

Article

# The Challenge of Chronotopicity: Female Co-Cremation in India Revisited in the Light of Time–Space Sensitive Ritual Criticism

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**Abstract:** Rituals are embedded in a particular time and space, and so are their objects and meanings. The ‘chronotope’ we focus on here is the occasional—partly self-chosen, partly societally forced—ritual death of Hindu widows along with their deceased husbands. Although never widely practiced, widow-burning caught the imagination of Europeans as illustrating both Hinduism’s ‘barbarity’ and its ‘high conjugal ideals’. Although *satī* had been outlawed since 1829, in 1987 a new case inflamed opposing sentiments. In 2002, in a passage called ‘Ritual Criticism and Widow Burning’, Ronald Grimes drew attention to it as a rite of passage that calls for normative comments and ritual criticism. Since then, in circles of ritual studies Hindu, widow-burning has occasionally been repeated as one of the ritual practices in need of condemnation. In order to put this rare practice, banned since almost 200 years ago, back into a proper time–place perspective, both its ritual details and its sociocultural contexts are revisited. Finally, we propose some case-specific factors that could serve as retrospective ritual criticism. We conclude with a plea for time–space sensitivity.

**Keywords:** *satī*; widow-burning; India; ritual criticism; chronotopicity

## 1. Introduction

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the spectacular phenomenon of Indian women committing ritual suicide by entering their dead husbands’ funeral pyres strained the limits of cross-cultural understanding. When the British conquered India, they came face to face with practices they could neither understand nor condone, and in the Indo-British colonial encounter, this occasional funerary practice became one of the prime examples of what they considered the ‘horrid rites of Hindustan’. Yet, there was European fascination as well, mostly with the bravery of the woman. We have found this ambivalence expressed through early travelers’ accounts, ranging from ancient ‘historiographies’ (Karttunen 1989; 1997, pp. 64–67); through Venetian traveler–merchant Marco Polo’s *Il Milione* (put on paper by Rustichello in 1298) and Portuguese General Albuquerque (the later Viceroy), who managed to temporarily abolish the practice around Goa in 1510 (Major 2006, 2011); and to British merchant missionaries, whose role in abolition was merely an offshoot of a much grander design, the conversion to Enlightenment rationality and/or Christianity (Mani 1998). Whereas, from the European perspective, widow-burning became an alibi for the colonial civilizing mission, by the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, it also became a potent signifier for the oppression of women and the degradation of the once-great Indian civilization as a whole. The colonial divide necessitated a complex mediation, structured not only by relations of domination and subordination, but also by anxieties about the so-called noninterference. It was a fundamental principle of the British government to exercise ‘toleration’ in matters of religion, and to the orientalizing imagination, India was a place where religion held unbridled sway over both feelings and facts (Figure 1). In this context, the rhetoric

of reform had a wobbly basis, to say the least. Although the desirability of legislative prohibition was increasingly supported by indigenous reformers as well, especially in the state of Bengal (Ramos 2017), co-cremation was otherwise defended as an inviolable aspect of Hindu tradition and as a religiously sanctioned ritual (Weinberger-Thomas 1999). While during British colonial rule in India the widow tended to be portrayed as a tragic victim, her own voice and agency were shockingly marginalized and practically absent in all descriptions, deliberations, and decisions.



**Figure 1.** ‘Widow Burning in India’; illustration by the Wesleyan Missionary Society (a public domain image, <https://archive.org/downloads/wesleyanjuvenil08socioog/wesleyanjuvenil08socioog.pdf>).

In the above lines, the tendency to regard ritual acts as a model of and a model for a particular cultural world—that of Hindu subjects under colonial rule—is obvious. To counterbalance this, we should at least make an attempt to understand the practice as a ritual in its own right as well (Handelman 2004; Kapferer 2004). In addition to a representation of co-cremation as some trait essential to ‘eternal’ Hinduism (*sanātana dharma*), or as an arena in which colonial and anticolonial forces were played out along with the related conflicts of social, economic, and political rivalry, the ritual practice should be afforded its own integrity as well. Accordingly, we should allow the interior dynamics of this ritual to speak not only of the underlying sociocultural order, but also of its own autonomous position distinct from such an order; we should prevent such a presentation from slipping into an inherently and exclusively functionalist interpretation. At the end of this article we will have shown that, as rituals, both *satī* and accepting widowhood required rites of passage in which the ritual actions were more than representations: Hindu widows most literally had to cross a threshold in a matter of hours. Without that step, the widowed wife would remain in a liminal situation for the rest of her life.

Under various names, there may have been, in India, an ancient but never widely practiced ritual technically (and possibly euphemistically) related to as co-cremation,<sup>1</sup> but culture-specifically better known as *sahamaraṇa* (dying together), *sahagamaṇa* (going together), *anumaraṇa* (following in death),

<sup>1</sup> Or con-cremation, the term used by M. Monier-Williams, in *Indian Wisdom* (Williams 1875, p. 258, fn. 2).

*anugamaṇa* (going along with or after someone), *anumṛtyu* (the practice of following someone in death), and *anvārohana* (climbing the pyre after someone). It was only much later (in 1787) that the word *satī* (indicating both the practice and the woman who had performed it) came into vogue; the British typically made this into the infamous ‘suttee’. A few other fringe names exist, such as *me-satya* in some Hindu milieus of colonial Bali (rumored to be the proud exclamation of the widow: ‘mine is the truth’). The practice of co-cremation, as an anthropologically neutral and overarching term, may be compared to other related practices with similar technical terms, comprising various time-, space- and ethnically specific practices of co-death or co-disposal, such as co-interment (being buried together) and co-immersion (being immersed together in a body of (mostly flowing) water). Those generic technical terms do not necessarily indicate conjugality, like they do in the Hindu case, nor do they indicate the imbalance that one had died first and that the other person followed him alive, either willingly or unwillingly. War and epidemics all over the world may long have been occasions for any type of joint or even mass disposals, and romance anywhere may have induced an occasional self-chosen death after a partner’s demise. In Hindu India,<sup>2</sup> there has indeed been a tendency that such practices gained a certain prestige in ruling families, in which both the code of honor and the code of property may have inspired the customary right (respectively duty) to accompany the deceased male to the beyond.

How this Hindu conjugal practice—a widow following her deceased husband to the funeral pyre and being cremated alive with him—came to have some acclaim is not supported by a singular unilinear story. Instead, we have a fragmented narrative through the ages, with an overrepresentation of ‘foreign’ reports: alleged eyewitness accounts, written by Greek historiographers, early European and Middle Eastern merchants, Mughal rulers (1526–1857), and imperial-colonial travelers. As a first introductory window into the practice, we draw attention to the widely spread (both in time and space) etymological connotation of the word ‘widow’. The contemporary English word has an all-over Indo-European lineage, and goes back to a Proto-Indo-European verb (\**uidh*), meaning to (be) separate, to (be) empty, to (be) divide(d), as well as to be destitute, to lack.<sup>3</sup> Even now, the Sanskrit word for widow (*vidhavā*) signifies lonely, solitary, bereft, and more specifically: husbandless. Although the same is valid for the widower, it has long been customary law among Hindus that widowers could easily remarry, whereas widows at times and in certain milieus could not. This imbalance in perspectives may have some explanatory power from a socioeconomic point of view. The salience of widow-burning over time has indeed much depended on the conditions of whether widows in particular regions and under particular regimes had the right to inherit and/or remarry, or not.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the first millennium CE, possibly as a response to a growing critique (both internally and externally), some defenders of the practice of self-immolation of widows, schooled in Vedic and Hindu scriptures, began to point at authoritative texts as well. In defense of co-cremation, a cryptic and highly ambiguous text from the *Atharvaveda* (AV 18.3.1)<sup>5</sup> was often referred to as the locus classicus:

Choosing the husband’s world, this woman lays herself down beside his lifeless body.  
Faithfully preserving the ancient custom, bestow upon her both wealth and offspring.

But if one continues reading (AV 18.3.2-8), one can’t help but notice the dramatic performative reversal:

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<sup>2</sup> In Hindu philosophy, but also as a basis for Hindu common sense in general, there is the acknowledgement that every phenomenon should be understood in the light of *deśa-kāla-pātra*, meaning: in the light of place (country, habitat, ambiance, atmosphere, occasion), time (proper time, time period, age, phase, cosmic cycle), and the subject (person, performer, the individual in his/her circumstances). Applying this to the phenomenon of *satī* would result in a welcome de-essentializing of the practice, recognizing also that it has been performed relatively rarely and has always been contested. For the line of argumentation in this article, it is crucial to emphasize that the practice has been banned for almost 200 years. See also notes 7, 31, and 42.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Latin *vidua*, German *Witwe*, and French *veuve*.

<sup>4</sup> See note 18, below.

