
**The Practice of Sati in Colonial Bengal with special references to
Hooghly District in West Bengal**

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Abstract: *Roop Kunwar's Sati incident on 4 September 1987 shocked the entire country. This repetition of the practice of sati is a reminder of its prevalence during the colonial period. One of the damned practices that prevented social progress during the colonial era was sati-immolation. Hooghly district had the highest number of sati-immolations, as the law of inheritance was in force which stipulated the right of women to the property of their deceased husbands. Many Indians became vocal against this practice during the colonial period. In fact, the nineteenth century was a turning point. During this time, people became more rational by adopting western education and knowledge of modern science. So many people stood against the prevalent practice of Sati which is also a crime. Rammohan Roy went against it with the resolve not to allow any more widows to become Sati on the dead husband's pyre. Trying to removing this practice with scriptural law, Rammohan translated the ancient scriptures to show that according to the scriptures it was a murder or a crime that deprived a woman of her right to live. In 1829, Bentinck, a believer in the Utilitarian philosophy, outlawed the practice of sati. As a result of government restrictions, the incidence of sati-burning began to decline. Yet the idea of sati and the myth of sati persisted in folk culture, despite the criticism of the Western educated middle class and the reformist zeal of the colonial ruling class. The concept of sati was materialized through epics, folktales and ballad even forty years after independence.*

Keywords: *Education, Folk Culture, Nineteenth Century, Practice of Sati, Regeneration etc.*

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Introduction

Nineteenth century was a turning point in the history of Bengal as a particular and India as a whole. By the middle of this century, the British occupied almost half of India through imperialistic annexation policy. That is, politically it became clear that the British were going to be the next sole ruler of India. So while playing the role of the ruler, they started taking various plans. Several administrative, economic and social reform measures taken by them had a profound impact on India. The reaction to the impact of various social reforms on traditional social order in India was very defensive. But the traditional society of Bengal did not have the strength to ignore the foreign ideas that arrived at India's doorstep in the nineteenth century. Under the umbrella of British rule, Indians began to sustain throughout intellectual and cultural uprising. This dynamic changes were the characteristics of nineteenth century Indian social life. As a result of coming in contact with Western culture individualism, humanist and rationalist ideas gradually developed in the society. A gradual change began to take place in the arena of the old faith. This dramatic difference in the world of faith appeared in all areas of life. Exposure to new ideas not only opened the door to Western education and modern knowledge, but also changed the view of 'human being'. At the same time this vision entered into the zenanas, which was the sphere of women's life.

When James Mill's "History of British India" was published in 1817, a huge uproar started in India. In this book, Mill took a big looks at the discussion of the Indian women's issue through Western lens. Western ideologues used the context of women as a tool to criticize the Indian civilization. All these foreign observers often compared Indian society with their own homeland's society. In this comparative discussion various aspects of the society came up which they felt were irrelevant. James Mill writes in his book while describing the social status of Indian women that , "We have already seen as in the most barbarous nations, that the women among the Hindus are excluded from sharing in the paternal property. They are, by system, deprived of education. That remarkable proof of barbarity which we found

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among some of the rudest tribes, where the wife is un-worthy to eat with her husband prevails in Hindustan.”¹ The details he recorded about India depended mainly on the reports of India that came to England as official reports. It is also true that Mill’s History of India was regarded as the main textbook for British civilians in India to learn about the society and customs of the country before their recruitment in administrative posts. Even many of the early Indian historians viewed the above book as a holy manuscript. However, based on this book, the degraded status of women in India is considered to be indicative of India’s inferior position among the world’s other civilizations. It is said that the civilization that respects women is more advanced than other one. Therefore, to modernize Indian society, the intellectuals of the nineteenth-century India, collectively worked for the prosperity of the status of women within society. So, improving their position became a major social reform programs throughout that century. In response to harsh criticism from the West, indigenous intellectuals imagined a golden past as a counterpart, when women were given considerable dignity and respect, no sign of oppression took place against them. Social reformers called for the reformation of those customs that they considered corrupted or abnormal. In this context, we can recall a heinous practice like immolations of woman on her dead husband’s funeral pile which was a great crime committed against women.

