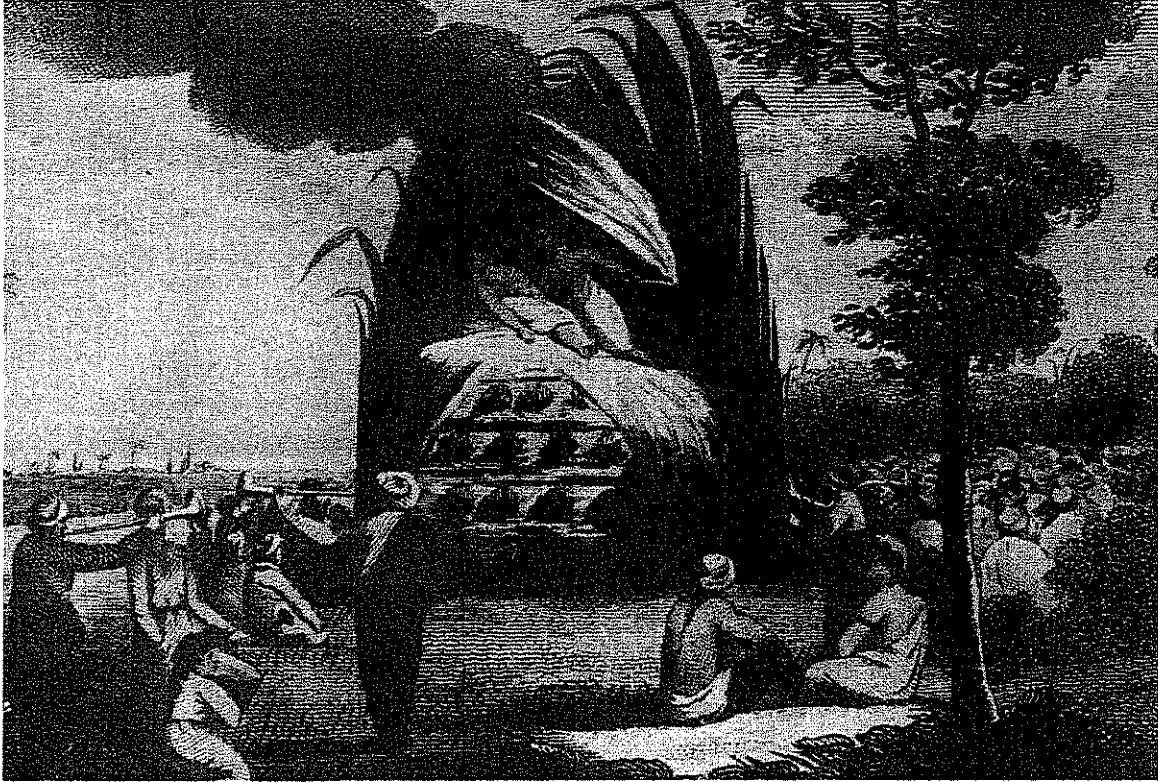


SUTTEE



This print of a Hindu woman preparing to follow her husband in death was published in 1813.

In India, like many other Asian countries, a wife is almost like a servant to her husband. Until just about a hundred years ago, an Indian woman may have followed her husband even into death. A visitor to India wrote the following in the 1700's.

We were walking along the river in Calcutta. There we saw a fire being prepared. Bodies of the dead were placed in such fires along the banks of the river. The ashes would be carefully gathered and then sent drifting down the river. A small crowd of people gathered around a woman about 30 years old. This woman was the wife of a dead man. She neared the pile of straw and sticks. Here lay her dead husband. With a steady hand, she held a lighted stick to the straw underneath him. Then she lay next to his body, placing one arm gently under his head. All the while she spoke to those who gathered around the fire. Even when the flames seemed to cover her whole body, she still spoke to those near her. She never once cried out or groaned. Within a few minutes she had joined her husband in death.

The custom of dying on a dead husband's funeral fire is called **suttee**, which comes from the Sanskrit word **sati**, or **true wife**. Many women in India followed it by their own choice. They were not forced to do so and considered it a privilege. She might even have her own fire separately, if her husband died at a distance. Sometimes instead of being burned to death, a widow would climb into her husband's grave. She would have herself buried alive. This was thought as another final way of honoring and serving her husband.

The practice of suttee was a considered a noble duty to show honor and devotion to the husband. It was also believed that a woman could rid herself and her husband's sins by joining him on his funeral pyre. In theory, suttee was voluntary, but in any orthodox community any women who refused to perform the act was ostracized.

Today, any form of suttee is against the law. However, a wife is expected to honor and obey her husband during his life. Marriage in India, as in many other Asian countries, is far less likely to be an equal partnership than marriage in the United States.

Directions: After reading the passage respond to the following:

1. Why did the women in India sometimes join their husbands in death?

2. One reason Indian women do not seem to mind being treated as inferiors is?

3. Are there things in our society that determine what kind of life that women will have? What are they? Do we have anything to say about them?