

Charan Shah's Immolation

Countering Earlier Reports

○ Report by Jaishree and Vijaya (Saheli), Shalini and Dipta (Nirantar), Jageshwar and Huma (Vanangana) and Nandini Sundar (An Independent Researcher)

CHARAN Shah's immolation was reported in the national newspapers, *The Hindustan Times* and *The Times of India* two days later (November 13) as a *sati*, though the press also reported the local authorities as saying that it was a suicide. This was followed by several other press reports describing large crowds congregating at the spot to worship the *sati*.

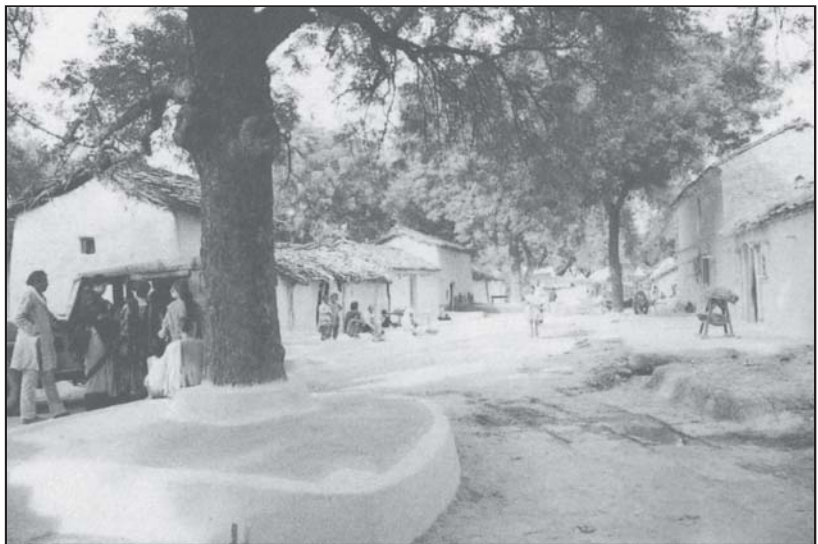
On November 15, an AIDWA (All India Democratic Women's Association) team visited Satpura and after talking to relatives and villagers concluded that it was a suicide and not a *sati*. (see detailed report on page 14)

An NCW (National Commission for Women) team which also visited the area on November 18 and 19 had come to a similar conclusion, that it was a suicide and not a *sati*. They commended the family for voluntarily reporting the incident to the police, acknowledged the administration for preventing glorification of the incident, and condemned the media for sensationalising the incident. The sequence of events as pieced together by both the AIDWA and NCW teams is roughly similar: Man Shah died in the morning around 8 a.m. He was cremated about an hour later. Charan Shah was sitting in her house surrounded by women mourners. Having lit the pyre, all the men went to a nearby stream to bathe. At this point, Charan Shah left her

house and went towards the pyre. By the time her absence was noted, and other women went after her, it was too late. A shepherd boy saw her going and alerted others. She broke into a run and by the time anyone could reach her, she had thrown herself on the pyre and had burnt to death. Both AIDWA and NCW concluded that because there was no prior intimation of intent to commit *sati*, there were no rituals typically associated with *sati*, and Charan Shah did not wear bridal finery, it was not a *sati* but a suicide.

The AIDWA and NCW reports provided a good basis for further investigation. Twelve representatives of different women's groups, visited the area on November 22.

About Satpura and Charan Shah: Satpura is about 7-8 km off the main road from Mahoba, the headquarter of Mahoba district. Two other villages can be seen in the distance en route to Mahoba, and Imaliya, the seat of the panchayat to which Satpura is attached, is about one km away on the other side. Contrary to press reports, it is not a 'remote village' (*The Times of India*, November 14, 1999), or a 'most backward hamlet, virtually inaccessible by road' (*The Hindu*, November 14, 1999). In fact it is surrounded by villages - the nearest one, Imaliya, being a kilometer away, and the others at a distance of 2-5 km. Nor as the press reported (*The Hindu*, November 14, 1999) is it completely devoid of any facilities - there is a



A shot of Satpura village in Mahoba district of Uttar Pradesh

PHOTO: NIRANTAR

primary school, a well and handpump, and the nearby village of Imaliya has a *panchayat bhavan* and a private school upto the VIIIth standard. Imaliya also has two small grocery stores. The village is occasionally visited by a health worker and by the Lekhpal or land records keeper. While it is clearly poor, and all the villagers suffer from a paucity of land with sons being forced to migrate to Delhi for casual labour, the village does not suffer from such abject poverty as has been suggested and linked to a possible reason for why Charan Shah did not think life was worth living.