II

Exact literary guidance is not available as to when the practice of sati was first noticed in India. The existence of this practice is known during the period of Mahabharata. On the other hand, the Greek historian Diodorus mentioned the practice of Sati in the Punjab region. However, the Eran Pillar Inscription of the Gupta period suggests that when the local ruler Gopraja was killed in the Eran region (present-day Madhya Pradesh) probably by a Hun attack in 510 CE, his wife sacrificed herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This was perhaps the earliest documented instance of a Sati memorial.² It is in this context that the question arises as to when exactly the degradation of the status of women began. According to Ananta Sadashiv

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Altekar, a famous historian of ancient India, the oppression of women started in India from the Turkish rule. But Sukumari Bhattacharya's research says otherwise. He has shown in his *'Society and Literature of Ancient India' (Prachin Bharater Samaj o Sahitya)* that the degradation of the status of women began in the Vedic period (notes pp. 27-40). On the other hand, the practice continued even in the medieval period. It is mentioned in the account of the foreign traveler Ibn Battuta. While traveling in India, he spoken of a sati incident in the Malwa region where three wives immolated themselves on the pyre of their dead husbands. It is also known that Ibn Battuta fainted after seeing this horrible scene. He narrated somewhere that some measures were taken by Muhammad bin Tughluq to stop this practice. According to Sushil Chowdhury "Muhammed bin Tughlaq was perhaps the first Muslim king of India who raised his voice against the nasty practice of burning widows."³ On the other hand, even during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar, this practice was always in afloat, the details of which are available in the book " Akbarnama" written by Akbar's councilor and close friend Abul Fazal. There he illustrated the measures taken by Akbar to stop the practice of Sati. According to him, "Since the country had come under the rule of his gracious Majesty. Inspectors had been appointed in every city and district, who were to watch carefully over these two cases, to discriminate between them and to prevent any woman being forcibly burnt".⁴ But in the Middle Ages, this practice was not completely destroyed from society. At that time, different regions of India such as Ganga Valley, Punjab, Rajasthan, Madurai and above all Vijayanagara which were the fertile zones of sati practice. Due to long- running existence of such practice in society discouraged people to eradicate it just because of its pious narration in the antiquity. In fact, the medieval Muslim rulers always understood that in India they were salt in the rice of dish. So they were very conscious about that , the majority community could not be turned against them. So the religious sentiments of the majority people were no longer being hurt was important to them. So allowing this ancient practice to continue as it has been going for a long time in society was one of the aspects of their policy. Later, during the British period, more efforts can be seen to stop this evil practice. Besides, a group of Indian intellectuals also at this

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time tried to remove this crime from the society by cooperating with the ruler. Raja Rammohan Roy was such personalities who wanted to close down it. Several factors were responsible for such pot changes. I will discuss it later.

Before discussing the practice of Sati in Hooghly district, it is important to know who exactly is meant by the term 'Sati'. The word 'Sati' means – a woman who actually exists, who does not merely breathe like a blacksmith's bellows, but actually lives. Who is pure, excellent and righteous. For this Amarsingh wrote in his book *Amarakosh* mentioning – 'Sati Sadhvi Pativradya'. The supreme religion of women to act as a penelope. The woman who observes this marriage ritual is called Sati. This practice was kept alive in the society through various imaginary stories. A story like this is, 'It is sometimes linked to the myth of the Hindu goddess Sati, who burned herself to death in a fire that she created through her Yogic powers after her father insulted her husband, the god Shiva—but in this myth Shiva remains alive and avenges Sati's death.'⁵ But in this tradition, which is a crime in the eyes of the present society, widows used to sacrifice themselves on the pyre of their dead husbands. While defining Sati, J.Peggs said in his book *'India's Cries to British Humanity'* that, 'SUTTEE is the name given in India to a woman. Who immolates herself on the funeral pile of her husband and denotes that the female is considered true or faithful to him, even into death; ...'⁶