<sup>5</sup> With a parallel in *Rgveda* 10.18.7-8; see further below.

Come, rise unto the world of the living, o woman, since the man by whose side you now lie, is lifeless. [ . . . ] Rise, abandon the dead, re-join the living.

Evidently, there is more to this than meets the eye: was it meant to be a merely symbolic gesture—a performance, a ritual re-enactment possibly based on a long extinct archaic practice—when she joined her deceased husband for a moment? Was she meant to return to the world of the living, the social world? If so, what is hinted at with the contradictory promise of wealth and offspring in the first stanza? How could the gods (and their spokespersons, the funeral priests) promise her wealth and offspring when she was to be cut off from life? Those and other textual enigmas will be explored in Section 3.<sup>6</sup>

In Section 2 we describe widows' co-cremation according to its ritual aspects. In this, we try to refrain from interpretation and contextualization in an attempt to present co-cremation in the bare ritual components traditionally known to us.

In Section 3 we contextualize the phenomenon: the ever-returning trope of sacrifice; as well as matters of widowhood, iconography, auspiciousness, and a woman's *dharma* as a wife and a widow.

In Section 4 we explore some textual passages covering more than two millennia.

In Section 5 we zoom in on British and independent India: *sati*/suttee as a political issue; the case of Roop Kanwar in 1987, and the now extremely rare ritual of *sati* as still constituting a contradictory highly ambiguous interpretive category.

In Sections 6–8, some tentative conclusions and critical considerations are given; also, we make a plea for a place- and time-sensitive type of ritual criticism.

This structure required a multimethodological approach. In order to let a ritual—and its ritual variations—speak for itself first, we composed a collage of ritual components, as they may have determined the procedure itself, with some of its variations through time and space. Apart from ritual studies and religious studies, we used insights from performance studies as well as from the study of material culture, such as relating to the shrines, votive objects, and goddess worship. For the phenomenon's contextualization we took recourse to the type of texts that are most often quoted as either inspiring the practice or contesting it. Apart from the religious 'validity' of the practice as allegedly found in ancient texts, and later commentaries or digests, we needed to look into the social and legal realities of women within those milieus in which the practice of a widow's self-immolation has had some sanction. In order to understand how the 'foreign male gaze', from Alexander the Great's 'historiographers' and 'ethnographers' to contemporary feminists, journalists, and comparative ethicists, has impacted the formulation of both its inspiring and its horrifying character, we needed insights from travel writing, orientalism, feminism, and subaltern studies.

Yet, it goes almost without saying that all such forays are subservient to the central question that we hoped to contribute to this Special Issue on contemporary ritual: was it justified, and cross-culturally fair, when Ronald Grimes, with his vast readership among scholars of rituals, discussed India's long extinct practice of widows' co-cremation as a topic of contemporary ritual criticism?

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<sup>6</sup> Brick (2010, p. 205): 'Considering the complete absence of any mention of *sahagamana* in both Vedic literature and the earliest works of the *Dharmaśāstra* tradition, it seems reasonable to conclude that this practice first gained enough popularity within Brahmanical culture to warrant mention at approximately the time when [ . . . ] composed their works on *dharma*', broadly in the second half of the first millennium CE. For historical accuracy, it is crucial to note here that by far not all Sanskrit authors who mentioned the practice expressed their opinion, let alone endorsed it as a meritorious alternative to ascetic celibacy for at least some women. If a position was taken in these earlier commentaries and digests, the practice was often refuted. At some point much later, commentators in late Dharmashastraic texts of the medieval period, who were obviously directly engaged with one another in a complex pan-Indian discourse, began to refer the practice to Vedic scriptures. Locus classicus was the cryptic and variously translated Ayurvedic passage quoted above and its Rigvedic parallel c<sub>q</sub> precursor in RV 10.18.7. Such reference to alleged Vedic sanction was often made only indirectly, via a problematic passage in the *Brahmapurāna*, probably in an attempt to find Vedic support for the practice. The name of the commentator most strongly linked to this 'Vedic argument' is Raghunandana (c. 1500 AD), who may have either misread the text or purposely falsified RV 10.18.7. See also Section 4.

Although the platform of ritual studies is known for its plurality of methods and its multidisciplinary, every author has a pedigree and a distinctive mark of one's own. In this article we took the position of the in-between researcher, who had been thoroughly trained in South Asian languages and cultures, and gradually began to move over to disciplinary fields such as religious studies and ritual studies. To be honest, the initial trigger had been confusion, and then irritation: why 'freeze' and 'essentialize' a long-extinct distant practice, and propose it as a topic for ritual criticism on a par with current practices of clitoridectomy? For this research we used our South-Asian expertise to sketch the settings in which Hindu practices of female co-cremation historically occurred, and we use insights into ritual performances to zoom in on *satī* as one of three ways traditionally open to a Hindu widow. Due to the fact that we have to 'set something straight' at this cross-cultural frontier after three decades of ritual criticism, during which the topic of co-cremation rather lamely and lopsidedly hobbled along,<sup>7</sup> we end this article with a few suggestions for a more embodied and more embedded perspective.

## 2. Widows' Co-Cremation in Hindu India: Its Ritual Components

First of all, the term *satī* (colonial English: suttee) has three basic meanings.<sup>8</sup> *Satī*, as a proper name, is the name of a goddess (see Section 3); the term *satī* in general is a honorific term for a married woman, a term that gives her a saintly quality; and it is a colonial term for the practice of a widow's self-chosen death on her deceased husband's funeral pyre. Our main focus was on the third, although the first two may occasionally enter the stage.

In order to present the ritual procedure of widow-burning in its ritual components we must understand the centrality and drama of ritual sacrifice in Hindu traditions. In Hindu cosmogony, one of the most persisting images of creation is through sacrifice. Fire sacrifice is what set the cosmos going, and fire sacrifice, endlessly repeated, is what keeps it going right now. A Hindu's last rite of passage (comprising of dying, death, and disposal) is traditionally acted out as a sacrificial process, and its name indicates this: *antyeṣṭi*, one's final and ultimate sacrifice, a total gift, a sublime offering in which one's physical constituents break down through fire and return to the five basic elements. In a way, a widow who followed her husband onto the funeral pyre ritually re-enacted the same cosmogonic process and thereby more than doubled the efficacy of the act.

According to Hindu tradition, formally death is only real until the body is fully cremated, and *prāṇa* (the individual life force) has left through the top of the skull. The extremely brief period<sup>9</sup> between the husband's physical death and the beginning or end of the open-air cremation process may also have marked the moment when a wife chose to follow him in death. This may have been merely a performative act—a symbolic gesture, just as we saw above, in *R̥gveda* 10.18.7-8 and *Atharvaveda* 18.3.2-8—or real self-immolation. How this may have actually looked varies from description to description. One of the first eyewitness accounts was from members of Alexander the Great's armed forces in India. The Greeks provided us with the following account, through Strabo.<sup>10</sup> In 316 or 317 BCE a Hindu general by the name of Keteus (originally Ketu, or even Khatri, i.e., a *kṣatriya* of the warrior class; see also Williams 1875, p. 258) had died in battle. One of his wives, eager to commit *satī*,

<sup>7</sup> There may have been a (hitherto unexposed) reason that the Hindu co-cremation case rather tracelessly disappeared from Grimes's later notes on ritual criticism. In the years right after Roop Kanwar's case, it had been a hot topic in wider western academic circles, but soon died down there. It might also be a matter of self-correction, of course. Compare Grimes (1988, 1990, 2002, 2013). See also our notes 2 and 31.

<sup>8</sup> *Satī*, as a term indicating broadly a 'good woman, faithful wife', has a totally different origin than the term *sādhvī*, although they ultimately mean the same. The first is derived from  $\sqrt{\text{sat}}$  (to be, to exist; one of the other derivations is *satya*, truth), whereas the latter is the feminine form of *sādhu* (straight to the goal, right, successful, and indeed obedient). The crowd's expletive "sādhu, sādhu"—often accompanying the widow's procession to the pyre—means "well done, bravo!"

<sup>9</sup> Ideally, the deceased should be cremated before the next dusk or dawn, whichever comes first.

<sup>10</sup> The transmission is generally believed to have been made through two participants in Alexander of Macedonia's expedition (c. 327 BCE), namely Aristobulus of Cassandria and Onesicritus; both are referred to by Diodorus (first century BCE). These now lost works may still have been available to historian-geographer Strabo (c. 63 BCE–c. 23 CE), or at least in fragments.

was decked out and decorated in auspicious red as if for a wedding. She was escorted to the cremation ground by a train of female relatives, who sang songs in praise of her virtue and good fortune. Near the pyre, she took off her jewelry and other ornaments, which she distributed among the women of her cortège. Her brother (or brother-in-law?) helped her onto the pyre. Before the wood pyre was kindled, the entire army marched around it three times. The widow lay beside her husband, and as the flames seized her no sound of weakness or pain came from her lips. The account further emphasizes that some of the foreign spectators were moved by admiration for her heroic action, others could not help but pity her and consider it a savage custom, and again others praised her and counted themselves fortunate to witness this auspicious occasion.

