



## Death by Fire: Sati, Dowry Death, and Female Infanticide in Modern India

By Mala Sen

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### Death by Fire: Sati, Dowry Death, and Female Infanticide in Modern India

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The Indian village of Deorala in Rajasthan, the northwestern Indian state that borders Pakistan, is neither remote nor feudal in the strictest sense. A tarmac road links the population of 10,000 to neighboring villages and towns, there is running water and electricity, and the villagers have had television for more than twenty years. On September 4, 1987, Deorala found itself in the center of a furor that awoke age-old conflicts in Indian society. Before a crowd of several thousand people, mostly men, a young woman dressed in her bridal finery was burned alive on her husband's funeral pyre. The apparent revival of an ancient tradition opened old wounds in Indian society and focused world attention on the status and treatment of women in modern India.

The ancient practice of sati — the self-immolation of a woman on her husband's funeral pyre — was outlawed by the British administration in India in 1829, and sati was widely believed to have died out. The fate of 18-year-old Roop Kanwar changed that perception. Mala Sen explores the reality of life and death for women in modern India in a study that is both illuminating and terrifying. The book is part journey through the India that the author knows and loves, and part exploration of the enigma that India still remains in the minds of many. Starting with Kanwar, Sen enters the worlds of three women: a goddess, a burned bride, and a woman accused of killing her daughter, and shows how, in this society in which ancient and modern apparently co-exist comfortably, there is increasingly cause for real alarm. She creates an image of a state in which political turmoil is constantly at the surface, and in which the role of women is constantly being redefined.

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