privy Council in 1832. The orthodox Bengali press waxed lyrical about the infringement of Hinduism; *Samachar Chandrika* warned in 1832 that the Hindus ‘are now rebelling in heart because of the injury done to their religion.’

As David Kopf points out, while their opposition to the sati legislation has meant that they have subsequently received a bad press, Dharma Sabha leaders like Radhakant Deb and Ram Camul Sen, were also modernisers who were involved, among other things, in the formation of Hindu College, an institution of ‘western’ education in Calcutta. Their encounter with ‘colonial modernity’ was thus more complex than the reactionary defence superstitious oppression depicted in later accounts. Kopf suggests that their opposition to the sati legislation was primarily predicated on a defence of Indian cultural and religious sovereignty, the Dharma Sabha being formed not only to defend the cause of sati, but to show how its abolition had compelled Hindus to institutionalise and register their protest against the new colonial policy. As such, he argues, the revivalist Dharma Sabha was the first ‘proto-nationalist movement’ in India. Such teleological interpretations seem, superficially, to lend weight to suggestions of a connection between opposition to the prohibition of sati and rebellion in 1857. Such linkages homogenise Indian opposition to the prohibition, however, and obscure both the complex and fractured nature of the sati issue and the social, political and geographical specificities of the 1857 uprising. Sati was not a universal custom, affecting only 0.2% of widows even in Bengal, where it was most widely practiced, and some sections of the Calcutta elite even signed petitions thanking Bentinck for prohibiting it. Outside Bengal, there is little evidence of protest against the prevention of sati. Indeed, Foreign Department records from 1830-1857 indicated that in some peripheral areas of British India the prohibition not only caused no unrest; it had not even been promulgated. In these areas, the local population, not prone to sati in any case, continued completely ignorant of either the prohibition or the controversy in Calcutta for decades after 1829.

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23 Ibid., p. 146.
25 Kopf, D., Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance.
26 Yang, A. ‘Whose Sati? Widow Burning in Early 19th Century India’ in *Journal of Women’s History* vol. 1:2.
27 For Example, Board’s Collections, Vol. 2308, Collection 119265, Lt. Col. W. Sleeman, A.G.G. Saugor And Nerbudda Territories To Government, 7th Feb 1848
Empirical evidence regarding the existence of sati between 1829 and 1857 is incomplete. The Government of India, who meticulously recorded all sati cases in British India between 1815 and 1829, stopped keeping records on it once it was outlawed. Moreover, many of the judicial files relating to illegal satis post 1829, listed in the original Board’s Collection’s indexes, have not been preserved. We therefore have only piecemeal information about the existence of sati in British India after prohibition, based on sporadic government records, press reports and anecdotal evidence in personal memoirs and correspondences. For the purpose of this paper, it will suffice to say that there does not seem to be any evidence to suggest that intervention to prevent and prosecute sati caused ongoing violent resistance or aggressive protest. This is not to suggest, of course, that sati did not survive undetected in parts of British India, or that the ban on it was entirely successful. If police and judicial records from late colonial India (1860 onwards) can give an indication, sati, always exceptional and, after prohibition, extremely rare, represented a site of contest between colonial authorities and local communities throughout the colonial period, with some neighbourhoods closing ranks in order to keep an immolation secret or hamper later state investigations. In other cases, it seems that Indian police may themselves have been complicit in allowing sati to take place. H. Newnham, in 1833, recorded a conversation with a Bengali Zamindar, in which his informant told him

If it be his (alluding to the Deity) pleasure, all is right, if not the act of man is a presumption. As for myself, I know that women will continue as before to burn and should a sati appear amongst women of my family, I shall try the effects of secrecy and bribery. If such fail I will have recourse to intimidation of witnesses taking care that no one shall whom I consider likely to tell the tale, and thirdly shall be prepared to oppose with the sword the thana or police station if driven to necessity.28