Whether voluntary widow-burning at that time was exceptional or indeed occasionally practiced among women of the higher warrior classes, we cannot tell. However, what we can tell from this account is that some ritual components related here have remained more or less essential through millennia: (1) the widow's festive bridal attire, (2) her auspiciousness, (3) the songs of praise, (4) the more intimate cortège as contrasted with the great spectacle at the cremation site, (5) the distribution of her jewelry, and (6) the heroic serenity with which the bride greeted the flames. A seventh aspect, the mixed reception, is another constant, but we will come back to that only later on.

As a ritual repertoire, it shares details with other Hindu rites of passage, particularly the wedding. Ritually speaking, the woman was not a lamenting and lamentable widow, she was a joyful bride, eager to be reunited with her husband in death. Accounts may differ in details. In this case, we read that it was the army that made the triple circumambulation around the pyre, whereas this rite was normally performed by the eldest son first, and later by close relatives. In the Greek record it sounded like a kind of military salute (or tribute) to the deceased general, and may be a mere footnote to the widow's side of the story. A third variation can be found in the distribution of jewelry. In later accounts, especially those with a decidedly anti-Brahmanic stance, it was often reported that the Brahman priests received (or forcefully took) the jewelry as payment for their funerary services. A fourth variation can be found in the way the widow 'climbs' the pyre, 'jumps' into the fire, 'lies down next to her deceased husband', or 'sits down and lovingly places his head on her lap'. The greatest variation, however, must have been whether the widow acted of her own volition or was in some way talked round, drugged, coerced, or even forcefully dragged towards the pyre. In some reports it has been hinted at that a widow could become so terrified by the leaping flames that she struggled to escape, to her own shame and that of her family. In some colonial reports a further variation may have occurred: British officers may have arrived in time to cancel the entire procedure, drove the crowd of spectators apart, and fined the culprit (mostly the widow's in-laws), or, in quite a different register, rescued the lady in distress, for whom, naturally, the heroic rescuer developed an instant romantic crush, particularly when she happened to be young and beautiful. Although in most reports the procedure was described as synchronous—i.e., ideally the wife joined her husband on the pyre before the fire was lit, resulting in a proper *sahagamana*, respectively *sahamarāṇa*—this obviously was not always the case.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, not every determined widow became a *satī* right away: there may have been practical reasons for a lapse of time intermittently, such as distance,<sup>12</sup> but it could also be that at the moment of hearing about her husband's death the newly widowed wife did not qualify, such as in case she was under age, pregnant, or had small children. In such a situation, she could solemnly declare that she would postpone *satī* until she would formally qualify. This formal declaration of ritual intent was a crucial part of any proper Hindu co-cremation. Any sacrificial ritual in Hinduism is only valid if it has been preceded by this formal declaration of intent: *saṃkalpa*. In a way this ritual requirement

<sup>11</sup> *Saha-* means along with, in the sense of together. Some contemporary authors imply that the proper term to be applied when there is no synchronicity (but instead an obvious time difference) would be *anu-*, meaning along with, but in the sense of after: *anugamana*, *anumarāṇa*.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek report makes the impression of synchronicity. This would imply that the Indian army had allowed spouses to accompany their highly placed husbands on military tours.

could make or break a co-cremation, as the widow needed to speak out the formula in person. Apart from its otherworldly consequences, this could imply two things: in case of its omission the entire procedure could later on be assessed as invalid, and therefore condemned as either suicide or homicide; and secondly, it could be assessed as invalid because of coercion, force, the use of opium to drug the widow's senses, or indecent haste.

### 3. Contextualizing Co-Cremation

In order to understand the societal system behind the co-cremation of widows, voluntary or forced, it is necessary to explore the cultural and ethical values around the married woman. The logic of *satī* emerges out of a matrix of marital formations as an alternative to widowhood. What then, was so special about a married woman, and why was widowhood considered to be so inauspicious that some newly widowed wives chose joining their deceased husbands in the flames over life as a widow?

First, there is a myth, the myth of the goddess *Satī*. To cut a long myth short, goddess *Satī*, who was married to the great but rather 'untamed' god Śiva, once found out that her husband had been dishonored by her father Dakṣa, who had failed to invite him to a great sacrificial offering. As the ultimate consequence of her husband's dishonor she entered the fire. The self-immolation of wives partly<sup>13</sup> rests on this myth of goddess *Satī* (Hawley 1994; Ramos 2017). Not only do they have the name in common, in the ancient story *Satī* had entered the sacrificial fire as the dramatic gesture of showing loyalty to her husband. The rationale behind the practice of *satī* is thus related to notions of how a woman should ideally behave towards her husband. The technical term for this behavioral code is *pativrataḍdharma*, namely the *dharma* that is appropriate to a married woman. Central to her duties is care of her husband. A devoted wife ideally brings well-being to the husband, the family, and the overall community (Harlan 1994). Given this hierarchical relation, the husband ought to outlive his wife. If the husband dies first, this is considered a disruption in more ways than one. As the wife had generally left her own native family at the time of her wedding and became adopted into the community of her husband's lineage, the widow traditionally occupied an anomalous position. She herself often marked this transition by withdrawing to the margins of her family-in-law, renouncing participation in all auspicious family rituals. Breaking her bangles (which used to mark her auspicious married state), removing the red powder from the parting of her hair, and shedding all jewelry or bright colors, she was expected to live out her life as a carrier of inauspiciousness. Moreover, she might be treated badly or even banished from the house of her in-laws. Ritually, however, her function would be paramount: she was expected to scrupulously perform all the calendrical rituals required to guarantee her dead husband's well-being in the hereafter. Her anticipation of such a life of widowhood may well have brought her to the point that she favored *satī* as a more elevated alternative. Or, in some cases, she may have been forced by her in-laws, and possibly priests, to do so (Oldenburg 1994b).

In addition to the argument related to the inauspiciousness and material deprivation of a widow's state, there is another. The practice of *satī* may well have emerged among martial communities in frontier zones, as we saw above in the Greek report. In western and northern India, *kṣatriyas'* prime activity in the early days was the defense of land and cattle, and heroic sacrificial death-in-action became highly valued. It has been argued that this found a female parallel in shared death—the widow following her husband after he had died on the battlefield—for at least two reasons: first, that the male notion of honor and property extended to his wife (or wives), who should not fall into the hands of others; and second, that *kṣatriya* women had generally been reared in the spirit of heroism anyway.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note here that her husband Śiva had not died, but had merely been dishonored. Still, his wife literally died of shame.

<sup>14</sup> Especially among the Rājputs—living in the northwest regions where a succession of invaders had entered the continent—there was a special but extremely rare form of chivalric suicide by Hindu women: *jauhar* or *jauhar satī*. *Jauhar* was the act of collective self-immolation to avoid capture and abuse by foreign invaders. The term *jauhar* is commonly derived from Sanskrit *jatugrha*, literally a house plastered with lac and other highly combustible materials. This house was intentionally and purposely set on fire while women and children were inside, in order to save their honor when husbands and

This special form of heroism (*vīrya*) became iconographically represented in many memorial stones of warriors (*vīra*; often *bir* in the vernacular) on horseback, depictions in which the warrior is always accompanied by his wife who stands next to him, with her hands in the gesture of paying homage to him (Courtright 1994). What is striking about such memorial stones is that the ladies make this respectful gesture with their bangles perfectly in place on their wrists, indicating that they were seen as married and not as widowed, even in death. The famous *satī* stones, found across the entire landscape of India, sometimes became, over time, more abstract in expression. For instance, when nothing but a raised right arm is depicted, or merely a lady's hand or a palmprint (supposedly the print of the palm of her hand on stone, still with traces of the auspicious red powder with which she had decorated herself; see Figure 2).<sup>15</sup> In many places this auspicious red color is maintained even now, as married women still visit such sites 'to derive strength' and 'to gain *śaktī*' by putting their own hand palms in the palmprints allegedly left there in the past by virtuous widows on their way to their husband's pyre (Courtright 2011).



Figure 2. Fort Palace in Jaisalmer, with *satī* palmprints (Albertina Nugteren).

