

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky
Hindu widow-burning

Burning witches in the West,
Burning widows in the East,
They are vampires on a feast
Sucking the blood of the World.

— Anon.

Excerpted from *Blavatsky Collected Writings* (CAVES AND JUNGLES OF HINDOSTAN), pp. 238-43.

THE final marriage ceremony, after which the woman is forever cut off from the external world, had just begun. We kept our eyes and ears open and decided to observe every-thing more closely than ever. The bridegroom and the bride were placed before the altar. With their hands tied by long blades of *khus-khus* grass, the Brāhmana led them three times around the altar; their hands were then untied and the priest mumbled a mantra. When he had finished, the boy bridegroom lifted his diminutive bride and carried her in his arms three times around the altar; then they both walked three times around, the bridegroom preceding the bride, she following him like an obedient wife. When this was over, the young husband was placed on a high chair by the entrance door, while the bride took a basin of water, knelt at the feet of her future ruler, took off his shoes and, having washed his feet, wiped them with her long hair — a custom really most ancient, as we noticed. On the bridegroom's right sat his mother. The bride knelt before her also, and, having performed a similar operation on her mother-in-law's feet, she retired to the house. Then her mother came out of the crowd and repeated the same ceremony on the feet of her son-in-law and his mother, but without using her hair as a towel. The wedding was over. The drums and tom-toms sounded once more, and, half-deafened by them, we started for home.

In the tent we found the *akāli* delivering a sermon to Mr. W. and the "silent general," on the religion of "Nanak" and all the soul-saving advantages of "Sikhism," as compared with the religion of the "devil-worshippers," as he [239] called the Brāhmanas. Our friend was right. Satan himself could not have devised, in his moments of genius, anything more unjust, more subtly cruel, than that which these "twice-born" infernal rascals had conjured up in regard to woman. *Complete, unconditional social death* is in store for her in case of widowhood, even if this occurs when she is but a five or three year old girl, and even in cases of betrothal, during which ceremony, as we have just seen, she is not even present, but is figuratively represented by the sacrifice of a goat. The male, on the other hand, has the right to have several wives,



though it should be stated, in justice to the Hindus, that we have not yet heard of an instance of any of them having *more than one* wife, with the exception of the depraved princes and the Maharajas, trained in drunkenness and other charms of Western civilization by the Residents and their wardens, the English. In *case* of a widower, the man is required to enter into a second *and* even third marriage. No such law exists for the woman. For her, a second marriage is considered a great *sin*, an unheard of shame.

As I write these lines, agitators *and* opponents of the Brāhmanas have initiated a reform *movement* in Bombay, in regard to the remarriage of widows, and *this* is bound to shake the whole of orthodox India to its *very* foundation. It is now ten years since Mūljī-Thākur-Singh and other reformers raised this question (but only two or three individuals availed themselves of the opportunity). The struggle is one of life and death, a struggle that is silent and secret, but nevertheless fierce and obstinate. In the meantime, this is what every widow can expect; as soon as the corpse of her husband is burned, the widow must shave her head and remain shaved from then on. She is not allowed to wear any of her adornments; her bracelets, rings and necklaces are broken to pieces and burned together with her hair and her husband's remains. During the rest of her life, from head to foot, she must wear nothing but *white*, *if* she be less than twenty-five when widowed, and red, if older. The temples, religious ceremonies and society are closed to her forever. She has no right to speak to any of her relatives or to eat with them. She sleeps, eats and works separately, and her touch is considered impure for seven years. If a man, going [240] out to business in the morning, meets a widow first, he goes home again and postpones his business for another day, meeting a widow is the worst omen. Caught in the false interpretation of the *Vedas*, with the criminal intention burning widows in order to appropriate wealth, the Brāhmanas, unable any longer to carry out this cruel custom, have revived the ancient precept which was but rarely put practice — and then merely in the case of *rich* widows refusing the last minute to be burned — and have applied it to all widows indiscriminately. Powerless against British law they revenge themselves on the innocent and unhappy women.