III

In the first half of the nineteenth century, The practice of sati was more common in the Bengal Presidency than in other parts of India. Government reports from 1815 to 1824 said so. According to this report, while in Madras and Bombay Presidencies there were 287 and 248 cases of such incidents in eight years and nine years respectively, in the above ten years there were 5997 in Bengal Presidency. The following table gives the statistics of immolations of women separately for different divisions of Bengal Presidency:

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	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824
Calcutta Division	244	280	428	533	388	337	364	300	309	348
Cuttack Ditto.....	9	9	14	11	33	33	28	28	31	25
Dacca Ditto.....	31	24	52	58	55	51	52	45	40	40
Moorshedabad.....	11	22	42	30	25	21	12	22	13	14
Patna Ditto.....	20	29	49	57	40	42	69	70	49	42
Bareilly Ditto.....	15	13	19	13	17	20	15	16	12	10
Benares Ditto.....	48	65	103	137	92	93	114	102	121	93
Total	378	442	707	839	650	598	653	583	575	572

Source – Peggs, J – *India's Cries to British Humanity*, p – 09

Again, within the Calcutta Division, Hooghly district had the highest incidence of sati than any other areas. Below is the related report of 1824 tabulated with statistics.

Courts	No of Suttees
Burdwan	56
Hooghly	91
Jessore	30
Jungle Mehals	16

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Midnapore	22
Nuddyah	73
Suburbs of Calcutta	34
Twenty – four pergunnahs	22
<u>Baraset</u>	<u>04</u>
<u>Total</u>	<u>348</u>

Source – Peggs , J – *India's Cries to British Humanity*, p – 10

Thus, from the above discussion it is clear that during the nineteenth century, this evil act was the most prevalent in present-day Hooghly district within India and Bengal.

Just as the dawn of civilization was observed on the banks of the river, the area along the river was considered to be the sacred places for the practice of sati. The western side of Bhagirathi was spacious for such pious works. Because Bhagirathi was thought to be “west of Bhagirathi” equivalent to Varanasi. According to Halliday ,the then magistrate of Hooghly district, “Such things were frequent in Hooghly as the banks of that side of the river were considered particularly propitious for such sacrifices”.⁷ Besides, in the year of 1820 in Hooghly district among the ninety three of such incidents, there were widows belonging to castes like Paik, Kalu, Lohar, Muthi, pod,Babui, Moira, Kumor, Tuli, Tanti, , Mali, Budi, Hari etc. along with high caste Hindu widows.⁸ So it is clear from the above discussion that not only among the upper caste but also among the lower castes the practice of sati always in wont. Why this practice was slowly becoming popular among the lower class people? The answer can be found from a very acceptable explanation. In fact, the lower class people used to imitate the various rituals and behaviors of the upper class to rise their status in the caste hierarchy . Sati was also one such ritual. Srinivasa termed this upliftment of the lower classes as

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'sanskritization'. Sanskritization is the process in which the lower castes wanted to upward their position through following the customs of the upper castes. Simply say that , the matter of Sanskritization or rising caste hierarchy was fueled in this case.

IV

Why did the women voluntarily choose this very painful way of death, what was the reason behind it? A simple reason may be that, a great ideal of penelope was presented in front of them. They grew up with that ideal from childhood. The religious concept of the ideal wife as a follower of her husband in life and death – such mentality worked. A fantasy was inculcated in women's heads, that was, "Those widows immolated in their dead husband's funeral pile , as the companions joining in heaven with their husbands for three and a half million years." Besides, by becoming a sati, the woman was given the status as a goddess in the society. Their memorial site where they practiced such act was known as a holy place, and temples were also built there. Satichora ghat in Murshidabad can be mentioned as an example. On the other hand, Sati's relatives also remained in folklore, which people remembered with sanctity for ages. In this way, the practice of sati was intimately connected with folklore. Therefore, most of the writers wanted to show the practice of this evil, 'as a most meritorious act, productive of good effects to the soul of the widow and her husband, and to those of the surviving members of their families...'.⁹ On the other hand, the status of women in the patriarchal society was very neglected. Their hopes – aspirations or desires – reluctance were ignored. So women were forced to be chaste – thinking that at least she had the right to be chaste. No one is taking away this right. Here his will is being honored. William Carey in 1798 mentions a widow who wishes to be immolated herself. According to him, "she in the most calm manner mounted the pile, and danced on it with her hands extended as if in the ultimate tranquility of spirit."¹⁰ Here the psychological aspect played a pivotal role .The then Hooghly District Magistrate Halliday, on the other hand, also referred to an incident of sati that took place in Hooghly. In 1829, when

