



Widow Immolation in the Early Nineteenth Century Nadia: A Case Study

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Received: 20.03.2026; Accepted: 24.03.2026; Available online: 31.03.2026

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Abstract

The practice of widow immolation, also known as Sati, Suttee or Satidaha, has been prevalent in Indian society since ancient times. The social practice of widow immolation still exists in Indian society, despite the country's progress and advancement. During the nineteenth century, various religious superstitions and practices were prevalent in the society of Bengal and Nadia. The practice of widow immolation or Satidaha, polygamy, child abandonment in Gangasagar, child marriage, self-torture in charak puja, homicide, etc., polluted the society of the nineteenth-century Nadia. Although this century saw the emergence of oriental education, educated social reformers, and several religious reform movements, it also helped dispel these religious and social myths in society. In this paper, an attempt has been made to present a thorough historical discussion of the prevalence of the Satidaha practice in Nadia district during the early nineteenth century, as well as its various social aspects.

Keywords: Bengal, Nadia, Society, Widow Immolation / Satidaha / Sati, Reforms.

While Indian society has achieved significant progress and development, the unfortunate practice of widow immolation, known as *Satidaha* or *Sati*, still persists in some parts of India. Eighteenth year old Roop Kanwar, a young widow from Rajasthan who had only been married for eight months, was compelled to perform *Sati* on 4th September 1987 after the passing of her Husband. Another important incident was the case of Kuttu Bai, a sixty-five years old widow who committed *Sati* in August 2002 in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Along with it, there was other instances like- the August 2006 sati case of Vidyawati, a thirty five years old woman who committed *Sati* by jumping into her husband's blazing funeral pyre in Uttar Pradesh; the August 2006 *Sati* death of Janakrani, a forty year old women in Sagar District of Madhya Pradesh; and the October 2008 case of Lalmati, a seventy year old women from Chhattisgarh.¹ The recent instances of widow immolation represent an indication of how often it had been extensively performed throughout the past in Indian society.

The *Sati* practice, commonly known as *Satidaha* or widow immolation, which means the sacrifice of a woman in the funeral pyre of her husband, has been based on the practice of devotion and continued since ancient times. However, there is debate among historians about when and how this custom originated. Its references can be traced back to the Epic period, as evidenced by Madri (Maddi) practising *Sati* after King Pandu's death. This

incident was well explained in the Mahabharat, but it was unequivocal that *Sati* was not considered a popular cult figure at the time. In ancient times, it did not perform in the entire Indian region, but it gradually expanded across the country. According to A.S. Altekar, the practice of the ritual was not popular in India until 300 B.C., with the exception of certain tribal groups in Punjab.²

Greek travellers who visited northern India claim that *Sati* was practised as early as the fourth century B.C., but others claim that the tradition dates to 510 AD. There were indications in some religious texts that it was practised only by a few tribes before that time. Few people adhered to the practice in the eighth century. It was only the beginning of actively promoting *Sati* among women. But by the thirteenth century, it had become common practice.³ Along with other travelers and renowned scholars, Al-Biruni (973-1048 AD) observed the *Sati* ritual while researching Hindu culture and traditions. Ibn Battuta (b.1304 AD) was a Moroccan explorer who visited India between 1333 and 1347. He described several incidents of widow burnings in his literature that are primarily true. Since his work is still cited in scholarly circles worldwide.⁴

The practice of *Sati* was widespread in South India. During the eleventh century, there were numerous reports of *Sati* instances in South India. Inscriptions at *Nidubrolu* mentioned *Sati* in the Kakatiya kingdom. Most kingdoms in South India between 1200 and 1700 AD had witnessed *Sati*. It was primarily observed during the reigns of the Reddys, the Kakatiyas, the Yadavas, the Hoyasalas, the Nayaks of Musunur, and the Padma Nayaks of South India.⁵ In the Vijayanagara Empire, *Sati* was largely prevailed. During the fourteenth century, *Sati* was more common than at any other time in the Vijaynagar reign. Numerous travelers, including Nuniz, Caesar Frederick, and Barradas, have noted in their works that there were numerous instances of *Sati* practices throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁶ Nearly every region of Mughal India practiced *Sati*, with the Ganges Valley, Punjab, and Rajputana in the north, as well as Madura and Vijaynagar in the south, serving as the primary focal points. Bengal was the region where the practice of *Sati* was most prevalent in the 12th century.⁷