Examples of open resistance or outright violence resulting from state intervention in sati were rare, however. In August 1830 a policemen was fatally wounded and two more injured trying to prevent a sati in Muradabad district. A more serious confrontation took place in the Princely state of Ahmadnagar in 1835. As an ‘independent’ state, the British prohibition of sati did not have effect in Ahmadnagar and armed British intervention to prevent the burning of five wives of the deceased Raja Kurn Singh, however humanely intentioned, was a direct violation of the state’s sovereignty and British treaty obligations. Perhaps more significantly, the region was extremely unstable at the time and the reaction of Ahmadnagar mercenaries in firing at British troops who sought to prevent the sati must be understood in the context of

28 Cited in Datta, Sati, p. 145.
endemic violence in the region.\textsuperscript{29} These examples aside, accounts of violent clashes or simmering resentments over the prohibition of sati in British India are conspicuous in their absence, and, as Jorg Fisch points out, such isolated incidents as did not crystallise into general dissatisfaction.\textsuperscript{30} Rather, as the Bengali Zamindar’s statement suggests, confrontations were primarily responsive, provoked by a specific sati event, not ongoing ideological opposition to the legislation itself. Always exceptional, the ‘true’ sati in the Hindu idiom was not only voluntary, but miraculous and divine. This interpretation is, of course, deeply problematic; the supernatural narration of sati is embedded in community strategies to circumvent criminal responsibility for sati, provide ideological sanction for acts of violence against women and blur the boundary between coercion, compulsion, indoctrination and agency.\textsuperscript{31} That said, belief in the possibility of ‘authentic’ sati certainly existed among some communities, and the perception that a ‘true’ sati had emerged, whatever the reality of the situation, could be enough to create confrontation in usually law abiding communities. This was not, however, a generalised conflict over the hypothetical ‘right’ of the colonial state to prohibit sati, but the immediate strategies of a local community in the grip of a specific event. Moreover, there are many examples of successful state intervention to avert satis, and even of families and communities taking it upon themselves to prevent immolations. The Bentinck Manuscripts contain references to satis prevented in the year immediately after 1829, and include one incident where a local British judge was dismissed for taking a bribe to allow a sati to proceed.\textsuperscript{32} Newspapers and journals from the time also occasionally carried articles advertsing to successful prevention of satis, or the prosecution of individuals involved in illegal immolations.\textsuperscript{33} Pre-1857 the British, at least, believed that the measure had passed off successfully and uneventfully.

The absence of a continuous history of protest against the prohibition of sati does not automatically imply that it was not a cause of resentment in 1857, of course. There is, however, very little evidence that the localised opposition in 1829-33, or the sporadic confrontations that occurred subsequently, were directly or causally linked to the rebellion in 1857. Geographically, the two events do not fit. Although British conspiracy theories abounded, there is no evidence that the Calcutta elite that had been so vocal in their opposition to the sati legislation had any role in fomenting unrest in 1857. Indeed, it is widely accepted that

\textsuperscript{29} BOARD’S COLLECTIONS, VOL. 1540, Collection 61224, various letters.
\textsuperscript{30} Jorg Fisch, Burning Women.
\textsuperscript{31} See Sangari, K., and S. Vaid ‘…’ for an excellent exposition of these issues in the context of contemporary India.
\textsuperscript{32} The Judge, J. W. Sage of the 24 Pergunahs was found to have received Rs800 to Rs900 as a bribe to allow the sacrifice to take place. Datta, Sati.
\textsuperscript{33} See, for example, The Times, 12\textsuperscript{th} April 1831.
this section of Indian society was extremely hostile to the revolt and certainly did not use the opportunity to
exact revenge for the prohibition of sati, or any other grievance, real or imagined. Moreover, the vast
majority of sati cases occurred in the Lower Provinces, Bengal and Bihar, from which very few army
recruits came and which remained relatively quiet during 1857. The main centres of the Uprising were in
central India, around Delhi, the United Provinces and Awadh, where few sati cases occurred. Between 1815
and 1823, for example, there were on average 375 satis annually in the Calcutta division, compared to only
45 in Dacca, 22 in Murshidabad, 97 in Benares, 47 in Patna and only 16 in the all important Bareilly
division, which included key centres of the Uprising like Meerut, Kanpur and Saharanpur etc.34
Furthermore, the Muslim rulers of Awadh had been among the first Indian rulers to prohibit sati, and had
done so voluntarily as early as 1833.