Places where a widow had followed her husband in death have often become places of pilgrimage. The pilgrim's destination may be a single memorial stone, a wayside shrine, or a proper temple. The story of a singular historical *satī* may have been at the basis of such a site, but often the historical and the devotional get fused. The story of the goddess *Satī* likewise forms a network of local and regional shrines, especially in Rajasthan (Harlan 1994). The idea is that a human *satī*, first by her self-chosen death and then by her continued service to her deceased husband in the hereafter, partakes in a particular form of divine power, called *śakti* or *sat*. This power may be considered to be beneficial for devotees, but, as the other side of the coin, may easily be turned into a curse as well. Some historical

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armies faced inescapable military defeat. This makes it, in the words of Wendy Doniger, 'a kind of prophylactic suttee' (Doniger 2010, p. 611). Although in collective memory, both in India and in Britain, *jauhar* is often connected with Muslim invasions—the most famous *jauhar* is that during the Mughal siege of Chittorgarh in 1568—the practice was at least a millenium older. Even Arrian, in Book VI of his *Anabasis* (second century CE), referred to a military clash between Macedonian and 'Agalossoi' armies, during which civilians, fearing defeat, set fire to their home town and cast themselves into the flames. See, for instance, Hawley (1994).

<sup>15</sup> Although we call them handprints or palmprints, they are in most cases the exact opposites, and in that sense palindromic in form. The existence of daubed palmprints on walls must have originated in actual impressions (concave), which over time became reproduced in elevated form (convex). The same counterintuitive reversal is found in the cult of Buddha's footprints.

*satīs* have thus transcended the status of a simple lineage goddess and have grown into community goddesses, both loved and feared.

#### 4. Textual Passages

There are two sources in the ancient scriptures that are regularly referred to in the debates on the practice of *satī* (Sharma et al. 1988; Datta 1990; Hawley 1994; Major 2007; Brick 2010). The one mentioned above (*Atharvaveda* 18.3.1-8), if partially read, can easily be considered as advocating ‘this ancient custom’ (*dharmam purāṇam*), whereas the larger part (2–8) gives the impression that ‘lying with the deceased husband’ is not at all ‘dying with the deceased husband’ but merely a symbolic gesture. In some commentaries, it is said that her brother should be the one to help her rise, in some other comments it is posed—more logically, in a patrilinear joint family system—that it was the brother-in-law who rightfully took her hand and accepted her as a co-wife. The reference to wealth and offspring may indeed make more sense this way. Even more cryptic is the parallel passage from *Rgveda* 10.18.7-8:

Let these [accompanying] women, who are not widows, and who do have good husbands, sit down, [their eyes] shining with clarified butter used as collyrium;

May the wives, whose eyes are tearless, who are free from disease, and who are well-decorated, occupy the front seat [respectively: step into the fire].<sup>16</sup>

Oh, woman! Rise, up towards the world of the living; you lie down near this departed [husband]; Come, the state of being a wife to the husband who held your hand, and whose love for you has now been fulfilled, [is over].

Should we read this passage, being part of a Vedic funeral hymn, as advocating *satī* or not? The first part was to be repeated when the wife was made to sit near the corpse, as in any cremation ceremony, and the second half was employed when she was instructed to rise. While some have read this as the remnants of ancient customs (providing the dead man with weapons, ornaments, clothes, food and possibly his widows as accompanying him to the hereafter), others have pointed at the dynamics between the two half-passages: the widow should first sit or lie down, then rise and return to the world of the living, and possibly to a new married life with her brother-in-law. Over the course of time the middle passage has been understood in either of two ways, reading *agne* ([sit, or step] in(to) the fire) instead of *agre* ([sit] in front)!

It is often stated that such ambiguous Vedic verses had been incorporated into *satī* ritual around the sixteenth century to accord Vedic-Brahmanic legitimacy to the practice, such as by Raghunandana, a *paṇḍit* from Varanasi. This probability redirects us to text genres such as the *Dharmaśāstras*<sup>17</sup> and *Dharmanibandhas*<sup>18</sup> for providing a more reliable setting in which we may find a clue for the emergence of (or at least the ideology about) *satī* as an actual and lawful practice. The *Dharmaśāstras*, an extensive

<sup>16</sup> As we will see below, any translation of this part is problematic. There have been variations such as “let them occupy the seat in front (first)”, but also alternative renderings such as “let them first go up into the dwelling” or even “let them first mount the womb”, or, more dramatically and meaningfully: “let them step into the fire”. The controversy centers around the meaning of the word *yoṇi* here (womb, or seat) as well as about reading either *agre* (first, or in front) or *agne* (in(to) the fire).

<sup>17</sup> *Dharmaśāstras* (roughly the first millennium CE) are texts rooted in the *Dharmasūtras*, which are dated to the second half of the first millennium BCE. They are both law books on *Dharma*, containing guidelines for individual and social behavior, including ethics and personal, civil, and criminal law. The later *Dharmaśāstras* constitute commentaries on the earlier *sūtras*, as well as elaborate treatises on duties, and thus form an expansion to the *Dharmasūtras*.

<sup>18</sup> *Dharmanibandhas* are one further step in the *Dharma* literature: digests and commentaries written from the early twelfth century onwards. For historical accuracy it is crucial to note that *Dharma* texts are prescriptive, not descriptive. Yet, as a genre that spans some 2.5 millennia, one can guess that they at least reflect something of the evolving regional, ethical, ideological, cultural, and legal practices (Olivelle 1999, pp. 175–8; 2006, pp. 184–5). The genre of *Dharma* texts gained an entirely new status, when in the early colonial period they were declared to be ‘the law of the land in South Asia’ by the British administrators.

compilation of sociomoral prescriptions produced by Brahmanic traditions, ranged from one or two centuries BCE to probably the end of the first millennium CE. In them, there was a widespread tendency to value the widow as a person who best honors her husband's memory not by self-immolation on his pyre, but by living a life of chastity, frugality, and commemorative rites in support of her husband, especially memorial rites to keep him fulfilled in the hereafter. It is only later that the topic of a wife's co-cremation began to enter Dharmashastric discourse, possibly under influence of royalty and certain martial classes. One explicit example from the *Viṣṇusmṛti-Dharmasūtra* (25: 14) still presents a middle position:

When a woman's husband has died, she should either practice ascetic celibacy or ascend [the funeral pyre] after him.

(quoted by Brick 2010, p. 204)

While this sounds fairly general there are other instances that indicate that at that time the position in the *satī*-debate tended to be class-specific:

Due to Vedic injunctions a Brahmin woman should not follow her husband in death, but for the other social classes tradition holds this to be the supreme Law of Women. When a woman of Brahmin caste follows her husband in death, by killing herself she leads neither herself nor her husband to heaven.

(commented by Brick 2010, p. 206)

Only in the *Dharmanibandha* texts—a genre of later commentaries and digests, stemming from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries—are there more extensive discussions on *satī*, both on its preconditions and on ritual instructions. As we saw above, the practice may have gained some ground between the ninth and eleventh centuries AD, among some locally confined martial classes. It may have gained a somewhat wider acclaim in the centuries leading up to the nineteenth century. To this we should add that gradually some Kashmiri and Bengali Brahmans appear to have adopted it in imitation of their rulers or for reasons of their own.

A tentative conclusion so far is that in pre-Vedic times there may or may not have been a custom of funerary gifts including the deceased's living wife or wives. In the Vedic passages referred to above, this may be hinted at as 'the ancient custom', although by then long extinct. But there may have been circles of ruling families, especially in situations of war, in which the custom of co-cremation was continued. Among aristocrats and in martial families there may have been individual cases, far and wide apart, of heroic self-sacrifice, such as by widowed queens whose honor, loyalty and courage at dramatic moments were admired but not generally emulated. The practice was never widespread, and never was it sanctioned unreservedly. At some point in time, probably towards the end of the first millennium CE, the topic began to enter debates about individual *dharma* (proper behavior for one's class, caste, and phase in life). In general, suicide was considered a grave sin, and so was homicide (forcing a woman to the pyre). At a relatively late stage there must have been a crucial turn among Brahmans, probably first in Kashmir and later in Bengal and Nepal. The reasons may have been varied: changes in property laws, changes in the minimum age of child brides, changes in the visions of the afterlife, possibly. Another factor may be that the position of high-class Hindu women had partially changed as a result of Islamic Mughal rule. In general, *sahagamana* as the noble example of a wife's loyalty began to be more favorably received, but as a practice it had never become rampant before European travelers began to report on it (Figueira 1994; Lewis 1994). Soon, it became expected from any foreign traveler to write an eyewitness account of such a case, but there is no clue to the exact number of cases before the beginning of the nineteenth century, when especially missionaries began to count the number of widow-burnings in their reports (Courtright 2011, pp. 170–71).

