# 20 Sati and sanskrit: the move from orientalism to hinduism

*Peter van der Veer*

In the 1970s I studied Indo-Iranian Languages and Cultures in The Netherlands. The course offerings were, by and large, limited to aspects of Sanskrit language and literature, which provided, according to my professors, the key to Indian Civilization. The term "Indo-Iranian" did not refer to the more recent period of a millennium of pervasive Persian influence on Indian languages and cultures, but to a much earlier relation between Vedic and Avestan material in the larger context of Indo-Aryan or Indo-European studies. The assumptions which guided the construction of this field of scholarship were never theoretically questioned, since all the available time was devoted to the mastery of Sanskrit grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and poetics; in short, to philological craftmanship. Of course, my choice for this field was a totally marginal one in the 1970s. Since then, it has been even more marginalized in European and American universities, so that it is hard not to sympathize with those who are still surviving in it without much institutional support, social status or material gain.

However, Indology has not always been so marginal. Between, say, 1860 and 1930, this field was one of the most dynamic in the academy and drew great minds and produced impressive scholarship. Many of the unchallenged assumptions which I found in the 1970s were given their authoritative status in this period. Orientalist scholarship has come under repeated scrutiny in the post-colonial period. A landmark was, of course, Raymond Schwab's *La Renaissance Orientale* (1950), and this was followed by a number of studies which had an increasingly critical tone, culminating in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). While much of that critique focused on Middle Eastern studies, there have been, recently, some attempts to bring it to bear on the study of South Asia (Inden 1990, Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993). In this paper I want to build on this critique in an analysis of the use of "foundational" Sanskrit texts in the understanding of Indian history. However, I also want to go one step further by looking theoretically at some of the problems in deconstructing Orientalism. The issue I would like to engage is what happens when one deprivileges "scripture" as the source of one's historical interpretation of Indian religious practice. My analysis will focus on recent writings by Lata Mani, Gayatri Spivak and Catherine Weinberger-Thomas which deal with the phenomenon of *sati*, the burning of the Hindu widow, in colonial India. I will first look at the construction of Indian tradition by Orientalism and, subsequently, at some problems in the analysis of sati.

## *Orientalist empiricism*

India has, of course, many languages and many literatures in these languages. Moreover, much of the literary production up to now is in the oral and

performative mode. To look for the category of "Indian Literature" is thus fraught with great conceptual difficulties (Ahmad 1992). It is almost inescapable to look for homogenizing principles, to pose the civilizational and/or the national question. There are certainly a great many ways to go about this, but one important approach developed in the colonial period was to canonize the Sanskrit classics and to see them as the basis of Hindu civilization (*sanskriti*). A crucial corollary of this approach was to equate Hindu with Indian. Albrecht Weber's *The History of Indian Literature*, published in German in 1852, was the first grand Orientalist answer to the question: what is Indian literature? It only dealt with Sanskrit texts. It is an answer which still set the agenda for my "Indo-Iranian" studies in the 1970s, and it certainly continues to be very influential in India.

To an important extent, this Orientalist construction of Sanskrit High Culture cannot be understood without seeing its intimate connection to colonial rule. I propose to conceptualize Orientalism as the various colonial accounts of the thought, religion and history of colonized peoples in Asia. In this way I have incorporated the colonial element in the definition of Orientalism. In order to rule India, the British had to acquire empirical knowledge about India's population, geography, history, languages, customs. Bernard Cohn (1978) has shown that this colonial documentation project constructed a large body of authoritative knowledge to which everything which came to be said about India had to refer. An encyclopedic library of reports, statistics, censuses, gazetteers, histories, and ethnographies was produced out of utilitarian motives no doubt, but also, importantly, out of a far-reaching desire for scientific, empirical knowledge (Ludden 1993).

