



## Gender, Patriarchy and 'Honour Killing' in India

Nadeem Hasnain<sup>1</sup>

Murder of young girls and women in the name of saving or retrieving the honour of the family, caste or community has assumed serious dimensions in democratic India. Though such killings are not confined to India and may also be seen in other parts of South Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka), Middle East, South America and Africa in gross violation of human rights. In US and Europe it is largely confined to the migrant communities many of whom continue with their archaic traditional notions of family honour. Largely speaking, such killings present the obnoxious face of strongly patriarchal societies.

The so called 'honour killing' or 'crimes of honour' may be seen a part of broader violence against women which is not confined to any particular caste, culture or religion. This is also not limited to the rural areas or uneducated illiterate persons. Though such violence, stretching to killings, is reported from throughout India except perhaps the tribal regions, the largest number of reports come from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Western Uttar Pradesh. Many such killings go unreported largely because of its consent from the entire village community.

Many of us agree that the health and moral and political condition of a state should be determined on the basis of condition and status of women and minority groups. Patriarchy runs deep in Indian society and manifests itself in all forms of violence against women- female foeticide and infanticide, discrimination, domestic violence, and killings. The psyche and mindset behind all forms of violence and discrimination against women must be understood to situate honour killings in our social structure. This mindset is rooted in the local culture when women are not regarded as human beings entitled to rights and cultural autonomy but property representing the honour of the male members of her family. Her body signifies the honour of the family. Hence gender and honour become the site of honour killing. Perhaps that is why convicted killers often speak with defiant pride and without regret about their actions.

Shame, dishonour and loss of face accompany the situation in which the daughter violates the normative order. The implications of such a situation are not temporary for it would never be forgotten by the local society. As PS Judge (2012) points out, non-conformity to normative expectations and exercising choices that are the exclusive prerogatives of the parents and male members of the community poses a serious threat to the existing

---

<sup>1</sup> Nadeem Hasnain, Ph.D, is Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Lucknow.

normative social order. Indeed shame can become a millstone around a family's neck. Even generations later, the event continues to put a family to shame whenever the event is mentioned as a reminder. For most families involved, the only way to defend one's honour is to eliminate the source of shame. If we analyse the prevailing trends of 'honour killings' we find that the perceived dishonour is normally the result one or more of the following behaviour or even the suspicion of such behavior:

- Clothing in a manner going against the traditional dress pattern for women. Often this is unacceptable to the family or the community.
- Defying and not accepting or terminating a marriage arranged by the family and going for her own choice or going for divorce.
- Inter-caste marriage or marrying within the village or *gotra*.
- Pre-marital or extra marital intimacy or sexual relation.
- Same sex relation or lesbian relation.
- Going for a profession against the wishes of the parents or brothers.

The feminist explanations of such killings look at 'honour' as power. It helps us to understand how patriarchy perpetuates the right and dominance of males over women and how it justifies the definitions and expectations of males especially with reference to women's behaviour. This 'honour system' may be divided into three broad areas:

- (a) control over women's behavior
- (b) sense of shame in losing this control
- (c) regulation and magnifying this sense of shame by community participation.

Enquiring and analysing patriarchy helps us understand different types of discrimination and violence within the milieu of unequal gender relations. Social status or honour and prestige may help maintain the group identity. It may also help defining those social boundaries that are threatened by other competing groups. Patriarchy believes that the control over sexuality of women is essential in maintaining the purity and continuity of the male's seeds. The increasing number of such killings also reflect the tensions arising out of unwillingness of the rigidly traditional social structures in accepting the modern laws. The patriarchy and caste rights look at the struggle for women's rights as a challenge and threat to its hegemony.

Confluence of patriarchy, caste, and masculinity is a heady mixture in all the South Asian societies especially in the Indian Sub-continent. As Gilbert Sebastian (2013) points out "the pre-existing semi-feudal, caste based hierarchy in India sought to confine women, especially of the privileged castes, to their homes and hearths whereas capitalist patriarchy liberated them for 'social production' that is, outside work". Semi feudal caste-based patriarchy guarded the honour of the women of privileged upper castes and equated it with the honour of the family and caste, accorded 'protection' to them and envisaged severest of punishments to men of under privileged lower castes for even mild offences or even advances against the women of higher castes. Perhaps that is why in Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh any relationship with the man of *dalit* castes, not to speak of marriage, invites severest punishment for both-the boy and the girl. Thus "the violent masculinities of imperialist patriarchy and semi-feudal caste based patriarchy have a meeting ground" (Sebastian, *ibid*).

It is important to note here that in the Indian society women of *dalit* castes enjoyed much more cultural autonomy and rights than their counterparts from the higher castes. They always enjoyed the right to visibility (unlike higher caste women who maintain veil or *Ghunghat*), right to mobility (they worked on the fields and felt free to move about outside the four walls of home), right to choose life partner and a host of other parameters of

autonomy such as going for divorce if the marriage does not work. The idea and value of *Pati Parmeshwar* (husband is like god) to be adored and worshipped without questioning his authority has never been an integral part of the *dalit* cultural ethos. Rather, it was part of Brahmanical patriarchy and value system. In the process of *Sanskritization* (emulating the life style and value system of higher caste for enhancing social status and prestige), in most of the regions, the *dalits* emulating the higher castes are shedding a number of their traditional values and adopting the traditional values of higher castes. In the process, the higher castes, in villages expect them too, to conform to their values especially with reference to women. Perhaps, that is why their liberal and, to some extent, permissive attitude towards their women is also undergoing change and they too are rapidly nurturing the concept of honour and 'shame' on the lines of higher castes. "Thus, sub-ordination of women is proportionately related to caste hierarchy. Higher the constraints on her, the higher in the caste hierarchy." Control is exercised over her sexuality through arranged marriage, child marriage, prohibition of divorce, *sati*, ban on widow remarriage and strict seclusion of the widows" (J. Vishwanath & S.C. Palakonda, 2011).

