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*Sita's Daughters:
Coming Out of Purdah*

THE RAJPUT WOMEN OF
KHALAPUR REVISITED

Leigh Minturn

WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF
Swaran Kapoor

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I dedicate this book to the women it describes, my friends, who twice welcomed an inquisitive stranger into their homes, adopted me as a daughter of the village, and shared with me their hospitality, their stories, and their friendship. I hope that my rendition of their lives does them justice.
I also dedicate the book to the memory of my assistant, Swaran Kapoor.

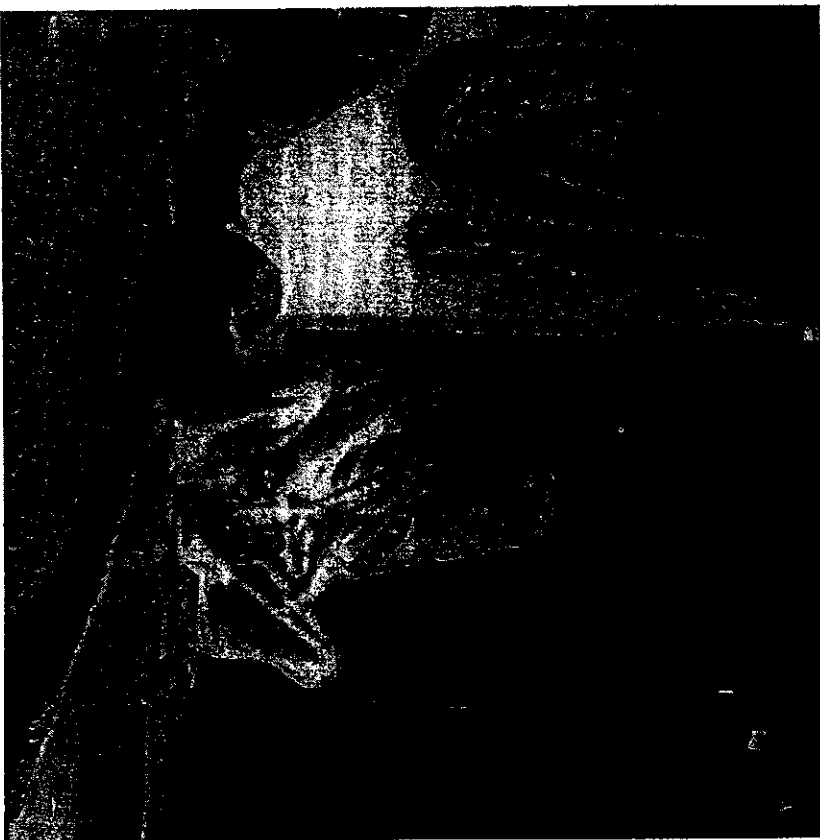
Widows: Sati, Rand, Bhaktani

When the husband dies, then the crown is gone.

When my husband died a woman came and embraced me and said,
"The joy of your life is gone." I went into my room and I did not cry.

You are crying over my plight, but my heart has become a stone.

I have no more tears.



A widow with shorn hair and a white, borderless sari uses a string of prayer beads and a brass pot of water in her personal worship service (1955).

Widows are unlucky, so unlucky that they are frequently underreported in census figures, because other family members are reluctant to admit that a widow, particularly a young widow, lives in the household. Hindus believe that misfortune is the result of bad karma earned by sins of previous lives, and widows may be blamed for their husbands' deaths. They are an unwelcome burden on their husbands' families, particularly if they do not have grown sons. Although the general improvement in women's status by 1975 had lessened the stigma of widows, their basic situation was the same as I described it in 1955. Rajput widows were still forbidden to remarry but remained in their husbands' homes as financial burdens and potential sources of scandal.

Because it is believed that women are virtuous as a result of external, not internal controls, and must live under the authoritarian control of fathers and husbands to ensure their proper behavior, a widow's virtue is suspect. Widows' roles are constrained by three stereotypes: *sati*, the saintly suicide; *rand*, the immoral woman; and *bhaktani*, the holy woman. While all of these roles are, to some extent, abstractions, they influence beliefs and expectations concerning the behavior of widows.

Several Rajput customs make the social position of widows particularly difficult. The traditional constraints on them have a religious basis. The custom of female infanticide persisted into this century despite the 1795 British law against it. Northwestern Indian census figures still show an excess of men. Indirect female infanticide resulting from the greater medical neglect of girls has been recently documented (Miller, 1981). This direct and indirect infanticide alters the natural sex ratio, resulting in an acute shortage of women. This shortage of available wives is

further increased by the prohibition against widow remarriage. Widows are expected to remain unmarried and celibate in their husbands' households, under the protection of the *sosasar* and *jajiths*.

Prescriptions, often reiterated, for the proper conduct of widowhood included instructions that she should not eat more than one very plain meal a day, that she should perform the most menial tasks, never sleep on a bed, leave the house only to go to the temple, keep out of sight at festivals (since she was inauspicious to everyone but her own children), wear nothing but the drabest clothes, and, of course, no jewelry. Perhaps the most humiliating of all for a high-born lady was having her head shaved monthly by an untouchable male barber. All this was held to be necessary for the sake of her husband's soul and to keep herself from being reborn as a female animal. (Stein, 1978, p. 255)

A widow could escape this miserable life by dying with her husband on his funeral pyre. This custom, called *sati*, was regularly practiced by Rajputs and other castes into the nineteenth century despite British laws prohibiting it.

The prohibition against remarriage of widows means that even virgin widows must remain unmarried if their husband dies between the *shadi* and *garma*. Reformers have opposed the custom of not remarrying widows since the middle of the nineteenth century. Much of this opposition has been based not on concern for widows' welfare but on concern that widows will be seduced and damage their families' reputations. Gandhi called virgin widows "a source of corruption and a dangerous infection to society" and used this judgment as the basis of his campaign for the remarriage of virgin widows (Stein, 1978, p. 263).

Despite these reform movements, the prohibition still exists. The patrilineal kinship system of Hindus assigns children to the patrilineage. Therefore, a widow with children would have to abandon them or marry one of her husband's kinsmen. Among Hindus the nonremarriage of widows, including virgin widows, is widely accepted as a status symbol. For this reason the custom is often adopted by upwardly mobile caste groups whose members wish to increase their social status.

Whatever a widow's age, her status is never as secure as that of women whose husbands are alive, but the widowed *sasu*, whose husband lived out his life and who has married sons and *bahus*, is much better off than the young, widowed *bahu*, who must be supported by her husband's kinsmen. When we asked about mourning for husbands, several women mentioned that it is much worse to be widowed when the sons are young and still unmarried than when one is already a *sasu*. The worst fate is to be widowed before one has borne sons for the patrilineage.

The degree to which widowed *sasus* lose their position of authority depends on the amount of wealth they control and the loyalty of their sons. Most widows maintain some degree of authority in their *bugharis*, by virtue of their control over their husbands' property, their sons, and their *bahus*. The control of the husband's property passes to his widow for her lifetime. Widows usually do not relinquish this control to their sons, since it represents their primary source of power. Disputes between mothers and grown sons may arise over decisions regarding land. Conflict with sons presents a difficult dilemma for some widows, since control of their sons' loyalty is another important factor in their status and treatment. As one widow put

it: "When a woman has her husband, her *bahus* will have some respect for her and fear her. When the husband dies, then the crown is gone and the *sasus* will not respect her." This fear is probably the most important basis for the concern expressed by older women about husband-wife intimacy. If a mother cannot keep the loyalty of her sons in disputes with her *bahus*, she may be mistreated by them after her husband dies.

A young widow remains under the direction of her *sasu*. The husband's kinsmen have the responsibility of looking after her and her children and arranging the children's marriages. Although they may go there on visits, few widows return to the homes of their parents permanently. Returning permanently to one's parental home would indicate that the husband's family was negligent in its responsibility. If the widow has sons, they are part of their father's lineage, and his relatives want them to grow up as part of their paternal kin group. If they are young, their mother is needed to take care of them.