The story of how Professor Wilson caught the Brahman distorting the text of the *Vedas* and practicing deception is most curious. For long centuries they cruelly burned the wretched widows, appealing for justification to a certain *hymn* of the *Rigveda*, and claiming to be rigidly fulfilling the institutes of Manu, the interpreter of their revelation. When the British government first declared its intention to suppress the burning of widows, the whole country, from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas, rose in protest under the influence of the Brāhmanas. “The English promised to up hold the policy of non-interference in our religious affairs, and they must keep their word,” was the general outcry. Never was India so near revolution as in those days. The English seeing that things were bad, did nothing. But Wilson the best Sanskritist of the day, did not consider the bat lost. He searched the most ancient manuscripts, until he became convinced that the alleged precept did not exist anywhere in the *Vedas*, though in the *Laws of Manu*, the infallible, interpreter of the “revelation,” it seemed to stand out clearly, and had been translated accordingly by H.T. Colebrook and other Orientalists. The affair was becoming : embarrassing. An effort to prove that Manu's interpretation was wrong would have been tantamount, in view of popu-



lar fanaticism, to attempting to reduce water to powder. So Wilson set himself to study *Manu*, comparing the text of the *Vedas* with the text of the lawgiver. And this was the result of his labor: the *Rigveda* orders the Brahmana to place the widow side by side with the corpse, *before* the pyre is lighted, [241] and then, after certain rites have been performed, *to lead her down from the funeral pyre* and loudly to sing to her the following verse from the *Rigveda* (x, 18, 8):

Rise up, woman, come to the world of living beings, thou sleepest nigh unto the lifeless. Come; thou hast been associated with maternity through the husband by whom thy hand was formerly taken.¹

Then the women present at the burning rubbed their eyes with collyrium, and the Brahmana addressed to them the following verse [*Rigveda*, X, 18, 7]:

May these women, who are not widows, who have good husbands, who are mothers, enter with unguents and clarified butter: without tears, without sorrow, let them first go up into the dwelling.²

It is precisely the last few words that were distorted by the Brāhmanas in the most cunning and subtle manner. The original of these words reads thus:

ārohantu janayo yonimagre.

which literally means: “first let the mothers enter into the womb of the altar” (*yonimagre* — *within* the altar) Changing one letter of the last word “agre,” which they altered to “*agneh*” (fire), the Brāhmanas acquired the right for centuries on end to send the hapless Malabar widows into the *yonimagre* — the “womb of fire.”³ [242]

¹ [Horace H. Wilson's translation in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. XVI (1854), pp. 201-14, in his essay entitled: “On the Supposed Vaidik Authority for the Burning of Hindu Widows, etc.” — Boris de Zirkoff.]

² [Prof. Wilson's translation.]

³ [We give below the transliteration in Roman characters of the original Devanāgarī of these two verses from the *Rigveda*:

Imā nārīraividhavāh supatnīrāñjanena sarpishā sam viśantu.
Anāśravo'nāmivāh suratnā ārohantu janayo yonimagre (X, 18, 7).
Udīrshva nāryabhi jīvalokam gatāsumetamupa śesha ehi
Hastagrābhasya didhishostavedam patyurjanitvamabhi sam babhūtha (X, 18, 8).

These are also given in the *Atharvaveda*, XII, 2, 31 and XVIII, 3, 57; there was a controversy between Colebrooke and Prof. Wilson about the translation of these verses, and Colebrooke was of the view that they gave authority for the practice of suttee (See *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. IV, 1799, p. 213). In doing so, he took the reading *jalayonimagre* which is given by one of the commentators on law codes, Raghunan-dana, in his *Sūdhittattva*. This is a comparatively late work.

The reading which Prof. Wilson adopts and the translation he gives of *ārohantu* . . . has the authority of the most famous of Vedic commentators, Śayana. None of the *Grihya-Sūtras* (ancient texts containing procedures for ceremonies) nor *Dharma-Sūtras* (ancient law codes in the form of aphorisms), except that of Vishnu, gives any procedure for *suttee*, which means that it did not exist then. But the later law codes and then the commentators, including Raghunandana, began to pre-scribe the use of these two verses for the performance of *suttee*.

There is a learned and interesting discussion on this complicated subject in Dr. P.V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. II, pp. 617-19 and 625-35 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1941). See also Dr. A.S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, Benares, The Culture Publication House, Hindu University, 1938. Dr. Kane points out that Raghunandana could not have altered the Vedic verse as thousands of people knew the *Vedas* by heart in those days. Either the MS. of his *Sūdhittattva* is corrupt, or he made an innocent mistake. He had no reason to change *agre* to *agne*, because even the original reading had been taken as authority for *suttee* even before Raghunandana's time by Aparārka and others. Dr. Kane points out that the first verse has nothing to do with the widow but refers to other women relations, friends, etc. As for the second verse, in ancient times it was used to make the widow rise after she had been asked to sit near the body of her husband, which might have had a symbolical meaning or may have been a relic of pre-Vedic practice of *suttee*. Later on the first verse was used in the *suttee* ceremonial which had been created.