The most significant contribution of Orientalism to this documentation project which provided the British with their instruments of rule was the "discovery" of indigenous law. The capacity to assess taxes was, of course, intimately linked to knowledge about property rights and legal procedures. Instead of outright imposition of British law on India, the East India Company under Warren Hastings persuaded "eleven of the most respectable pandits of Bengal" to compile from Sanskrit sources on Hindu law a code that could be translated into English for the newly appointed judges to use. This Sanskrit compilation was first translated into Persian, since no European at that time knew Sanskrit, and then from Persian into English. The English translation by Halhed was published in 1776 in London. This code was used until the early 19th century.

Sir William Jones (1746-1794), who had been appointed to the Court in Calcutta, did not trust the compilation and started to learn Sanskrit in order to gain direct access to that fixed body of legal knowledge which was Hindu law, locked up in the heads and texts of pandits, Hindu religious specialists. Instead of relying on the fragmented, and constantly disputed, knowledge of individual native specialists, an authoritative Ur-text had to be reconstructed. The search for the oldest text was supposed to yield the most authoritative and authentic statement. Incidentally, Jones's discovery of the relations between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin set the agenda for the emergence of Indo-European scholarship which became a booming industry in the second half of the 19th century.

The empiricist desire to go back to the Ur-text was in the case of the colonial lawyers immediately related to a perceived need to transcend the

internal disputes among native specialists. However, it was also propelled by Enlightenment notions of a search for the "lost origins" of a common civilization, characterized by "natural light", tolerance and purity. Of course, colonial India only showed decay and corruption of these higher ideals, but by going back to the origins one could retrieve this remarkable civilization. This fascination with the Ur-India continued with the German Romantic philosophers whose interest was, in fact, related to a radical critique of the Enlightenment by a turn to the "spiritual East". Significantly, it was Wilhelm von Schlegel, the brother of the famous Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, who held the first chair for Sanskrit in Germany, at the University of Bonn (1818). It is these metropolitan, theoretical concerns which propelled the desire to know India's heritage among Western philologists. All this set the agenda for the enormous production of Indological scholarship in the second half of the 19th and first decades of the 20th century.

One could argue that in this period the link between the instrumentalities of rule and the production of Indological scholarship had become rather remote. This distance is in a way symbolized by the fact that the Germans had taken the leading role in this kind of scholarship, although they did not have any colonial relation with India. As Sheldon Pollock (1993) has recently argued, however, the colonizing project turned itself inward in the German case to produce an "internal Orientalism" in which a master race was distinguished from the slave peoples. This racist ideology was given philological legitimation through the appropriation of the Brahmanical opposition between the Aryan and the Shudra slave. Pollock's argument shows the extent to which Orientalist discourse was deployed in the construction of nationalism in Europe.

Nationalism is clearly not the answer to Orientalism, as implied in Said's path-breaking book on the subject. Obviously, Orientalism played a formative role in the construction of both European and Asian nationalist ideologies. Above I have mentioned, in passing, the construction of Hindu and Islamic law. This was, in fact, not only one of the most important contributions of Orientalism to colonial rule, but also to a subsequent essentialization of Hindu-Muslim differences and oppositions in Hindu and Muslim nationalisms. It set the stage for the search of the "Indian heritage" in Hindu scriptures. The interest in origins led to a philological investigation of "the wonder that was India" (as the title of one popular Indological textbook has it) before the twelfth century, that is, before the Muslim invasions. The Muslim presence was effectively occluded from the Indian past. Since Orientalism constructed the archive of India's past, this occlusion remained a striking feature of the nationalist historiography of the nation-state which the constitution calls "India, that is Bharat". Bharat is an abbreviation of the Sanskrit Bharatavarsha, the land of the Bharata clan, the subject of the Hindu epos the Mahabharata. India is thus constitutionally linked to a pre-Islamic past, celebrated in Hindu texts.