Widows' rights to their husbands' property give them economic control of their sons' families, and they generally resist efforts by their sons to legally divide the land among them. If a widow's sons are grown when their father dies, they usually respect their mother's wishes, although they may farm their sections of the land separately. The holdings of a widow with young children are usually managed by her husband's kinsmen, and this situation sometimes results in conflict. Control of the land by widows with sons too young to work it is a matter of concern to men of the patrilineage, particularly if a widow insists on managing the cultivation and sale of crops herself. Some widows do insist on managing their own property because they fear, sometimes with justification, that their husbands' relatives may cheat them and divide their land among their own sons.

Such efforts are fiercely resisted by her husband's relatives. If a widow's sons are still too young for fieldwork, she must get others to farm the land for her, usually on a sharecrop basis. This means that she herself often must leave the seclusion of *putdah* and go about the village alone. Even if she is a fairly old woman, this always stimulates gossip, damages the family reputation, and annoys her affinal relatives. More serious, however, is the fear that she may allow herself to be duped and lose or sell some of the land. If a widow has only daughters, the suspicion that she may sell land is even more intense. Traditionally widows without sons could not control land, even by regency. One Khalapur widow with an only daughter who insisted on managing her own estate and let it out on shares was severely beaten by her husband's kinsmen. The worst situation is that of a widow with no children, like Radha's mother. Land is basic to Rajput economy; therefore, it is not surprising that Radha's grandparents reacted so strongly to the threat that Radha's mother would claim her share of their property.

There is strong feeling among Khalapur Rajputs that a wife's lifelong loyalty should be to her husband's family, although her affection may remain with her blood kin. Since a widow's place is in her husband's home, and the obligation to support her rests with the husband's family, she may not be welcome in her natal home, particularly if her parents are already dead. As we have seen, relations between *nandas* and *bahus* are often strained, and few *bahus* would welcome a widowed *nandi* and her children as a permanent addition to their household.

The status of widows, like the status of all married women, is usually better if her family and her husband's family are relatively wealthy. A widow is expected to give presents to her husband's relatives, just as she did when he was alive. If a widow comes from a wealthy family, the value of these presents offsets the cost of supporting her. However, if she comes from a poor family and is seldom called home by her parents, her work is the only compensation she can give for her support.

There is considerable variation in the treatment of widows by their husbands' families, and this is an important consideration for most families in their selection of husbands for their daughters. A number of village families have well-founded reputations for dealing justly with their widows and for taking good care of them and their children. In one family of the sample there was an elderly widow who was treated with great deference and who had become something of a matriarch in a large *bughar*.

In some houses widows are mistreated; in others they are tyrants. Mamma and her sister, Durga, had married two brothers. The two sisters had entirely different temperaments: While Mamma was kind and gentle, Durga was ill tempered. Mamma's widowed *sasu* lived with Durga, and Mamma said that Durga beat her. This was the only unkind remark we heard Mamma make, so there was no reason to doubt it. In some families where widows do have problems, the fault lies partially with them. One widow was known to beat herself with bricks and then run from the house accusing others of beating her. One elderly lady became so angry when a busy *bahui* asked her to wait to have her hookah filled that she then refused the hookah and caused a family upset. The most disruptive action of a widow that we heard of was that of a cantankerous elderly grandmother who accused a new bride of immorality. Fortunately, the girl had a maternal great grandaunt living in a neighboring household who was so concerned about the treatment of this bride that she wrote to her brother-in-law to come and bring his daughter home. The aunt's account of the situation is as follows:

This old woman has a bad nature. She always finds fault with everyone. Now, suppose I tell you in the presence of everyone that my *bahu* is of loose character, then everybody will also say so, even if the *bahu* is not at fault. You know this bride is the granddaughter of my real sister. She got pregnant in the very beginning, when she came to this house for *gaura*, 3 months ago. Since that time the poor girl has not taken a piece of bread and has grown very weak. She kept lying on her bed in such hot weather in May and June.

The *soosar* asked "Why does the new bride not come out into the open air? Is she sick?" The girl told her *soosar*, through a young *nandi*, that she felt very weak and could not get up from her bed. The *soosar* felt pity and sent her some fruit. Similarly, her *jaiih* also sent some fruits to her.

On this the old grandmother started telling everybody that the bride is entangled with her *jaiih* and *soosar*, who sends fruits to her. How sad it was. What might the poor girl have felt? She was very healthy and is now reduced to a skeleton in this house, in these 3 months. Another *jaiih* was shouting at me, saying why should I interfere in their household affair. I said that the girl would die under such unhealthy conditions.

I asked my brother-in-law to come and fetch his daughter for a while. So she is

not here now. Now her husband has joined the service out of the village, and the girl need not come here. She will join her husband and live there peacefully. The boy is good, educated, and healthy and of good nature. We are satisfied. I think that the groom for a girl should be energetic so as to be able to earn with hard work, and educated and of matching age. For the rest, I do not care. A woman cannot be unhappy with such a man.

That old woman killed her own *bahui* like this. In her eyes every woman is of loose character.

In general widows are respected, although not as much as women whose husbands are still living. In a few houses where poor *sasus* were mistreated by their *bahus*, a facade of respect was always maintained.

MOURNING CUSTOMS

When a married man died, his widow's glass bangles were broken and her gold jewelry and toe rings were removed. Her head was shaved, and she was dressed in a plain white cotton sari. At the end of the 20-day mourning period, family members took the widow to Hardwar, a holy city on the Ganges. There, she discarded the clothes she was wearing when her husband died and threw them into the Ganges. Until this was done, she was unclean and could not cook or use cooking utensils. This ritual cleansing of widows is still practiced, with varying degrees of exactitude.

The separation of husbands and wives, enforced by customs of purdah during their lifetimes, is maintained even at death by excluding widows from the funeral rituals and forbidding them to cry for their husbands. The exclusion of widows from mourning is the final act that dilutes the bonds of marriage. At death, the primacy of the blood relatives is emphasized. While exclusion from the ritual wailing emphasizes the peripheral status of widows, it also serves to give them privacy at a time of grief. Whereas ritual wailing is expected to be loud, women weep in silence when they are genuinely upset. My description of the death of a *sasu* in 1955 illustrates the contrast:

When married women of the deceased's lineage receive news of the death, they come to help prepare the body and express their regrets. Together with the women of the household, they beat their foreheads, breasts, and thighs and raise their voices in the high-pitched tones of ritual wailing. A family will be criticized by neighbors if the women's wails are not long and loud, and one woman said that when women mourned properly, their bodies should show the bruises of their self-inflicted beatings. The wailing reaches a peak when the men of the family arrive to remove the body to the cremation grounds, usually not more than two or three hours after death. In marked contrast to ritual wailing, grief, when wailing is not required, is expressed in complete silence. As the body of a mother-in-law was carried away, a daughter-in-law beat her head against the courtyard wall and had to be restrained by the other women, but the dead woman's teenage, unmarried daughter stood on the sidelines, holding the baby of her wailing aunt, with silent tears coursing down her face.

Khalapur widows used to remain alone in their rooms while the other women of the family engaged in ritual mourning. Several of the older widows remember being thus secluded when their husbands died. Some women said that their home villages also had this custom, while others reported it absent in their parental homes. Most reports indicated that the widow was simply isolated from the formal ritual waiting. However, one woman reported that a particularly vindictive *jehani* looked under her *gungat* to see if she was crying.

Women gave various explanations for this custom. Some women said that a widow's crying was interpreted to mean that she was shamelessly sexual and could not bear to live without a husband, an ominous validation of the belief that her Shakti was uncontrollable. Widows who cried were reportedly rebuked for their lust by phrases such as, "Can the man come again through your weeping?" or "If you are so fond of your husband, nail him to the wall, or dry the body and keep it with you. Do you want a corpse with you?" According to this interpretation, the prohibition against mourning for spouses also applied to widowers, who were forbidden to come near the bodies of their wives. If a widower approaches his wife's corpse, people said, "Even now he has come to her breast." Although there was no fear that a married man would return as a ghost if his widow cried, some women feared that the man's spirit would not rest quietly. Others denied the sexual explanation, attributing the custom to the greater closeness between blood versus relatives. Some women reported that a widow does not participate in public mourning when her *sasu* and *nandas* are alive to mourn the death but may do so if they are dead.

