



**Antique Indian Silver Tinderbox With Flint, Calcutta, India – 1800/50  
£1,800.00**

In the days before matches were invented, a flint and steel were the fastest and most reliable way to start a fire and widely used. They were so important that they would be kept on the person at all times, often hung around the neck or from a belt. A tinder box and flint would have been an indispensable piece of equipment for anyone wishing to light a fire and an essential piece of kit for those serving in the military or traveling out of the cities in India prior to the arrival of fast and reliable forms of transportation from city to city, specifically the railways.

The box would be used to store the fine dry tinder which would be initially required to start a fire. Certain dried leaves, fungi, wood shavings or charred cloth were favourite tinder, whichever material was most convenient and highly combustible. Once the fire was built, the flint would be struck repeatedly on a piece of steel, commonly a knife, which would produce small sparks. These sparks would ignite a small pile of fine dry tinder which would be gently blown upon and fanned until a small flame was produced. At that stage, larger pieces of dry tinder would be introduced before using this bundle to set alight to the larger twigs and branches necessary for a good fire. A good fire gave warmth, allowed cooking and warded off predatory animals.

This antique Indian silver fire striker compendium comprises a box with a hinged lift up lid and a protruding silver thumbpiece to facilitate easy opening. Below this hangs a curved silver frame to hold the flint. The flint is in place and probably original. There is a sturdy ring to the top of the box which would accept a silver chain, leather thong or thick cord.

There are two repoussé and chased panels to front and back, both feature designs after illustrations by Solvyns and both have a connection with fire. To the front is a copy of Solvyns' portrait entitled 'Paramhansa, a Purum Hungse'. This was the name of a particular type of fakir who superstitious Hindus believed was a man who had descended from heaven and had lived for thousands of years without taking any nourishment. They believed that if this man was thrown into water or fire, he would suffer no fatal effect from either experience. The inspiration for the back is another Solvyns illustration entitled 'Sahagamana, A Sho Hogomon, 3' which shows a widow about to step onto the funeral pyre of her late husband.

'When the Flemish artist Balthazar Solvyns arrived in Calcutta in 1791, the debate over sati (suttee) was just beginning as missionaries, amongst others, condemned official toleration of the "dreadful practice" and called for its suppression. Of all Hindu customs, none more fascinated--or appalled--the Europeans than "suttee," the practice of widow-burning. The term sati is Sanskrit for "virtuous woman," but it is used principally to refer to the faithful wife who "becomes sati" through self-immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband. Europeans erroneously took the word to mean the practice itself, and suttee, the European corruption, has become the conventional term for the wife's self-immolation. Solvyns uses neither suttee nor sati as terms in his description, but rather the Sanskrit word he spells phonetically from Bengali pronunciation. The practice by which the wife joins her husband in the flames and becomes sati is termed sahamarana, "dying together," also known as sahamarana--Solvyns's Shoho-Gomon--meaning "going together."

The practice was prevalent in Bengal in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Benoy Bhusan Roy, in 'Socioeconomic Impact of Sati in Bengal', writes that suttee was most frequent among Brahmins, but that the practice was found among the families of lower castes that had distinctive positions in wealth or property. Indeed, the possible increased frequency of suttee may have reflected an aspiration to higher social status among upwardly mobile sudra families. But, as official records in the early nineteenth century reveal, suttee was not limited to the more affluent. The practice was to be found among many castes and at every level of society.

Amongst European travelers in India during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, no description was complete without a reference to suttee--preferably with at least one eye-witness account! Pierre Sonnerat, who traveled in India in the 1770s, describes the practice and provides an engraving of an Indian woman going to be burned with the body of her husband. Another French traveler, Grandpre, writing of his experience in Bengal in 1789 and 1790, relates his own unsuccessful effort to rescue a beautiful young woman who was to become sati, and notes that the practice of suttee was particularly "horrible" in Bengal. Failed intervention was a frequent theme in European accounts, as in Thomas Twining's description of his thwarted effort to prevent a suttee some 60 miles outside Calcutta in 1792. Confirming accounts of restraints to prevent the woman's escape, Edward Thompson writes in *Suttee* that "Especially in Bengal, [the woman] was often bound to the corpse with cords, or both bodies were fastened down with long bamboo poles curving over them like a wooden coverlet, or weighted down by logs."