Cf. also John Wilson, *History of the Suppression of Infanticide in Western India under the Government of Bom-*

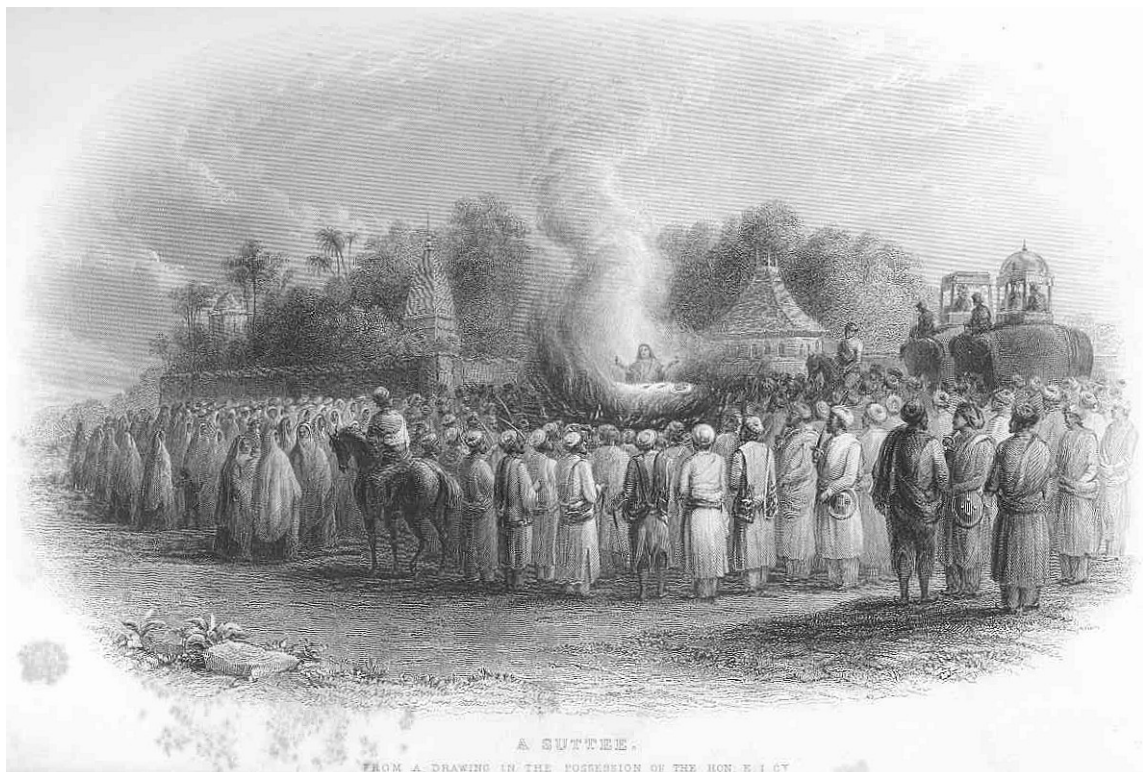


Not only did the *Vedas* never permit the burning of widows, but there is even a passage in the *Taittiriya-Aranyaka* (VI, 10, 2) of the *Yajur-Veda* where the younger brother of the deceased, or his disciple, or even a trusted friend, in case no other relative exists, addresses the widow in the following terms:

“Arise, Oh woman! do not any longer lie beside the lifeless corpse; return to the world of the living, far from the deceased husband, and become the wife of the *one who* holds you by the hand, and is willing become your husband.”

This verse shows that during the [243] Vedic period *a second* marriage for widows did exist; and, furthermore, in several places in ancient manuscripts pointed out to us by Swami Dayānanda, we found orders to the widow “to gather and keep the ashes and bones of the husband for several months after his death, and to perform over them certain final rites . . .”

However, notwithstanding the complete exposure, and the scandal created by Professor Wilson’s discovery, as well as the fact that the Brāhmanas had to bow to the double authority of the *Vedas* and *Manu*, the custom of centuries proved so strong that some super-pious Hindu women still burn themselves when they can. Only two years ago, on the death of Yung Bahādur, chief minister of Nepal, his four widows insisted upon being burned. Nepal is not under British rule, and so the Anglo-Indian Government had no right to interfere.



bay, 1855; Max Müller, “Comparative Mythology,” in *Chips from a German Workshop*, New York, 1885, Vol. II, pp. 22 et seq., and H.J. Bushby, *Widow-Burning, A Narrative*, London, 1855. — Boris de Zirkoff.]