The absence of financial support for widows without sons of working age was a third explanation for the custom. Reportedly, weeping widows may be told, "Your widowhood is a burden for us, not for you, since we must now support you." Since the expense of supporting orphaned children and arranging for their marriages falls on their parental uncles, and the orphans' share of the family land diminishes the shares of their cousins, the support of widows and orphans is a burden to the husbands' families. An older woman said that older widows whose husbands have lived out their lives should not mourn, and will be ridiculed for doing so, but that widows of young husbands cry because they are unlucky and have no one to support their children.

Women vigorously denied that the absence of open crying means that they did not mourn their husbands. Several women emphasized their denial by saying that one cries for the loss of an animal, so one will certainly cry for a husband. Some reported having spells of unconsciousness, because of this prohibition. Others said they cried alone. One said that a widow may mourn all of her life, if she does it alone. One woman utilized the traditional closeness of the brother-sister relationship to participate in the mourning of her husband by crying and chanting the names of two recently deceased brothers during the ritual mourning for her husband.

WIDOWS WORK

The work of widows is no longer confined to "the most menial tasks." It does not differ greatly from the work of other women of their age and family status. The

degree to which they maintain the desirable qualities of widows and avoid scandals is a subtle determinant of the respect they are accorded. *Bahus* do most of the hard labor in the *bughar*, but their contributions to the household economy are downgraded. This denigration of women's work is often more acute if the woman is widowed, particularly if her sons are young and her *sasu* is still alive. Although widows may work hard, their labor is often not appreciated.

Young widows who are still *bahus* are considered to be particularly unlucky since their husbands died prematurely. *Sasus* and family women may blame them for their husbands' deaths and make them scapegoats in the *bughar*. They are often burdened with most of the household and treated like servants, particularly if they do not have wealthy parents to support them. Radha's mother was able to maintain her own household within her *bughar* because of the wealth of her father's family.

Older widows are better off, particularly if their sons are married and they have attained the status of *sasu*. *Sasus* may move about the village and surroundings with ease, and this mobility is often an advantage to other women of the *bughar*. Widowed *sasus* often leave the responsibility of running the household to their *bahus*, thus avoiding conflict, and take on tasks that require leaving the *bughar*.

In one family, when a buffalo was stolen, their widowed *sasu* walked for days throughout the village, going into the neighborhoods of low-caste residents, which she ordinarily would not enter, to search for it. Once we were visiting the *bughar* when she set out to search for the missing animal. She was obviously exhausted and asked two grandsons to come with her. They both refused, saying, "Can't you go alone?" Without arguing, the old woman got up and left to search alone. She finally found the animal in the courtyard of a Sudra family. Without calling on any of her family men for assistance, she went into the *bughar*, claimed the animal, untied it, and led it home. Since farmers know their individual cattle, and the cattle know the roads to their home compounds, the thieves could only excuse themselves by saying that they had found the buffalo wandering in the fields and were keeping it until it was claimed. Although the buffalo was valuable property, the young women and boys teased the widow; one brash young daughter of the household, back from her *shadi* and puffed up with her newly married status, was particularly rude, saying sarcastically, "The most energetic person in the house has found our buffalo." The distraught widow finally became so angry with her insolent tormentor that she called the girl a co-wife, an insult which not only silenced the young bride but sent her crying to her room, refusing to come out.

Each day the widow Mamta, the *sasu* of Bala, the child bride, took her spinning wheel to her grove of four guava trees; there she spun and guarded the ripening fruit from thieves and parrots while her sons worked the family fields. Her fields and guava trees were next to the land of Bahai, a widow (described at the end of this chapter), and the two women were good friends. They often sat chatting in the shade of the trees, away from the smoke and noise of the *bughars*. Bahai smoking her hookah and Mamta spinning. Their quiet conversation was interrupted only by Mamta's periodic forays to shoo away hungry parrots.

Some *sasus*, particularly widows, act as peacemakers. When women quarrel, their shouting can easily be heard in neighboring houses. Senior women from the neighborhood come to the *bughar* when arguments occur. They separate the quar-

relers, and each is talked to quietly by one or two women, who listen to their stories, calm them down, and mediate the dispute. I noticed, after seeing several of these incidents, that the same women usually appear, even when they are not the closest neighbors. Their intervention is quiet, informal, and usually successful. This seems to be a self-selected role that *sastis* may assume. These peacemakers are not overtly praised or rewarded for their efforts, but they are always welcome in the homes they enter, no matter how bitter the dispute they interrupt. Other older women are typically the bearers of bad gossip. When Radha died, one *sastu* of a poor family appeared in several houses, repeating the scandal, praising the virtues of her own daughters, and obviously relishing the opportunity to criticize a wealthy family.

While older women do not visit their parental homes as often as they did when they were young, they still return for family festivals. Widows are often freer to return for visits in their parents' homes than are women who must still care for living husbands. As senior daughters of the village, older women have the most freedom. One elderly woman, Maina, stayed for several weeks in her brother's house. Maina usually wore widow's white, immaculately clean, but dressed in tunic and pants rather than the sari usually worn by married women. She was the gayest and most humorous of the women that we knew. She danced for us and talked freely about marital relations, assuring us that purdah was not kept in the bedroom. Maina was the only woman who openly admitted the danger of seduction of *bahus* by senior men. Like many older people she had lost most of her teeth. Most toothless Rajput women cover their mouths with their saris when talking, but Maina simply smiled and laughed without embarrassment. She came to see us unexpectedly one day, and we thoughtlessly served her the usual company food of peanuts and seeds. She joked about her inability to eat them, saying, "The hut of the cow dung cakes is empty." We offered her an orange, which she ate with relish. While Maina seemed to be a particularly happy and outgoing woman, her vacation in her childhood home no doubt enhanced her relaxed demeanor. Evaluation of the lives of widows, as of married women, must include the recognition that they do, throughout their lives, spend time in their parents' havens.

WIDOW'S ROLES

The Sati Tradition

The custom of sati probably characterizes, in the Western mind, the mystery and cruelty of India better than any other aspect of it. Sati seems to have originated as a custom among the Rajputs and other warrior castes, but it became a fairly popular prestige symbol for other caste groups as well. Baniyas and other low-caste groups did not practice sati until the nineteenth century, when the custom became so popular that low-caste groups often adopted it. Although widow murder is associated with India in modern times, the custom is not unique to that culture.

The practice of burning or burying women alive with their deceased husbands, even as an expression of an underlying view of women as property, is not as bizarre and

exotic a custom as its identification with Hindu India has made it seem. Although Greek visitors to North India wrote accounts of sati as early as the fourth century B.C., there are accounts of widow sacrifice among Scandinavians, Slavs, Greeks, Egyptians, Chinese, Finns, Maoris, and some American Indians. The practice apparently originated among warriors who probably also elaborated the mythology attached to it. The heroism of the *sati* (the sacrificed woman) was in fact equated with that of the warrior. The connection of sati with the warrior and ruler (Kasatriya) caste endowed it with a social prestige which it never lost. In the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, it became usual to make a clean sweep of the women's quarters of a dead ruler before installing his successor. Sometimes even ministers were included, and the total could amount to the burning of several thousand persons, including queens, concubines, and servants of both sexes.

The practice was said to have been forbidden, at least originally, to Brahmins, the highest caste in terms of social rank, but the associations with honor which sati acquired proved too strong. Eventually, Brahman women were burning as liberally as Kasatriyas, or even in greater numbers as the power and retines of the princes declined. The Brahman association with sati was probably responsible for the form of the ceremony and its assimilation to the scriptural and sacrificial tradition.

The most usual form that sati took was that of burning the wife alive in or on the funeral pyre that consumed the husband's body. There were scriptural rules prohibiting the ceremony while the woman was menstruating (which was equated with uncleanness or unchastity), pregnant, or could not be spared from the care of her young children. In such cases, or when the husband's death occurred during his absence from home, some women burned themselves along with an article of clothing or personal effect of the dead man. This "following after" was forbidden to some castes, including Brahmins. In those castes where the dead were disposed of by burial rather than cremation, the widow could be buried alive.

(Stein, 1978, pp. 253-254)

The ideal of voluntary sati is a religiously sanctified suicide or martyrdom. The act of sati confers salvation not only on the martyr but on her relatives as well; it also confers economic benefits on her husband's family. It is believed that through the Sati, her husband, her husband's family, her mother's family, and her father's family would be in paradise for 35 million years, no matter how sinful they all had been.

