



International Journal of Allied Practice, Research and Review

Website: www.ijaprr.com (ISSN 2350-1294)

An Article

'Honour Crimes' and Women in Haryana as Presented in Manjeet Rathee's : *Women, Media and Society*

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Abstract - The present paper deals with one of the most urgent and significant issues as far as the identity, existence, representation and survival of a woman in contemporary Haryana is concerned related to her autonomy, choice and agency. Women's struggle today has come a long way since the old times when women were denied various political, economic, educational and constitutional rights and her status and identity was completely subjugated to patriarchal structures and mindset existing at various levels of society. The concept of 'Honour Killings' as discussed by the writer relates to her fundamental right to live and love and exercise her choice in a matter which is most crucial and decisive in her life in the sense that it shapes her whole future course of life and action.

The violence involved in Honour crimes and killings under the guise of protecting the 'honour' of the family and the community varies in different cases but the use of force to uphold the worst forms of caste and cultural oppression is the most disturbing feature in all such cases. The present paper attempts to focus upon the feudal roots of caste (Khap) panchayats which are directly or indirectly responsible for 'honour' related violence to salvage the false honour of the community and to 'teach a lesson' to those who dare to transgress the conventional norms by their attempt to exercise their own choice and right to marriage. The role of Khap Panchayats needs to be analyzed in a proper context so that the democratic choice of the people at large and women and weaker sections in particular, is not met with impunity and hostility by the retrogressive forces and mindsets.

Article

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After a long term involvement with gender issues at two levels -- one at the theoretical and academic level, having been associated with teaching work and hence with literature and gender discourse for around a period of 25 years now and secondly at the level of understanding developed on the basis of writer's work and involvement with Women's Movement and Literacy and Science movements since 1990. Manjeet Rathee's constant grass root association and day to day interaction with the categories of women belonging to various class, caste and region that has formed the basic framework of her understanding of the gender issues and their political, economical and socio- cultural inter linkages with policies structure and mindsets.

Women's struggle today has come a long way since the old times when women were denied of various political, economical, educational and constitutional rights and her status and identity was completely subjected to patriarchal structures and mindset existing at various levels of society. 'Honour Killing' is a most heinous crime and meted out stringent punishment to its perpetrators. Also 'Honour Killing' is treated as 'rarest' of rare crime.

The barbaric practice of issuing of death threat and killing of young people at the behest of khaf Panchayats in Haryana is not something new more that is confined to Haryana alone. Vehement, opposition to own choice marriages has been witnessed in Delhi, Western Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamilnadu, Maharashtra and varying degrees in other parts of the country too. The form of violence perpetrated under the guise of protecting the 'Honour' of the family and the community have varied in different cases but the use of force to uphold the worst form of caste and cultural oppression is the most disturbing feature in all such cases. The honour killing that have been highlighted are largely confined to marriages within the Hindu community inter religious marriages also invite merciless retribution, as seen in (Caste) Khap Panchayats, largely prevalent in areas around Delhi which are directly or indirectly responsible for these killings to salvage the false honour of the community and to 'teach a lesson' to those who dare to transgress the conventional norms in their attempt to exercise their own choice and right to marriage. These were primarily meant in pre modern times for the purpose of providing security and for settling local disputes as there were no law enforcement agencies. They are either gotra centric or area specific and many Khap Panchayats join together to form SarvKhap (All castes) Panchayat -- a larger entity consisting of different castes.

Earlier Khap Panchayats were figure of justice but today are essentially undemocratic, biased and tyrannical in there, structure and functioning. Upper and middle caste landowning sections who own huge property and enjoy a very luxurious life with all latest modern facilities dominate these Panchayats. Women and weaker sections are almost totally excluded unless

otherwise necessary for some specific case. They have very close inter linkages with communal and fundamentalist forces and are particularly repressive in their actions towards women and dalit section. This is proved when we look towards Mirchpur Incident related to Dalits and the culprits who were guilty of burning dalit houses saved by the efforts of these Panchayats. They always support the interest of richer or upper sections within the caste, oppose equal rights for women in property, speak up against co-educational schools, support dress codes for women and oppose women's right to divorce and widow remarriage.

All Khap members, it is claimed, are supposed to be blood relations. 'Bhaichara' (Brotherhood) which has been the main plank of these traditional Panchayats. This has resulted in several marital taboos such as ban on same gotra marriage, same village marriage and marriage in immediate neighborhood.

It is being a patriarchal society, women viewed as the property of the family, caste and the community. The 'Honour' of the caste is seen to be vested in the chastity of the woman. The influence of films and television serial in shaping the consciousness and aspirations of adolescent minds cannot be underestimated the globalized media today boasts of 'choice' in every sphere of life, suggesting that it is intrinsic to market economics and societies.

