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## Disguising Cowardice as Honour: The Many Padmavats



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People shouts slogans to demand ban on Bollywood movie Padmavat near the Central Board of Film Certification center in Mumbai, India, Friday, Jan. 12, 2018. (AP Photo/Rajanish Kakade) - AP

*The film 'Padmavat' glorifies mass suicide by Rajput women as a mode of voluntary death that confers honour on the community. Historical precedents of mass suicide provide evidence that mass suicide in the face of certain military defeat, is the result of careful preparation and coercion. Is the mass suicide committed by Rajput women in the film Padmavat a voluntary and honourable act, or did they succumb to military coercion and propaganda? Swapna Sundar, Public Policy Scholar, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, takes a step back from the rabble of protests to throw the spotlight on the*

*patriarchal and militarist thought processes throughout history that reframe defeat as honour and deprive women of their agency over life.*

Three interesting ideas arise when recalling the furore that erupted around the release of the film *Padmavat* <sup>1</sup>. The first is that of mass suicide when the fighting forces perceive or encounter imminent defeat; the second, the deprivation of agency in the victims of mass suicides; and third, the valorisation of the mass suicide events to camouflage the lack of resistance on the part of, and humiliating defeat of the fighting force.

Rajputs have certainly not been the first or the only people in the world to commit mass suicide when faced with an overwhelming enemy force, nor is Rajasthan the only site in the world of repeated mass suicides; and yet these horrific occurrences – the consequence of poor military strategy, cowardice and propaganda – have been propagated and revered as heroic instances that speak to the courage and honour of the community. Modes and nomenclature differ across the world. The Rajputs call mass self-immolation by the women, *Jauhar* – and engagement by soldiers in suicidal battle charges is termed *Saka*.

As late as April 1945, during the Battle of Okinawa, reportedly one-third of the prefecture's civilian population committed suicide by various means – killing each other before killing themselves – while soldiers and conscripted civilians chose suicidal defensive strategies <sup>2</sup>. Earlier, in July 1944, an estimated 1,000 Japanese civilians committed suicides by jumping over cliffs above Marpi Point Field at the Northern end of Saipan Island. The Japanese called the mass murder-suicide *Shudan Jiketsu*. The use of the word *jiketsu* (awe-inspiring splendid act of taking one's own life) instead of *jisatsu* (suicide) demonstrated the belief that this was recorded as a heroic act <sup>3</sup>. Suicide battle charges – incorrectly referred to as *Banzai Charge* <sup>4</sup>, by American soldiers, were called *gyokusai* (shattering jewels) to create a heroic, aesthetic delusion <sup>5</sup>.

The Balinese also resorted to self-slaughter 1894 and 1908, in face of Dutch aggression <sup>6</sup>. These mass ritual suicides were called *Paputan*. Yet again, in the final

months of World War II, Germans who foresaw their defeat at the hands of the allies, committed suicide in large numbers. In May 1945 hundreds of people killed themselves in Demmin (now in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) by drowning, hanging, bullets, cyanide or jumping into fire<sup>7</sup>. Many more instances of mass suicides in the face of military defeat can be found in history including that of Teutonic women in 102 BCE at the defeat of the Teutons by the Romans in the battle of Aquae Sextae (102 BCE), of Jewish rebels, opposing Roman invasion in the fort of Masada (73 CE), of Lithuanians at Pilenai (1336) when fighting Teutonic knights, and of the Souliotes in Epirus when they lost to the Ottoman ruler Ali Pasha (1803).

### **An illusion of voluntariness**

Discussions on the long *Jauhar* scene in the film have focused on the illusion of voluntariness of the women choosing to commit *Jauhar*. The queen, Padmavati, is seen to be taking permission from her husband to commit *Jauhar*. An analysis of what drove victims to mass suicide in Japan, Bali and Germany, reveal that their agency was compromised through obscurantist political propaganda, coercion or inducement.