Economic as well as spiritual rewards were bestowed through the act of Sati:

Over and beyond these scriptural inducements given, custom conferred prestige on the surviving families in this world as well as the next. For families of high rank and some affluence there were also tangible benefits. When a Hindu girl marries, she is officially transferred from her father's patrilineage to that of her husband; at the same time, her family is relieved of any moral responsibility for her future maintenance. Once widowed, she is of no further value to her in-laws as a potential bearer of sons; indeed, their worst fear is that she should chance to become pregnant, casting a possible shadow on the legitimacy of any previous children. In such a fanatically patrilineal tradition, the widow's death assured guardianship and

undisputed influence over her children to her husband's family. It also kept her from enjoying in her lifetime rights in her husband's estate.

(Stein, 1978, p. 2)

This magnificent spiritual reward, contrasted with the abuse faced by widows, makes their willingness to accept the custom of sati more understandable. The sati tradition makes the contemporary conflicts between widows and their husbands' relatives over management of property more comprehensible.

The rationalization for the custom was twofold. First, the assumption that women possess powerful Shakti and weak wills led to the conclusion that they must be married before menstruation, and that they would be incapable of leading chaste lives if their husbands died while they were young. Second, women were not expected to outlive their husbands. (India, today, is one of the few countries where the life expectancy of women is less than that of men.) Therefore, widows' sins in past lives were the presumed cause of their husband's deaths. The younger the husband at the time of his death, the greater the blame attributed to his widow. Sati explained this bad karma and ensured an extended period in paradise and a "clean karma state" in future lives. Widows who chose sati went to their deaths gloriously and proved their virtue by their choice.

In order to understand the reverence for such a cruel custom, one must appreciate the values of piety and loyalty that sati embodies. When Rajputs ruled Rajasthan, and some surrounding states, as feudal lords, they commanded the service and devotion of wives and vassals. This time holds the same romantic appeal for Rajputs that the age of knightly chivalry holds for Westerners. However, in India the feudal system ended in this century. The Zamindari Abolition Act was not passed until 1952. Older Rajputs in families like that of Amar Nath and his brothers and cousins were the Zamindars.

The burning of wives became more frequent during the Middle Ages, when Rajputs frequently fought with Muslims. When defeat was inevitable, wives were burned to avoid capture. The custom is called *joker*. Probably the most famous immolation of women was the *johar*, or mass suicide, at Fort Chittor in the thirteenth century, when the Rajput women in the fort were burned to avoid being captured by a licentious Mogul invader. The story, cloaked in myth and legend, is still very much a part of the Rajput heritage. The newspaper report of the Lohars' return to Chittor includes a brief history of the mass sati and the final defeat of the Rajput rulers of the fort:

The annals of Chittor throw up from history the story of man when he either lived by the sword or died by it, when kings and princes, soldiers and generals defied death for love, for freedom and the glory of conquest.

Pappa Rawul, according to history, took Fort Chittor sometime in the fifth century and from then till the middle of the 16th century 59 princes, his lineal descendants, ruled it. Twice the fort was stormed and ransacked. The first attack was in the 13th century. Allaudin Khilji, history reveals, ordered the massacre of men and destruction of property for a woman he could not get. He wanted to

possess Padmini, a celebrated beauty of the time and wife of the Rana Bhimsingh, ruler of Chittor.

When the marauding troops of Khilji were about to take the fort, the defenders preferred death to dishonor and slavery. Women folk, led by Rani Padmini, whose reported beauty had incensed Khilji, entered the funeral pyre set alight in the subterranean retreat within the fort. In chambers impervious to the light of day the Rajput women were sealed off, allowing them to be devoured by fire rather than dishonored by aliens.

No human eye has peeped into the dark cavern so far and legend has it that a serpent, probably multi-hooded, keeps watch over the place warding off intruders.

Shortly after, however, Rajputs retook the fort and ruled over it until Akbar reached his commanding hand into the interior of Rajasthan. Udai Singh, the last of the Rajputs to rule from Chittor, fled the fort when it fell to the Moghuls in 1568. With a handful of followers and Prince Pratap, he scoured the jungles chased by Akbar's soldiers and agents. Four years later, Pratap became the Rana and took the vow to be a nomad until Rajput glory was revived at Chittor. He shunned all earthly pleasures and died without fulfilling his pledge.

The faithful Rajputs and Lohars, who had followed their monarch, were bound by the pledge and for generations it has remained. Their descendants have been roaming about the plains and plateaus of India living in carts and abstaining from comforts.

(The *Hindustani Times*, April 6, 1955)

The long shadow of this event became apparent in the spring of 1955. Prime Minister Nehru led about 2,000 Lohars—descendants of those who served the last Rajput Rana of Chittor—back into the ruins of Fort Chittor to encourage them to abandon their nomadic life and become settled citizens of modern India.

The Indian government took this action in order to relieve the Lohars of a vow they took when Fort Chittor fell, for the last time, to the troops of Akbar, the greatest of the Mogul emperors, in February 1568. The following account is taken from a newspaper report of the story on the occasion of the return of the Lohars. Centuries after the events described, the newspaper report reads like a legend.

When they left the fort after its fall to the Moghuls, they [the Lohars] took a fivefold vow—not to rest until the fort is recaptured, not to live under a roof, not to draw water from a well with ropes, not to lit [sic] any lamp, and not to sleep on a cot.

The pledge was taken by the Gadi Lohars four centuries ago in February 1568, when the fort fell to the Moghuls. Lohars, who made arms for the Rajputs and the Ranas, left Chittor along with the Rajput defenders, taking a vow not to return until the fort was liberated. With Rana Pratap, who refused to bend the knee to the mighty Akbar, they resolved never to rest or seek a life of ease and pleasure until the honour of Chittor and all it stood for was vindicated.

Another legend says when the Moghul troops took Chittor, thousands of Brahmin priests—whose safety was the first duty of the Rajput king—were done to death by the invaders. The slaughter was so great that the weight of the sacred threads of Brahmans, who fell to the sword, was estimated at 600 lb. Rage and

remorse caught the Lohars, the legend records, and they pledged not to rest until the sacrilege was avenged.

(*The Hindustani Times*, April 6, 1955)

A band of Lohars camped in Khalapur in the winter of 1954-55, on their way to Fort Chittor. The men wore *dhooiris* and turbans and women wore the full red cotton skirts and head clothes characteristic of Rajasthan dress. Their carts were handmade and elaborately carved. They were poor, proud, dusty, and colorful. For 400 years they had been nomads in Rajasthan and surrounding states. They were not included in census reports and were not on the voters' roll of any of the states in which they roamed. They maintained their own system of justice with their own *panchayats*. They still forged tools and sold them to Rajput families.

The legends of Fort Chittor incorporate several themes central to Rajput values. One theme is the purity of the Rajput bloodline and the chastity of the Rajput women on whom the bloodline purity depends. The sanctity of the bloodline and the belief in ritual pollution are the basis for the permanent exclusion of women who have been raped or seduced by alien men. Whereas a high-caste Hindu man may remove the pollution of sexual intercourse with a low-caste or non-Hindu woman by a ritual bath, the pollution of high-caste women from comparable sexual contact is permanent. The biological rationale for this belief is that a man's pollution is external, while a woman's is internal.

Another theme is the irresistible and fatal appeal of a woman's beauty. History records land and power as the causes of wars, but in legend men fight for beauty. Like Troy's Helen and Camelot's Guinevere, Chittor's Padmini is the legendary cause of the attack that destroyed her husband's rule. Unlike Helen and Guinevere, however, Padmini was a blameless, faithful wife. Whether Kihji saw Padmini in her cloistered harem or had only heard of her beauty is not clear. The legend is one of many stories that place the blame for the seclusion of women on the lust of alien Muslim invaders.