Descriptions of Charan Shah by her daughter-in-law and other villagers also do not fit the image of 'a poor Dalit woman who single-handedly looked after her ailing husband... shunned when alive' (*India Today*, October 29). Her daughter-in-law described her as a strong woman who managed her entire household, someone involved in rearing her grandchildren. According to Shishupal, "she was an active woman, who looked after the house and her grandchildren whenever we would go away to Delhi to work as *beldars* [unskilled daily wager]." "Some people are saying that my mother was mad. She was not mad. Obviously, she had made up her mind to do this." Unlike many other women in the area who are abandoned by their natal families, Charan Shah had strong connections with her brother, who was supportive of her. Her brother Malkhan Singh of Mangrol Kalan village owns a tractor and used to help out his sister's family. In short, the media attempt to explain her apparent suicide as a product of poverty and the miserable status of widows in the area skims the surface of what appears to be a much more complex phenomenon.

Satpura consists of about 20-24 houses stretched out in a long horizontal line (perpendicular to the

road that leads to it). Charan Shah's house is towards the centre of the village. The village well is located near her house, and the school is in one corner to the right. The cremation ground is about a kilometer away towards the right beyond the village. For Charan Shah to have run to the pyre, she would have had to traverse the entire length of the village, and gone past the well and past most of the other houses in the village (approximately half km), then run approximately another half km along a stony and winding path to end up at the pyre. The cremation ground itself is quite open. There are fields on one side and rock formations on the other. According to one source, Man Shah wanted the cremation to take place in their field, but her son was keen on having it in the usual place - the village cremation ground.

Differing Narratives Regarding the Sequence of Events: Accounts of what and how it all happened were often varied and contradictory. This was particularly true in respect of the precise details of what actually transpired on the day. Yet behind the conflict of detail, it was not difficult to discern a shared narrative purpose. What emerged was that while there was pressure on the villagers to corroborate the "official" version of the event, i.e. to say that Charan Shah's death was not a sati but a suicide, given the presence of the "law-enforcers" in the village - there was equally an attempt to claim it as a sati to leave open the possibility of later glorification. As Charan Shah's son, Shishupal, put it repeatedly - "I will call it whatever you want me to. If you want to call it a suicide then so be it. Equally, if you say it was a sati, then I will follow suit."

Timing of Man Shah's death and cremation: According to the version Charan Shah's family and

other villagers in Satpura gave the AIDWA and NCW teams, Man Shah died at 8 a.m. on November 11. The Satpura villagers also told us he died in the morning, 'after drinking tea.' Some villagers in Imaliya, however, claimed he died at night, a theory that a local journalist Ram Datt Tiwari also gave us. According to the family, Charan Shah's brother and sister-in-law were called at night on the 10th because they knew Man Shah was dying, but theoretically it is equally possible that they came because he had actually died that night.

According to three women in Imaliya, Man Shah had died the night before (the cremation). Charan Shah had expressed a desire to commit sati but no one had taken it seriously. This was also echoed by some girls in Bhainsari (another neighbouring village), who said they knew beforehand that there was going to be a sati, and went along to watch it between 12 and 1.00 p.m.

When we asked villagers how they were able to organise the cremation so quickly, they said that all it took was some wood, incense and a *kafan* [shroud]. Each household contributed some wood, and someone happened to have a clean white cloth lying in the house. We corroborated from one of the Imaliya grocery stores that the family had bought *dhup* in the morning. While it is possible that everything else was available in the village itself or Imaliya, the instant availability of the *kafan* deserves further investigation. If the *kafan* had to be procured from outside, the nearest market would have been Charkhari, about 7-8 km away. This would strengthen the theory that he died at night.

Treatment of TB patients: According to local women's groups, TB patients in the area are treated almost like untouchables.