In recent times, though there is continued fear and tension at the local level over the decision of , Khap Panchayats at the same time due to regular interventions on behalf of democratic and women's organizations and the positive role played by a section of the media in highlighting the cruelty behind these murders, a section of people from within the village and sometimes even from within the family have begun to openly question their verdicts. Some of the government decisions and directives from the human rights commission etc. have also helped to prevail in favour of the democratic atmosphere.

The evidence of injustice related to 'Honour Killing' are before us as brutal murder of Manoj and Babli for the sake of 'honour' -- a young couple from Karoda village in Kaithal district of Haryana who dared to challenge the archaic caste , norms by tying the nuptial knot. Other victims of this are Scheduled caste couple belonging to same village was forced to leave it when they married on their own choice. Later the Panchayat gave a verdict of stoning the couple to death. In Ismaila village, district Rohtak, 2002, a Jat girl of the village was friendly with grown smith boy. The girl's family killed both the children. Similar cases can be seen in Halva village of district Jhajjarin 2002, Miyandvala village of Fatehbad district. Also Sonia-Rampal case of district Rohtak, according to this, a married couple who were declared 'brother-sister' by caste panchayat in Haryana but who refused to surrender. Evidence of inter religious marriage come into light when Muslim girl Afsana married to Hindu Boy Manoj in Meerut district in July, 2009. These all indicated towards 'honour' crimes which emerges as worst forms of caste and cultural oppression by some authoritative powers of society. The right to life and choice is under tremendous threat of youth.

Struggles by organizations like AIDWA to make the crime visible have contributed in no small way to this change. A few years back, the Union Home Minister, stating that 'honour'¹ killings are rooted in anachronistic, antiquated attitudes and false premise, come out strongly against its barbarity, calling it a 'national shame'. Rajya Sabha also announced that 'the vilest crimes are committed in the name of defending the honour of the family or women and we should hang our heads in shame when such incidents take place in the 21st Century. The Supreme Court directed the administration and the police authorities throughout the country to ensure that adult going in for inter-caste and inter-religious marriages are not threatened or

harassed and stern action must be taken against those perpetrating such violence. Rajasthan State Human Rights Commission too had found the role of caste Panchayat in that state negative enough to file a writ petition in the Jodhpur High Court, for action against them.

Condemnation of 'honour killings' by a sizable section of the society, highlighting of the issue by the press directives issued to the Khap Panchayats and leaders from the Session Courts, National Human Rights Commission and other law protecting agencies and some recent landmark judgments have resulted in a severe backlash from the fundamentalist sections, this was evident after the court verdict in Manoj/Babli case where, instead of being apologetic about the brutal murder of the couple, the Sarv Khap Mahapanchayats in Haryana openly declared that many more such murders might take place if the Hindu Marriage Act is not amended to ban the marriages within the same sub-caste. Some of the Jat institutions and their leadership have also been defending the illegal diktats of these Khap and felicitating their self-styled leaders in public. Abhay Ram, Khap President of Krora (the village to which Manoj-Babli belonged to), has openly stated that 'we refuse to acknowledge the Courts, the constitution which encourage ruining our society'. Another Khap leader (Beniwal) has threatened that if their demands are not met they will compel to tear the constitution. This clearly brings out the undemocratic and non constitutional face of these Panchayats who do not believe in any other law or constitution except that of their own power and authority.

The recent demand by the SarvKhap Panchayat in Haryana and adjacent areas to amend Hindu Marriage Act further exposes their real intent and character. This is a deliberate attempt on their part to deviate people from the real issues affecting their life and livelihood. We must understand that real bhaichara (Brotherhood) lies in defending the lives and constitutional rights of the most deprived sections of the society, especially of women and dalits and in fighting collectively against the social and economic challenges posed by the wrong policies of the government. Also apart from the actual killings, issuing if illegal diktats ordering social boycott of 'guilty' families or asking couples to annul their marriages and live like brother and sister is an equally heinous crime and should be dealt with accordingly by the government and the administration.

The fight for right to own choice marriage and against the illegal diktats of caste Panchayats has constantly been taken up by certain social and women's organizations like AIDWA with the help of other democratic organizations and individuals. In incidents after incident they have fought for the victims from local level to raising the issue before National Human Rights Commission, the National Commission for Women and Parliament demanding Khap Panchayats to be declared illegal AIDWA's experience shows that multi-pronged strategies need to be evolved broad based social reform campaigns, ensuring that such illegal verdicts are challenged and exposing the undemocratic, anti-poor, anti-women are dubious character of the self-styled Panchayats, AIDWA has also facilitated many who took the bold step to opt for inter caste and inter religious marriages.

Since, in the Indian context, any struggle for women's emancipation and empowerment is intrinsically uprooting of caste and communal structures and retrogressive mindset, a careless struggle and campaign to raise the consciousness of the people against heinous such forms of violence and win them over to democratic point of view is the only way one can hope to survive with dignity and honour.

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