Finally, there was the ultimate seclusion of Padmini and her attendants, said to number 300. The funeral pyre was "in chambers impervious to the light of day," which have never been unsealed. Already sanctified, their ashes were never scattered on the sacred Ganges but remain entombed in their subterranean pyre. For 1600 years the privacy of these royal Satis has been sealed with their mortal remains, guarded by the multi-headed serpent of Siva. It no longer matters whether they were 300 or 30, whether they went bravely to their sats, led by their Rani, or were dragged screaming to their death chamber by their husbands, or the Rani's soldiers. They are holy Satis, sanctified by time and tradition. The *Johar* tradition drove hundreds of Hindu women to suicide during the partition riots of 1947. Many village wells were filled with the bodies of women who had jumped in to avoid capture by Muslim troops. Reportedly women who were captured by Muslims during these riots still reside in Pakistan because their families would not take back their permanently polluted relatives.

This is the heritage of the daughters who keep the golden thread of honor pure. It is a heritage they cherish still and will for generations yet unborn. Just as Christians

who would not suffer martyrdom, worship at the shrines of martyrs, Hindu women worship at the shrines of their Satis.

The continued worship at village sati shrines and the pride of women relating the stories of these local saints indicates that this ancient custom still represents ideal values for widows. Women who want to join their husbands in death may still kill themselves in private. A Khalapur woman says that her sister-in-law became a Sati by this method around 1960.

She locked herself in her room after her husband's death when no one allowed her to enter his funeral pyre. The family had built a sacred fire in a large iron can because of the death. The wife sat on the fire, behind locked doors. When her relatives saw smoke they tried to open the doors, and when this failed they put a hole in the roof and took her out. They wanted to take her to the hospital, but the wife said, "Why have you taken me out of the fire? That was bad on your part, and you should not have done so." With these words she died and her husband's family built a large shrine for her.

Sati is still an ideal for some Khalapur men. In 1955 Amar Nath said that he would be pleased if Draupadi, his third wife, committed sati when he died. In 1975 Draupadi commented jokingly, "That old man has made chutney out of two wives. Now I will make chutney out of him." Clearly Amar Nath's wish is a nostalgic dream that he does not expect to have realized.

Religion Versus Law

The Portuguese, French, and Dutch colonial governments outlawed sati before the nineteenth century. Encouraged by the success of these efforts, the British colonial government began abolishing sati state by state in 1829. The last legal sati reportedly occurred in Udaipur in 1861 (Stein, 1978). However, newspaper accounts of sats appeared about every six weeks during the winter of 1954-55, usually with the comment that it was unclear whether the widow had climbed onto the pyre voluntarily or been forced by relatives. Despite the reported lack of clarity, papers never reported any police investigation of these sats. Most of them occurred in the sacred city of Banares, where many devout Hindus go to die. The newspapers reported that as many as 100,000 people came to worship at Banares sati sites. In 1974-75 I did not see sati reports in the newspapers, but some Rajputs in Rajasthan have tried to revive the custom in recent years. A sati in Rajasthan in August 1980, in a village about 70 kilometers from Jaipur, received little national attention, but the sati of a young bride Roop Kanwar in 1987, in a village close to the main Delhi-Jaipur highway and reputedly witnessed by 10,000 people, was reported in the national press and caused widespread protests and government intervention was necessary to stem the revival of this ancient custom. The newspaper account of this event is as follows.

The ancient Hindu rite of sati, requiring a woman to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, was abolished in British India in 1829. But early this month,

when her young husband died suddenly of gastroenteritis, Roop Kanwar, 18, a bride of just eight months, declared her intention to revive the grim custom. By that afternoon thousands of people had gathered to witness her immolation. After taking a ritual bath, the woman dressed once more in her bright red bridal finery. Sitting atop the funeral pyre with her husband's corpse, his head on her lap, she asked her teenage brother-in-law to light the fire. Within moments, as the crowd's cries reached a climax, she was consumed by flames.

The Indian press and public reacted in horror. Said the national daily *Indian Express*: "A barbarous and primitive act." Women's groups protested, and the Rajasthan high court banned further ceremonies at the site. But to some people, Kanwar had become a goddess. Pilgrims thronged to the village of Deorala, 47 miles northeast of Jaipur, to pay homage. Last week hundreds of thousands of people converged on the site for ceremonies marking the end of the 13-day mourning period. The pyre, which had been kept smoldering with ghee (clarified butter) and coconuts, was decorated with a flower-bedecked silk canopy. Kanwar's four brothers spread a stole embroidered with gold thread over the pyre. As Brahman priests chanted mantras, the stole was burned. The pyre was then extinguished with holy water from the Ganges and milk.

Despite the high-court ban on the ceremony, police, fearful of provoking a riot, did not interfere. They did, however, arrest Pushpendra Singh, the youth who lit the pyre, and four other in-laws, charging them with murder. The maximum penalty: life in prison. Authorities were investigating whether the bride's in-laws, who by tradition would have been required to care for her the rest of her life, had pressured her into the act. Kanwar's father, saying he believed that she acted under "divine orders," took consolation from the fact that his daughter had become a devi (goddess). A shrine commemorating the widow will be built at the sati site. More than \$160,000 has already been contributed by devotees.

(*Time*, September 1987, p. 41)

The history of sati from its ancient origins to the events following Roop Kanwar's sati are recorded in S. Narasimhan's excellent book *Sati: Widow Burning in India* (1990). Narasimhan reports the failure of the government to stop the thirteenth-day sainthood ceremony, reputedly attended by 100,000 people, and the first-year anniversary celebration, attended by 4,000 people. She describes the formation of a permanent shrine and the money it earns. She notes that although the men responsible for the burning had committed nonbailable offenses, they were let out on bail and have not been tried.

Narasimhan compares the contemporary reaction to the government's attempts to stop sati with similar reactions to the British anti-sati law of 1829. Widespread protests occurred both times. Government action was seen by traditional people as an attack on their religion, caste, and tradition by outside forces. In the nineteenth century this force was the British colonial government; now it is the modern, West-ernized Indian government. Rajputs resisted British efforts to stop sati, and at the second anniversary of Roop Kanwar's death a convenor of the anniversary celebration is quoted as saying, "This government wants to finish off Hinduism and Rajputs in the name of this anti-sati law" (Narasimhan, 1990, p. 146).

At both times some religious leaders invoked scripture as sanctified justification for this custom. In 1988 a religious leader in Rajasthan attributed natural disasters in

the years following these government actions to divine wrath, saying, "You will notice that ever since this anti-sati law was enacted, nature has been revolting. Today, when we should be feeling the heat of summer, it is cold. The monsoons bring no rain. And the untimely rainfall has been destroying crops ready for harvest. . . . All because sati has been insulted" (Narasimhan, 1990, p. 132). The ban against sati became impossible for the British to enforce and is proving resistant to contemporary government actions.

There was evidence that Roop Kanwar and the widow who had been consumed in 1980 were coerced. One Rajput widow interviewed after Roop Kanwar's sati said, "I am a widow. I know what it is to lose a husband. You go insane. It is cruel to term an act of insanity as an act of voluntary bravery. It is the womenfolk of the household who use a moment of weakness and madness to encourage you to die." This suspicion was also voiced in earlier times. In 1818 a British magistrate wrote that "ninety-nine out of a hundred women sacrificed themselves under the influence of the infatuation poured into their ears. . . . than from any conviction of their own minds" (Narasimhan, 1990, pp. 86-87).

Narasimhan also discusses the relationship between sati and the recent burning of brides for their dowries. Since the husbands of these brides are still alive and their deaths were clearly involuntary, bride burning is as far from sati as murder is from martyrdom. However, Narasimhan argues that these bride burnings, along with female feticide, are a manifestation of the low value placed on women's lives in Indian society.

Rand

Hindu scriptures say that women cannot control their Shakti when they do not have husbands to satisfy their lust. Widows, particularly young widows, may tempt their male relatives and bring disgrace upon the household. The Hindu word for widow, *rand*, also means prostitute, and "immoral widow" is one of the most frequent insults hurled by angry women. Some families may avoid the burden of supporting widows by selling them into prostitution. Such an action would bring disgrace upon a Khalapur Rajput family. Nevertheless, in 1955 a woman told me about one family who had reputedly sold a widow into this degraded occupation.