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initiative to abolish this custom under the Regulation No. XVII were being debated in official circles, he received news of a sati incident some distance from his residence. He along with Dr. Wise and Christian priest went that area to see it with his own eyes. In the prayer of the priest, when he asked the woman to be disarmed from being a suttee, 'Did you know what pain you were about to suffer?' 'Then the woman placed her finger on a burning lamp and in a moment the finger blistered and hung black. Then the woman said 'are you satisfied?'" The woman was not disturbed for a moment, she endured the heat of the fire. That is what Halliday said in C.E Buckland's book, 'the last suttee that was lawfully celebrated in the district of Hooghly and perhaps in Bengal'¹¹

The most heinous crime like suttee should not be explained only from the psychological aspect of women. In fact, a larger socio-economic context worked behind it. The Hindu Shareholding Act Dayabhaga recognized the widow's right to her husband's property as compared to the Mitakshara law. Besides, referring to Brihaspati, Narada and other ancient legislators, Rammohan Roy frankly said in his research booklet 'Brief Remarks regarding modern Encroachment on the ancient rights of Females: According to the Hindoo Law of Inheritance', All the ancient lawmakers unanimously award to a mother an equal share with her son in the property left by her deceased husband, in order that she may spend her remaining days independently of her children.¹² Therefore, in Calcutta and other districts including neighboring Hooghly, where this law was prevalent, cases of sati-burning were more common. Usually the relatives of the widow did not want the widow to get the share of the husband's property after the death of the husband. Therefore, the relatives sometimes forced the widow to go to death on funeral pile. In this case, the main reason was the greed of property among the relatives played a major role. Besides, the relatives of the widow's father side did not eager to take the maintenance of the wife of deceased polygamous men, they also forced the widows to do the evil act. On the other hand, the priestly community was also enthusiastic enough to keep this tradition alive in the society. In the greed of getting money, they used to encourage widows to immolate. A grand ceremony was organized under the leadership of the priest on the

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eve of such immolation. In that arrangement there were rice, betel nut, camphor, salt, turmeric, sandalwood, coconut, wood and incense etc. Besides, there were singers and musicians, whose musical instruments would cover the sound of Sati's screams. According to a calculation of 1824 CE, the total cost of the organizing a funeral pile ceremony was 15 rupees 5 annas 3 paisa. Out of that, there was 3 rupees for the priest. That is about twenty percent of the total cost. The priestly community would have greatly benefited financially, so they too would have encouraged this practice. According to Peggs, 'Brahmins began to perceive, that, if properly managed, suttee might be made a very productive source of emolument;'¹³

There was also a great social aspect behind suttee. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, polygamy and casteism were very common. According to Bipan Chandra, "An eighty year-old Brahmin in Bengal had about 200 wives. The youngest of them is only eight years old."¹⁴ As a result, many women had a miserable household or married life. Because of their husbands used to marry the girls to rescue their father from the difficulty facing by them at the time of marrying their daughter. As a return the polygamous men earn money as compensation. Later, when a polygamous man died, many wives were often immolated. Sudhir Kumar Mitra's "*Hooghly jelar itihas o Bangasamaj*" mentioned such sati practices. On the other hand according to J. Peggs, "In 1798 at Baganpara 37 widows were burnt with their husband, the fire was burning 3 days, on the first day 3 were burnt, on the second 15, and on the third 19, the deceased had over 100 wives."¹⁵