The other main centre of sati was in the Rajput states. In the years between 1830 and 1857, and
especially after 1844, the British brought indirect pressure to bear on the Indian rulers to prohibit the
practice, with varying degree of success. The majority of princely states quickly followed the example of
Jaipur, which outlawed the custom in 1845, although some Rajput rulers, like those of Jodhpur, Udaipur,
Kota and Bikaner, stood out longer. Initially, British policy on sati in princely states was cautious, due to
the fear that authoritative intervention would provoke violent opposition; a concern partly predicated on the
assumption that Rajputs were both particularly warlike and volatile and exceptionally devoted to sati. More
importantly, however, any direct British intervention in a ‘domestic’ issue like sati would be a direct
violation of British treaty obligations, creating the potential for sati to become a site for political conflict
over the integrity of Indian sovereignty.35 Despite this the British had, by 1857 been able to bully and cajole
all the princely states except Udaipur into prohibiting the rite. In many cases Indian acquiescence on this
issue was effectively coerced, but discontent over British interference in sati does not seem to correlate with
unrest in 1857. Indeed, many of the Rajput states remained either loyal or neutral during the uprising, and
some of the states that had been subject to the greatest British pressure to prohibit sati, such as Udaipur and
Bikaner, actually remained loyal and even offered shelter to British fugitives.

There is little evidence from the Indian side that the prohibition of sati was a direct cause of the
revolt. The famous Azamgarh proclamation lists a number of grievances, mostly economic and/or political,

35 Fisch, Burning Women.
but while there is a general call to religious sentiment, there is a conspicuous lack of religious grievances cited and certainly no mention of sati. Khan Bahadur Khan, in one of his proclamations, does advert to the prohibition of sati as an example of the indignities and injustices to which the people of India were subject, as does... but these proclamations, made once the rebellion was under way, can be read as attempts by Muslim rebels to galvanise Hindu support, rather than a declaration of the motivations for revolt. Moreover, as Jalal and Bose point out, when religious themes do inform the uprising, they usually appear in the guise of Islamic millenarianism in districts like Muzaffurnagar and Saharanpur. Hindu religious millenarianism does not seem to have figured significantly in the revolt. Even to the extent that infringements of Hindu religion were influential 1857, other measures, as Ainslee Embree points out, such as the 1850 Act that made it possible for converts to Christianity to retain their inheritance and inherit ancestral property, were likely to have caused more immediate and widespread resentment than the prohibition of sati nearly thirty years previously.

The role of the prohibition of sati in provoking the uprising of 1857 was marginal at best, and certainly much slighter than the emphasis given to it in subsequent British accounts implies. Certainly any causal relationship between the prohibition of sati and the outbreak of unrest in 1857 is far more complicated and fractured than the simplistic, teleological linkages suggested in so much traditional British historiography, leaving us to question why the connection has been so often and so uncritically invoked. I would argue that the appropriation of the sati issue in later British discourses on 1857 works on two levels. Preconceived orientalist ideas about the nature of Indian society that solidified during the sati debate had a significant influence on the ideological framework through which the uprising was processed and represented, a trend reinforced by the discursive utility that the sati issue offered in discourses designed to de-legitimising the uprising and reassert the moral basis of colonial rule.