Shishupal, the son was, however, keen to clear his family of the charge of ill-treatment of his father and wanted to clarify that they did not indulge in any discrimination despite his being a TB patient. "People are writing that we used to give our father *rotis* with a stick. We never did that. We never practiced any *chua-chut* with him, he used to eat with us. He loved to wear clean clothes [he brings his father's shirt to show us]... that morning too he had got up and had his morning cup of tea and we did not even know when he went."

According to women working in the area, TB patients in this part of Uttar Pradesh are usually buried and not burnt. When one of us had raised this issue with Shishupal on November 18, he had conceded that although the usual practice was to bury TB patients, they had by consensus decided to cremate his father. On the 22nd, however, he said that there was no practice of burial, and like all other Hindus, they cremated their dead, even if they had TB. Funerary practices regarding TB patients in this area need further investigation.

Absence of men at the pyre when Charan Shah flung herself on the pyre: In earlier accounts, Shishupal had attributed the absence of anyone next to the newly lit pyre to the belief that TB germs spread through fire. Consequently, as the pyre was lit, everyone present had moved away from the pyre. This time, Prahlad, Shishupal's relative, gave a different reason for the absence of people at the cremation site, which was not contested by Shishupal. According to him, the reasons were mystical. "I

do not know why there was no one next to the pyre, why we all left to bathe. It must be all God's doing that there was nobody there, otherwise there is always someone next to the pyre." In an earlier meeting, Shishupal said that on hearing about his mother he had, along with others, rushed to the spot. This time, however, he claimed to have fallen unconscious on hearing that his mother had jumped into his father's pyre and had come to his senses only much later.

The absence of attention by women mourners when Charan Shah left the house: The inability of women co-mourners to prevent Charan Shah from leaving the house or even noticing her absence till it was too late also bears thinking about. According to Shishupal, there were nearly 20-25 women in the house, but they were all busy getting water, cleaning the house, etc. They did not

see her leave. Other women corroborated that she was surrounded by six-seven widows.

Participation in the Sati: Even though nobody admitted to having been there at the time when Charan Shah entered the fire, several people admit to having reached there within a few minutes of this.

Shishupal's relative Prahlad said: "She came and sat at his feet and there were huge flames. She just sat at the side of the pyre '*chipak ke*' and within four-five minutes she was burnt. By the time we ran from the stream she was already dead. There was no smell from her body. As a matter of fact it smelt of ghee. She did not move even once while burning." Another neighbour, Ramdas, revealed: "While Charan Shah's body was burning, at one point it fell out of the fire. At the time, the Lekhpal Santram Kushwaha had remarked: 'Now that she is dead,

let her body burn properly. Put more cow-dung cakes in the fire. If she is regarded as (having committed) sati, the whole village will benefit materially.'" He told them the village would get a road and other developmental benefits if there was a Sati. Some of the women mention how Charan Shah's body seemed to burn brighter than her husband's." Another woman said, "What we saw was that while Man Shah's body was hardly burning, there were huge flames surrounding Charan Shah's body."

Several people from Imaliya said that they had gone to watch the sati. "As soon as Charan Shah jumped into the fire, someone came running to our village and informed us about it. We were very excited to hear this... we picked up our young ones and rushed to see the sati." One of the Imaliya women claimed that she had



Icon from sati mandir in Mahoba, built in 1930s

PHOTO: NIRANTAR

seen Charan Shah crouched next to the funeral pyre, at the feet of her deceased husband's body, holding a coconut in her hands. Two of the women were widows themselves and there was a younger married woman who claim that she had even done *parikrama* of the pyre. The women said that a fairly large crowd of people who arrived from the neighbouring villages of Imaliya and Bhainsari had witnessed Charan Shah burning till late in the evening. Some people said that her body smelt of ghee, and according to some in our team, it was clear that large quantities of ghee had been put into the fire, as the ground near the pyre was wet.

What is clear from these accounts is that whether or not they were involved in getting Charan Shah to the pyre, once she started burning, everyone stood back and watched her. There was no attempt to rescue her from the pyre at all. On the contrary, the moment it happened, everyone joined in glorifying the act.