Rigidly patriarchal societies hardly allows any space to the socio-cultural autonomy for women. In the recent decades education and economic freedom has empowered substantial sections of women. They are enjoying a bigger role in the decision making process and they are taking up more responsibilities outside home. All these changes have loosened the grip of patriarchy over women. Religion and caste are not willing to accept these changes. The urban societies, unlike the rural ones, find it more difficult to restrict the march of women towards greater freedom and autonomy. In villages the space of control of males over women is much wider and the support system against women's rights is always willing to lend a helping hand to the draconian patriarchy. It is seen that the larger the city, the higher is the flight of women's autonomy. The civil society organisations are also there to support women.

### **Role of Traditional Panchayats**

Numerous studies have shown that the traditional panchayats are still playing a strong and important role as a tool of social control in the village societies despite the establishment of statutory panchayats under Panchayat Raj. Of all such traditional panchayats, the *Khap* Panchayats of Harayana have grabbed the biggest attention because of its highly questionable role. For several centuries *Khap* and *Sarva Khap* panchayats have been characterized for their role in 'social administration'. The term *Khap* has been known as signifying the social-political aspect in geographical context. Since ancient times the social fabric of rural India has been known through village units. The village panchayat has been representing its' socio-political system. The *Khap* panchayat, even today, may be considered equivalent to *Tehsil* or district. Several *Khaps* together constitute a *Sarva khap*. This whole region has been dominated by the Jats and the Gujjars. Even after the emergence of the statutory, constitutional panchayats, the role of *Khap* remained effective in terms of social control. In this entire region, or for that matter, in different regions of rural India, the cornerstone village life is based largely on four points - *Ekta* (unity or solidarity), *Izzat* (honour), *Biradari* (larger kin group) and *Bhaichara* (brotherhood). The *Khaps* constructed to exercise power because it focused on purely social issues, so important to village India. The main function of the *Khap* and such other traditional panchayats has been to maintain peace, settle disputes, especially with reference to the disputes over property, and inheritance, sexual or marital 'misconduct' and a host of others. Significantly, such panchayats have been an all male institution where the women were always kept on margins in decision making process. The main source of their strength has been the local dominant castes and they have been instrumental in enforcing the decisions taken. In this arrangement the *dalits*, like the women, have also been on the margins. In the electoral process, right from the panchayats to parliament, their influence is there for everybody to see. Perhaps, that is why all the mainstream political parties, except the left parties, do not challenge its authority openly.

Some political parties have, shamelessly, supported the illegal and unconstitutional decisions of *Khap* panchayats.

In recent years the hidden hands of *Khap* panchayats may be seen behind the killing of hundreds of women though its leaders have always denied it. Negating the constitutional rights of citizens, *Khap* panchayats have projected themselves as the protector, guardians and savior of the local culture and doing moral policing at will. Thousands of 'brides' purchased from the poorest regions of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh are serving as domestic slaves in this region as a result of disturbed sex ratio. Where does morality go in such cases?

In the wake of the increasing number of honour killings the Supreme Court issued notice in 2010 to the Central government and six state governments including Harayana, Punjab and Rajasthan and directed them to take effective measures to prevent such atrocities and killings.

### Legislative Measures

The increasingly combative *khap* panchayats go scot free as the humiliation and killings of women enjoy the tacit approval of the local community. Public lynching of the 'guilty' couples, public beating and humiliation, blackening of faces, and murder made to appear as suicide are regular features of these societies and most of these incidents go unreported. Even in cases which are able to reach courts of law, the rate of conviction is abysmally low as the law enforcing personnel at the lower levels belong to the same social milieu.

Under the intense pressure of the civil society groups the government is considering to make some suitable legislation. There is no specific criminal law to deal with the offence of honour crimes. A special law is required along with some specific provisions in the Indian Penal Code. The Constitution of India has ample provisions allowing an individual to exercise his/her choice, independent of caste, religion or gender and hence a new legislative measure. In this regard it would be in conformity with the constitutional rights of Indian citizens. Extra judicial punishment in *Taliban* style has no place in India or any civilized society.

Needless to say, without strong political will, neither the humiliation of women can be checked nor the role of the illegal and unconstitutional panchayats. We also have to decide whether we wish to live as an open, liberal, democratic society or live in the dark and dingy caves of the past. This social problem shall continue to play havoc with the lives of the millions in the absence of a strong social movement.

### REFERENCES

1. Judge, Paramjit S., 2012. *Love as Rebellion and Shame: Honour Killings in the Punjabi Literary Imagination*, Economic & Political Weekly, Vol. XLVII, No. 44, November 03,.
2. Sebastian, Gilbert, 2013, *Patriarchy and the Rise in Sexual Assaults in India: An Explanation*, Mainstream, Vol. LI, No 13, March 16,.
3. Vishwanath, Jyothi & Srinivas C. Palakonda, 2011. *Patriarchal Ideology of Honour and Honour Crimes in India*, International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences, January-December Vol. 6(1&2):386-395.