



# Sati: Goddess Incarnate

## A Musical Epic

Music by Zachary Catron  
Book and Lyrics by Vaibu Mohan

# CAST

ROOP----DEVI PEOT

UMA----MIRIAM LAUBE

AARTI----MARIYA REZA

NEELKANT----SAVIDU GEEVARATNE

DHARMA----MAYA JEYAM

SATYA----SAVIDU GEEVARATNE

MAYA----VAIBU MOHAN

WOMAN 1----KHYATI SEHGAL

WOMAN 2----SWETHA VISSAPRAGADA

WOMAN 3----SARAH NANDOLA

WOMAN 4----ISHA NARAYANAN

Content Warning: This show discusses issues of caste-based and gender-based violence.

# CREATIVE TEAM

COMPOSER----ZACHARY CATRON

LYRICIST/BOOKWRITER & DRAMATURG----VAIBU MOHAN

DIRECTOR----THALIA RANJBAR

MUSIC DIRECTOR----MONA SEYED-BOLORFOROSH

ASSOCIATE MUSIC DIRECTOR/PIANO----GREG PALADINO

PERCUSSION ARRANGER/PERCUSSION----RYAN BLIHOVDE

INDIAN PERCUSSION CONSULTANT----BALA SKANDAN

CHOREOGRAPHER/BHARATANATYAM CONSULTANT----SRIMATHY MOHAN

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# PROGRAM

"FROM HER WOMB" - DHARMA, SATYA, MAYA, UMA, WOMEN

"YEAR AFTER YEAR" - ROOP, AARTI

"THE PUPPET SHOW" - DHARMA, SATYA, MAYA, WOMEN

"BEYOND" - ROOP

"OH MOTHER" - UMA

"BRING US THE GIRL!" - WOMEN

"WHAT THEY SAY" - NEELKANT, ROOP

"YEAR AFTER YEAR (REPRISE)" - AARTI

"WHAT A MESS" - NEELKANT, ROOP

"HEAT" - AARTI, ROOP

"A GIRL, A BLESSING (FINALE)" - COMPANY

# What is Sati?



- *Sati* (sometimes spelled *suttee*) is a Hindu practice in which a recently widowed woman commits (or is forced to commit) suicide. The most common way is on the husband's funeral pyre, though there are also reports of drowning and being buried alive.
- The first recorded mention of sati is from 510 CE in the modern state of Madhya Pradesh. As stones were placed at sati sites, we know the practice began to grow in popularity as the number of stones found up to the modern era increased.
- Women of all castes have partaken in sati, although it was originally condemned by Brahmins.
- While we will never know the true magnitude of the practice, there are reports that over 575 women committed sati in 1823 in the state of Bengal alone.

# What is Sati?



- Historically, sati was practiced within all caste-based communities and was seen as proof of a woman's religious purity. It was deemed an act without equivalence and would release the Hindu woman from the cycle of birth and death, as she would immediately attain moksha (salvation).
- Many tried to outlaw sati: the Mughal empire passed laws banning it; the British passed the banning of sati in 1827, and the law was reevaluated and repassed in 1929. So why did nothing stick?

# The Fate of the Hindu Widow



- Some attest that perhaps death was better than the fate that awaited the Hindu widow.
- Widows were considered impure, cursed, and bad luck.
- They were forced to leave their homes, give up all their possessions to their husband's family, and live either alone or amongst a colony of other widows.
- Considering the fact that child marriage was still prevalent in the 1980s, many widows were still children when their husbands died and were forced to live the rest of their lives in isolation.

# The Story of Sati and Shiva

- The practice of sati gets its name from the story of Sati and Shiva.
- The first mention of the goddess Sati comes from the 1st millennium BCE, making her a relatively new addition to the female goddess pantheon in Hinduism. Scholars believe that the Sati/Parvati myth gained prominence because of the poet Kalidasa's epic poem *Kumarasambavam* which was written between the 5th-6th century BCE.
- As with any oral tradition, there are numerous versions of the story:
  - Prajapati Daksha was the son of the creator god, Brahma. Brahma advised Daksha to pray to the Mother Goddess to come to him as a child so he may raise her avatar. The Goddess agreed on the condition that if he mistreated her, she would abandon her body.
  - In the version we are referencing, Daksha held a marriage ceremony for the men of the land to compete for Sati's hand. Sati had been a devotee of Lord Shiva since she was young, and when she threw a flower garland up into the air, Shiva manifested before her, sealing their union. Daksha was deeply opposed but Sati's mind was made up.

# The Story of Sati and Shiva

- The following is the account from the *Mahabhagavata Purana*:
  - To emphasize his disapproval, Daksha hosted a yajna (a religious proceeding) to which he invited all the deities except for Sati and Shiva. Sati decided to go anyway because it is her home and her right. When Shiva protested, Sati split herself into 10 deities (The Mahavidyas) to show her cosmic power to Shiva who was humbled by her presence.
  - When Daksha insulted Sati, she split herself into her physical self and her shadow self. Her shadow self destroyed the yajna and immolated herself while her physical self was reborn as Parvati, Shiva's new consort. Sati also proclaimed to her father that she would be born to a father deserving of her and was born to the king of the mountain, Himavan.
  - Shiva was distraught by his wife's death and he performed the fearsome Tandavam—the Dance of Destruction. He is close to destroying the universe when the other gods have to calm him before all creation ceases to exist.



# The Story of Roop Kanwar

- ROOP KANWAR WAS 18 YEARS OLD WHEN SHE COMMITTED SATI ON SEPTEMBER 4, 1987.
- Her immolation was attended by thousands, including state officials and politicians. She was of the Rajput caste, a caste specific to the state of Rajasthan who once were fierce warriors.
- While many contend that Roop voluntarily chose sati, we will never know what actually happened that day.
- There are shrines erected to her in her hometown, which have become Rajasthani pilgrimage sites.