Whether from the perspective of Tory criticisms of the insensitive imposition of liberal reforms and Christianising policies that had ‘amazingly disturbed the religious mind of Hindoostan’, or an providentialist evangelical perspective that saw it as a Brahminical struggle to maintain the oppressive

36 In Embree, India in 1857.
38 Embree, India in 1857.
39 Cited in Embree, India in 1857, p. 18.
structures of ‘paganism’ against benevolent British reform and evangelisation, interpretations of the uprising drew heavily on ideas that had crystallised during the sati debate. Disraeli’s indictment of EIC reforms as ‘nibbling at the religious systems of the natives’ did not mention sati directly, but it drew on precisely the same assumptions about the hazards of interference that had informed the non-interventionist side of the sati debate. The evangelical community, on the other hand, represented the prohibition of sati as proof that reforms could and should be implemented. ‘We have observed too, in our own time,’ Rev George Salmon remarked, ‘distinct marks of decay in the force of Hindu superstition, and have seen the government put down without a struggle, superstitions such as widow-burning, once deemed to powerful to grapple with.’ In their focus on the mutiny as the death throes of Brahminism, they too were reproducing pre-existing tropes about the nature of Indian society and religion that resonated strongly with those found during the sati debate.

The cruel, scheming and rapacious Brahmin was a stock figure in nineteenth-century British accounts of India, for while in the eighteenth century he might be portrayed as noble and learned, by the early nineteenth century his religious teachings were considered self-interested subterfuges. Nowhere was this more obvious than in relation to sati, where conniving Brahmins were represented as exerting their religious influence to beguile the innocent widow, coaxing her onto the funeral pyre with specious promises of felicity in the next life, while they filled their pockets with payments for presiding over the ceremony and offerings from the pious, and even scrabbled in the ashes to retrieve their victim’s jewels. Francois Bernier, whose seventeenth century accounts of sati were hugely influential in the early nineteenth century, wrote

I have seen some of these unhappy widows shrink at the sight of the piled wood; so as to leave no doubt on my mind that they would willingly have recanted, if recantation had been permitted by the merciless Brahmens; but those demons excite or astound the affrighted victims, and even thrust them into the fire. I was present when a poor young woman, who had fallen back five or six paces form the pit, was thus driven forward; and I saw another of these wretched beings struggling to leave the funeral pile when the fire increased around her

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40 See, for example, various accounts in the LMS Missionary Magazine, 1857-8
41 Cited in Embree, India in 185, p. 17.
43 See for example...
44 For more on British images of sati see
person, but she was prevented from escaping by the long poles of the diabolical executioners.⁴⁵

As the atrocities of the Uprising began to filter back to Britain, very similar imagery was used to demonise the perpetrators of acts of violence against British men, women and children.⁴⁶ Although in the early days of the uprising, the revolt was thought to be a Muslim conspiracy,⁴⁷ by Autumn of 1857 news of events at Kanpur and the actions of Nana Sahib had reached Britain, implicating high caste Hindus in the violence. The fast day sermons of October 7th 1857, together with the national press worked to ‘demonise Indian culture and Indian colonial subjects’⁴⁸ and ‘vilify Indian religions, focussing attention most typically and most intensely, on the piquant barbarities of Hindooism’.⁴⁹ From this point on, although Muslims were not absolved, attention was focused on disgruntled Brahmins as well as duplicitous mullahs. As Rev Benjamin Rice of Bangalore put it

Although the Mohammedans have taken the lead in the revolt, yet it has to a large extent been a high caste Hindoo rebellion. No one ever expected Brahminism to descend from the position which it had held for ages without a struggle, and the present conflict may be the beginning of the end. That end, the utter downfall of Brahminical power and of Hindoo superstition, must come, and the sooner the better for this benighted, priest ridden, wretched country.⁵⁰

Similarly Rev. James Kennedy of Benares wrote

The Brahmins, even when illiterate, have first-rate talents for plotting...They are also intensely superstitious. They are not high-principled, or even as a body, orderly in their lives, but their immorality is quite consistent with superstitious zeal. They are superstitious from policy as well as from education and habit, being well aware that the downfall of Hindooism would be the downfall of that fancied greatness to which they attach so high a value.⁵¹