Victims of mass suicide were deprived of choice through a secondary process of indoctrination in the 'values' of the community that included the communication that honour and greater glory lay not being captured for servitude by those considered to be barbarians, or lesser than themselves socially and ritually, notwithstanding their superior military might, thereby denying them the honour of a battle victory. The victims of mass suicides appear to have believed in and practiced systematic discrimination based on birth and origin, and place themselves on a higher social and ritual plane.

The Nazi regime was determined to establish a system of rule based upon race, and the racially homogenous 'Aryan' national community<sup>8</sup>. India and Bali are still casteist. Again, mass suicides appear to have occurred in a militarised state, where the military – conventionally organised for protection of the citizens against an external enemy – appears also to have gained a civilian administrative role.

In 2007, Japan's textbooks were purged of references to the Japanese imperial army's coercive role in the mass suicides and mass murder-suicides during the Battle

of Okinawa. Subsequent controversies spurred much research into the tragic period in Japanese history. While the Ministry of Education stated that it could not verify whether the Japanese military had ordered civilians to commit suicide, further research<sup>9</sup> has shown that people were forced by the military to kill close relatives, and subsequently, themselves. Mass deaths were emphasised as duty to the emperor and immortality of the nation. Military propaganda ensured extreme fear of 'brute Americans and British' and residents were supplied with grenades to commit suicide. Residents chose to kill their relatives, particularly female siblings and wives, by their own hands, fearing rape and outrage at the hands of the invading army. Many Japanese feared the 'American devils raping and 'devouring' Japanese women and children.'

One of Bali's *Paputan* occurred in September 1906, when the Badung king and his army, became convinced of certain defeat at the hands of the numerically superior Dutch without offering any resistance. A Dutch eye-witness, Van Weede<sup>10</sup>, recorded his horror. Soldiers and civilians, having received their rites of death, were ritually dressed in white cremation garments and carried *krises* (ritual daggers). They were led by their king and nobles. The frontline was mowed down by the first volley fired by the Dutch. A mass murder-suicide took place among those who came behind, leaving hundreds dead in a matter of 40 minutes, for the loss of one Dutch life. Both men and women were involved in the self-slaughter. Some of the aristocratic ladies committed suicide at the hands of the priest. Balinese believe fervently that *Paputan* in the face of an irredeemable situation means that they die but are not defeated, because they choose the time of their death.

Nazi Germany too, faced with certain defeat at the hands of the Allies, witnessed mass-suicides among soldiers, administrators and civilians. The largest mass-suicide, at Demmin, was provoked by the atrocities at the hands of the invading Soviet army. The retreating German army and Nazi Party functionaries had destroyed bridges and blocked roads, trapping civilians and delaying the onward march of the Russians. The looting, rape and atrocities led to civilians murdering their relatives and children before killing themselves<sup>11</sup>. The Nazi propaganda machine legitimised suicide in the last months of the Second World War (WW-II) with many Germans carrying cyanide and razor blades. The local health authority

allegedly distributed potassium cyanide, and Hitler Youth are said to have distributed cyanide to the audience of the last concert of the Berlin Philharmonic. Hitler allegedly also distributed cyanide to his secretaries as a farewell gift <sup>12</sup>.

### **Reframing murder as honour**

This late in time, it is doubtful whether critical investigation can be conducted of the circumstances under which the Padmavat *Jauhar* took place, or the process or content of the communications that went into causing the women to commit *Jauhar*. In any case, what is interesting to note is that mass suicides in the face of military defeat are most often recorded by a person external to the event, and perhaps much later. Ramya Sreenivasan records three other texts that end with *Jauhar* and *Saka*, with the aim of providing heroic romances to legitimise later Rajput rulers <sup>13</sup>. She writes that these narratives promoted the claim of the Rajputs to a past steeped in valour and honour, despite military subjugation.