The Role of Police: It is not clear whether the police came to the village in the evening (as some Satpura villagers claim) or whether they came the next morning (12th). It is also not clear whether the matter was reported by the chowkidar (in Imaliya) or by the family members themselves. The only thing that is clear is that by approximately 6 p.m. on the 11th the police had been informed. It is also clear that there were large crowds on the first two days, though media reports about the numbers may be exaggerated. By the 13th or 14th, however, the police had barricaded the village and were preventing anyone from coming in, which also explains why both the AIDWA and NCW teams did not see anyone. When we went, we found all the entry and exit points to the village manned by police. An entire company

(approximately 36 men, though not all are there simultaneously) had set up camp in the village.

Some villagers in Satpura said the police had warned them against uttering the word *sati*, saying they were preparing their own noose if they did so. One woman from Satpura told us that the police had threatened the villagers not to proclaim Charan Shah's death as *sati*. "You will all be thrown in the jail for six years if you dare to utter the word *sati*."

While the administration's attempt to prevent glorification is commendable, it is not so clear that by downplaying it and calling it a suicide rather than *sati*, they are actually preventing that glorification in the future. Given the degree of pro-*sati* feelings in the area, it might have been better to confront it head on and ensure that people know that abetting *sati* is a crime. By calling it a suicide and getting villagers to call it that too, the administration is in a sense merely side stepping or postponing the issue.

A Dalit Sati: From the villagers' point of view, calling this suicide rather than *sati* is mere semantic quibbling - for what else is a *sati* but a widow who jumps into her husband's pyre. Shishupal and others in the village also implied, often explicitly suggested, that the official version was motivated and biased against the Dalits. If only Charan Shah had belonged to a higher caste, the belief went, the administration might have reacted differently. They felt that as with other claims by Dalits, their claim to their own *sati* was not being recognised by the state or upper castes. They said that the administration was trying to prevent anyone calling it a *sati* in the hope that in a few months, her memory would be erased.

Sati Ideology in the area: A female neighbour of Charan Shah's came up to us and said: "Poor woman! She was blessed! She was a *sati*... [before the cremation] she had washed her dead husband's feet and drank the water, also sprinkling some of it on her body... While she was sitting with other widows in mourning, she suddenly got up to leave... She knew of the precise instant when her husband's pyre was lit..."

When asked if they approved of *sati*, the Imaliya villagers said that not everyone could become a *sati*. One had to have that special power or '*sat*.' But they all (old women, old men, young men) concurred that it was good for the village. If the police had not stopped it', one said, there would have been *chadhona* (offerings) of 1-1.5 lakh rupees in a few days. One Imaliya shopkeeper said they had informed the administration about the *sati* because they had expected to get help as in the past.

There exist three *sati* temples in this area - one at Jaari, another at Magrauta and the third at Mahoba. The pattern in the area is that immediately after the *sati*, *melas* are organised in these temples during a special time of year. Thousands of devotees, especially women, come. It is believed that a *sati* has the power to fulfill one's desires. For a couple of years this occurs at a grand scale. Later people visit the temples occasionally and *melas* are also discontinued. In 1980, following the Jaari *sati*, a *mela* was held for three years consecutively. The administration arranged buses for people to go to the *mela*. The Imaliya villagers expected similar behaviour this time.

All three *sati* temples are in the honour of Brahmin or Rajput *sati*. We visited the *sati* mandir at Mahoba, constructed for a *sati*

which occurred in 1930. It was being looked after by a Tiwari family. We spoke to one Sandhya Tiwari who said that her father-in-law had been called from Chattarpur in Madhya Pradesh to take over as the priest of this temple. The government had given the nearby land to this family. The temple had flourished at one point of time. At present there were few people visiting the temple, but the family of the priest had taken over a large plot of land, what was and still is called 'sati mohalla.' A road had also been constructed (in the past) for people to gain access to the temple easily. The temple at Jaari was constructed in 1981, when Javitri, an 18 year old Brahmin woman, committed sati on the death of her husband. Today Jaari is quieter and the *mela* no longer attracts the numbers it did. Apparently, however, today lower caste people frequent the *chabutara* more than the Brahmins in the area. There are many myths about the satis – that they managed to escape from a police lockup in order to throw themselves on the funeral pyre of their husband, that the pyre lit itself etc.