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⁴⁵ A century later, M.M. Kaye’s ‘Mutiny’ novel Shadow of the Moon, published in 1957, contains a scene where a positively fiendish Brahmin priest murders an infant English boy in a pseudo-religious sacrifice designed to bind the plotters of rebellion together in secrecy. The hellish imagery of this scene resonated strongly with Bernier’s portrayals of sati and reflects the longevity of these tropes and stereotypes.

⁴⁶ A perception that, as E. I. Brodkin points out, informed the actions of the British forces in India, who often characterised Hindu factions as loyal and Muslim ones as rebel. Brodkin, E. I. ‘The Struggle for Succession: Rebels and Loyalists in the Indian Mutiny of 1857’, in Modern Asian Studies, 6:3, 1972


⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ MM December 1857, p. 267.

Attacks on Hinduism, ‘that combination of cruelty, falsehood and lust, which has ever been and must ever be the direst curse of India’\textsuperscript{52} were, of course, embedded in a pre-existing evangelical/Anglicist discourse that utilised sensational customs such as sati and infanticide to vilify the whole edifice of ‘idolatry’ and its Brahmin guardians, and prove the need both for British rule and Christian evangelisation.\textsuperscript{53}

Suggestions that the uprising was a plot fomented by the Brahmin elite\textsuperscript{54} was reinforced by a providentialist evangelical portrayal of the uprising as the bloody realisation of the metaphorical struggle between ‘darkness and light’,\textsuperscript{55} between those who would burn women and those who would redeem them. Brahmin conspiracy theories also appeared in non-evangelical accounts, however, reproducing more secular perspectives on the Brahmin capacity to make trouble. Captain Benson, for example, in answering Bentinck’s circular about the safety of abolishing sati in November 1829, had warned

In reply I beg leave to observe that although I certainly should not apprehend any immediate ill consequences from the promulgation of such an order, yet I am in my own mind convinced that it could be ere long seized upon by the priesthood and be by them converted into a desire on our part of upsetting their religious customs and usages, and which they would take every opportunity of instilling into the mind of the sepoys on meeting them at their homes on furlough who I fear, blind to the justice and humanity of our motives, would be but too proud to listen to, and be guided by, a class who in all other matters so arbitrarily lead them; imbibing such an opinion could not but tend to gradually lessen the attachments which at present hold them to their duty.\textsuperscript{56}

Nearly thirty years later Lt. William R. Aikman, in a letter to Lord Palmerston written on September 26\textsuperscript{th} 1857, reproduced very similar imagery, arguing that the uprising was the result of a deliberate conspiracy fostered by elite Hindus in Calcutta. ‘It is well known’ he remarked, ‘that families of the highest caste among the Baboos of Calcutta have been scandalised and openly put to shame through the adoption of Christianity by certain of their members…these families are wealthy and, in the way of secret intrigue, powerful…There is no doubt that of late years extreme exasperations has prevailed among this class generally…combined with an irrepressible foreboding that if British supremacy were to last their religion

\textsuperscript{52} MM June 1858, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{53} There were equally strong pre-existing discourses on the nature of Muslims that underpinned ideas about 1857 as a Muslim conspiracy. These are beyond the remit of this study, but see Alex Padamsee for a study of British attitudes to Muslims before, during and after the revolt.
\textsuperscript{55} MM
\textsuperscript{56} MM
would be a thing doomed. Although the sepoys have not been directly touched by religious grievances, he argued, they had been influenced by discontent emanating from Brahmin families in Bengal.

