

19. *Lord William Bentinck on the Suppression of Sati, 8 November 1829*

WHETHER the question be to continue or to discontinue the practice of *sati*, the decision is equally surrounded by an awful responsibility. To consent to the consignment year after year of hundreds of innocent victims to a cruel and untimely end, when the power exists of preventing it, is a predicament which no conscience can contemplate without horror. But, on the other hand, if heretofore received opinions are to be considered of any value, to put to hazard by a contrary course the very safety of the British Empire in India, and to extinguish at once all hopes of those great improvements—affecting the condition not of hundreds and thousands but of millions—which can only be expected from the continuance of our supremacy, is an alternative which even in the light of humanity itself may be considered as a still greater evil. It is upon this first and highest consideration alone, the good of mankind, that the tolerance of this inhuman and impious rite can in my opinion be justified on the part of the government of a civilized nation. While the solution of this question is appalling from the unparalleled magnitude of its possible results, the considerations belonging to it are such as to make even the stoutest mind distrust its decision. On the one side, Religion, Humanity, under the most appalling form, as well as vanity and ambition—in short, all the most powerful influences over the human heart—are arrayed to bias and mislead the judgement. On the other side, the sanction of countless ages, the example of all the Mussulman conquerors,

the unanimous concurrence in the same policy of our own most able rulers, together with the universal veneration of the people, seem authoritatively to forbid, both to feeling and to reason, any interference in the exercise of their natural prerogative. In venturing to be the first to deviate from this practice it becomes me to show that nothing has been yielded to feeling, but that reason, and reason alone, has governed the decision.

So far indeed from presuming to condemn the conduct of my predecessors, I am ready to say that in the same circumstances I should have acted as they have done. So far from being chargeable with political rashness, as this departure from an established policy might infer, I hope to be able so completely to prove the safety of the measures as even to render unnecessary any calculation of the degree of risk which for the attainment of so great a benefit might wisely and justly be incurred. So far also from being the sole champion of a great and dangerous innovation, I shall be able to prove that the vast preponderance of present authority has long been in favour of abolition. Past experience indeed ought to prevent me, above all men, from coming lightly to so positive a conclusion. When Governor of Madras I saw in the mutiny of Vellore the dreadful consequences of a supposed violation of religious customs upon the minds of the native population and soldiery. I cannot forget that I was then the innocent victim of that unfortunate catastrophe; and I might reasonably dread, when the responsibility would justly attach to me in the event of failure, a recurrence of the same fate. Prudence and self-interest would counsel me to tread in the footsteps of my predecessors. But in

a case of such momentous importance to humanity and civilization that man must be reckless of all his present or future happiness who could listen to the dictates of so wicked and selfish a policy. With the firm undoubting conviction entertained upon this question, I should be guilty of little short of the crime of multiplied murder if I could hesitate in the performance of this solemn obligation. I have been already stung with this feeling. Every day's delay adds a victim to the dreadful list, which might perhaps have been prevented by a more early submission of the present question. But during the whole of the present year much public agitation has been excited, and when discontent is abroad, when exaggerations of all kinds are busily circulated, and when the native army have been under a degree of alarm lest their allowances should suffer with that of their European officers, it would have been unwise to have given a handle to artful and designing enemies to disturb the public peace. The recent measures of Government for protecting the interests of the Sepoys against the late reduction of companies will have removed all apprehension of the intentions of Government; and the consideration of this circumstance having been the sole cause of hesitation on my part, I will now proceed, praying the blessing of God upon our counsels, to state the grounds upon which my opinion has been formed.

