

Charan Shah's Death

Victim of Media Misrepresentation

○ Report by All India Democratic Women's Association

ON 15th November, an AIDWA team comprising of Subhashini Ali (Working President, AIDWA, UP) Urmila Awasthi and Sheila Narayan (Kanpur District AIDWA leader) visited Satpura village in Mahoba district to investigate the reported incident of 'Sati' that was supposed to have occurred there on November 11th. This was the first women's team to visit the village who could have detailed discussions with the residents. After meeting the family of the deceased, the neighbours and villagers, the team has come to the conclusion that it was not a "sati murder" as has been made out in certain sections of the press, and there was no abetment by any of the family members: Charan Shah had committed suicide because she did not wish to live without her husband. Her decision had not been conveyed to anyone beforehand. She did not dress in any bridal clothes nor were there any rituals or ceremonies associated with sati. Therefore, there is no question of any FIR being registered for commission of the act of sati against anyone under the sati prohibition laws. The process of myth creation is well under way. Subsequent to the suicide a few groups of people from neighbouring villages have visited the site of the pyre. However, reports of thousands of people visiting the village are greatly exaggerated. In fact it is exaggerated reports in both the print

and the electronic media which are adding fuel to the rumours. So far the local administration has not permitted the building of any shrine or sati temple. However there are certain people who feel that a sati temple would bring more money into the village and lead to some development activity. Efforts to build a temple may intensify. Therefore, it is essential for local units of political parties as well as *panchayats* and social activists working in the area to intervene and discuss the issues in the area. It is shameful that not a single elected member of the area has even bothered to visit the village.

Development work under schemes like JRY, ICDS, and IAY should be carried out in the village and the road should be made *pukka*. It is a commentary on successive governments in the state that the area should be denied even the minimum necessities for human existence.

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We give some extracts from the report of the team:

Mahoba is part of the Bundelkhand area that comprises of the Southern districts of Uttar Pradesh and the Northern districts of Madhya Pradesh. This is a chronically drought-afflicted, backward region that is home to the brutal exploitation of feudal landowners and to the rapacity of various criminal gangs. At the same time, the area is rich in folklore and tradition. Along with Alha and Udai, the legendary warriors

of the region, legends of Sati also have a strong hold on the peoples' minds and hearts. There are at least three Sati temples in the region at Thathaura, Mudhari and Jaari. These are all outside Mahoba district itself... The village is about 25 km from Mahoba and falls in the Charkhari thana area. After 20 kms on the main road, a dirt track branches off to Satpura. At that spot we saw only two constables. On the entire route, contrary to press reports that thousands of people are trekking to the site, we did not see a single vehicle — trolley or bullock-cart or jeep — headed towards the village. On the dirt track we met no one. This track is the only connection between Satpura and the main road....

The village consists of about 20 thatched huts. It is very clean but very poor. There are no paved pathways (*kharanja*) and only one hand-pump. Most of the inhabitants were at home and they seemed to have become accustomed to visitors from outside. Before talking to them, we walked to the cremation ground which is a few furlongs from the village. It is a small clearing with fields on one side and rock formations on the other. There are plenty of thorn bushes around it so firewood is not a problem. The countryside for miles around is clearly visible and we could see no signs of any vehicles of any kind approaching the village or the site. There were also no signs of any crowd having been there — no debris or garbage or tracks

to indicate that thousands of villagers presumably with their children had visited the place.

The place where Man Shah had been cremated was clearly visible with the remnants of ashes occupying a space roughly the length and breadth of a pyre. There were four policemen standing around and the Station Officer was also present. About a hundred yards from the actual cremation spot, a small group of people – five men and one woman – were sitting on the ground. They had come on cycles from neighbouring villages. They had heard the news of the “Sati” and had come there for *darshan* but the police were not allowing them to go near the cremation site...

We saw a middle-aged couple ploughing the adjacent field. The man's name was Balram and his wife was Tulsadevi. They told us that they were from Satpura and were one of two Kori families in the village – the rest of the village, including Man Shah's family are Ahirwar Chamar. There are no other castes in the village. Balram said that he had accompanied Man Shah's body to the cremation ground with others from the village. He said that once the body was set on fire all the men left to bathe in the nearby *nallah*. When we asked him why no one had stayed back with the pyre as is customary, he looked a bit sheepish and then said that because the deceased had been a chronic TB patient, they believed that once his body started burning all the germs would fly out and infect them, so they all left together to bathe.

Tulsadevi said that she had stayed behind in the village with the other women when the men left for the cremation-ground. Charan Shah



was also inside her house at the time. According to Tulsadevi, after a little while, Charan Shah placed her hand on the grandson's head and then walked out of her house. By the time the women realised that she had gone and started running after her, she had gone quite a distance and then she broke into a run while they shouted for help. A shepherd who was near the cremation-ground also shouted to the men at the *nallah* to come... By the time people reached the spot she had already started burning.

Tulsadevi said that since many people from neighbouring villages graze their animals in the neighbourhood the news of Charan Shah's 'sati' spread quickly. The incident occurred at about noon and by 2 to 3.00 p.m. about a hundred people from the neighbourhood came. They broke coconuts at the spot and also threw coins there. She said that she did not see anyone placing any red flag there but some of the people were talking about constructing a temple on the spot. She said that the police arrived at about 6.00 p.m. and made the people leave the place. She said that since then, people from the neighbouring villages had tried to come there in small groups but had

not been successful... The ashes of the dead couple were taken away by the family as is the custom... Tulsadevi's version was confirmed by Charan Shah's family.