The scale of chaos and carnage that accompanied the uprising of 1857 might have been unprecedented, but unrest and conflict were endemic in early-nineteenth-century India, being the natural corollary of British expansion and state formation. Despite British attempts to instil colonial order, fears of the potential for rebellion and disorder were ever present beneath the surface of the colonial discourse. Glimpses of the potential for violence can be caught in British accounts of satis, in which the Hindu population is repeatedly depicted as a bloodthirsty mob. Such images reappeared, magnified many times, in accounts of atrocities during 1857, suggesting that British preoccupation with real and imagined atrocity stories was partly a gruesome manifestation of their ongoing concern with the potentially dangerous and uncontrolled side of the Indian ‘masses’. The Baptist missionary Joshua Marshman’s depiction of a sati, in which he commented

> The most shocking indifference and levity appeared among those who were present. I think I never saw any more shockingly brutal than their behaviour. The dreadful scene had not even the least appearance of being a religious ceremony. The rabble, for such it literally was, presented the appearance of an abandoned rabble of boys in England collected for the purpose of worrying to death a cat or dog. Such was the confusion, the levity, the bursts of brutal merriment while this poor creature was burning alive before their eyes...

for example, makes an interesting comparison with Amelia Horne’s account of the massacre at Kanpur:

> While we were endeavouring to embark the shore was lined with spectators, who were looking on and exalting like so many demons, as they undoubtedly were, over our distressing condition, taunting and jeering at us for having at last fallen into their hands. The black devils grinned like so many apes, keeping up an incessant chatter in their monkey language...the sepoys laughed and cheered, inciting each other to even greater acts of brutality.

Both accounts situate the acts of violence within an almost inhuman, alien landscape that dominated colonial fears of indigenous spaces and the dark underside of Indian life. Radhika Singha has argued that

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58 Joshua Marshman To J. Ryland, 29th Jan 1807, (B. M. S. A.).
one of the key reasons for the vilification of sati in the early nineteenth century was that the rite, with all its associated sights, sounds, smells and unruly crowds, was often performed in ‘British’ public space, bringing into sharp juxtaposition the British desire for colonial order and the ‘disorderly’ behaviour of the Indian ‘mob’. Furthermore, she suggests, sati was a public demonstration of possibility for Indian control over people’s bodies and lives, at a time when the colonial state was attempting to reserve for itself ‘the privilege of taking life’.60 If sati represented a site on which the colonial hierarchy could catch discomforting glimpses of the potential violence and disorder that could exist outside carefully disciplined colonial structures, the anarchy that ensued in 1857 represented for many of its victims the complete loss of colonial control, leaving them submerged in an unpredictable and brutal indigenous milieu.

Gayatri Spivak has famously characterised the colonial reaction to sati as ‘White men saving brown women from brown men.’61 Such idioms were central to a justificatory discourse of empire that positioned British men as the protectors of oppressed Indian women, affirming both a ‘muscular Christian’ identity and the moral basis of imperialism. In the context of the uprising, it was white women who needed protection from ‘brown men’. The emphasis on (largely imaginary) accounts of the rape and mutilation of British women in popular discourses on 1857 acted both to rally public sentiment against the metaphorical violation of the nation, and to mask the vicious acts of retributive justice with which the uprising was suppressed.62 Jenny Sharpe tells us that ‘The British army subsequently preserved the Bibighar…with its dried blood and rotting remains, as a kind of museum for passing troops to visit…Thus began the mythic invention of the dying women’s torments, as soldiers covered the walls with bloody inscriptions in the hands of the ‘ladies’ directing their men to avenge their horrible deaths.’63 The supposed outrages perpetrated against Hindu women through sati and British women during 1857 both serve a common function in allowing the British male to position himself as protector, rescuer and avenger and are embedded in a wider colonial discourse that saw the treatment of women as an index of civilisation. The below cartoon from Punch captures the continuities between these two events, showing British justice (in female form) avenging the violation of British womanhood, while in the background sepoys are blown from the British guns. Tellingly, however, there are also Indian women and children taking shelter and protection behind the vengeful wrath of ‘British

60 Singha R., A Despotism of Law,
63 Ibid.
Justice’, implying that the re-establishment of British power in India was as much for the protection of Indian women as British ones.

