



ALTERNARRATIVES

AWARD WINNING ENTRIES OF LMA 2024



Lead

Celebrate Her Life
An Initiative by Population First

EDITED BY
DR. A. L. SHARADA



United Nations Population Fund

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2024

PREFACE

I'm beyond excited to introduce Alternarratives, a vibrant collection of selected award-winning entries from the 14th Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity 2024.

Assembling this book wasn't easy. Selecting what to include was an internal tug-of-war—there were so many incredible pieces that I wish we could have featured them all. Yet, decisions had to be made. To those whose work isn't included, I offer my sincerest apologies. Still, I've worked hard to ensure that a wide range of subjects and regions are represented, and I've given special attention to regional voices and diverse perspectives. Fortunately, all award-winning entries will be available online for those who wish to explore them in full.

This book is a journey into the heart of gender issues, framed through the lens of some of the most impactful media pieces from across India and South Asia. The opening section, Understanding Women's Access to Public Spaces, sheds light on a subject that is often overlooked: how cities—designed mostly by and for men—can be inhospitable to women. It's a thought-provoking look at how urban environments often fail to account for the unique challenges women face, from safety concerns to gendered cultural norms.

In Navigating Identity, Aging, and Body Images by the Queer Community, we dive into stories from LGBTQIA+ individuals, exploring their ongoing battles for visibility and understanding. While media coverage has made great strides, there's still a long way to go in addressing the more nuanced and marginalized voices within the community. This section brings those voices to the forefront, offering a glimpse into the often unseen layers of identity and representation.

The third section, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Ethnic Strife, takes a hard look at how sexual violence is wielded as a weapon in ethnic conflicts. The devastating impact of this tactic—on both individuals and communities - remains a chilling reality, particularly for women and girls.

Following this, Coping with Gender-Based Violence explores the complex emotional, social, and financial hurdles women face when trying to leave abusive relationships. It's a sobering reminder that escape is often just the beginning of a long, difficult journey.

In Response to Gender-Based Violence, we shine a light on the dark nexus of power, politics, and religion that often shields perpetrators of GBV, making justice feel like an elusive dream for survivors. This section exposes the structures that allow abuse to flourish unchecked.

The next chapter, Understanding the Patriarchal Underpinnings of Crimes Against Women, unpacks the global crisis of violence against women. From acid attacks to the disturbing rise of deep fake videos, the physical, psychological, and social impacts are devastating. The section calls for a deeper understanding of the cultural and patriarchal roots of these crimes.

In Gender and Health: Barriers to Women's Healthcare in India, we reveal how deeply ingrained patriarchy affects not only women's autonomy but also their access to healthcare. The section explores how cultural and systemic inequalities continue to hold back women's health and well-being.

We then shift gears to Denied Opportunities and Recognition: Women in Education and STEM, which looks at the barriers women face in education and professional fields, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and math. This section tackles the longstanding glass ceilings and societal norms that have prevented women from receiving the recognition they deserve.

One of the most eye-opening sections is The Unseen Burden of Justice: Crackdown on Child Marriages in Assam, where we explore the state's efforts to end child marriage. The focus is on how these crackdowns have impacted the lives of child brides, revealing the ripple effects of these policies.

In 'Crafting Change: Women's Economic Roles in Rural and Urban India,' the eleventh section, examines the intricate relationship between women and work, revealing the diverse, yet interconnected, challenges and triumphs of women across various sectors in India.

I hope that 'Alternarratives' becomes a reference for journalists, media schools, and consumers to refine their understanding of gender issues and incorporate a gender perspective in media reporting. I extend my gratitude to Navan Shetty for his consistent support. Last but not least, I express my thanks to UNFPA for supporting the Laadli Media Advocacy initiative and facilitating the publication of this book.

We are excited about the collaboration with SAWM, enabling us to extend the awards to South Asian countries. We are pleased to present profiles of the South Asian winners in the book and hope to launch franchise events in South Asian countries soon.

Dr. A. L. Sharada
CEO, Population First

ABOUT POPULATION FIRST

Population First is a social impact organisation working on health and population issues from a gender and social development perspective. Population First was registered in March 2002 by Bobby Sista, doyen of the Indian advertising Industry, under the Bombay Public Trusts Act (1950) to leverage communication and media influence to address the social and demographic issues in the country.