As Partha Chatterjee (1992) has recently argued, nationalist history, as it started to be written in the 19th century, only mentioned Muslims as a cause of the corruption and decadence of Hindu society. The Hindu nation was subjected by Muslims, and the regeneration of the nation only became possible after the British had abolished Muslim rule. Muslims are merely mentioned as

aggressive murderers, plunderers, and destroyers of India's Hindu culture. Above all, they are outsiders, foreigners in the nationalist imaginaire. In this narrative Hindus are weak, because of their tolerance and because of their corrupted practices, but nevertheless constantly resisting Muslim oppression. The glories of ancient Hindu India are extolled in the same manner as the Orientalists had been doing. The conclusion of 19th-century writing is clear: reform Hindu society, revive the true ideals enshrined in the ancient Sanskrit texts, and, by that token, take one's political destiny in one's own (that is, Hindu) hands. To quote Chatterjee: "The idea of the singularity of national history has inevitably led to a single source of Indian tradition, viz. ancient Hindu civilization. Islam here is either the history of foreign conquest or a domesticated element of everyday popular life. The classical heritage of Islam remains external to Indian history" (1992:149).

## *India's (Hindu) heritage*

The Orientalist search for India's heritage in Hindu scriptures definitely defined the discursive terrain in which Hindu nationalism had to situate its project of nationalizing the past. So, interestingly, under the influence of reformism, Indian nationalists tried to find their nationalist past much less in the immense, medieval devotional literature which continues to be used in contemporary religious practice than in the Sanskrit classics of the pre-Islamic period. These classics were found in fragmented, regionally diverse traditions of a primarily oral and performative nature. To some extent, however, such traditions were supported by manuscripts that were used as "aide-mémoires" but became the object of Orientalist empiricism. Disparate traditions, transmitted by a mixture of oral and written means, now became available in critical editions, standardized Ur-texts.

As is often the case, the religious and the civilizational are completely entangled here. Writing has always been seen in modern Europe as the sign of "being civilized." In anthropology it was, till recently, common to mark the absence of writing as the criterion to distinguish the primitive from the civilized. Prehistory and history are also divided by the presence or absence of writing. A related argument about literacy is that there is a connection between literacy, critical inquiry and planned change (Goody 1977).

Within Benedict Anderson's influential thesis on the relation between print capitalism and nationalism (1991), there is a similar Enlightenment prejudice hidden. The modern nation cannot be imagined without the simultaneity of the act of reading. It is print textuality which is privileged in Anderson's theory to carry the nationalist imagination. It is important to see that Anderson's theory does not deal with what is of at least equal importance in the nationalisms of colonized Asia, namely collective action in public arenas and the oral performance of sacred texts (van der Veer 1993). Nevertheless, despite the marginality of the written word in nineteenth-century India, it is the privileged connection between scripture and nation which is not only adopted by Anderson in his recent theory, but also by the ideologues of Hindu nationalism.

If "history" and "the nation" are only possible in the presence of the written word, then it is quite understandable that the orality of Hindu traditions was a "national" embarrassment for Indian scholars who were confronted with the comparison with the West. However, it is important to note that the high value given to writing in Europe is not ascribed to it in Hindu traditions (Coburn 1989). On the contrary, the sacrality of the Vedic mantras depends on speaking and listening. To write these mantras down is explicitly forbidden. This prohibition has also to do with the secret power of these sounds which should only be known by the higher castes and certainly not by the lower castes and women. The Vedas were transmitted orally and only really made into written texts by the 19th-century Orientalists, starting with Max Muller's six-volume edition of the Rg-Veda.

The Vedas are known as *sruti*, that which is heard. They are generally considered to be the foundation of contemporary Hindu practice. So, for example, Vedic recitation is an element of daily Brahmanical worship and the root of the general Hindu practice of *puja-path* (worship-recitation) which continues to the present day to be the common mode of religious communication. The Mahabharata, Ramayana and Puranas are regarded as second in authority to the Vedas. They are called "remembered" (*smrti*) traditions. Also in their case, however, the preferred mode of transmission is oral recitation. An important way of sacralizing a specific occasion, like a birth or the building of a house in North India, is the "unbroken recitation" (*akhand-path*) of this text. In the case of both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as well as in other traditions, it is the dramatic enactment of the text in popular plays which is a major mode of keeping the oral tradition alive. These performative traditions can only be understood in their local/regional contexts.