If implicit images of the sati debate haunted the early interpretations of the uprising, as the rebellion was suppressed and British commentators sought more cohesive explanations for events, sati entered the discourse explicitly. In 1864 Sir John Kaye’s influential *A History of the Sepoy War in India, 1857-1858*, explained the uprising as a plot by disgruntled Brahmins, who saw the imposition of British authority as a threat to their own social and religious superiority. For Kaye these fears were not unfounded, but nor were they an indictment of colonial rule; the British were the harbingers of necessary progress and enlightenment in India. He writes

Every monstrous lie exploded, every abominable practice suppressed, was a blow struck at the Priesthood; for all these monstrosities and abominations had their root in Hindooism and could not be eradicated without sore disturbance and confusion of the soil. The murder of women on the funeral pyre, the murder of little children in the Zenana, the murder of the sick and aged on the banks of the river...were all religious institutions from which the priesthood derived either power, or profit, or both...Now all these cruel rites had been suppressed, and, what was still worse in the eyes of the Brahmins, the foul superstitions which nurtured them were fast disappearing.

Although the majority of Kaye’s argument would not now be taken at face value, the idea that the prohibition of sati was the first, and perhaps most significant, of a series of colonial interventions in religious issues that fostered hostility by destabilising the authority of reactionary elites has had surprising longevity. I would argue that the popularity of this interpretation reflects the ease with which sati could be slotted into a discourse on 1857 that drew many of its stock images and assumptions from the same ideological heritage. Sati also had an explicit discursive utility for the British as they rebuilt their empire. Incorporating the prohibition of sati into the discourse on ‘the mutiny’ helped to legitimise British actions in India in 1857 and more generally. Propagating the idea that 1857 was a reactionary defence of superstitious customs like widow burning allowed the British to present the uprising as grounded not in a complex matrix of ‘real’ economic, social, political and religious grievances, but in the ‘irrational’ and purely religious fervour of ‘the native’. As the extract from Kaye makes clear, there were a number of institutions and practices reformed by the British that might be used to support this argument. Sati was particularly useful because, unlike some other British infringements of Indian religion, which might be deemed ill advised or insensitive, it represented a relatively unproblematic example of the ‘civilising mission’ in action.
Discursively it was not difficult to imply that those who rebelled against a reform that prevented burning women alive were both backward and barbaric, allowing the British to retain the moral high ground. Such a position enabled the British to shift blame for the Uprising away from their own actions and on to the Indians, who reacted so unreasonably to eminently humane and beneficial reforms. Edward Thompson, in his 1928 study *Suttee*, even went as far as to comment, that it was the humanitarianism of Dalhousie ‘reinforced and sharpened by his experience of the unwillingness of the native states to set their houses in order in matters of elementary decency’ that was responsible for his desire to annexe whenever possible. ‘I believe there was no ‘earth-hunger’ behind his doctrine of ‘lapse’’, Thompson asserted ‘and while criticising him we should remember the exasperating refusal of many states of abolish suttee and female infanticide.’ More importantly, invoking sati also allowed the British to legitimise their own response in putting down the uprising and reinstating British rule. As Rev William Butler, in a volume published in America, put it ‘let us bless God for that wonderful victory of civilisation in 1857-8 over Brahminical rebels, who, had they triumphed, would most surely have rekindled the fires…and the daughters of Hindustan would again have had to mount their chariots of flame…’ The desirability of positioning the prohibition of sati as a cause of 1857 is thus fairly self-evident in the context of a colonial discourse concerned with reasserting the ideological basis of justifiable imperial rule. That such explanations have survived in more recent accounts, however, is indicative of the hold that late Victorian interpretations of the uprising still have on the British historiography and underline the urgent need for more revisionist analysis of this seminal event.