# The Sati Prevention Act

- Kanwar's death was the impetus to renew all of the old laws about sati under one unifying legislation: *The Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987*. The law condemns all attempts to glorify what it refers to as a social evil, and would punish people with heavy fines and potential jail time if they glorified the act of sati.
- However, the shrine to Kanwar still stands in Deorala in Rajasthan, along with other temples around India.
- The trial investigating Kanwar's murder only ended in 2019 with acquittal. No one faced consequences for her death.

## THE GODDESS COMPLEX

- In the west, there is the Madonna-whore complex. In Hindu society, there is the Goddess complex.
- The Goddess complex describes the phenomenon in which women in Hindu society are upheld to impossible standards and are referred to in relation to female goddesses. When they falter, they are not only offending their families but also offending the Mother Goddess with their behavior
- This also refers to dichotomy of people praying to female deities while dismissing and disrespecting the women in their lives and in the world.



## THE GODDESS COMPLEX

- While a 2022 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that the majority of Indians see women as equally good political leaders, they also expect women to occupy traditional gender roles in home life.
- Thus, the Goddess complex reaches its zenith: you must be everything and nothing. You must fight for women's liberation without asking for your own liberation. Others can seek freedom as long as it does not disrupt our life.
- Nine in ten Indians agree that a wife should submit to her husband. The modern era has exposed this complex for what it is: an ancient patriarchy clashing with modern sentiments. The want to make progress while needing to keep the status quo.



# Sati as a Symbol of Hindu Nationalism

- Hindu Nationalism: the social and political thought that the Indian subcontinent should be governed by Hindus using Hindu principles.

# Sati as a Symbol of Hindu Nationalism

- Hindu Nationalism is the political off-shoot of Hindu Fundamentalism. There is an undue value placed on a woman (particularly a young woman's) virginity and purity before marriage, and her docile nature after marriage. A woman cannot exist outside of being someone's daughter and being someone's wife. If she does, the system falls apart.
- Kanwar's burning has many symbols attached to it: the red sari of a bride, the gold and jewelry, the pomp and circumstance surrounding it. These symbols place value on her as a bride and that her value begins and ends with her position as a wife.
- Hindu nationalists have sought to establish the symbols of the nation along a Mother Earth narrative where Mother Earth and the feminine are the representatives of the nation and thus they must be protected.

# Sati as a Symbol of Hindu Nationalism

- A large theme in this show is the way the female body is viewed. Whether it is pregnancy, the lack thereof, or the appropriate qualities for marriage, the female body is scrutinized and linked to honor. Dishonor and shame are conditioned to be felt by not only that woman but her family, community, and the nation.
- A young widow is a threat that must be neutralized. Her sexual desires must be tamed. To maintain her chastity, she must be burned and made into a symbol herself.
- The thousands who attended Kanwar's burning describe her in divine terms (The Goddess Complex), and the laws that passed following her murder were met with massive protests. Hindu Fundamentalism thrives on making women wives, mothers, and martyrs. But they cannot live as people.

# Caste in India and Beyond

- Caste is defined as your social standing within society, which was originally conceived as a way to stratify society based on their jobs in ancient Indian society. The four main branches were Brahmin (priests), Kshatriya (warrior/ruling class), Vaishya (merchants), and Shudra (laborers).
- Hindu scripture validates this inequity and takes it a step further with one more caste which falls outside of the system due to their perceived sins: the people who now refer to themselves as Dalits but were once called "untouchable."
- This system is over 3,000 years old and even dictates marriage. Even in modern society, inter-caste marriage is looked down upon and sometimes even met with violence.
- According to the Pew Research Center as of 2021, only 4% of Indians identify as Brahmin while 68% identify with the scheduled castes (Indigenous tribes, Shudras, Dalits, etc).
- Even though this is a Hindu system, the caste system has been adopted across almost every religious group existing within India.



# Caste in India and Beyond

Interested in learning more? We highly recommend reading *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020) by Isabel Wilkerson to see the parallels between institutional racism in many Western countries and how these systems have drawn from the much older caste system.

# Bharatanatyam



- Bharatanatyam is the oldest form of Indian classical dance, with its origins tracing back over 2,000 years ago to Hindu temples where hereditary families of dancers (primarily women) created this art form to be performed for religious purposes.
- Bharatanatyam almost died due to a colonial ban on the artform under Victorian ethics laws, which painted hereditary dancers as prostitutes and their art as erotic and immoral.
- The revival of Bharatanatyam post 1947 was spearheaded by dancers like Rukimi Devi Arundale, Balasaraswati (a hereditary dancer), and Yamini Krishnamurthy.
- A primary criticism of modern Bharatanatyam is its treatment of hereditary dancers and the lack of recognition they receive, which feeds into caste based biases.



# Bharatanatyam

- Bharatanatyam is split into 4 parts: bha- for Bhava (emotion), ra- for raga (music), ta- for tala (rhythm), and natyam or movement.
- These elements together create the balance we strive for in Bharatanatyam.
- What is unique about Bharatanatyam is its blending of movement and storytelling. There are two limbs of the artform: nritta and abhinaya.
- Nritta is pure movement with no deeper meaning. It is there to serve aesthetic purposes and to show off the skill, stamina, and prowess of the dancer.



# Bharatanatyam

- The second limb is abhinaya: storytelling and expression. This is what makes Bharatanatyam a unique fit for this show. There is an extensive practice of using face and body expression to communicate with an audience in this way is an identifiable characteristic of Bharatanatyam.
- As a dance born from religion that has taken on an identity of its own, Bharatanatyam's vast and complex history makes it the perfect dance language to tell this story.



## SOURCES

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