We have now before us two reports of the Nizam Adalat, with statements of *satis* in 1827 and 1828, exhibiting a decrease of 54 in the latter year as compared with 1827, and a still greater proportion as compared with former years. If this diminution could be ascribed to any change of

opinion upon the question produced by the progress of education or civilization the fact would be most satisfactory, and to disturb this sure though slow process of self-correction would be most impolitic and unwise. But I think it may be safely affirmed that, though in Calcutta truth may be said to have made a considerable advance among the higher orders, yet in respect to the population at large no change whatever has taken place, and that from these causes at least no hope of the abandonment of the rite can be rationally entertained. The decrease, if it be real, may be the result of less sickly seasons, as the increase in 1824 and 1825 was of the greater prevalence of cholera. But it is probably in a greater measure due to the more open discouragement of the practice given by the greater part of the European functionaries in latter years, the effect of which would be to produce corresponding activity in the police officers, by which either the number would be really diminished or would be made to appear so in the returns.

It seems to be the very general opinion that our interference has hitherto done more harm than good by lending a sort of sanction to the ceremony, while it has undoubtedly tended to cripple the efforts of magistrates and others to prevent the practice.

I think it will clearly appear from a perusal of the documents annexed to this Minute, and from the facts which I shall have to adduce, that the passive submission of the people to the influence and power beyond the law—which in fact and practically may be and is often exercised without opposition by every public officer—is so great that

the suppression of the rite would be completely effected by a tacit sanction alone on the part of Government. This mode of extinguishing it has been recommended by many of those whose advice has been asked; and no doubt this in several respects might be a preferable course, as being equally effectual while more silent, not exciting the alarm which might possibly come from a public enactment, and from which in case of failure it would be easy to retreat with less inconvenience and without any compromise of character. But this course is clearly not open to Government, bound by Parliament to rule by law and not by their good pleasure. Under the present position of the British Empire, moreover, it may be fairly doubted if any such underhand proceeding would be really good policy. When we had powerful neighbours and had greater reason to doubt our own security, expediency might recommend an indirect and more cautious proceeding, but now that we are supreme my opinion is decidedly in favour of an open, avowed, and general prohibition, resting altogether upon the moral goodness of the act and our power to enforce it; and so decided is my feeling against any half measure that, were I not convinced of the safety of total abolition, I certainly should have advised the cessation of all interference.

Of all those who have given their advice against the abolition of the rite, and have described the ill effects likely to ensue from it, there is no one to whom I am disposed to pay greater deference than Mr. Horace Wilson. I purposely select his opinion because, independently of his vast knowledge of Oriental literature, it has fallen to his lot, as

secretary to the Hindu College, and possessing the general esteem both of the parents and of the youths, to have more confidential intercourse with natives of all classes than any man in India. While his opportunity of obtaining information has been great beyond all others, his talents and judgment enable him to form a just estimate of its value. I shall state the most forcible of his reasons, and how far I do and do not agree with him.

1st. Mr. Wilson considers it to be a dangerous evasion of the real difficulties to attempt to prove that *satis* are not 'essentially a part of the Hindu religion'. I entirely agree in this opinion. The question is not what the rite is but what it is supposed to be, and I have no doubt that the conscientious belief of every order of Hindus, with few exceptions, regards it as sacred.

2nd. Mr. Wilson thinks that the attempt to put down the practice will inspire extensive dissatisfaction. I agree also in this opinion. He thinks that success will only be partial, which I doubt. He does not imagine that the promulgated prohibition will lead to any immediate and overt act of insubordination, but that affrays and much agitation of the public mind must ensue. But he conceives that, if once they suspect that it is the intention of the British Government to abandon this hitherto inviolate principle of allowing the most complete toleration in matters of religion, there will arise in the minds of all so deep a distrust of our ulterior designs that they will no longer be tractable to any arrangement intended for their improvement, and that the principle of a purer morality, as well as of a more virtuous and exalted rule of action, now actively inculcated by European

education and knowledge, will receive a fatal check. I must acknowledge that a similar opinion as to the probable excitation of a deep distrust of our future intentions was mentioned to me in conversation by that enlightened native, Ram Mohun Roy, a warm advocate for the abolition of *sati* and of all other superstitions and corruptions engrafted on the Hindu religion, which he considers originally to have been a pure Deism. It was his opinion that the practice might be suppressed quietly and unobservedly by increasing the difficulties and by the indirect agency of the police. He apprehended that any public enactment would give rise to general apprehension, that the reasoning would be, 'While the English were contending for power, they deemed it politic to allow universal toleration and to respect our religion, but having obtained the supremacy their first act is a violation of their profession, and the next will probably be, like the Muhammadan conquerors, to force upon us their own religion.'