An early instance of mass suicide which bears striking similarities to the Rajput mass suicides, is the event in 1336 at Pilenai, glorified by the Lithuanians as a heroic act. The sole reporter of this mass suicide is Wigand of Marburg, a herald (an officer) of the Teutonic forces who perceived the Lithuanians as the enemy. A noted chronicler of the Middle Ages, he wrote in much the same high rhymed poetic style as Alauddin Khilji's court poet, Amir Khusrow. He records that Duke Margiris, unable to defend his fortress, and fearing conversion to Christianity, killed his wife, loyal guards and himself, leading to a mass suicide of the 4000 people inside the fortress. Today, the location of Pilenai cannot be identified, although, through the heaping of large amounts of heroic literature and historical fiction, the story has arrived at a popular narrative that includes large pyres and knights who were left stricken at the bravery demonstrated by the vanquished <sup>14</sup>.

### **Effete militaries**

A further common theme in the narratives is the military weakness of the defending army. The primary chronicle of the Pilenai suicide, written by Wigand of Marburg <sup>15</sup> documents the lack of strategy, military strength and confidence on the part of the defenders of Pilenai. At the sight of the advancing army, they fell into despair and chaos broke out. Seeing from an external point of view Wigand may not

have had the opportunity to see the more romantic and heroic aspects of the mass suicide, if any, allowing for later embellishment by other writers. Another striking note in the original text is that there is no record of active resistance on the part of the Lithuanians.

The Padmavat of Jayasi also records a most ineffectual military resistance to the advance of Khilji. Jayasi, writing 237 years after the siege of Chittor, describes extensively the military might of Khilji and his skill and his strategic moves, but is noticeably silent about the skills of his adversary, Ratan Sen <sup>16</sup>. In the Chapter *The Battle between King and Emperor*, Khilji has laid siege to the fort for eight years <sup>17</sup>. The Rajputs inside the fort taking a defensive stand, have decided that ‘the end of the world has come.’

The Rajput king is not defeated in his heart, but calls for dancing and music, while the besieging army below built earthwork to enter the fort on elephants. Seeing the elephants enter the fort, the King’s advisors advise him to fashion pyres for *Jauhar* while the men prepare for Saka. Indeed, at no point in the poem, does Ratan Sen take up weapons against Khilji or his army. Ratan Sen, without a fight, is abducted by *Khilji* in a passage where Jayasi compares *Khilji*’s strategic abilities to that of Lord Narayana <sup>18</sup>.

*Mass murder-suicide in the event of certain military defeat, has been planned and prepared for in advance of the actual of need of such course of action.*

It is evident that mass murder-suicide in the event of certain military defeat, has been planned and prepared for in advance of the actual of need of such course of action. Preparation includes grooming of the victims towards lowering their resistance to suicide, through propaganda including demonization of the enemy. Victims are charged with intense nationalist fervour. They are chided for their hesitation in taking this most desirable and inescapable course of action. The mode of suicide is presented to them – they receive the tools and aids to go through with the exercise. All that remains is for the fighting force to declare that the situation is irredeemable. Until the moment of their demise, their women folk and servants continue to believe in the bravery and heroism of their soldiers. Having committed murder or coerced

mass suicide in the women, children and servants under their control, the soldiers choose to enter battle with no intention to return.

### **A regrettable impulse**

In some cases there are rituals surrounding the suicide and the suicidal battle charges that were probably used to encourage and comfort the victims. The Balinese committing *Paputan* were in cremation clothes, while the Rajputs committing *Saka* wore saffron, the colour of sacrifice and renunciation. Like the Japanese *Banzai* charges, these were alternatives to surrender, not effective resistance. The ignominy of defeat is camouflaged by a veneer of sacrifice and honour redeemed.

The filmmaker, perhaps wishing to steer clear of the law against glorifying *Sati*<sup>19</sup>, chose to provide the equally crude spectacle of *Jauhar*. He spends a good 10 minutes on the denouement which serves at once to glorify *Jauhar* and draw out the raw emotions of the audience. It is ironical that the constitutional right to free speech and expression had to be invoked in the defence of such a film.