## 5. The Imperial–Colonial and Post-Independence Period

The oldest material evidence of *satī* as an actual practice are inscriptions: one in Nepal dated 464 CE<sup>19</sup> and one in India dated 510 CE. There are surviving *satī* commemorative stones from the eleventh century onwards (Michaels 2004, p. 149). European travelers to South Asia, as far back as Marco Polo (late thirteenth century), made mention of the practice of widow burning, and later it became an almost obligatory item in the evolving genre of travel writing, whether as an eyewitness account or from hearsay. Whether these accounts testified to an actual flourishing of the practice, or tell us more about the European frisson about a cruel exotic culture, is not for us to decide. Whereas *satī* has always been the exception rather than the rule in Hindu life, it is striking that in the orientaling imagination, religiously motivated suicide became regarded as one of the ubiquitous excesses both of the religious sentiment and of its authorities, the Brahmins. At the same time, some visitors could not help but express admiration for the noble women who did so voluntarily, although priests were often blamed for advocating the practice as a honorable ‘way out’ of dishonor, especially in those regions where widows had limited or no inheritance rights.<sup>20</sup> In the Mughal period (1526–1857), the Muslim rulers had generally been averse to it: some (such as Akbar, in 1582) had merely prohibited the use of compulsion, others had actually banned the practice (see Figure 3).

In 1510, the famous Portuguese Alfonso Albuquerque (governor of Portuguese India from 1509 to 1515) temporarily prohibited *satī* within the Portuguese territory of Goa, even though he had promised to respect local customs and to adopt a policy of noninterference in Hindu religious practices. This abolition was repealed in 1555 after Brahmanic intervention.<sup>21</sup> Whether the practice had become more widespread autonomously, or whether the European and Mughal condemnation began to act as an incentive for ‘going underground’ and flourishing out of reach of imperial–colonial power, there is some numerical evidence that there were considerable amounts of cases in some districts before *satī* was officially banned in the year 1829,<sup>22</sup> by Lord Bentinck, with support from Indian reform intellectuals such as Ram Mohan Roy. Preceding this, the colonial court in Calcutta had gradually built up a well-documented case against *satī*. From 1805, it had ordered *panḍits* to investigate those textual authorities that were most often referred to as prescribing *satī* as a religious obligation and an ancient custom. The advisory opinions that were produced by the court Brahmins were nuanced: *satī* could not be classified as an absolute religious obligation, but there existed certain authoritative statements, such as on which widows qualified and on the merits bestowed on the widow who accompanied her deceased husband in the hereafter. Parallel to the juridical inquiries and the compilation of statistical data, some well-established reform-minded Brahmin intellectuals discussed, in various pamphlets, the lack of religious legitimacy of the practice from the perspective of the Dharmashastric tradition. Both Roy, as a public intellectual, and a group of evangelical missionaries such as William Carey and James Pegg, denounced the practice of *satī* and opened a reformist attack on the position of Hindu women. The discourse gradually shifted towards the greater civilizing mission of the British Empire as an agent of reform, and although there was some discussion on the position of Hindu wives and widows, women themselves were conspicuously absent from those debates and had no voice in the matter. Once the abolition of *satī* had been achieved, opposition to the policy prohibiting it

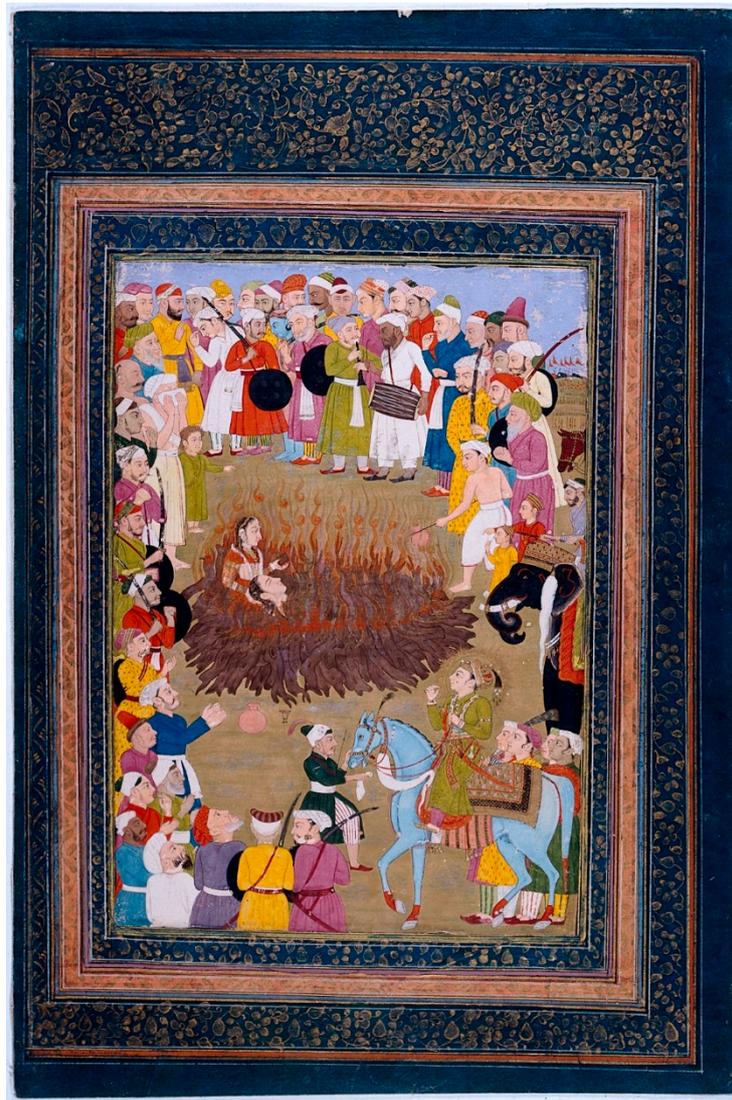
<sup>19</sup> See note 27. For a recent picture of a *satī* gate in Nepal, see Figure 4. For an older photograph of that same gate, see (Michaels 2008, p. 139).

<sup>20</sup> This is not self-evident, however. It is correctly pointed out by some historians that the existence of inheritance rights for widows in some parts of India may have caused their in-laws to use more force on the widow to become a *satī*. This would ensure them that the family property would remain undivided. In this light, the suggestion inherent in the two Vedic texts quoted above achieves a new poignancy: if the widow was to remarry inside the family, preferably to her eldest brother-in-law, the family property would be likewise ensured. The custom of levirate may well have its basis in such material and/or legal conditions.

<sup>21</sup> This was paralleled by similar measures by the Dutch and French in their respective colonies in India. The Danes permitted it until the nineteenth century.

<sup>22</sup> Given the patchwork nature of British control over South Asian states, it was only in 1861 that a general ban was issued by Queen Victoria, whereas, for instance, it had been banned in the City of Calcutta already since 1803.

rather easily dissipated, but the entire process gave rise to a growing suspicion among the people that Hindu religious traditions were under attack. This state of mind fed into uneasiness about further 'Anglicization', such as the educational system, the missionaries, and the English language. It may be that in the independence movement, the nation had been imagined as a virtuous mother (Mother India) but it took solid postcolonial criticism as well as feminist and subaltern voices to more thoroughly deconstruct the '*satī* of the mind' (Spivak 1988). The same is valid for contemporary Hinduism in Nepal (see Figure 4).



**Figure 3.** 'A Hindu princess committing suttee against the wishes of the Emperor Akbar but with his reluctant consent' (gouache, painting 16/17th century, by Muhammad Rizā Nau'ī of Khasbushan (d. 1610). A public domain image, Wikimedia Commons/Wellcome Library London, image L0022809).

India gained independence and full political sovereignty in 1947. In its penal code, the ban on *satī* was maintained, but in India custom, usage, and statutory law are so inextricably mixed up in personal law that it was only in 1987 that there was a general reformulation in the form of the Sati Prevention Act, in which 'the supporting, encouraging, forcing, glorifying or attempting to commit *satī*' was explicitly declared illegal and punishable. This legal step was rather suddenly induced and actuated by a new case of *satī* that took India by storm and was widely picked up by national as well as international media. In general *satī* was not only seen as a crime but as a relic of a dark and primitive

past. There was a widespread notion that it had become completely extinct. In a dramatic way, this was contradicted by the voluntary death of a young woman named Roop Kanwar (18 years old) in Deorala, a town about 70 km north of Rajasthan's capital Jaipur.<sup>23</sup> She had been married for less than a year when her husband (24 years old) had suddenly died in hospital. It was told that immediately when she had heard about her husband's death, she had dressed up as a bride and had announced that she would follow him as a *sati*.<sup>24</sup> On the 4th of September 1987 she joined him on the pyre merely six hours after the corpse had been brought home from the hospital.<sup>25</sup> It was only a matter of days before thousands of local people flocked to the place to receive a blessing. Naturally, all kinds of reporters, international journalists and researchers from women's organizations came flocking as well (Nandy 1994). There were massive counter-demonstrations for the right to widow-burning, mainly by women from the same state. The resulting court case languished for over twenty years: had her in-laws coerced her or adequately tried to dissuade her? Why had her own parents been absent? Had she been confused and overwhelmed? Had she made a mature decision all by herself? Was it her community, the Shekhawat Rājput caste in eastern Rajasthan, that had instilled such heroic romantic values in her? Was there an underground revival of the practice behind this?<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 4.** Paśupatināth cremation *ghāṭs*, Deopatan, Nepal, with ‘Satiḍvāra’ (the historical *sati*s’ gate) indicated in red (photograph courtesy of Purushotam Khatiwada, Kathmandu).

