

UPA Cabinet Pours Cold Water on Amendments to Sati Law

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The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act was passed in 1987 following the shocking immolation of a young woman, Roop Kanwar in Deorala, Rajasthan. Glorification of sati is a crime in the eyes of this law. Yet, recently a member of the 'secular', 'pro-women' UPA Cabinet, Minister of Mines Sis Ram Ola, defended sati temples in the name of 'traditional mores' !

The UPA Cabinet was considering some amendments to make the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act more stringent. Some of the amendments proposed included making it a non-bailable offence to coerce a woman to commit Sati ; prison terms for those committing as well as glorifying sati to be increased to a minimum of three years up to 10 years ; heavy fines (increased from Rs 10,000 to Rs 50,000) for a village for participation in an act of sati ; and making the panchayat responsible for alerting the police and the district magistrate to any such incident. The amendments were cleared by the group of ministers (GoM) headed by HRD minister nearly a year ago in August 2007. But the UPA Cabinet has now refused to approve the amendments. Not only Sis Ram Ola, but ironically even Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal blocked the Cabinet's move to approve the amendments to the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, objecting to the proposals to holding the entire village and the panchayat guilty.

We can easily see how these amendments are necessary if we note how people have escaped punishment under the present act. BJP leaders who held a demonstration openly glorifying sati soon after Roop Kanwar's killing were acquitted by a Special Court in 2004, for 'lack of evidence'. The BJP Government of Rajasthan headed by Vasundhara Raje Scindia (whose mother was notorious for openly glorifying sati) has even brought out tourism brochures which glorify sati temples (the govt was forced to withdraw these brochures due to a public uproar by women's groups in Rajasthan).

In the Cabinet meeting, Sis Ram Ola reportedly said the proposals would challenge « existing mores » and asked, « What would happen to the Sati temples and how would the government deal with the tradition of worship at these temples ? » Well, Shri Ola, any pro-woman law is bound to challenge existing patriarchal « mores » and « traditions », and in a modern democratic country, how can a Minister be allowed to suggest that traditions - especially cruel and barbaric traditions like sati - are greater than laws ?! In the name of « tradition », female foeticide, child marriage and sati would all be « justified » !

In the existing Act, even prior to any amendments, sati temples are illegal : according to Section 2(1)(b)(iii) and Section 2(1)(b)(iv) of the Act, arranging any function to eulogise the person who has committed Sati, amounts to glorification of Sati ; the creation of a trust, or the collection of funds, or the construction of temple or other structure or the carrying on of any form of worship or the performance of any ceremony with a view to perpetuating the honour of, or to preserve the memory of, a person who has committed Sati also amounts to glorification of Sati. Section 7(1) of the Act even empowers the Government to direct the removal of such temples where sati is glorified. But no Government has ever ordered action under these laws. And Shri Ola, MP from Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, pretends to be unaware of the above law, and asks « What will happen to the Sati temples and the tradition of worship at these temples ? » Eminent lawyer and the UPA's Minister for Science and

Technology too, could not inform his colleague that sati temples are illegal and ought to be demolished by the Government !

The regions of Sikar, Churu and Jhunjhunu are particularly prone to Sati, and Ola, as an MP from Jhunjhunu ought to be prosecuted himself for failing to follow the law and take any action against the sati temples in his constituency. CM Vasundhara Raje also is said to have described Jhunjhunu as the 'land of sati' at a Rally.

Interestingly, among the 11 people who were accused (and later acquitted) of glorifying Roop Kanwar's 'sati' was Pratap Singh Khachariawas — nephew of the Vice-President, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, and former president of Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha — who later joined Congress and was fielded as the party's candidate from Jaipur for the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. Clearly, both BJP and Congress alike are happy to glorify the glorifiers of sati !

The above episode exposes the soft-Hindutva of the Congress and UPA Government, and also the hollowness of their claims of being pro-women. If they are unwilling to prevent women from being burnt alive ; if they defend the medieval obscurantist « tradition » of worshipping women who were burnt alive ; they have no business to being in the seat of power at the Centre !

P.S.

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