Those who did not want to be chaste, had to suffer humiliation and deep suffering in the society. In widowhood, girls had to spend their days in endless misery. Most of the time they had to be dependent on the other earners of the family. This made them feel that death is much better than a sad and miserable life as a widow. Because it is more acceptable to attain at least the status of a goddess by becoming a Sati than to enjoy an afflicted life in this world. Rammohan Roy unequivocally stated that 'The afterlife is not a promise of eternal happiness, but the widows would lose all attachment to their own lives after seeing the hardships and humiliations in their daily life. This indifference to the worldly life and the possibility of peace

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in the future life if chaste – after the comparison between of these two that the girls wanted to be immolate. According to him, they (women) become in a great measure regardless of existence after the death of their husbands; and this indifference, accompanied with the hope of the future reward held out to them, leads them to the horrible act of suicide. ¹⁶ Rammohan Roy has also shown that in view of this condition, three ways were usually open to the widow after the husband's death , 1st – To live a miserable life as entire slaves to others without indulging any hope of support from another husband. Because remarriage of a woman was prohibited in the then society. 2^{ndly} – To walk in the paths of unrighteousness for their maintenance and independence. 3^{rdly} – To die on the funeral pile of their husbands, loaded with the applause and honor of their neighbors.' ¹⁷ There were good reasons for choosing the third path. Besides, after the death of the husband, the wife did not have the right to remarry. After the death of her husband, widows would observe strict Celibacy , which was the guideline for women in the conservative society of that time.

A widow carrying her husband's dead body in her lap would immolated herself – this was a very common practice of Sati. Apart from this type of sati , another type of sati practice was prevalent in Bengal i.e. Hooghly district. Sudhir Kumar Mitra in his book narrated a sati immolation witnessed by Magistrate Halliday. According to the Magistrate, "The lady's husband had died in a distant country. It was not possible to bring his body. Instead some part of his (the deceased husband's) garment was put on the pyre with the woman. Then the pyre was burnt with incense powder and ghee."¹⁸ A grand prohibition made by society especially for the childbearing women to forbid them not to do such act. In a patriarchal society there was always a desire that women must be gave birth of a son. It is from this aspiration that such special initiative arise to safe the childbearing women from the immolation.

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V

During the colonial period, the incidence of sati-immolation in Hooghly district was increasing. Evidence of this is found in a list published in 1825. It shows that there were 104 such incidents in Hooghly district in that year, which was much higher than anywhere else in India at that time.¹⁹ On the other side, in the newspaper called '*Samchar-Darpan*', stated that "one-seventh of all co-deaths in Hindustan were held in Hooghly district alone."²⁰ So at the time of the first half of the nineteenth century it was clear that the abolishment of sati practice was necessary to build a healthy society.

Initially, the British government's intention was to keep distance from the social affairs as much as possible, i.e. a policy of complete non-intervention. Because of the fear of agitation against the British rule – such sentiment played behind it. But the Christian missionaries did not remain silent. They opposed the practice of Sati from the beginning. The practice of Sati was kept alive in the society by the scriptural laws. According to the ancient legislatures, this practice is valid and even virtuous according to the Shastras. So review of those scriptures was necessary to eradicate this crime from the society. Many linguists Rammohan Roy came forward in this case. He re-studied the scriptures to prove that sati-immolation was "murder according to all scriptures". Orientalists, on the other hand, also played a leading role. Respectfulness view on Indian civilization, encouraged them to undertake the task of translating ancient Indian scriptures into English. As a result they saw that this abominable practice dims the glow of Indian civilization. Even the Hindu lawgiver Manu did not even mention this practice. As a result, two aspects are becoming clear – one, maybe this practice was not prevalent in Manu's contemporary society, secondly, it is also possible that other lawgivers including Manu had no support to this evil act. so they did not mention it. It also appears that after getting the scriptural evidence, the British decided to abolish the custom. So in this case it is better to say that social reformation based on the interpretation of Hindu scriptures was one of the aspects of the nineteenth century reform movement. On the other hand, the decade of 1820 was very important in the history of India. Because in 1828 Lord