In several ways, women's organizations took the lead in interpreting this shocking recurrence of *sati*: the case was presented as shaming India's modernity and as an illustration of the tenacious hold that patriarchal institutions and caste values still had on young naïve minds—and, as was said explicitly, on female bodies (Oldenburg 1994b). Although some forms of Indian feminism were explicitly against

<sup>23</sup> Whereas there have been rumors about some other cases since independence, this is certainly the most high-profile *sati* incident.

<sup>24</sup> For some locally situated research, see (Van Den Bosch 1990, 1992, 1995). For focus on the widow, see (Buitelaar 1995).

<sup>25</sup> In this contemporary case it is fortunate that we have this detail. Without claiming that this time lapse of a mere six hours is representative for most cases, it illustrates the extremely short time the widow may have had for her deliberation, and for the parents or parents-in-law to support or dissuade her. Moreover, it remains completely invisible how despite political and judicial processes in the outside world, certain tendencies and contests might have formed within households and within individuals.

<sup>26</sup> Even as recently as the 5th of September, 2019, on the 32nd anniversary of the event, *The Times of India* reported on the ‘court case’ with the headline ‘In Rajasthan Roop Kanwar still burns bright’, and placed a photograph of her *samādhi sthal* (the monument marking the place where she was burnt).

modeling themselves after ‘Western’ feminism, not only the practice but also the very ontology behind *satī* were generally seen as blatantly harmful and opposed to women’s well-being. As in the ages before, this singular case evoked contradictory trajectories of interpretation and evaluation: a horrid rite symbolizing abuse of women by relations, in-laws, priests, and caste communities, but just as well the romantic appeal of true love and conjugal loyalty. Others used the occasion to unfold critical theories about female agency. Particularly, Gayatri Spivak became a spokesperson of/for what she called ‘sub-altern voices’, asking herself and others: ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (Spivak 1988). In this case, the subaltern is the disenfranchised woman whose subaltern voice had remained mostly unheard and whose arguments had remained marginal to the debate.<sup>27</sup> Closer historical investigation revealed, however, that women in the past, caught between bleak widowhood and the flames of the pyre, had had a voice, albeit a muted one, instrumentalized by evangelical missionaries for their own ends. It was found that amidst the multivocality of millennia of opined male players in the grim drama of burning widows, colonial records of the years between 1805 and 1830 testified that those women who had managed to escape coercion or had been rescued by British officers, respectively talked around by Indian reformists, gave as their prime motive for co-cremation: material suffering (Doniger 2010, p. 613). As subjective dignity of the women involved—and particularly those who had died in the flames—this may not amount to much, but it strengthened the urgency with which critical theories of the Frankfurter Schule were applied to both women’s issues and postcolonial issues in the long shadows of ‘inner colonization’.

## 6. Ritual Criticism

Why did Ronald Grimes (2002, pp. 299–302) choose *satī* as a topic of ritual criticism? Was it fair to put a more or less obsolete practice—that had been abolished and punishable by law for almost two centuries—up for ritual scrutiny and moral indignation?

It may be merely a detail, but Grimes did not present it as *satī*, *sahagamana*, *sahamaraṇa*, nor as the more scandalous *suttee*, but as co-cremation, a designation he apologized for: ‘[ ... ] an act euphemistically called co-cremation.’ (Grimes 2002, p. 299) Although scholarly sound, co-cremation is an ambiguous term, a container term. Co-cremation and co-burial, or even co-immersion, are terms with a claim to universal validity, whereas *satī* is stubbornly alien, strange, foreign, culture-specific. There seems to be a diachronic identity to the term co-cremation. It testifies to the human tendency to bring about a synthesis of time, place, and identity by grouping the particular, even the ‘horrid’, under a universal umbrella term that, at face value, looks innocent enough. The specifics are worked into the fabric of intellectual identification and acknowledgement of an overarching anthropological category (Kapferer 2004). Specific time thus begins to be represented as both global and universal, and so does location. Time specificity and space specificity become diffused, flatlined as it were, as on a hospital monitoring screen. Yet terms like co-cremation do help us forward in our conceptualizing of funerary practices. Just as there is a chronosynthesis, there is a semblance of spatiosynthesis when the neutral term co-cremation is applied, even to what the British had deemed pan-Indian ‘horrid Hindu practices’. By using the term co-cremation for widow-burning, we seem to have safely distanced ourselves from it in both time and space.<sup>28</sup> By making it part of a universal, the sting is taken out of it. Grimes seems to have been right when he labeled the term a euphemism.

<sup>27</sup> Although our focus in this article has been on India, we could have mentioned neighboring country Nepal as a place where *satī* was banished as late as 1920. Nepal’s Legal Code of 1854, the *Mulukī Ain*, moreover, contains a detailed prescription-description of the procedure. In the previously mentioned first inscription (Nepal, 464 CE), we found an interesting conversation between a would-be *satī* and her son, who tried to dissuade her from entering the pyre by arguing that he as her son has equal or even more right to her presence. In a way, these are rare ‘subaltern’ voices. See (Michaels 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Exactly this is what happened when both Hindu priests and Hindu blood-and-soil nativists began to feel defensive in the years right before abolition. They countered the British civilizational zeal by pointing out parallels on the level of co-cremation, co-burial, and co-immersion in other cultures, including Europe. Even more poignantly (though less to the point topically) they indicated the evil of slavery, in which most of the so-called civilized nations were still deeply involved.

With the term ritual criticism, we indicate the current position of critical reflection on ritual within the academic framework of ritual studies. Roughly, three modes can be distinguished: (1) the predominantly internal perspective of criticizing a particular ritual performance or the ritual act in itself; (2) the predominantly external perspective with which a particular ritual performance or a ritual tradition is evaluated and assessed; and (3) ritual criticism as a step towards theorizing about ‘doing ritual’ or ‘doing ritual studies’. Although this distinction (Post 2013, pp. 173–4; 2015, p. 8) can be helpful, in a case study such as this, types one and two are intertwined, since the criticism is presented both from within (inside Hindu culture itself) and from without (colonial British, as well as the open platform of ritual studies today).<sup>29</sup> The way Grimes presented the two examples of clitoridectomy and widow-burning was mainly within a normative framework mode (type two). It is not clear, however, whose normative framework. Presenting widow-burning as a topic for ritual criticism makes this a normative framework about a normative past and a normative ‘elsewhere’. Under these conditions—the past and the distant—there is always the risk of an ‘inversion of reality’: othering. The British had presented India as a country where horrid rites like *satī* prevailed, whereas indigenous nineteenth-century public intellectuals had even condemned both present and past versions. They thus admitted to their own culture’s horrid rites, both in their nineteenth-century form and in the form of a vaguely referred, possibly even more horrid rite of the pre-Vedic past: the ‘ancient custom’ (AV 18.3.1) of living wives accompanying dead husbands as funerary gifts<sup>30</sup> into graves and onto pyres.

Grimes defined ritual criticism as ‘the act of interpreting a ritual with a view to implicating its practice. [ ... ] Tendering interpretations is not only about finding or formulating meanings; it is also about identifying or taking positions regarding practices.’ (Grimes 2013, p. 72). In an earlier work, *Deeply into the Bone*, Grimes had introduced the case of Hindu co-cremation in a chapter called Passages (ch. 5): ‘A telling example in which a rite of passage comes under critical scrutiny from both inside and outside a tradition is *satī*. It is not widely practiced now, **so I will speak of it in the past tense.**’ (Grimes 2002, p. 299; emphasis ours).<sup>31</sup> In a way, the case of co-cremation in India could be introduced by the same words he used on the case of female circumcision: ‘[ ... ] occurs at an intercultural frontier where indigenous practitioners and outside observers engage in considerable debate.’ (Grimes 2002, p. 295). Likewise, we could pose the same questions to our case: ‘Do observers have the right to criticize indigenous ritual practices? Do they have a right **not** to criticize them?’ (Grimes 2002, p. 298). Indeed, the *satī* practice has been contested both by many Hindus themselves and by outsiders, even those back in Europe who had heard the most hair-raising missionary accounts of it. The practice, however, had never been widespread, and never had it been sanctioned unreservedly. In a way, there has always been indigenous Hindu criticism on the practice, not so much about one ritual component or another, or about its evaluation or interpretation. Rather, the moral and soteriological grounds have always been a matter of contention, for everyone involved, both proponents and opponents.<sup>32</sup> Yet among the opinions and even outrage, one voice is sadly missing, that of the widow herself. Her perspective—becoming a *satī* or not, with which reasons, which emotions, and which expectations—is absent, as is often the case in the clitoridectomy debate—which Grimes explored as another case for ritual criticism—as well. In the real-life societal setting, the Hindu widow was often dramatically younger than her husband, and child widowhood had brought another

<sup>29</sup> The term ‘ritual studies’ emerged in the habitat of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in 1977. This does not, however, limit the phenomenon of systematic ritual criticism to this platform, nor to this timeframe. Examples can be found in various ancient cultures. For instance, scholars such as Catherine Bell (on ancient China) and Kathryn McClymond (on ancient India) are known to interweave classic culture-specific ‘ritologies’ with critical debates on the contemporary ritual studies platform.