Admitting, as I am always disposed to do, that much truth is contained in these remarks, but not at all assenting to the conclusions which, though not described, bear the most unfavourable import, I shall now inquire into the evil and the extent of danger which may practically result from this measure.

It must be first observed that of the 463 *satis* occurring in the whole of the Presidency of Fort William, 420 took place in Bengal, Behar, and Orissa, or what is termed the Lower Provinces, and of these latter 287 in the Calcutta Division alone.

It might be very difficult to make a stranger to India understand, much less believe, that in a

population of so many millions of people as the Calcutta Division includes, and the same may be said of all the Lower Provinces, so great is the want of courage and of vigour of character, and such the habitual submission of centuries, that insurrection or hostile opposition to the will of the ruling power* may be affirmed to be an impossible danger. I speak of the population taken separately from the army, and I may add for the information of the stranger, and also in support of my assertion, that few of the natives of the Lower Provinces are to be found in our military ranks. I therefore at once deny the danger *in toto* in reference to this part of our territories, where the practice principally obtains.

If, however, security was wanting against extensive popular tumult or revolution, I should say that the Permanent Settlement, which, though a failure in many other respects and in its most important essentials, has this great advantage at least, of having created a vast body of rich landed proprietors deeply interested in the continuance of the British Dominion and having complete command over the mass of the people; and in respect to the apprehension of ulterior views, I cannot believe that it could last but for the moment. The same large proprietary body, connected for the most part with Calcutta, can have no fears of the kind, and through their interpretation of our intentions and that of their numerous dependants and agents, the public mind could not long remain in a state of deception.

Were the scene of this sad destruction of human life laid in the Upper instead of the Lower Provinces, in the midst of a bold and manly people,

I might speak with less confidence upon the question of safety. In these Provinces the *satis* amount to forty-three only upon a population of nearly twenty millions. It cannot be expected that any general feeling, where combination of any kind is so unusual, could be excited in defence of a rite in which so few participate; a rite also notoriously made too often subservient to views of personal interest on the part of the other members of the family.

It is stated by Mr. Wilson that interference with infanticide and the capital punishment of Brahmans offer a fallacious analogy with the prohibition now proposed. The distinction is not perceptible to my judgement. The former practice, though confined to particular families, is probably viewed as a religious custom; and as for the latter, the necessity of the enactment proves the general existence of this exception, and it is impossible to conceive a more direct and open violation of their Shasters, or one more at variance with the general feelings of the Hindu population. To this day in all Hindu states the life of a Brahman is, I believe, still held sacred.

But I have taken up too much time in giving my own opinion when those of the greatest experience and highest official authority are upon our records. In the report of the Nizam Adalat for 1828, four out of five of the Judges recommended to the Governor-General in Council the immediate abolition of the practice, and attest its safety. The fifth Judge, though not opposed to the opinions of the rest of the Bench, did not feel then prepared to give his entire assent. In the report of this year the measure has come up with the unanimous

recommendation of the Court. The two Superintendents of Police for the Upper and Lower Provinces (Mr. Walter Ewer and Mr. Charles Barwell) have in the strongest terms expressed their opinion that the suppression might be effected without the least danger. The former officer has urged the measure upon the attention of Government in the most forcible manner. No documents exist to show the opinions of the public functionaries in the interior, but I am informed that nine-tenths are in favour of the abolition.

How, again, are these opinions supported by practical experience ?

Within the limits of the Supreme Court at Calcutta not a *sati* has taken place since the time of Sir John Anstruther.

In the Delhi territory Sir Charles Metcalfe never permitted a *sati* to be performed.