Satpura also has its own linkages to the sati *chabutara* in Magrauta. The wife of Shatrughan Singh (the landowner who donated his land to settle the Dalit families in Satpura) committed sati. An annual *mela* was held every December in Magrauta, which women from Satpura have attended. Colonel Pratap Singh, Shatrughan Singh's son, still has considerable clout over the village, and villagers take their disputes to him rather than to the police.

Recently in the area, there was an attempt by a Dalit woman to commit sati, which was prevented by the police. What needs further exploration is whether the actual practice of sati (not just a



Unfinished and abandoned sati temple, Mahoba, built in 1945 to honour Gyneshwari Tiwari who poisoned herself to death when she heard her husband had died.

belief in it) is a new phenomenon among the Dalits in the area.

According to news reports, the majority of the people of Satpura are Data Panthis, where there is worship of the Guru rather than Gods and Goddesses. Data Panthis do not eat meat, drink or practice discrimination as a part of their Panth. While this seems progressive, Shishupal admitted that they do celebrate all the festivals and do Lakshmi Puja on Diwali. Among Data Panthis women are referred to as satis. "You say this woman is this man's sati and not wife. Sati-Purush are the terms used among Data Panthis for husbands and wives." This becomes significant in light of the statement made by the head of the Panth, Padakhand Shah Dutta. In an interview (*The Times of India*, November 18, 1999) he has made a statement saying that he believes that Charan Shah committed sati.

Conclusions: Evidence collection at this point is difficult given the presence of the police, the awareness among people that sati

is illegal, the high media coverage, and the desire among many to claim a Dalit Sati for commercial or status reasons.

Therefore, it is impossible to say whether this sati was premeditated or was instigated with the collusion of others. While the attribution of a desire to commit sati to Charan Shah may be a post facto construction, born out of the desire to read intentionality and sati-hood into it, it is equally likely that the villagers knew of her plans to commit sati beforehand. What is worth noting is that everybody seems to have had some alibi or reason for not having been there when she flung herself into the pyre or when she left home. Those who followed her could not reach in time to stop her. This reads a lot like the other satis in the area, where the police, despite being there, couldn't prevent the act. This lends itself both to giving the act a miracle element in the future, and at present absolves the villagers of any criminal responsibility.

While the family and villagers wish to steer clear of the possibility

of being accused of having forced or of even actively instigating her to commit sati, they all admit to letting it happen. The women who ran after her and the men who ran towards her from the stream admit to reaching there within minutes. But once she was in the fire, no one pulled her out, and no one attempted to save her. In their eyes she was sati then. The symbolism of what she had done – immolating herself on her husband's pyre – was and is sati. It did not matter whether she was in her bridal dress or not, or whether she had done the rituals necessary for a sati.

This brings us to the point about the media and individuals making a distinction between suicide and 'sati.' They claim that only if there is an element of force or coercion it becomes "sati-murder," but if the woman willingly jumps in on her own it is a suicide. The NCW goes even

further to state that this is a "case of a highly distressed and depressed person acting irrationally," and that "she was suffering from a depressive suicidal syndrome." While the family vouches to the contrary, what needs discussion is whether:

(a) anyone will ever be able to sift out the truth after the 'event.' The logic of the eye-witness accounts, the need for miracles and of attributing the power of 'sat' to the woman, creates its own narrative that permeates the entire chain of events to make it difficult to separate fact from fiction.

(b) we can define consent merely as the absence of disagreement and force. In the context of women it can emerge out of a lack of choices, vulnerability or the belief that she will attain true salvation through this act. In addition to this, consent can be as varied as the decision being taken

"independently" or actively encouraged, or Charan Shah being persuaded and motivated, her not being discouraged or others tacitly agreeing with her.

Therefore, the distinction between the event being a suicide or a sati seems more in the direction of dealing with the issue of sati by delegitimising it and refusing to recognise it. But for the people of Satpura there has been a sati in their village. Even if police action cannot be directed at specific people, given the widespread complicity of villagers in the act of glorification, the administration and other groups should take steps to deal with the problem through recognising its existence. Sati in such instances is a prime example of the interweaving of conservative Hindu religious beliefs with the desire for capitalising on it for commercial purposes. □

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