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William Bentinck came to India as Governor General. He undertook a series of social reform programs. A believer in Bentham's utilitarian philosophy, Bentinck's principle was "the greatest welfare of the greatest people" was the main theme in the then social reforms initiatives. Therefore, the issue of women's welfare was also important in his reformist philosophy. As a result, he issued Regulation No. XVII in 1829 declaring the practice of sati-immolation prohibited and those found guilty a stern action took against them. Rammohan gave Bentinck his unwavering support. Derozio also gave tribute to Bentinck through his beautifully illustrated poem which devoted on the governor-general. Contrariwise the biographer of Rammohan Sophia Dobson Collet also narrated on her book entitled "*The life and letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*" all aspects of Rammohan Roy's life who was the most remarkable protagonists in the nineteenth century socio-religious movement.

Even though the law was passed, many wanted the practice of sati to be continued. Brahmin priests were its supporters, while Radhakanta Dev founded the Dharma Sabha in 1830 in support of the practice of sati. In fact, it is good to say in this case here, the main point which Radhakanta Dev said in that respective case was that the British had no right to interfere in any Indian affairs, especially in the societal structure. Later, a similar echo was heard in Balgangadhar Tilak's voice when he opposed the decision which enacted by the government to increase the marriage age of women through the age of consent act. So, it was not enough to only pass the law, instead of essentially to build public opinion against this crime. In this case too, Rammohan's role was prominent. In 1818, Rammohan published a booklet in Bengali against this practice and distributed it in various regions, especially in areas where sati-immolations were frequent. He also translated this book into English. His aim was to create the impression in the minds of the English ruling officials that there was no Hindu theological principle behind the practice of sati. He thought that social change was initiated by the transmission of consciousness among people through public education along with law. Besides, the British also realized that modern education is needed to make the reform project effective at the lower levels of the society. Because education can lead people from darkness to light. On the other hand, Ram Mohan, a staunch supporter of the newspaper, also took the help of the

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press to campaign against this act. In this case, he used 'Sambad Kaumadi' widely to build public opinion against this practice. According to P. N. Bose, "... Rammohan Roy took a prominent part in the agitation against sati....In this journal (kaumadi) he wrote many strong articles and reprinted his pamphlet against the practice."²¹ Aftermath Rammohan's worthy successor Vidyasagar agitated in favour of widow remarriage. Because of miserable widowhood also fueled the practice of immolation. Apart from this he also tried to improve the conditions of women through educating them. Because he thought that this education can only be able to enhance the social status of women. Therefore, it appears that due to the solidarity of the British government and especially social workers like Rammohan and Vidyasagar, sati and other criminal practices were removed from the society. In this regard a context of James Long can be shared here. In his book "*Calcutta and its neighbourhood*" where he described the sati and infanticide that took place frequently on the banks of the Bhagirathi, in the portion of 'The banks of river Bhagirathi' a part of that book, 'The banks of the Bhagirathi in 1864 present widely different scenes from what they did in 1746..... the sati fires have been extinguished and Ganga stream is no longer polluted with infanticide.'²²

Conclusion

So importantly enough that spreading of education played a pivotal impact on the rate of proportional decrease of sati incidents in colonial Bengal as a whole and in Hooghly as a particular. For this reason when a warm climatic condition was created in the socio-cultural arena, a debate was raised questioning which particular field was suitable to start the reforms. After a depth evaluation the government chose the Educational section as an initial ground, based on which the social reform movement can be carried out. But the impact of spreading education amongst all regions is not the same. Somewhere other factors also have a deep root in the society. Though the practice was eradicated from the society, but such incidents remain in the mind of the people through ballads and folklore. For this reason after forty years of

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India's Independence this custom repeated at Deorala in Rajasthan. According to 'The Times of India' (September 9, 2019), "18-year-old Roop Kanwar burnt herself on her husband's funeral pyre at Deorala village in Sikar district, people of the hamlet continue to accord her a god-like stature." This incident proved the strong ground of folk culture in the society which still recognizing the evil custom as a sacred act.

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