Death by *Jauhar* is treated as distinctly different from self-immolation under other circumstances. For instance, women who set fire to themselves using cooking fuel to escape abusive marriages are seen as objects of pity. In fact, I had opportunity to meet some survivors, now in the care of International Foundation for Crime Prevention and Victim care (PCVC). A film on them had won an award in the 'one-minute film festival' organised by the Human Rights Advocacy and Research Foundation (HRF).

These women neither view themselves, nor are they viewed as heroic women who have chosen suicide over a less than human life. A few of them insisted I should spread the message that self-immolation had perhaps freed them from their husbands, but had not enriched their lives in any way, as they had become destitute and people were repelled by them. It was through PCVC that they were exploring a brighter world. They had impulsively, but independently, chosen immolation over yet another day of abuse. They were happy that they had not succumbed to their injuries, though that had been their original intention. Escaping the cruelty of their

own husbands and families by death has not the same connotation as doing the same act in defence of an ethnic community.

Notably, post WW II, there has been a gradual decline in global narratives that exploit the stories of mass-suicides for national propaganda. Told against the background of the mass murders committed by fascist regimes in national interest, global narratives often deny the glorifying or heroic aspects of mass-suicide, preferring to view them as avoidable tragedies of war. Further, cult-led mass-suicides of families in the past decades have almost completely wiped away any glory from mass suicide. It is painful that in such a milieu, large sections of Indians continue to see virtue in glorifying mass suicides, inspiring an ambitious film-maker to zoom in on such a regressive theme, cleverly circumventing the law against glorification of *Sati*.

### **References:**

*[All URLs were last accessed on February 28, 2018.]*

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17. The poem says 'years', but it is more likely to have been eight months.

18.

Ratnsen-bndhn-khnd	The Imprisonment of Ratan Sen
Payanh gadhi bedi pari; sankar geu, hath hathkari.	Fetters upon his feet and neck; handcuffs on his wrists.
Aur dhari bandhi manjusha mela; eis satru jini hoi duhela.	And was made a prisoner in a cage (or box); such as would not be wished on an enemy.
Suni chita-ur mahan para bakhana; des des chari-u disi jana.	Was heard and was discussed; and was known in every country in for directions.
Aaju Narayan firi jag khoonda; aaju so singh manjusha moonda.	Today Narayan has again leapt into the world, today the Singh is shut in the cage. (The surname 'Singh' meaning lion was widely adopted by the Rajputs in the 10 <sup>th</sup> century CE.)
Aaju khase Ravan das Matha; aaju kanha kalifan natha.	Today fell the ten heads of Ravana; today Kanha became lord of the black-hooded serpent.
Aaju puran kans kar dheela; aaju meen sankhasur leela.	Today Kamsa's hold on life has loosened; today the (death) drama of Sankhasur and the Matsya avatar. (Shankhasur was said to have stolen the 4 vedas)
Aaju pare pandav badi maahaan; aaju dushasan utareen baahaan.	Today the pandavas have been captured; today the arms of dushasan have fallen. (Perhaps in reference to a passage where Ratan Sen claims that Pandavas won in the face of deceit.
Aaju dhara bali raja; mela bandhi pataar.	Today king Bali has fallen; bound and brought to hell.
Aaju soor din athava; bha chita-ur andhiyaar.	Today the day has come sunless; Chitaur has become dark. (The sun has set on Chitaur)

[https://ia800200.us.archive.org/34/items/Bibliotheca\\_Indica\\_Series/PadmavatiEnglishTranslation-AgShirreff1944bis.pdf](https://ia800200.us.archive.org/34/items/Bibliotheca_Indica_Series/PadmavatiEnglishTranslation-AgShirreff1944bis.pdf)

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19. Section 5 of The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, makes glorification of Sati a punishable offence. Glorification includes the supporting, justifying or propagating the practice of sati in any manner.