Population First believes that unequal social development and gendered mindsets are responsible for the poor social demographic indices - be it maternal and child mortality, child marriages, or the falling sex ratios.

Population First focuses on the gendered mindsets which undermine the value of girls and women, promote discrimination against them, and justify gender-based violence. The challenge is to change those mindsets.

ABOUT LAADLI MEDIA INITIATIVES

The *Laadli* Media Advocacy initiatives focus on promoting gender sensitivity in media and communication to build a more gender equitable society by challenging the deep-seated misogyny and patriarchal mindsets in society. Recognising the importance of this section of our socio-economic tapestry, The *Laadli* Media and Advertising Advocacy initiatives focus on:

1. Capacity building of communicators
2. Creating a supportive ecosystem of industry stalwarts, thought leaders, policymakers and influencers promoting change
3. Institute awards and other reward mechanisms to reinforce positive change

The interventions to achieve these stated goals are:

- Workshops for various stakeholder such as media and film professionals, advertising agencies, industry groups, professional bodies and students of media, film and journalism Fellowships and networking platforms for journalists.
- Awards for excellence in gender sensitive portrayal across the fields of journalism, films, advertising, theatre, television, books and content creation.
- Campaigns and events to raise awareness on various nuances of gender sensitivity
- Reports, research studies publications, films, and innovative and creative content.

Website: www.populationfirst.org

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Understanding Women's Access to Public Spaces

Women's access to public spaces, is essential for creating inclusive urban environments. These spaces present unique challenges for women due to concerns around safety, cultural norms, and urban design that often fail to consider gendered experiences. Media reporting on these issues should underscore the importance of addressing them holistically, accounting for both physical infrastructure and societal attitudes as the articles featured in this section reveal..

Streets are one of the most critical public spaces where gendered experiences shape access and movement. Jashvita Dhagey highlights that women often change their routes, behaviour, or appearance to minimize the risk of harassment or violence. Poorly lit or deserted streets are often perceived as unsafe for women, limiting their mobility, especially after dark. The micro-mapping exercise of streets, which she undertook, serves as the basis for her evidence-based advocacy. Simple interventions like improved street lighting, wider sidewalks, and more open public areas can help women feel safer.

Public transportation presents yet another significant challenge for women. Smruti Koppikar reports on the harassment women face in crowded buses, trains, and stations. The fear of harassment limits women's use of public transportation, particularly during off-peak hours or in poorly monitored areas. Many avoid certain transport modes or opt not to travel due to safety concerns. Smruti argues that urban transport systems are often designed for a 'neutral' user, unintentionally marginalizing women. For example, routes and schedules that do not consider women's caregiving roles—such as taking children to school or running errands—can limit their mobility. She advocates for redesigning transport systems to prioritize women's safety and convenience, such as women-only compartments, well-lit stops, and real-time monitoring systems. Smruti argues that improving transport safety for women requires not only infrastructure changes but also confronting the normalization of harassment in these spaces. Public awareness campaigns, better reporting mechanisms, and stricter enforcement of anti-harassment laws, she argues, are necessary to make public transport more accessible to women.

Need for safe recreational spaces for women are often neglected in urban planning. Parks, plazas, and recreational areas should be places where women feel free to relax, exercise, and socialize. However, many women feel unsafe or unwelcome, especially in male-dominated spaces. Ankita Dhar Karmakar, in her article on "Purdah Bagh," documents the empowering experiences of women in a "women only" park. Recreational areas often prioritize male-dominated activities like sports, while failing to provide amenities that cater to women. Urban planners should design spaces with open layouts, good visibility, and seating arrangements that make recreational areas more inclusive for women.

All three articles stress the need for urban planners to adopt an intersectional approach to designing public spaces, ensuring streets, transport systems, and recreational areas are safe and accessible for all women, regardless of background or ability and urban design to go beyond surface-level fixes and address cultural norms that stigmatize women's presence in public spaces as risky or inappropriate.