During colonial rule, incidents of *Sati* were observed across various parts of India, particularly in Bengal. But it was the time when the social circumstances began to change. Some eighteenth-century European writers, such as Edward Eve and John Holwell⁸, have written about the horrible scene of a lady burning herself to death. The Brahmins were instrumental in advancing and supporting the practice of *Sati*. A girl was taught the value of practicing *Sati* from an early age without displaying any hesitation or resistance, and without even speaking a small voice while fire was burning on her body, since the idea and perception of *Sati* sacrifices were so powerful in the community.⁹ The incidents of widow-immolation were widespread throughout Bengal even during the eighteenth century. According to a report compiled by the Baptist missionaries of Serampore under William Carey¹⁰, a survey of *Satidaha* cases was done in 1803. The report estimated that 275 women were burned alive in an area of 30 miles around Calcutta over a period of 6 months. Obviously, the numbers themselves testify that in the vast majority of cases, Hindu widows in Bengal were not obligatory in effect.¹¹

The government began keeping regular records of *Satidaha* incidents in 1815. During the first 10-year period of this century, from 1815 to 1824, a total of 6632 horrific incidents of *Satidaha* occurred in the three presidencies of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras combined.

Among the total number of incidents at that time, 5997 occurred in the Bengal Presidency alone, constituting 94.4 per cent of the total incidents across the three presidencies. This makes it very evident that one of the most significant centers for horrifying events of *Satidaha* was the Bengal Presidency.¹²

According to government reports, a total of 8134 cases of *Satidaha* were reported in the Bengal Presidency between 1815 and 1828. Among the various divisions under the Bengal Presidency, the Calcutta Division was the biggest witness to this terrible incident because out of the total incidents in the whole of Bengal, 5119 incidents occurred in the Calcutta Division alone. This was almost 63 per cent of the total incidents, which makes it clear that the Calcutta Division was the main focal point of the horrifying incidents under the Bengal Division.¹³ Detailed statistical information's are provided in Table I below.

Table I: Sati-daha Cases in the Bengal Presidency from 1815 to 1828

Divisions	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824	1825	1826	1827	1828	total
Calcutta	253	289	442	544	421	370	392	328	340	373	398	324	337	308	5119
Banaras	48	65	103	137	92	93	114	102	121	93	64	70	49	33	1153
Dacca	31	24	52	58	55	51	52	45	40	40	101	65	49	47	710
Patna	20	29	49	57	40	42	59	70	49	42	38	43	55	55	689
Murshidabad	11	22	42	30	25	21	11	22	13	14	21	8	9	10	260
Bareilly	15	13	19	13	17	20	15	16	12	10	17	8	18	10	203
Total	378	442	707	839	650	597	654	583	575	572	639	518	517	463	8134

Source: Amitabha Mukhopadhyay, 'Sati as a Social Institution in Bengal', *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol- LXXXVI, No- 142, 1957. p.106; J. Peggs, *India's Cries to British Humanity*, Seely and Son, London, 1830, p. 9.

Calcutta Division that 5,119 *Sati* incidents took place in this Division alone. When compared to the incidents of *Sati* in the entire Bengal Presidency, it is clear that the prevalence of such incidents was much higher in the Calcutta Division. Just as Bengal was the epicenter of *Sati* practices in the whole of India, the Presidency Division was also the epicenter of *Sati* practices in Bengal.

Table II: *Satidaha* Cases in the Different Districts under Presidency or Calcutta Division 1815-1826

Presidency Division	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824	1825	1826	Avg.
Hughli	72	51	112	141	115	93	95	79	81	91	104	98	94
Burdwan	50	67	98	132	75	57	62	40	45	56	63	45	66
Nadia	50	56	85	80	47	59	59	50	59	79	60	44	61
Calcutta	25	40	39	43	52	47	39	43	46	34	48	35	41
Jungle Mahal	34	39	43	61	31	18	39	24	27	16	9	11	29
24-Parganas	2	3	20	31	39	26	33	25	21	22	26	20	22

Source: Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, ed., *Women and Social Reforms in Modern India*, Vol I, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2007, p. 34.