The main point made here is that Hindu religious practice does refer to a textual heritage, but that this reference depends on historical context and is thus highly variable. The variation in the reference to either the "remembered" or the "heard" traditions is possible because of the oral nature of these traditions. Moreover, reference is more often than not made to a vernacular tradition which has some tenuous relations with the Brahmanical Sanskrit one. Let us look by way of illustration at the performative elaboration of the Mahabharata lore in the context of the Tamil Draupadi cult. While the Sanskrit Mahabharata's composition is conventionally dated between 500 B.C. and 400 A.D., we already find Tamil versions in the first centuries A.D. There are a great number of Draupadi temples and festivals in Tamil Nadu, while in many other parts of India there is often hardly any attention to Draupadi. So, there is a great unevenness in the importance attached to the Mahabharata lore in different parts of the country. It is not the Brahmans which dominate the Draupadi cult, but some major peasant castes such as the Velalars. Elements of possession, which are abhorred in Brahmanical ideology, are crucial in the performance which is largely in the hands of itinerant professionals. What we find in South India is a cult which, in the words of Alf Hiltebeitel (1989:135), is "an adroit and compelling multileveled interpretation of a living Mahabharata." The performances are articulated within complex regional traditions in a variety of political and social contexts. The idea that there is a Sanskrit Mahabharata which serves as the foundational text for the understanding of these traditions is against their very nature. I want to explore the

status of foundational texts somewhat further in a short discussion of the much debated issue of "widow-burning" in Hindu India.

## *Sati*

The term sati is a Sanskrit term that refers to the woman who immolates herself on the pyre of her deceased husband. Such a woman is called sati, that is "good" or "virtuous", true to her conjugal vow to serve her husband as her god. A secondary use of the term refers not to the woman but to the practice of widow-burning itself. In 1829 this practice was abolished by the British colonial authorities. In a recent, brilliant analysis of the discursive aspects of the nineteenth-century debate on sati, Lata Mani (1990) has tried to show that the notion of "tradition" in these debates is specifically "colonial". Her argument is that "woman" is neither subject nor object of that debate but that it became the site of the formulation of tradition. In her view Brahmanical scripture only became a privileged source of tradition because the colonial authorities established it as such in their need for an indigenous legal basis for their rule over Indian society. This implied that the authorities had to watch over widow-burning to see whether the ritual was scripturally authentic and correctly performed or not. A distinction between "genuine" and "spurious" sati could be made by asking Brahman scriptural authorities (pandits) to give a legal opinion on the basis of Sanskrit scripture. Moreover, both the native opponents of the practice and the defenders of it had to base their arguments on scriptural evidence.

Mani's analysis of colonial discourse is an astute one. She rightly argues that the colonial constitution of personal law from religious scripture had important consequences for the status of women in Indian society. She also shows convincingly that, although the question of the "free will" of the woman who ascends her husband's pyre is a crucial element in the debate, her voice is not heard in the colonial records which focus on Brahmanical scripture. She explicitly refuses to be drawn in any discussion of the social history of sati by limiting herself to the definition of the practice in colonial discourse.

The parameters of Mani's mode of deconstructive practice are relatively clear. They are those of the colonial debate. The British authorities and the Indian opponents and defenders of the practice of sati are all confined to an arena of colonial construction. One wonders, however, if one can go at least somewhat beyond the parameters of the colonial debate and its postcolonial deconstruction to find a space which is not constructed by metropolitan discourse on "free will" and "protection of the weaker sex", but by indigenous discursive traditions.