Village society has no place for spinsters; all daughters marry. However, the excess of men, brought about through female infanticide, and prohibition on marriage outside of acceptable *jatis* meant that in the past a number of men remained bachelors, a situation that still exists in some families. Many families could not afford to arrange good marriages for all their sons. The work of adult sons increases the family income, and in poor families the work of the eldest brothers was often necessary to build up enough capital to arrange marriages. Sons are married in order of their birth, and it is virtually impossible for a man to marry after a younger brother has been married. Furthermore, these elder brothers were often past marriageable age by the time they had earned enough to arrange good marriages for their younger brothers. Therefore, it was the younger brothers who usually married, while elder brothers, who had authority over them, remained bachelors. The separation of *choopars* from *bughars* and the custom of bringing food to men in their

choppers, so that they did not have to enter the *bughar*, functioned to separate bachelor brothers from the vulnerable *bahus*.

The concern for the virtue of family wives is increased when there are widows, particularly young widows, in the *bughar*. The presumed seductiveness of widows is the primary rationale behind their traditional lifelong mourning dress and shaved heads. This traditional mourning dress, like other purdah customs, was no longer strictly enforced in 1975. Some widows no longer cut their hair and continued to wear colored saris, or the homespun saris with colored borders, worn by many older women. Since toe rings were no longer worn by married women, this mark of widowhood was no longer present, and a few widows continued to wear gold jewelry. In 1975 widows could be reliably identified only the absence of glass bangle bracelets.

Although mourning dress had been abandoned, and, in most families, all men married, concern for widows' morality persisted. When a woman of 50 years lost her husband in the fall of 1974, leaving her *jaitih*, aged 65, as the only senior man in the house, rumors that they were having sexual relations surfaced within 2 months of the husband's death.

Bhaktani

When sati was abandoned, high-caste widows faced lives of austerity so bleak that some English reformers thought that a return to sati would be preferable to their miserable existences. Widows no longer face these severe restrictions, but they are expected to live celibate and holy lives, so as not to disgrace themselves and their families. Widows are particularly likely to visit holy shrines and make offerings to deities. One childless Khalapur widow had gone beyond the expected degree of religiosity and become a *bhaktani*, the feminine version of *bhaktana*, or religious leader. The Khalapur *bhaktani* was a commanding woman, standing about 5 feet 8 inches and towering over most village women. She was about 50 years of age when we met her in 1975.

The *bhaktani's* husband was a student of Urdu who used to teach his wife 1 hour each day, imparting his religious lessons to her. He lived for 4 years after their marriage. Three days before his death, he gave his wife three orders, "Lead a religious life as a *bhaktani*, obey my father, and look after my younger sisters and take the responsibility of getting my two younger sisters married with they grow up."

The widow took a Punjabi teacher, who lectured in Khalapur, as her guru. This guru taught that women should obey their parents-in-law, not trouble anyone with their actions, obey Almighty God, and refrain from, and teach others to refrain from, bad actions. She worshipped Lord Rama, Siva, Narayan, and her now-deceased guru.

In 1975, she had been practicing this life for 14 years, since her husband's death. She had a following of about 40 women, who met with her regularly, 22 of whom lived in Khalapur and 18 in surrounding villages. Most of her followers were Rajput, but a few were from other castes, including one low-caste barber woman. About one half of her followers were widows themselves. Throughout the year these women had regular meetings during which they prayed and sang religious

songs. During the months of July and August they had a 1-month fast from cereals and gathered for 3 hours a day to read a religious book.

Hindus believe that the temporal world is Maya, or illusion, and the spiritual represents the true reality. The songs sung by the *bhaktani* and her followers speak to the false illusion of worldly trials and the promise of better lives hereafter. The first song says that cares of the world "will soon be cleared" if the worshiper sings "the songs of God." The second compares the body to a rented house soon to be vacated and reminds worshipers that immortal souls travel from body to body.

Sing the songs of the God with full devotion, O friend.

Your sins committed in all births will be washed away

And clouds of distress will soon be cleared

Your mind will be purified with the soap of devotion.

Sings the songs of the God with full devotion, O friend.

Distress from all directions has come to surround me.

In distress nobody comes near to you when you are in trouble,

The world is full of falsehood. You can try and find it false

Sing the songs of God of the God with full devotion, O friend.

Mother, father and the whole family.

All these relatives are just a fabricated system of the world

All the worldly love is a falsehood I can play on the beat of drums.

Sing the songs of God with full devotion, O friend.

O my soul, you have to travel.

You have been granted this body

So you have to complete the journey.

This body is like a rented house, why to bother about it much.

One day, the house owner

will ask you to vacate it.

You have to pay the rent as well as

to vacate the house.

O my soul, you have to travel.

You shall have to pay the rent and

vacate the house.

If you do not listen to my suggestion

The messenger of Death [Yama] will make you obey him.

You will get the treatment according to

your own good or bad karma.

You shall have to burn in the fire of sins

and vacate the house.

O my soul, you have to travel.

You shall have to face the court of Yama

How shall you convince him in your case?

You shall have to clear the account there,

and vacate the house.

The *bhaktani's* husband was an only child, so the household had no other *bahus* to do the housework. Therefore, after her husband's death, the *bhaktani* asked her own younger married sister to move in, along with the sister's husband and children. The sister kept house so that the widow was free to pursue her religious life.

The *bhakani's soosar* still lived in the house. He was happy with the devotion of his widowed *bahu* and supported her religious life. The *bhakani* spent whatever money she got on alms and religious gatherings, and her *soosar* never objected to her expenditures. She helped other widows lead religious lives by attending *kirtans* within the confines of her *bughar*.

Like a *sai*, a *bhakani* can acquire Shakti through her religious life. Maina, the widow who described Shakti to us, said this of the village *bhakani*:

She has no Shakti. During her previous life she might not have done any worship and had no prayers and consequently she remained devoid of Shakti. Now, if she does not pray to God and have devoted worship, how can she get Shakti in her future lives?

THE HOUSE OF THREE WIDOWS

The Orphans

Bahai is an elderly virgin widow who returned to her parental village to fight for the land of her brother, Takadwar. After the death of her brother and the tragic death of his newly married son, Hoshiyar, Bahai stayed to continue the struggle for her dead brother's wife and Hoshiyar's virgin widow. Takadwar's two married daughters sometimes stay with their mother while their husbands are working in cities, increasing the household to five women.

The tragedy of this household began when Takadwar and his older sister, now called Bahai, lost their parents. Their father, the last surviving man of his lineage, had inherited a large landholding of about 900 *bighas*. Their mother was already dead, and there were no paternal uncles to care for the children. Therefore, their father, on his deathbed, entrusted their care and guardianship to a neighbor, the senior man of one of Khalapur's most powerful lineages, and the responsibility for their marriage arrangements to a cousin of this neighbor, a man who was himself wealthy and politically powerful. The brother and sister were raised in this neighbor's household across the street from their parental home.

Apparently, the men of their guardian's families and other wealthy families bribed officials to change the land records and list much of the children's land in the guardian's names. The children were too young to know how much land they had inherited, and most of their property was stolen in this manner before they reached maturity.

The girl Bahai was the first to marry. Although her inheritance was sufficient to supply a generous dowry, her guardian married her as a second wife to the wealthy husband of his own dead sister. Her husband was considerably older than Bahai and already had a half-grown son and two daughters by his first wife. It is customary for a widower with children to seek a second wife from his first wife's household, on the assumption that a blood relative of the children will make a kindly stepmother. The custom also saves extensive negotiations with a new set of in-laws. Since the bridegroom has already received a dowry from his first wife, and the bride's family is giving him a replacement, the dowry of a second wife is customarily small. The

guardians, therefore, cheated the orphaned girl out of a youthful husband and her rightful share of her inheritance.

Meanwhile, Takadwar, less shrewd than his sister, worked as a servant for the family of his guardian, completely unaware that his birthright was being gradually stolen from him by the men of his adoptive family. In time he too was married. His wife, dissatisfied with life in the joint household, asked for a separate house, and the division of her husband's land. One of the several houses owned by the bridegroom's father was repaired and given to the young couple, along with 150 *bighas* of land. The young bridegroom apparently accepted this as his rightful inheritance; his sister, however, was certain that their landholdings were much larger than 150 *bighas*. She left her husband and returned to live with her brother for most of her adult life to fight for their inheritance, giving up a life of luxury for one of poverty and fieldwork.