<sup>30</sup> Although superficially the phenomenon may look the same, there is a crucial difference between wives as funerary gifts and wives as mediators of salvation.

<sup>31</sup> This crucial line tends to be overlooked. See for instance (Post 2013, p. 178), on ‘co-cremation in Asia’: ‘[ ... ] is the ritual tradition [ ... ]’ instead of ‘was’.

<sup>32</sup> In an earlier article (Grimes 1988, p. 221) Grimes had distinguished emic (intrareligious), cross-cultural (inter-religious), and etic (mainly between scholarly and indigenous) contexts of ritual criticism. For seven principles of ritual criticism, see his pages 231–237.

sharp edge to the practice. It is telling that the Sati Regulation Act of 1829 has been followed closely by interrelated issues, such as the Widows' Remarriage Act (1856), the Female Infanticide Prevention Act (1870), and the Age of Consent Act (1891).

Many indigenous historical arguments for and against the practice, formulated by those privileged enough that their authoritative opinions had been transmitted in written form, are thus mainly circumstantial and contextual. As a result, the painful question remains whether a simple misreading in a Vedic text (*agne* (in the fire) for *agre* (at the front) had actually misguided countless generations of men and women about the scriptural authority of widow-burning. The same is valid for the failure to literally contextualize the Vedic statements. Had people—and especially women<sup>33</sup>—been able to read, would they have stopped reading after the first injunction about the widow lying down next to her deceased husband on the wood pyre? Or would they have continued reading and would they then have reasoned that the first injunction was merely a symbolical gesture, a ritual re-enactment of what might have been an actual practice in the hoary past? Would they have understood its 'purely performative' character<sup>34</sup> and have played their part willingly, luckily escaping to a renewed chance at life? How could it happen that the invitation issued to the widow to join her husband in the fire had become completely disconnected from the following stanzas, in which she was invited back to the world of the living, and possibly even to remarriage, wealth, and offspring? If she had known, would she then have taken the proffered hand of her brother-in-law? Or do such things like philological and theological hairsplitting have relevance for only a few, and are the actual lifeworlds in which centuries of Hindu men and women used to live by far more crucial than a few dubious text passages?

Still, these textual details and their implications are serious grounds for ritual criticism, and have been so in the academic study of Hinduism (Oldenburg 1994a; 1994b, p. 159). They show the Janus face of lived religion: popular emotion-charged religious practices can arise and continue more or less independently of scriptural injunctions that might have been interjected into the discussion at a much later stage by commentators who advocated the practice. Were they indeed late justifications, introduced when literate Brahman priests began to advocate and glorify the practice in a certain way? They may have incorporated the Vedic verses into the commentarial tradition as late as the sixteenth century, with a view to lend Brahmanic legitimacy to a practice that to all probabilities had been limited to communities that had long followed their own logic and argumentation.

But what really remains unanswered so far are other grounds for framing *sati* as a topic for ritual criticism, especially the cross-cultural framework: do outside observers have a right to criticize indigenous ritual practices, and even more pointedly: do they have a right not to criticize them? To these poignant moral questions we need to add: do outside observers have a right to criticize indigenous ritual practices of the **past**? Do they have a right/duty not to?

Sidestepping the moral and intercultural issues mentioned above, we can merely remark that what is presented as type-2 ritual criticism tends to be not about ritual itself, but rather about its moral environment. Moreover, the moral indignation we are expected to express in this case is misplaced and lagging behind the facts: it is predominantly a thing of the past, and others have already done all the arguing, documentation, and legislation of abolishing it. In the last fifty years, a considerable number of scholars have written detailed analyses (Sharma et al. 1988; Datta 1990; Hawley 1994; Mani 1998; Weinberger-Thomas 1999). In another tone of voice and with other tools, novelists and filmmakers have brought the practice to life in all its heart-wrenching drama (such as the Bengali film *Sati* by Sen 1989). But what is still lacking is its (critical) evaluation as a rite. I therefore present, in retrospect, merely a few remarks of a more ritual nature than is usual in discussions of *sati*.

(1) It is crucial to point out that in a patrilineal society, man and woman, through the wedding ritual, had become a ritual unit. This implies that a wife lost her own lineage (*gotra*) and started to live with

<sup>33</sup> Even leaving general illiteracy aside, it had long been strictly prohibited for women to read the *Vedas*.

<sup>34</sup> See Richard Schechner on performance theories as related to ritual (chapter 3) and play-acting (chapter 4) in his *Performance Studies* (Schechner 2006).

her agnatic family, whose ritual structures she had to follow from that moment onwards.<sup>35</sup> As a result, when her husband died before her, a widow was doubly destitute, not only socioeconomically but also ritually. Ritually, a widow was an anomaly. A new widow stood at a dead end, in the most literal and ritual sense of the word. Her own identity had died when she married. As a consequence, a newly widowed woman was bereft in all dramatic senses of the ancient term. Being in this void, this limbo, she was forced to take a ritual step and cross a threshold, in whichever direction. This transition was to be marked either way: by becoming a *satī* or by accepting her inauspicious state as a widow and act accordingly. If she did not choose *satī*, all she could do was invest as much energy and dignity as was left in her into the numerous commemorative rituals that filled the ritual calendar from that moment onwards. Her only *raison d'être* was to become totally dedicated to her deceased husband's own well-being, and that of his ancestors, by scrupulously and meticulously performing ancestor rituals, including fasts, wakes, and pilgrimages. Both options—whichever of the two new life stages she would choose—had to be preceded by a solemn declaration of intent (*saṃkalpa*). If she declared to become a *satī*, she was dressed and decorated as a bride and led triumphantly to the pyre; whereas if she declared to accept her state as a widow she had to relinquish her marital paraphernalia, such as jewelry and the auspicious red powder in the parting of her hair. Her hair was shaven off, her bangles were broken, and from now on she would wear only coarse white cotton. She would live celibately and frugally at the family's periphery, despised or at best ignored, and would take no part at all in whatever auspicious occasion (including life rites) of this household. It would require research of its own to come to a proper evaluation of the previously mentioned subalternative for widowhood: marrying her eldest brother-in-law. Somehow, this option of remarriage seems to have petered out in recent centuries, or at least it failed to draw much attention in studies on *satī*. It may also indicate a gap between cultural ideals—the customary Hindu law to provide the widow a safe and secure place within the joint family—and actual social realities. We know from other sources that remarriage was widely practiced, except among those who aspired upper-class status. It must have been after 1000 CE that remarriage gradually began to give way to the two other options, at least among some communities. Taking ritual criticism seriously<sup>36</sup> in a specifically and exclusively ritual sense might thus produce a slightly changed perspective on *satī* as one of those 'horrid Hindu rites'. Weighing both starkly contrasted widow rituals against one another would at least create some idea of what went on in such a widow's mind when she was forced to make her choice in a matter of just a few hours.

(2) A second aspect of ritual criticism, again in a purely ritual sense, is her ritual reward, the soteriological merit to be gained from either of these options. Cynically, one could say that *satī* would merely bring a short moment of glory—the festive procession, in bridal attire, to the pyre—followed by the unimaginable fear of the flames and the excruciating torture of being burned alive. But traditions were generous and quite explicit in promising what came later: endless marital bliss in the beyond and either an auspicious rebirth or the attainment of heaven for the couple. If we would be equally cynical about a widow's inauspicious existence at the periphery of her family-in-law, reconciliatory tradition would counter this picture of dreary survival as only of short duration, provided the widow was determined in her ritual service to her deceased husband and his ancestors (cf. Embree 1994). This came with equally promising compensations in the beyond: a prosperous and safe path to the gods for both, gratefulness and honor accorded by the ancestors, and finally an auspicious rebirth or the attainment of heaven for both of them. In the end, if women would make a well-informed calculation, the ritual reward of devoted ascetic widowhood would amount to more or

<sup>35</sup> This is why it is often said that wedding rites for Hindu women double as initiation rites: whereas boys undergo *upanayana* rites around puberty, girls are initiated into a proper ritual identity only by marriage, namely into the ritual identity of her husband and in-laws.