1. Micro-mapping streets and footpaths in a neighbourhood, as a woman

Jashvitha Dhagey | Question of Cities | Oct 6, 2023

We walk by on badly-designed streets and footpaths or race across at ill-planned traffic intersections made to facilitate vehicles rather than pedestrians, and come to believe that this is a part of wretched and stressful life in a city. Walking in cities, except in a few well-kept neighbourhoods, is hazardous and unsafe, especially for women, children and the elderly. But what makes it so? Walking with a purpose, observing closely, noting points at every step – in other words, micro-mapping – offers a way to pin down what is wrong and what needs to be set right. Here's an account of such an exercise in one of Mumbai's densest areas. Women's experience of streets, like everything else in their lives, is dictated by their gender. Blending into streets is a constant challenge. Would it make a difference if women micro-mapped their streets instead of only men? It appears so, given my experience this past Sunday morning.

Streets, like other public spaces, have meant I conduct myself a certain way. I do not make myself too visible but I am afraid if nobody can see me, which makes it unsafe. I want to believe that this too is my space as much as that of any man. However, as soon as I step out into the streets, perhaps after years of conditioning and practice, my shoulders become taut, jaw is clenched, and I am looking over my shoulder while dodging the uninvited male gaze or 'accidental' physical touch. There is a persistent sense of being 'looked at', an awareness that young women – all women – are familiar with. All of this is heightened when there are no or low lights.

My experience is not unique; in fact, it is universal going by the accounts and experiences I hear and read. The report released recently, *She RISES: A Framework for Caring Cities* by SafetiPin called for responsible, inclusive, safe and equitable cities[1] alludes to this experience of every woman. Urban sociologist Saskia Sassen has written about how urban planning renders women invisible, writing that "Urban planning is not gender neutral." [2] In a separate co-written essay, she argues that the use of time and space should be central to gendered planning if our understanding of cities and potential policy reforms are to enhance social progress.[3]

These thoughts were top of mind when I joined the Walking Project (WP) last Sunday. The WP has brought Mumbai's residents together to talk about their observations-experience of walking in different areas of the city. These, peppered with discussions about the right to walk, and standards for footpaths, streets and roads, should ideally lead to awareness and policy reform. The venue was Borivali;

the WP had previously done walks in Bandra and Dadar. This micro-mapping of streets or public places is important for what it nudges people to ‘see’ in areas they are familiar with, where they looked but did not really see. I made a note of my points as we walked.

How the walk was done

The walk was scheduled to begin at 8 am from the road opposite the last north-side exit of Borivali railway station which registered nearly three lakh commuters a day some years ago. That’s an overwhelming number of people using the streets in its vicinity. All streets leading to this important station in Mumbai’s northern suburbs, also a major junction for long-distance trains, are always congested with vehicular traffic, filled with air pollution and high-decibel noise. Pedestrians are forced to jostle for space to make their way in and out of the station.

The road is flanked by informal markets and shopping complexes on both sides. The skywalk to the west is rarely used; pedestrians are on the streets. Footpaths are missing in patches; those that exist are either occupied by shops or too narrow and damaged to walk on. Yet, every nakkad or street corner has hawkers, shoppers, and commuters.

The walk began with the group’s decision to take the barricaded footpath. My experience of navigating the city’s streets as a woman would inevitably inform my walk; I was the only woman in that group. I hesitated to take the footpath; it did not feel right. Walking and mapping it explained why. It had no exit points and could barely accommodate two people walking side-by-side. The railing was so high that it blocked the view of the street. I was compelled to point out how unsafe I would feel if I were walking alone.

We found out later that there was no logic to the design of the railings, and were allegedly a ruse to utilise allocated funds. They also violated the guidelines of the Indian Roads Congress (IRC) which states that railings ought to provide access to road crossings and facilities like bus stops. She RISES also observes that, “Unobstructed, wide, and well-lit pavements enhance women’s safe mobility in public spaces. This becomes more essential if they are accompanying children or the elderly.”

Point 1: Footpaths have to be even, accessible and have exit points; railings along them must offer a view of the street rather than block it.

Skywalk space is no one’s land

The Borivali station skywalk, on the western side, has an exit beside a famous shopping complex, Moksh Plaza. It is planned so that commuters do not have to

negotiate the super-dense congested streets below. Yet, the skywalk has few people. Along its length, garbage is overflowing from bins, tiles are chipped, and rainwater has collected in places. Hawkers, homeless people, and lovers actively use this space. The presence of hawkers makes me feel relatively safer here.