A general review of the districts under the Presidency Division indicates that between the years 1815 and 1826, there were 1132 cases of *Satidaha* in the Hooghly district, 790 in Burdwan, 725 in Nadia and 491 in Calcutta.¹⁴ The Brahmin population was most prevalent and dominant in the four primary districts, Hooghly, Burdwan, Nadia, and Calcutta, under this division. It's interesting to see that *Satidaha* incidents were most prevalent in these areas.¹⁵ On the other hand, looking at the age of the women who committed *Satidaha* shows that women between 41 and 50 years of age were more likely to commit this. The women between 31 and 40 years of age were also committed *Satidaha* because they had minor children, which would allow the other guardians of the house to own the children's property, and sometimes the other guardians of the family forced the widows to commit *Satidaha* due to the greed of gaining ownership of the property.¹⁶

Table III: Caste Based Number of *Satidaha* Incidents from 1815 to 1827

Caste Name	Numbers in Bengal	Numbers in Nadia	Percentage of Nadia
<i>Brahamins</i>	2071	448	21.63
<i>Kayasthas</i>	800	112	14.00
<i>Baidyas</i>	208	1	0.48
<i>Sadegope</i>	210	6	2.85
<i>Kaibarttas</i>	170	11	6.47
<i>Goalas</i>	128	33	25.78
<i>Sudra</i>	114		
<i>Teli</i>	113	18	15.38
<i>Zogi</i>	99		
<i>Tanti</i>	96	12	12.50
<i>Bania</i>	87	16	
<i>Aguri</i>	71		

<i>Bagdi</i>	61		
<i>Rajput</i>	60	7	11.66
<i>Napit</i>	57	11	
<i>Chandal</i>	44		
<i>Kumor</i>	41	9	21.95
<i>Kamar</i>	40	11	27.50
<i>Chhutar</i>	32	11	34.37
<i>Dhopa</i>	26	1	3.84
<i>Traders</i>	24		
<i>Others</i>	836	60	7.29
<i>Total</i>	5388	767	14.24

Source: Benoy Bhusan Ray, *Banglai Satidaha Samajik O Arthanaitik Mulyayan*, Sahityasree, Kolkata, Reprint 2018, pp. 62-65.

In the Bengal society, *Satidaha* was one of the evillest practices. This practice of *Satidaha* was prevalent in various places and among people of different castes, but, if we judge it as a whole, it was in vogue among every Hindu caste in Bengal. According to various official sources, between 1815 and 1827, among the total number of *Satidaha* cases reported in Bengal, most occurred among the Brahmins, then among the *Kayasthas* and *Baidyas*. There were also many cases that happened among the twenty other castes. The number of cases among other castes was limited compared to the total number of cases in Bengal. Besides, the number of people belonging to these twenty other castes was much higher than the total population of Brahmins, *Kayasthas* and *Baidyas*.¹⁷

Nadia was a prosperous region of Bengal from early times, with a distinct identity in education, religion, and culture. At that time, this region was the forerunner of Bengal. Various religious practices have been practiced in this district for a long time, one of which was the practice of *Satidaha*. Between 1815 and 1827, a total of 767 incidents of *Satidaha* were recorded in Nadia, making it the third most *Sati*-prone region of Bengal. During this period, 568 incidents out of the total *Satidaha* took place with high caste women, which was 73 per cent of the total cases, and were confined to upper castes. As the elevation of social status and influence was the main aim of the upper castes Brahmans, they patronized various religious and social rituals in the region.¹⁸

The highest incidence of *Satidaha* was observed among Brahmins. In fact, during this period, a total of 448 cases of *Satidaha* in Nadia took place in the Brahmin community alone, which was the highest compared to any other district in Bengal. After that, about 112 cases of *Satidaha* among the *Kayasthas* and around 33 cases among the *Goala* community have been observed in Nadia. Later, cases of sati-burning were also seen in the region among the Benia, Teli, Tanti, Chhutar, Kamar, Kumor, and other minor communities.¹⁹

Table IV: Distributions of the Number of *Satidaha* cases by caste identity and *Thana* (Police Circle) in Nadia from 1815 to 1827

<i>Thana</i>	<i>Brahmins</i>	<i>Kayashtha</i>	<i>Kaibartta</i>	<i>Tantti</i>	<i>Teli</i>	<i>Goala</i>	<i>Benia</i>	<i>Napit</i>	<i>Sutradhar</i>	<i>Kamar</i>	<i>Kumar</i>	<i>Rajput</i>	<i>Sadgope</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Santipur	147	16	2	7	7	16	3	6	-	5	4	2	1	14	230	29.98
Hunra	48	13	1	2	2	3	4	3	-	-	-	1	-	5	82	10.69
Suksagr	117	33	1	1	4	6	-	-	5	3	-	1	4	18	193	25.16
Subasha	3	4	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	10	1.30
Agradip	28	3	1	-	1	4	-	-	1	-	-	3	-	3	44	5.73
Goborga	7	3	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	13	1.69
Nabadwip	64	14	3	2	-	1	8	1	1	2	2	-	-	16	144	14.86
Doulatgoj	16	4	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	1	25	3.25
others	18	22	3	-	3	2	-	-	3	1	1	-	1	2	56	7.30
Total	448	112	11	12	18	33	16	11	11	11	9	7	6	62	767	