This point is recognized in a wide-ranging essay on the Western intellectual's access to the civilization of the Other by Gayatri Spivak (1988). In that essay Spivak also looks at the issue of sati. It is entitled *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and that title refers not only to the work of Gramsci, but also to that of a collective of historians of India who publish *Subaltern Studies*. Her question is of course critical for the project of that collective which is to retrieve the consciousness and politics of the people, to let the subalterns speak. That project is explicitly formulated as an alternative to elitist historiography which

only writes the history of the achievements of both colonial and indigenous elites. To illustrate the complexities and ambiguities of giving the subaltern – and more specifically the subaltern as woman – a voice in history, Spivak looks at the history of sati. As she puts it, "The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of: 'White men saving brown women from brown men.' White women – from the nineteenth-century British Missionary Registers to Mary Daly – have not produced an alternative understanding. Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: 'The women actually wanted to die.' The two sentences go a long way to legitimize each other" (1988:297).

In marked distinction from Lata Mani, Spivak presents a rather lengthy discussion of the scriptural basis of the sati practice. Her initial question "Can the subaltern speak?" leads her to tackle the problem of the free choice of the sati. This is clearly the main issue in the debates between critics and defenders of the practice in the nineteenth century, as highlighted by Mani. She recognizes that "imperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind," but goes on to ask, "how should one examine the dissimulation of patriarchal strategy, which apparently grants the woman free choice as *subject*? In other words, how does one make the move from 'Britain' to 'Hinduism'?" (1988:299). Spivak decides to move to the Sanskrit tradition. Her argument in the analysis of that tradition is that it defines the woman as object of *one* husband who is her god and locates her free will in the act of self-immolation as a means to free herself from her female (lower) body. In this way Spivak succeeds in showing that the woman disappears between patriarchy and imperialism and comes to the conclusion that "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak" (1988:307).

Spivak's argument shows convincingly how rewarding it can be to go beyond the analysis of colonial discourse. In the attempt to understand what the practice of widow-immolation signifies, it is of great importance to look at Hindu discursive traditions, a great many of which are in Sanskrit. Of course, one does not retrieve the voice of the subaltern woman, but one can understand her subject-formation better by looking at such traditions. One of the problems here, however, is that there is precious little evidence of the discursive authorization of sati in the Veda and the Dharmasastra, the texts referred to by Spivak. The point made by Mani that it is in the nature of the debate about sati that reference has to be made to scripture is at least partly correct, and Spivak seems to fall in the same discursive trap as the debaters in the nineteenth century. The practice of widow-burning appears to rest on oral traditions which are only marginally recorded in the Sanskrit tradition. What we know of these traditions shows a linkage between a cult of sati with the cult of male warriors. The stones which refer to the self-immolation are objects of worship located at the shrine of their warrior husbands. This worship also signifies the importance of feminine power (shakti) in Hinduism.

Nevertheless, Spivak is, paradoxically, also right in referring to the Sanskrit tradition, since this is the hegemonic tradition to which the indigenous elite turned in its debate with itself and with the colonial authorities. The point clearly is that the Sanskrit tradition had been a hegemonic discourse in its own right in the pre-colonial period and that the Orientalist interest in it was not

simply a romantic fancy, but based on the recognition of that hegemony. One of our problems is that, writing in the present, one cannot easily distinguish anymore between the authoritative status of the Sanskrit tradition and its construction by Orientalism. Some of these texts may have received their paradigmatic status only in the colonial period, so that their transmission and reception have to be thoroughly historicized – a work which has hardly begun in Indian studies. Moreover, as I have argued above, these textual traditions were largely orally transmitted and allowed for an enormous range of interpretations. One should therefore not exaggerate the hegemony of the Sanskrit tradition and the silence of the muted subaltern.