We took the stairs to the skywalk. The tiles on the steps were chipped, cracked, or missing. One of us stumbled on a broken tile. The staircase itself is a safety hazard with openings after each step. It takes 60-odd steps and two turns to access the skywalk, our walk leader and program manager of Walking Project, Vedant Mhatre, measures the width of the walking area on the skywalk. It was approximately three metres.

Point 2: The skywalk is not perceived as an alternative to the street even if the street is congested; its design, poor maintenance, and the presence of drunkards do not make it safe for women.

On the footpath

The walk continued towards another footpath which was occupied by cows. Their swinging tails nearly got us. Mhatre drew our attention to the stamp concrete material used for the footpath which, according to architects, wears off quickly but helps to cut costs and allows for easy sloping needed for wheelchairs. This footpath had a sloped opening. The walk continued till the penultimate exit of the skywalk where the staircase turns and opens exactly behind a bus stop, which is dim even in the day. Taking this exit at night would make me extremely cautious.

We turned into a narrow lane towards Shimpoli Road. The footpath measured 1.8 metres and we learned that the width is determined by usage; since Mumbai is mostly mixed use, the ideal width should be 3 to 3.5 metres – footpaths that are not sufficiently wide can be hazardous. We then measured the height of the footpath from the street. It was about a foot high but, farther ahead, it measured 1.4 feet. We discussed the difficulties older people face when using such uneven footpaths before veering to the subject of wide footpaths and walking-friendliness in Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC). “Yet, why is it so difficult to walk there,” asked one.

Point 3: Footpaths need to follow guidelines for height and width. Their occupation by vendors – legal or illegal – and accessibility to the old and children must be borne in mind by the authorities.

Towards destination

On Shimpoli Road, we head towards the garden where the walk is slated to end. Children outside the Gokhale School march, chanting slogans about the Swacch Bharat Abhiyan, ironically, on relatively unclean streets and footpaths. We walk

towards an intersection where Mhatre points out that the pedestrian signals need to be longer – the official guidelines say a minimum of 20 seconds on a 30-metre road – and shorter distances to minimise accidents. He talks about the need for table-top crossings which allow pedestrians to cross a road at the same level as the footpath. We discussed, again, how roads are planned for traffic and cars, but not for people. We observed that the footpaths on Shimpoli Road have bollard barricades across their width. These can be a safety hazard for the elderly, people on wheelchairs, women with prams, and ironically, people running for safety. Additionally, the footpath is uneven because, every few metres, it is sloped to allow entry to buildings. It is also difficult to ignore wobbly manhole covers and uneven surfaces. Where we finally met a wide footpath, it was claimed by vegetable vendors, a chaiwala, and a food cart. It appeared chaotic but it felt ‘lively’. To me, this was a hurdle-filled walk but it felt safe; I remembered the phrase ‘eyes on the street’ by Jane Jacobs, the doyenne of urban planning.

In their book *Why Loiter?*, authors Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade wrote about an exercise with students of architecture. It asked if the students would walk on a well-fenced street lined with trees or a residential street with activity spilling onto the streets; women students chose the latter despite it being the “nightmare of city planners”. We finally reached the garden, found a spot to sit, and realised that we had not come across green spaces throughout the 2.3 kilometres walk. I avoid walking by green or open spaces if there aren’t people in them but the eye needs the green amidst the grey concrete.

Point 4: Streets and footpaths with activity and informality can make even modern design interventions fall flat if they do not ensure people’s safety and comfort. Authorities should read the micro-mapping.

The WP is in touch with the BMC to communicate these and other outcomes of the various micro-mapping exercises. But the civic body’s perception, they say, is informed by the question “Car se kya accha dikhega? (What will look good from cars?)”

Yet, if the BMC were to take such walking exercises seriously and factor in the outcomes of micro-mapping into its plans for streets, pavements and skywalks, walking would be a far more pleasant, less hazardous, and safe activity for millions. The design of streets and footpaths does matter in how liveable an area – or a city – is. Our walk micro-mapped this one area during daytime; nighttime would add more layers of challenges and anxiety for walkers, perhaps.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the *flâneur* as ‘an idle man-about-town’. Lauren Elkin, author of *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City* correctly points out that as long as there have been cities, women have lived in them but few choose to be a *flâneuse*. She reflects that the word is attributed to a sex worker, a homeless woman or someone ‘whose circumstances forced her onto the street’. Elkin writes,

“Today, when most women you meet in the city have a tale or two of street harassment to tell, the notion of wandering the streets alone seems a fraught proposition.”