We entered the low doorway into the first room, which was the room in which Man Shah breathed his last. This room opens into a fairly large courtyard with three small, dark rooms, one on each side. This is where Man Shah and Charan Shah lived with their son Shishupal, his wife and the two sons of their eldest son who died of TB, and whose widow married their youngest son, with whom she now lives in Delhi.

As we sat down in the courtyard, many people from the village came in... an elderly woman, Parmi, who had been sitting in the house at the time, narrated what had happened. She said that Charan Shah was wearing a printed green sari and she left the house in the same clothes. Parmi told us that according to their custom, the room in which Man Shah died was being cleaned and '*lipai*' with cow dung was being done. They were all busy either doing '*lipai*' or watching it being done.

Charan Shah had not wept much. In fact she had been comforting the others and was quite restrained and quiet. While the *lipai* was being done, she went out of the hut once and then came in again. Then she went into the courtyard and petted her grandson. Then she went out of the hut again and no one paid much notice to this. After a few moments, when they realised that she had not come back, they went out and realised that she had gone to the cremation-ground. It was too late for them to stop her. She said that she also ran after Charan Shah but being an old and feeble woman, it was not possible for her to

reach Charan, and by the time she reached a place from where the pyre was visible, Charan Shah was already burning on it.

After this, we talked to Shishupal, Charan Shah's son. He is a young man with no education but is very straightforward and frank. His young wife, Rekharani, who was cooking inside the room on the left of the courtyard, had been at her mother's place when his parents died. He said that his parents, like all the other families of the village, were followers of the Charan Data *panth*. They all wore a *kanthi* around their necks and did not drink, smoke or believe in superstitions. The *Panth's* main '*gaddi*' is in Faizabad and the smaller '*gaddi*' is nearby in Koylari. Shishupal said that all the families of the village had a small piece of land because in 1856 or thereabouts, Raja Shatrughan Singh had formed a co-operative society in the *bhoodan* movement and made them all members. Because of lack of irrigation facilities, they were very poor and had to work as labourers on others' land also.

They also had no money to treat Man Shah who had been chronically ill for many years. His older brother had also died of TB. He said that a day before his death, his father, realising that he did not have much time, sent him to the neighbouring village to bring his maternal uncles and their wives which is why his *Mama* and *Mami* happened to be there the next day. He said that his father died in the morning and at about 11.00 a.m. they carried his body in a '*kafan*' to the cremation-ground. Gayadeen, a neighbour, interrupted him, saying that had not his mother asked him to decorate a '*doli*' and call some musicians for her?

Shishupal was a little irritated by this. He said that it was the custom to do this when an old person died,

and his mother had been keen that this be done for his father's funeral procession. But he had told her that there was no money for this kind of thing. The body had been wrapped in a '*kafan*,' tied to bamboos, and carried to the cremation ground. Since there was no shortage of brushwood, the pyre caught fire quickly and, fearing infection from the TB germs that would escape from the burning body, they all left together for their bath in the *nallah*. While they were bathing, he heard a shepherd shouting that his mother was jumping onto the pyre. He also heard women shouting. He started running towards the cremation ground but it was too late. All the people who were sitting there corroborated his statement. One or two seemed to wish that he had been a little more dramatic. Gayadeen felt that Charan Shah had actually 'flown' to the cremation ground but had not seen this. Shishupal's cousin, Karan, felt very strongly that a Sati temple should be constructed. About the crowds, no one had much to say. One or two people said that some people had come, but the police had forced them away.

When we asked him about the desirability of a temple, he said that if this happened, there would be many such incidents, including forcible burning of women, in the area...

Shishupal then told us that the police had taken him and his maternal uncle, Malkhan Singh, into custody and had kept them at the thana for two days. They had not been beaten or maltreated but the police had tried to force him to say that his mother was mad. He said he had refused to say this, and had told them what he had told us because that was true. He said that many of the villagers wanted to build a temple because then there

would be offerings coming in, shops could be set up and a *pucca* road would be built...

The team met several women who said they had heard that Charan Shah had "flown" to the pyre, that later three mute children who had been taken for *darshan* started to speak and a blind man got his vision back... Fantastic stories are doing the rounds... and taking advantage of this innocent belief in supernatural powers, those who would like to gain commercial advantage from turning a suicide into a sati are pressing for a temple.

The team also met an influential landowner of the area, a retired colonel whose family had founded the village through the donation of land to Dalit families as part of the *bhoodan* movement in the 1950's. He is a Rajput and said that his mother had committed sati, although they did not build a temple in her memory. In front of the team he told the villagers that they should not do anything against the law. However, it was striking that in his discussions with the villagers he told them clearly that "it was sati in the true sense of the word." It is this kind of sentiment propagated by educated influential individuals, which encourage ritualised glorification of sati.

AIDWA appeals to all concerned not to be misled into treating a case of suicide as sati, which will lead to harassment of innocent individuals, including the poverty stricken members of Charan Shah's family. While demanding vigilance on behalf of the administration, it reiterates that what is required is a widespread social reform movement in the area along with concrete developmental activity. It is only such a combination which will help eliminate crippling superstitious beliefs. □