In Jessore, one of the districts of the Calcutta Division, in 1824 there were 30 *satis* ; in 1825, 16 ; in 1826, 3 ; in 1827 and in 1828 there were none. To no other cause can this be assigned than to a power beyond the law exercised by the acting magistrate, against which, however, no public remonstrance was made. Mr. Pigou has since been appointed to Cuttack, and has pursued the same strong interference as in Jessore, but his course, although most humane, was properly arrested, as being illegal, by the Commissioners. Though the case of Jessore is, perhaps, one of the strongest examples of efficacious and unopposed interposition, I really believe that there are few districts in which the same arbitrary power is not exercised to prevent the practice. In the last work in the report of the Acting Commissioner

(Mr. Smith) he states that in Ghazipur in the last year sixteen, and in the preceding year seven, *satis* had been prevented by the persuasions, or, rather, it should be said, by the threats, of the police.

Innumerable cases of the same kind might be obtained from the public records.

It is stated in the letter of the Collector of Gaya (Mr. Trotter), but upon what authority I have omitted to inquire, that the Peshwa (I presume he means the ex-Peshwa Baji Rao) would not allow the rite to be performed, and that in Tanjore it is equally interdicted. These facts, if true, would be positive proofs at least that no unanimity exists among the Hindus upon the point of religious obligation.

Having made inquiries, also, how far *satis* are permitted in the European foreign settlements, I find from Dr. Carey that at Chinsurah no such sacrifices had ever been permitted by the Dutch Government. That within the limits of Chandarnagar itself they were also prevented, but allowed to be performed in the British territories. The Danish Government of Serampur has not forbidden the rite, in conformity to the example of the British Government.

It is a very important fact that, though representations have been made by the disappointed party to superior authority, it does not appear that a single instance of direct opposition to the execution of the prohibitory orders of our civil functionaries has ever occurred. How, then, can it be reasonably feared that to the Government itself, from whom all authority is derived, and whose power is now universally considered to be irresistible, anything bearing the semblance of resistance

can be manifested? Mr. Wilson also is of opinion that no immediate overt act of insubordination would follow the publication of the edict. The Regulation of Government may be evaded, the police may be corrupted, but even here the price paid as hush money will operate as a penalty, indirectly forwarding the object of Government.

I venture, then, to think it completely proved that from the native population nothing of extensive combination, or even of partial opposition, may be expected from the abolition.

It is, however, a very different and much more important question how far the feelings of the native army might take alarm, how far the rite may be in general observance by them, and whether, as in the case of Vellore, designing persons might not make use of the circumstances either for the purpose of immediate revolt or of sowing the seeds of permanent disaffection. Reflecting upon the vast disproportion of numbers between our native and European troops, it was obvious that there might be in any general combination of the forces the greatest danger to the State, and it became necessary, therefore, to use every precaution to ascertain the impression likely to be made upon the minds of the native soldiery.

Before I detail to Council the means I have taken to satisfy my mind upon this very important branch of the inquiry, I shall beg leave to advert to the name of Lord Hastings. It is impossible but that to his most humane, benevolent, and enlightened mind this practice must have been often the subject of deep and anxious meditation. It was consequently a circumstance of ill omen and some disappointment not to have found upon the

Records the valuable advice and direction of his long experience and wisdom. It is true that during the greater part of his administration he was engaged in war, when the introduction of such a measure would have been highly injudicious. To his successor, Lord Amherst, also, the same obstacle was opposed. I am, however, fortunate in possessing a letter from Lord Hastings to a friend in England upon *satis*, and from the following extract, dated 21 November 1823, I am induced to believe that, had he remained in India, this practice would long since have been suppressed :—

The subject which you wish to discuss is one which must interest one's feelings most deeply, but it is also one of extreme nicety when I mention that in one of the years during my administration of government in India about 800 widows sacrificed themselves within the Provinces comprised in the Presidency of Bengal, to which number I very much suspect that very many not notified to the magistrate should be added. I will hope to have credit for being acutely sensible to such an outrage against humanity. At the same time I was aware how much danger might attend the endeavouring to suppress forcibly a practice so rooted in the religious belief of the natives. No men of low caste are admitted into the ranks of the Bengal Army. Therefore the whole of that formidable body must be regarded as blindly partial to a custom which they consider equally referrible to family honour and to point of faith. To attempt the extinction of the horrid superstition without being supported in the procedure by a real concurrence on the part of the army would be distinctly perilous. I have no scruple to say that I did believe I could have carried with me the assent of the army towards such an object. That persuasion, however, arose from circumstances which gave me peculiar influence over the native troops.