<sup>36</sup> It is striking that Grimes, who made a career of writing about rituals, ignored (2002, p. 301) this aspect of a traditional Hindu widow's existence: she may be deprived in various material and social ways, but her ritual value is unique and priceless, as she is the only one to safeguard her husband in the afterlife through constant ritual action.

less the same as *sati* would. In other words, when weighing the ritual rewards of one option against the ritual rewards of the other option, it would seem that overall there was not much difference.<sup>37</sup>

Undoubtedly, a much more exhaustive ritual criticism could be given, even if we would indeed focus on the ritual alone. It must suffice in this article that we have tried not to sensationalize the ritual practice and instead consider it a ritual in its own right, deserving well-balanced description and analysis. But there is another pitfall: the scholarly language of understanding could easily take the edge off it, reducing the ‘horrid rite’ to a mere custom, thus trivializing it. By ascribing mature deliberation to the woman finding herself at such crossroads we may forget about the terrific power a ritual may hold for those who have internalized a certain ideology, especially the oppressive ideologies about women, wives, and widows. For the larger part of *sati*’s history, the woman had to choose between becoming a widow or a *sati*. It was not the death of her husband that had made her a widow, but her choice between two rituals would make her either a widow (containing everything the life and status of a widow implied) or a *sati*. For her, this was not simply a choice between life and death, but a choice between two religious paths, either of which would define her as a good woman, and would define both rituals as demonstrating her womanly power for the salvation of her husband. Whatever choice she would make, this soteriological power changed her, momentarily, from a victim to a victor.<sup>38</sup> By demonstrating this as a crucial ritual choice, we might again contribute something to type-1 ritual criticism, but not without admitting that in many cases this would overrate the choice women actually had in such moments. For most Hindu women, choice itself must have been a fiction.

## 7. Some Tentative Conclusions

One of the slogans of post-independence feminism in India was: ‘Widows<sup>39</sup> are not for burning.’<sup>40</sup> Long after *sati* had been abolished, it remained a ‘burning’ issue, although the focus had gradually shifted to the position of Indian women in general, and more particularly the perception of widowhood in society (Chen 1998, 2011).

Type-1 and type-2 ritual criticism have quite a history here. Whereas the British had tended to sensationalize the practice of widow-burning, the Indian response may have been to trivialize the institution (Sharma et al. 1988, p. 10). In a parallel opposition and rivalry, British historians still tend to monopolize the credit for having abolished it, whereas contemporary Indian historians mainly point at their own nineteenth-century Bengali intellectuals, thus appropriating and nationalizing the abolishment. Moreover, Indian post-independence feminism took up the challenge to psychologize the issue: now that *sati* is abolished and widows can no longer burn themselves, they still suffer ‘cold’ *sati*, therefore their minds need to be decolonized as well as dewidowed. Such processes show us the variety of perspectives. It has never been a general practice and there is a long indigenous tradition of internal dissent and debate.

One of the forms of criticism that have been expressed in legal texts had to do with the overall prohibition of ritual suicide<sup>41</sup> and ritual homicide. More elaborate commentarial traditions merely mentioned it as an alternative to widowhood, but gradually commentators began to take positions.

<sup>37</sup> Various commentators have put more weight on the unimaginable merit of her choice for *sati*, and others more weight on her slow, difficult, but indispensable path of ritual dedication to her husband’s salvation, as a widow. At some point, the curious argument was made that, considering a woman’s fickle and sensuous disposition, the path of celibate ascetic widowhood would be more difficult, and thus unreliable, than the ‘more easy, safe and secure path’ of *sati*. This, again, requires quite a stretching of monocultural minds. See also Leslie (1989, p. 189).

<sup>38</sup> This double attribute was elaborated by Leslie (1992).

<sup>39</sup> In fact, ritually speaking, a wife only became a widow once she had fully undergone the ritual transition from the state of a married woman to being a widow. Should she choose *sati*, she would enter the fire auspiciously and victoriously as a wife, not a widow. This also explains why in most *sati* memorials the woman still wears her bangles.

<sup>40</sup> The issue of burning, in those years, was not only inflamed by a renewed case of *sati* (see Roop Kanwar, in Section 5), but also by dowry burnings, mostly known as dowry murders: various tragic cases when young women were intentionally set afire in the kitchen in order to settle dowry issues, although such acts were made to look like cooking accidents.

<sup>41</sup> There are nuances regarding religious forms of suicide. See, for instance, (Michaels 2004), Chapter 4.

In legal texts from the fifteenth centuries onwards, we found both supporters and opponents. An intricate debate about the limiting conditions under which *satī* would be permissible ensued. So did a theological–soteriological discourse: on the one hand about the ritual merit ascribed to ascetic widowhood and on the other hand, the ritual merit ascribed to *satī*. While such soteriological merits hung in an uneasy balance, the everyday realities of rights to inherit (or not), the age of brides, and the level of socioeconomic constraints for women often determined conjugal life, including the prevalence of remarriage, widowhood, or *satī*-hood.

Whereas the topic has long elicited internal as well as external moral judgements and even outrage, explicit ritual criticism, in the sense of evaluating *satī* as a ritual, on its own terms, and in its own right, is rare. In that setting, four further critical ritual considerations need to be made:

First, imagine a wife's choice for one of the two rituals as not merely determined by the pressures and limitations of patrilinear family life, but as one determining her husband's salvation, and indirectly her own. Second, imagine the newly widowed woman at a dead end, in the most literal and ritual sense of the word. Understanding the ritual void she was in—a dramatic form of in-betweenness—the newly widowed woman had to solemnly declare her decision. In Hinduism, a ritual decision reinforced by fire and water is irreversible. This illustrates once more the literal hold ritual can have on people. Third, whereas one of the key messages of the *Bhagavadgītā* might be that one should act without attachment to the results of one's actions, Hindu ritualism requires an elaborate and intricate bookkeeping of ritual merits. How can a newly widowed woman make a well-balanced computation on which she bases her choice? Both her life and her death are in service of her husband's eternal well-being anyway. Fourth, considering the brief time span allowed between death and cremation, often no more than a mere few hours, who could expect the newly widowed woman to be led by mature deliberation? Crucial ritual choices were to be made within a matter of hours, how could she be expected to make the required well-informed choice? From the perspective of the woman<sup>42</sup>, the terms indecent haste and socioeconomic pressure do seem to fit here, even if we take into account the 'normality' of the extremely short time generally allowed between the moment of death and the lighting of the pyre.<sup>43</sup>

## 8. Discussion: Rethinking Chronotopicities

In the light of the historical colonial intercultural frontier, Grimes' phrasing of the predicament was spot on: 'to criticize or not to criticize?', indicating, in this case, the predicament between siding with the British chauvinist horror and the relativist reaction of not wanting to mess with someone else's religious practices. Yet, at present, both approaches (criticize or refrain from criticizing) are driven by a need to come to a modicum of understanding of *satī*'s dramatically different 'otherness'.

Articulating proper ritual criticism would be dependent on a well-stocked interculturally and cross-culturally variegated toolbox; ritual studies so far haven't provided us with one. Rethinking the critical discourse of the long extinct practice of *satī* led us to admit defeat. To a certain degree we have summarized its history, its places, and its arguments. In oversized boots we made a tour around the practice in times and locations. But our imagination fails when it comes to the voices and attitudes and physical experiences of burning widows themselves. In the absence of their own testimonies—embodied and embedded in their dramatically different lifeworlds—we hand back the challenge to the person who brought this topic up for ritual criticism: Ronald Grimes.

Yet, our exercise has not been altogether fruitless. In a modest way we have contributed to type-3 ritual criticism. By pointing out the pitfalls of an a-historical presentation (as if the practice hadn't

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<sup>42</sup> We refer back to note 2 here. Although most of our argument is about a certain lack of time–space sensitivity in both Grimes's and Post's presentation, Indian philosophy prescribes a third factor that should always be taken into consideration as well: the subjective person in her/his situation. We have made clear throughout this article that women's voices are conspicuously missing. In an Indian philosophical and moral perspective, this would imply that any representation of the *satī* practice would be incomplete, even if factors of time and place would have been given due attention.

<sup>43</sup> See also note 9.

been banned since some 200 years), we may have made readers more sensitively aware of its time limits, and by marginalizing the practice to particular situations at the fringes of the realm (far and wide apart both in time and space), we have set straight some of the practice's spatial limits. In terms of theorizing both ritual studies and ritual criticism, this article is a plea for chronotopcity.

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