Source: Benoy Bhusan Ray, *Banglai Satidaha Samajik O Arthanaitik Mulyayan*, Sahityasree, Kolkata, Reprint 2018, p.139

From various sources, it came to be known that a total of 767 females were burned through this evil practice at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Nadia. A total of 56 *Satidaha* incidents happened in 1816, followed by 88 in 1817, 80 in 1880 and 47 in 1819.²⁰ Santipur in Nadia district was one of the areas where the maximum numbers of *Satidaha* incidents were seen during the period. A total of 230 *Satidaha* incidents occurred in Santipur alone followed by 193 *Satidaha* incidents in Suksagar and 114 *Satidaha* incidents in Nabadwip.²¹ The Santipur region of Nadia had the most evidence of *Satidaha*, which practiced mostly among the Brahmin community. There were two classes of *Sati* cremations in Santipur. First one called *Sahamaran*, in this case, upper-class women were cremated on their husband's pyre, and lower-class women were buried in the ground. The second one, called *Anumaran*, in this case, if a husband died abroad, then the woman was burned in the crematorium with a memorial symbol of her husband.²² In Nadia district, the highest incidence of *Satidaha* incidents was seen among the *Brahmin* community, followed by the *Kayashtha* and *Gowala* communities.

William Bentinck's appointment as India's next governor general in July 1828 marked the end of this cruel practice. During his lifetime, India experienced the arrival of the utilitarian era.²³ During the tenure of Lord William Bentinck as Governor General, Raja Rammohan Roy, the pioneer of the renaissance in Bengal, tried to put an end to this barbaric practice through books like "*Pravartak O Nivirtak Pravartak*" and "*Nivirtak Dbita Sangbad*", etc. Conservative Hindus strongly protested this reform movement led by Raja Radhakanto Dev. Finally, within the eighteenth month governorship, Lord William Bentinck introduced a law called *Sati Regulation XXVII* of 1829 on 4th December 1829, declaring that those who supported this evil custom would be held guilty and punished for cooperating in murder.²⁴ Regulation XVII expressed that "the practice of *Sati* or burning alive of the widows of Hindus was declared illegal and punishable at the criminal courts throughout the territory immediately subject to the Fort William". The *Satidaha* practice

was outlawed by the regulation, and all officers were told that anyone found guilty of this heinous crime could face fines or even jail time. Under the direction of Governor Stephen Lushington, a second identical regulation was announced and passed in Madras on February 2, 1830.²⁵

Notes and References:

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⁸ J.Z. Holwell (1711-1798) was an employee of East India company and a temporary governor of Bengal in 1760; See, J.Z. Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events Relative to the Province of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan*, London, 1766.

⁹ Sujata Routray, 'Satidaha in Nineteenth Century Orissa: A Birds Eye View', *IJARESM*, Vol- 12, Issue 8, 2024, p.591.

¹⁰ William Carey (1761-1834) was a founding member of the Baptist Missionary Society. He came to Calcutta in 1793 and started his missionary activities as a Baptist. Besides being a missionary, he was also an educator, translator and social reformer; See, Smith, George, *The Life of William Carey*, Jhon Murray Pub., London, 1885.

¹¹ Amitabha Mukhopadhyay, 'Sati as a Social Institution in Bnegal', *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol- LXXVI, No- 142, 1957. p.105.

¹² Ibid, p.105.

¹³ Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar,ed., *Women and Social Reforms in Modern India*, Vol I, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2007, p. 33.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.35.

¹⁵ Benoy Bhusan Ray, *Banglai Satidaha Samajik O Arthanaitik Mulyayan*, Sahityasree, Kolkata, Reprint 2018, p. 57.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 57.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 55.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 59.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 62-64.

²⁰ Kumudnath Mallick, Op.Cit, p. 220; "The Banks of the Bhagirathi", *The Calcutta Review*, Vol-6, July -December, 1846, pp. 398-448.

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²⁴ Kumudnath Mallick, *Satidaha*, Shishu Press, Calcutta, 1913, pp. 119-121; Tapos Bandopadhyay, *Unish Sataker Ranaghat*, Sahityashree, Kolkata, 1995, p. 79.

²⁵ Sujata Routray, Op. Cit, p.693; Indian Historical Records Commission, Vol. XVII, p.39.