Lord Hastings left India in 1823. It is quite certain that the Government of that time were much more strongly impressed with the risk of the undertaking than is now very generally felt. It

would have been fortunate could this measure have proceeded under the auspices of that distinguished nobleman, and that the State might have had the benefit of the influence which undoubtedly he possessed in a peculiar degree over the native troops. Since that period, however, six years have elapsed. Within the territories all has been peaceful and prosperous, while without, Ava and Bhartpur, to whom alone a strange sort of consequence was ascribed by public opinion, have been made to acknowledge our supremacy. In this interval experience has enlarged our knowledge, and has given us surer data upon which to distinguish truth from illusion, and to ascertain the real circumstances of our position and power. It is upon these that the concurring opinion of the officers of the civil and military services at large having been founded, is entitled to our utmost confidence.

I have the honour to lay before Council the copy of a circular addressed to forty-nine officers, pointed out to me by the Secretary to Government in the Military Department as being from their judgement and experience the best enabled to appreciate the effect of the proposed measure upon the native army, together with their answers. For more easy reference, an abstract of each answer is annexed in a separate paper and classed with those to the same purport.

It appears first that of those whose opinions are directly adverse to all interference whatever with the practice the number is only five; secondly, of those who are favourable to abolition but averse to absolute and direct prohibition under the authority of the Government, the number is twelve;

thirdly, of those who are favourable to abolition, to be effected by the indirect interference of magistrates and other public officers, the number is eight; fourthly, of those who advocate the total immediate and public suppression of the practice, the number is twenty-four.

It will be observed, also, of those who are against an open and direct prohibition, few entertain any fear of immediate danger. They refer to a distant and undefined evil. I can conceive the possibility of the expression of dissatisfaction and anger being immediately manifested upon this supposed attack on their religious usages, but the distant danger seems to me altogether groundless, provided that perfect respect continues to be paid to all their innocent rites and ceremonies, and provided also that a kind and considerate regard be continued to their worldly interests and comforts.

I trust, therefore, that the Council will agree with me in the satisfactory nature of this statement, and that they will partake in the perfect confidence which it has given me of the expediency and safety of the abolition.

In the answer of one of the military officers, Lieutenant-Colonel Todd, he has recommended that the tax on pilgrims should be simultaneously given up, for the purpose of affording an undoubted proof of our disinterestedness and of our desire to remove every obnoxious obstacle to the gratification of their religious duties. A very considerable revenue is raised from this head, but if it were to be the price of satisfaction and confidence to the Hindus and of the renewal of all distrust of our present and future intentions, the sacrifice might be a measure of good policy. The objections that

must be entertained by all to the principle of the tax, which in England has latterly excited very great reprobation, formed an additional motive for the inquiry. I enclose a copy of a circular letter addressed to different individuals at present in charge of the district where the tax is collected, or who have had opportunities, from their local knowledge, of forming a good judgement upon this question. It will be seen that opinions vary, but upon a review of the whole my conviction is that in connexion with the present measure it is inexpedient to repeal the tax. It is a subject upon which I shall not neglect to bestow more attention than I have been able to do. An abstract of these opinions is annexed to this minute.