Bahai, the *Nannad*

Bahai said that she had never wanted to marry, have children, and be burdened with housekeeping and *purdah* restrictions. She liked her husband but did not want to be his wife. Circumstances allowed her to make a most unusual arrangement. Before the marriage had been consummated, her husband ran a high fever and became delirious. While delirious he called the young wife "sister." After he was well she told him that since he had called her his sister, she wanted to live with him as his sister and consider him to be her older brother rather than her husband. If he had been a young man without children, he would no doubt have refused, but since he already had a son, he agreed to her request. The marriage was never consummated, and Bahai remained a virgin. It was several years before her husband's family were aware of their arrangement. When they found out, they accepted it and praised the bride for her virtue in wishing to lead a celibate life.

The decision to remain a virgin relieved her of the burdens of childbearing. Her husband's family was wealthy enough to have servants and even elephants, the ultimate symbol of conspicuous consumption. Her husband's wealth relieved her of many of the household chores commonly performed by Rajput wives. Since she had no children of her own to contribute to the patrilineage and her labor was not needed in the house, she received the approval of her husband and his relatives when she asked to return to Khalapur to help her brother. When her husband died, she went to mourn him. She was offered a share of his land, for the duration of her life, but gave it to her stepson and relinquished all claim to her husband's fortune. She continued to visit her husband's home for weddings, births, and funerals. She also did not claim her share of her father's land but fought only for her brother's rights to his inheritance. In 1954 she had already been fighting this land case for several years.

The brother-sister bond is traditionally close and sacred in Indian families. This was particularly true for Takadwar and his sister. The loss of both their parents had brought them close together. Takadwar reportedly would not eat his food until his sister was in the house. Throughout his life Takadwar was closer to his sister than to his wife.

As a daughter of the village, Bahai did not have to keep *purdah* and soon began

to help her brother and their field hands with the farming. She rented time on a tube well with another farmer and sometimes had to go to the fields at night, when much of the irrigation is done. It was this unusual role that led to her being called "Bahai" (brother). Her hired hands, unused to working with a woman, made her, in effect, an honorary man. They called her "Bahai" and she, in turn, addressed them as "Bahai."

They shared their hookah with her after she promised she would not smoke hookah with other women. The sharing of a hookah is one of several customs by which women are treated like low-caste men. Men will not smoke hookah with men of castes ranked lower than theirs, nor with any women, even those of their own family. In order to maintain good working relationships with her field hands, and to avoid gossip, Bahai de-emphasized her sex as much as possible by her dress and manner. She always wore the loose shirt and *swan*, a form of dress that had been worn by women of older generations. In winter she wore her sweater under her shirt so that it would not cling to her figure.

While Takadwar and Bahai worked their fields and fought the futile battle to obtain more of their land, Takadwar's wife kept house and gave birth to four children, three daughters and the long-awaited son who, like his father before him, was the last surviving male of his lineage. All hopes for the survival of the family rested on the fate of this single son.

Once in her brother's home Bahai assumed the role of a *sasur* and directed the activities of Mrs. Takadwar. Since Bahai usurped the rightful place of Takadwar's wife, friction soon developed between the two women. In 1954 Bahai complained about Mrs. Takadwar:

She is a perfect fool. She is very dainty. If she steps on a sugar candy it will not break. She takes 6 hours for work that should be done in 1 hour. She takes 6 hours to bathe. The spinning and cooking also takes ages. I get tired of this, because she is so lazy. She is fond of embroidery and knitting. No one else in the village is as good at it as she is. She has taught all the girls to knit and embroider and make hooked mats. I get angry and say, "Why are you wasting your time doing this? Do something else."

She is educated and very intelligent. She wants to consult her husband on everything. My brother is simple and shy and does not care. She is not responsible and does not care about the children. Otherwise she is very good.

Bahai's concern for the way the children were being raised led her to separate them from their mother on more than one occasion. When Takadwar's son was 2 years old, Bahai took him to her husband's house and did not return with him for several years. In 1954 Takadwar's wife was living at her parents' house with her son and two daughters, because Bahai had sent her there after they had quarreled. The youngest daughter, 9 years old, stayed with her and Takadwar. This girl, one of the children in my first study, was a child of fragile beauty and a most gentle disposition. When Bahai talked about her future she often added, "If she lives." She did in fact die when she was 10 years old, just after I had left the village. Her aunt still spoke of her with fondness when I returned. Her death brought sadness to the family, but the truly tragic deaths were yet to come.

The Death of the Men

The only son, Hoshiyar, lived up to his name, which means wisdom. Despite the family's poverty, he pursued his education through college and went on to study for his master's degree at a nearby city, a most unusual achievement for a village boy. Hoshiyar was not only intelligent but a young man of exceptionally fine character. He was deeply religious, did not smoke or drink, and sometimes tried to reform the habits of the village men. On one occasion he pleaded with the elder men of Khalapur to stop some illegal practices that resulted in police intervention. He argued, with unusual skill for one so young, that the intervention of the police impoverished all concerned, since the police took bribes from both the accuser and the accused and seldom settled the disputes. In 1975 Hoshiyar was still remembered and praised by those who knew him.

Hoshiyar's marriage was arranged while he was still in residence at school, working on his master's degree. A few weeks after his marriage he came home from college sick, was taken to a hospital, and died suddenly in his mother's arms. His death was so abrupt and unexpected that Bahai suspected he was poisoned by the family of their faithless guardian. By this time his parents were too old to have children, and their last hope for a son to farm their land and perpetuate their lineage was lost.

After Hoshiyar's death, his father failed fast. Several times he took his sister and started to leave the village, saying nothing remained to keep them there, a vivid indication of the low status of wives and daughters. Each time they were stopped by friends and neighbors at the village edge. He died a few years after his son, leaving the family of five women: his sister, his wife, two surviving daughters, and Hoshiyar's virgin bride.

Mrs. Hoshiyar, the Devoted *Bahu*

Hoshiyar's young bride was staying with her parents when her husband died. Since students are traditionally celibate in India, her idealistic young husband had chosen not to consummate his marriage until he had finished his studies and could live at home permanently, rather than visiting on weekends. When news of the death reached the bride's family, her father wanted to remarry his daughter. She refused, arguing that if widowhood was her fate her second husband might also die. She said she had grown fond of her *sasur* and felt that if the mother had lost a son, she should share her fate and accept the loss of her husband. She chose, therefore, to live out her life in service to her husband's family. She wore a widow's dress and no jewelry, and believed herself to be a burden on the family, despite her lifelong service to them. She had no relatives in Khalapur but did not seek a ritual sister because she believed herself unlucky.

Bahai has high regard for Hoshiyar's illiterate widow. She does the family cooking and is greatly praised for this by Bahai, who says that it is only because of this *bahu* that food is in the house when she returns home from the fields. Bahai told us about the sacrifice and hard work of Hoshiyar's widow on our first visit to the house:

She thinks nothing of herself. She does not want to dress in pretty saris or wear jewelry. She thinks of herself as no better than mud and has given her life to help our family with our work. She thinks she is unlucky.

Unfortunately, Hoshiyar's widow is not treated well by her *sasu*. She would like to learn to read and complains that although both her *nanads* and her *sasu* are educated no one will teach her to read. She needs eyeglasses, but when we suggested that she ask Mrs. Takadwar to buy them for her, she replied, "Oh no, who will get me glasses?"

Mrs. Takadwar, the Cunning *Sasu*

Mrs. Takadwar had none of the courage and unselfishness of Bahai. She had a reputation for being cunning and played on her helplessness by wheedling, begging, and occasionally lying. She showed little gratitude to either woman for their sacrifices and work, although Mrs. Hoshiyar did all the cooking and most of the household work, and Bahai's fieldwork formed the financial basis for the funds Mrs. Takadwar saved to educate both her daughters and provide them with substantial dowries. While she had some reason to resent Bahai's assumption of the *sasu* role during the early years of her marriage, she had no justification for abandoning her faithful *bahu*.

The Land Dispute

Since the death of both father and son, the women must rely entirely on hired help to farm their land, which is now reduced to 90 *bighas*, despite all the efforts of Bahai to defend the family inheritance. At present their field hand is a Muslim man, probably because few Rajput or low-caste men would dare to help a family of women who challenged the honesty of some of Khalapur's most powerful men.