The case of sati forces us to go beyond both the parameters of the colonial archive and those of the Sanskrit traditions by looking at vernacular women's songs and women's culture, precisely because of the multiplicity of roles and subject-positions occupied by women. It might thus also be of importance to look somewhat more carefully at the class origin of women who commit suicide by self-immolation. Most of the evidence seems to point out that it is – by and large – the members of the dominant, propertied castes who are involved in this practice and not those of the subaltern "masses".

A good attempt to look at all the relevant sources – Sanskrit traditions, collections of local myths, women's songs, iconography – but also at the anthropological and historical analysis of Indian conceptions of death has recently been made by Catherine Weinberger-Thomas (1989). She tries to reconstruct the elements of the ceremony. This has to be done a step removed from the actual performance, since the practice, which is still performed, is hidden from outsiders till it is over, because it is still firmly prohibited by the state.

One of the conclusions at which Weinberger-Thomas arrives in her study is that the question of the "uttered intention" of the widow to become a sati is crucial to the ceremony. This implies that the question of "free will" is not merely an external element which is enforced on the debate of sati by colonial discourse as Mani wants us to believe. As often we find here a collusion of internal and external discursive elements which end up in constituting the new debate on sati. Another important point made by Weinberger-Thomas supports the line of argument of Spivak, namely the importance of the total devotion to the *one and only* husband. She shows that there is a strong belief that the wife whose husband dies before her is herself to blame for that death. It is her dangerous sexuality which has caused the husband's death. This sexuality can only be controlled by chastity and devotion to the husband. And, again, this chastity and devotion has to be proven, after the husband's death, by self-immolation. The alternatives before her are either to go on living as a despised widow, a burden on her in-laws, or to die a virtuous death which will make her into an object of worship.

## *Conclusion*

At least one conclusion can be drawn from the above discussion. The move made by writers like Said to thoroughly theorize the role of Orientalist knowledge in the colonization of the East is on the whole a necessary one if one

wants to come to an understanding of Indian history. If one wants to study the history of law or religious morality in India, one simply cannot ignore how these topics have been shaped and transformed by Orientalist discourse. However, the question is how to proceed beyond this view which has become rather commonplace. It should be clear that nationalism is not to be seen as the antidote to Orientalism. Lata Mani's argument about sati shows the extent to which the discourse of Hindu reformists and, one may add, precursors of the nationalists was implicated in colonial discourse. More in general, one should see that nationalist discourse is in many ways the direct heir to the Orientalist legacy, a point which Said now sees much more clearly than when he wrote his book.

The answer to Orientalism may lie in a move to go beyond the parameters of colonial discourse. Spivak's essay points to an important historical phenomenon: the collusion of an indigenous, hegemonic tradition and the Orientalist understanding of that tradition. The bridge between the Sanskrit tradition and Orientalism is formed by the Brahmanical division between authoritative, transcendent knowledge (*shastrik*) and contextual, immanent knowledge (*laukik*). The Vedas are, of course, the main source of authoritative knowledge and that is the reason that every religious innovation has to be legitimated by reference to the Vedas. It is precisely the attempt to transcend historical referentiality and to "vedicize" whatever "remembered" tradition by calling it "one of the Vedas" which characterized the pre-colonial establishment of authoritative discourse. It seems therefore the link between the Brahmanical need to ground authoritative discourse in what the Vedic rishis have "heard" in the time of origins and the Orientalist search for the golden age of Indo-European civilization in Sanskrit Ur-texts which provides the intellectual context for the debate on tradition in the colonial period.

One has therefore to take the Sanskrit tradition seriously and not to deny agency to pre-colonial elites in establishing their own hegemonic discourse. Another step to be taken, however, is to go beyond the foundational texts as much as possible and analyse the margins of their authority. The cult of Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata, as described by Hiltebeitel, and the cult of sati, as described by Weinberger-Thomas, simply cannot be reduced to any foundational text. This is a crucial step if one wants to understand female power in religious practice, however circumscribed, and to hear the voice of the subaltern sati, however faintly.