I have now to submit for the consideration of Council the draft of a regulation enacting the abolition of *satis*. It is accompanied by a paper containing the remarks and suggestions of the Judges of the Nizamut Adalat. In this paper is repeated the unanimous opinion of the Court in favour of the proposed measure. The suggestions of the Nizamut Adalat are in some measure at variance with a principal object I had in view, of preventing collision between the parties to the *sati* and the officers of police. It is only in the previous processes, or during the actual performance of the rite, when the feelings of all may be more or less roused to a high degree of excitement, that I apprehend the possibility of affray or of acts of violence through an indiscreet and injudicious exercise of authority. It seemed to me prudent, therefore, that the police, in the first instance, should warn and advise, but not forcibly prohibit, and if the *sati*, in defiance of this notice, were performed,

that a report should be made to the magistrate, who would summon the parties and proceed as in any other case of crime. The Indian Court appears to think these precautions unnecessary, and I hope they may be so, but in the beginning we cannot, I think, proceed with too much circumspection. Upon the same principle, in order to guard against a too hasty or severe a sentence emanating from extreme zeal on the part of the local judge, I have proposed that the case should only be cognizable by the Commissioners of circuit. These are, however, questions which I should wish to see discussed in Council. The other recommendations of the Court are well worthy of our adoption.

I have now brought this paper to a close, and I think I have redeemed my pledge of not allowing, in the consideration of this question, passion or feeling to have any part. I trust it will appear that due weight has been given to all difficulties and objections, that facts have been stated with truth and impartiality, that the conclusion to which I have come is completely borne out both by reason and authority. It may be justly asserted that the Government in this act will only be following, not preceding, the tide of public opinion long flowing in this direction; and when we have taken into consideration the experience and wisdom of that highest public tribunal, the Nizamat Adalat, who, in unison with our wisest and ablest public functionaries, have been year after year almost soliciting the Government to pass this act, the moral and political responsibility of not abolishing this practice far surpasses, in my judgement, that of the opposite course.

But discarding, as I have done, every inviting

appeal from sympathy and humanity, and having given my verdict, I may now be permitted to express the anxious feelings with which I desire the success of this measure.

The first and primary object of my heart is the benefit of the Hindus. I know nothing so important to the improvement of their future condition as the establishment of a purer morality, whatever their belief, and a more just conception of the will of God. The first step to this better understanding will be dissociation of religious belief and practice from blood and murder. They will then, when no longer under this brutalizing excitement, view with more calmness acknowledged truths. They will see that there can be no inconsistency in the ways of Providence, that to the command received as divine by all races of men, 'No innocent blood shall be spilt,' there can be no exception; and when they shall have been convinced of the error of this first and most criminal of their customs, may it not be hoped that others, which stand in the way of their improvement, may likewise pass away, and that, thus emancipated from those chains and shackles upon their minds and actions, they may no longer continue, as they have done, the slaves of every foreign conqueror, but that they may assume their first places among the great families of mankind? I disown in these remarks, or in this measure, any view whatever to conversion to our own faith. I write and feel as a legislator for the Hindus, and as I believe many enlightened Hindus think and feel.

Descending from these higher considerations, it cannot be a dishonest ambition that the Government of which I form a part should have the credit

of an act which is to wash out a foul stain upon British rule, and to stay the sacrifice of humanity and justice to a doubtful expediency ; and finally, as a branch of the general administration of the Empire, I may be permitted to feel deeply anxious that our course shall be in accordance with the noble example set to us by the British Government at home, and that the adaptation, when practicable to the circumstances of this vast Indian population, of the same enlightened principles, may promote here as well as there the general prosperity, and may exalt the character of our nation.

W. C. BENTINCK.

November 8th, 1829.

20. *Thomas Babington Macaulay, House of Commons, 10 July 1833*

HAVING, while this measure was in preparation, enjoyed the fullest and kindest confidence of my right hon. friend, agreeing with him completely in all those views which on a former occasion he so luminously and eloquently developed, having shared his anxieties, and feeling that, in some degree, I share his responsibility, I am naturally desirous to obtain the attention of the House while I attempt to defend the principles of this Bill. I wish that I could promise to be very brief ; but the subject is so extensive that I will only promise to condense what I have to say as much as I can.

I rejoice, sir, that I am completely dispensed, by the turn which our debates have taken, from the necessity of saying anything in favour of one part of our measure—the opening of the China trade. No voice, I believe, has yet been raised in Parlia-