At the time of our second visit, Takadwar's eldest daughter had been married for several years. Like her brother she had a master's degree and taught at the village school rather than living with her husband's family. Her husband was not a farmer but was employed in an office job. He visited his wife frequently. The younger daughter was also married to a man employed in an office.

On the surface these five women seemed to get along unusually well. The bickering one often sees among women in a Rajput household was absent. Hoshiyar's wife cared for the family women with unusual affection. The women of this household helped each other quickly and without comment. The second sister gave up her own college education to care for the daughter of her elder sister, when the young mother was working for her master's degree. (Unfortunately, this child also died.) The women presented a united front against the village families who oppress them.

This unity was threatened, however, by the demand of the elder sister for separation of her landholdings while her mother was still alive. Not only did she want her inheritance then, but she wanted the land divided between herself and her sister, with no provision for her brother's widow, whom she would have liked to see

sent back to her parental home. Reportedly, she often fought with her mother about this issue, took meals separately, and would not speak to Hoshiyar's widow.

Bahai's status as an honorary man did not extend beyond the field hands, and so because of purdah customs, she could not bring herself to testify in court, even to save the land that she had spent her life trying to regain. The family could not afford a lawyer, and without a male heir their traditional claim to the land was weakened. In 1975, Bahai wanted the land to be divided among her two nieces and her dead nephew's wife. While revised laws permit women to inherit land, village men and many village women feel strongly that since women cannot farm the land, they should not inherit it.

A family of sisters without brothers, and in this case without male cousins, are the only legal heirs to their father's property. Their situation is the circumstance that women did not consider in our interviews on dowry. Neither husband of Takadwar's daughters was eager to leave his job and face the hostility of the village men in order to farm the family's meager holdings. When they inherited the land they would probably sell it, an action abhorred by Khalapur men. According to law, the land should be divided into thirds, with each sister and the brother's widow receiving an equal portion. By custom all the land should go to Hoshiyar's widow while she lives and pass on to the family's nearest male relatives upon her death. These male relatives are the men who cheated Takadwar and Bahai while they were children.

Bahai never claimed her own share of Takadwar's land after his death; Mrs. Takadwar is now the legal owner of all the remaining landholdings. Mrs. Takadwar could not be forced to divide the land before her death, and it was unlikely that she would do so, since control of the land and money was her main source of power.

Whether this young widow would have the strength to press her claim against her sisters-in-law remained to be seen. Without the help of her urban brothers-in-law she would have to continue to rely on hired help to farm the land. Unlike Bahai, Mrs. Hoshiyar was meek and unassertive; furthermore, she was not a daughter of the village and, by tradition, had to maintain purdah in her husband's village. If both sisters-in-law desert her after her *sasu* dies, she may be defenseless. One hopes that Mrs. Hoshiyar's virtuous life will lead to her acceptance, if she must return to her home village.

Mrs. Hoshiyar said her mother died of grief because of her sufferings. She had no brothers, so when her widowed father died, she would have no male relatives to support her. She said that Mrs. Takadwar had promised to divide the land evenly between her and her two daughters. When asked what she might do after the two older women die she said, "I do not know what my future will be. If my *nanads* treat me well, it will be all right. Otherwise, I will have to go to my parents' house." Without the education to fight for her share of the land against her well-educated sisters-in-law, she would be helpless unless Mrs. Takadwar kept her promise to leave her one third of the land, and she would find some way to farm it.

It is disgraceful for a Rajput family to abandon a widow in such a fashion, but such fine points of honor injure the reputation of men, since it is men who are

responsible for the support of the family women. A household of women has no traditional responsibility for their sister-in-law and no prestige to lose.

In 1955 Bahai was still cautiously optimistic about the family's chances of winning back their land. Her brother and nephew were alive and healthy. Although Takadwar failed to live up to his name, which means "strong," he borrowed his sister's strength by following her orders. He appeared in court to fight his case when the hearings on the land dispute came up. At that time Bahai was also mistress of the household because she had sent Takadwar's wife to her parental home. She prepared food, managed the household budget, and raised her favorite niece. All this changed with the death of the two men. Mrs. Takadwar was now mistress of the house and in control of the household budget. Bahai directed the work in the fields but had no authority within the house. Her clothes were old and torn, and she had no money of her own to replace them. In 1975 she complained bitterly about Mrs. Takadwar's ingratitude:

She buys clothes for both her daughters and herself, but I have mended my clothes so often that I see now that I was foolish to have left my husband's house and my share of land to help my brother. I spent the prime of my youth to fight for my brother's land. It is because of my effort that this family is living in this house and still has a small patch of land. I gave whatever I brought from my husband's house to these people. My nephew was not thankful. Now my brother and nephew are no more, but even so I am still working in the fields my whole life for these people, but they are unthankless. This family, for whom I have spoiled my life, look strange to me. They are not my own. I have grown so old and weak now that I cannot work in the field, so I am barefooted and in torn clothes. I am much worried about my future. I cannot return to my husband's house nor am I given proper treatment in this house.

Mrs. Hoshiyar is also at the mercy of this woman. Her future is worse than mine. So long as she is young and able to work like a slave for them, they give her two meals a day, but when she grows old or becomes incapable of doing anything, she will, perhaps, be treated badly by this mother and her daughters. Perhaps she will be given some land, but nothing is guaranteed.

The guardian of Takadwar and Bahai, and his family members, had apparently expected Takadwar, along with his wife and children, to live with them throughout their lifetime, leaving them their land in exchange for support. While this expectation was not particularly logical, considering the wealth of Takadwar's family, their conviction that the land should be left to the men of the guardian's family was strengthened when Takadwar and his son died, leaving only female heirs.

In the fall of 1974, the alienation between the two families led to further trouble. The guardian's son, now a prominent man in his own right, began construction of a large cattle compound and men's quarters in front of Takadwar's house. Part of the construction was on the land owned by Mrs. Takadwar. Furthermore, the wall of the cattle compound blocked their door, leaving them barely enough room to pull their bullock cart up to the door to unload their grain. The women protested this action, claiming that, in addition to the encroachment on their land, it was illegal to block the doorway to another house. However, the

construction was not stopped, and the family had resigned itself to the loss of another piece of property. Neighbors agreed that some of the land under construction belonged to Mrs. Takadwar, but no one would help them to oppose the powerful man who had appropriated it. On one occasion we were moved to tears by Bahai's account of her failures to keep control of the family land. When she saw our distress, Bahai's only comment was: "You are crying over my plight, but my heart has become a stone. I have no more tears."

CONCLUSIONS

Widows are considered to be unlucky, both for themselves and for others, because a husband's early death is blamed on bad karma acquired by his wife in previous incarnations; therefore, a widow's fate is essentially thought to be self-inflicted. In 1955 I used a census based on Hitchcock's interviews with family men. I found several widows living in these families who were missing from the census, because the men had not reported them.

The stigma of this belief is attached primarily to young widows whose husbands' deaths were premature, but any woman who outlives her husband is considered to be somewhat unlucky. Children belong to their father's lineage and must remain attached to his home, so finding an acceptable second husband for a widow with children is virtually impossible. Although rules against widow remarriage are being abandoned in more urban areas of India, Khalapur widows still do not remarry. In order to avoid gossip and the stigma of *rani*, widows must lead lives of piety and celibacy. Devotion to this holy life has replaced the custom of sati as a means of earning good karma for subsequent lives, but local suttee shrines are still places of worship for women.

The roles described in this chapter are carried out singly or in combination by most Khalapur widows. Widows retain ownership of their husbands' land during their lifetimes. This gives them a degree of financial control over their sons and *bahus*, which most guard jealously.

The women of Takadwar's family epitomize the problems of village Rajput women without men to support them. Although their legal claims were just, they had no means of endorsing them. Bahai had had to deny her sex by dressing like a man, assuming the male role to carry out her work, and not smoking hookah with her women friends. It was only her lifelong virginity and her devotion to her brother's family that saved Bahai from slander. Mrs. Takadwar, anxious about the family's fate, had assured the future of her daughters with education and good marriages. However, she was not committed to the support of her husband's sister and her son's wife. Relationships between *bahus* and their *sasus* and *nanas* are frequently strained. The problems of coping with a patriarchal society in the absence of men has enhanced this friction, rather than reducing it.