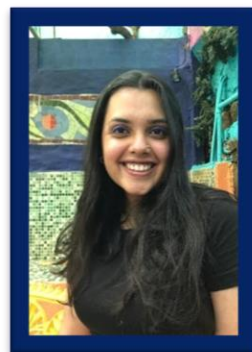
Why does walking on streets matter, especially to women? The study Activity Inequality found that women are less physically active than men, particularly in cities with unpleasant or unsafe walking environments; India ranked 38 out of 46 countries.[5] As planner Abbey Seitz writes, “Compared to men, women typically have a greater diversity of travel needs. They tend to make shorter, more frequent trips dispersed throughout the day, when compared to men” or combine with other women in “trip-chaining”[6]

Unequal access to streets, badly planned and laid footpaths and so on can be both mentally exhausting and physically unsafe for all but hold different meanings for women. Women have rarely been involved in the planning and design of these streets, especially at neighbourhood levels. In the rush of everyday life, we complain about how streets and footpaths fall short and move on, without allowing ourselves a moment to reflect on what exactly we see and how we could intervene. The WP walk offered me these moments – to consciously think about streets and transit spaces, road and footpath design that is not gender-friendly, safety on streets, and what it would take to make them functional, well-lit, spacious and safe transit spaces.

I want to relax while walking, I want to loiter and linger when I choose to, I want to cross a road without fearing for my life. This is, categorically, my right to the city.

Jashvitha Dhagey, a multimedia journalist and researcher, received the Laadli Media Award 2023. With a keen focus on the interplay between people, power, and media, she also manages social media for Question of Cities and reports in-depth on urban dynamics.

Link: <https://questionofcities.org/micro-mapping-streets-and-footpaths-in-a-neighbourhood-as-a-woman/>



2. Gender mainstreaming Mumbai's BEST buses

Smruti Koppikar | The Free Press Journal | Jul 6, 2023

It is, by now, well known that men and women interact with their cities differently

It's a tempting thought. What if local bus rides in Mumbai were made free of cost for women, at least over weekends to begin with, and the facility then extended to the rest of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region? Or certain frequencies of buses were made women-only? The number of women using the BEST buses would definitely show an increase, there would be a corresponding rise in revenues of small businesses they frequent, and eventually there might even be some profits for the BEST undertaking. Every time that I have attempted to speak about the gender aspect of public transport and mobility in our cities, planners and policy makers have come at me with the usual disdain that "women must stop bringing gender into everything". Find the absurdity in that lament.

Many like me argue that it is no longer feasible or conducive to imagine mobility and transport in cities without factoring in gender which, by the way, is not only about women but all genders other than male. It is, by now, well known that men and women interact with their cities differently. Just as the same urban space holds varying meanings for different genders, their use of urban transport systems also follows this principle. Innumerable studies have shown that women have a more complex and varied use of transport systems or modes than men do in any city. While men largely show a linear pattern of commute from home to work and back home with the occasional leisure routes thrown in, the majority of women's commutes tend to be non-linear because they combine several tasks in one trip – go to work and return but also drop children to school or pick them up, shop for the home, organise elderly care and so on in a day.

This is known but it is not completely acknowledged or responded to in urban development plans or city planning. What we then get are transport systems that favour the pre-dominant male use – roads designed to carry private cars point to point, metro lines that largely connect residential and commercial zones, bus routes which do not meander along the streets which is where women's care work is likely to be. We, as a nation, are still a far way off from bringing gender to bear into the design of our cities; what we do have now, in some cities, is the tweaking of existing systems to suit the needs of women and other genders. Even this brings a backlash as we saw in Karnataka.

In about a month since chief minister Siddaramaiah introduced the Shakti scheme for women in the state, making all travel for women free in buses in cities and across Karnataka, there has been a massive increase in the number of women using buses – which was expected – followed by an increase in revenue for the city bus network in Bengaluru which was a surprise for many. To some women, the free bus rides

meant savings in their meagre incomes giving them a wee bit of relief in juggling their monthly household budgets; to others, it meant not having to depend on the men in their lives to visit leisure venues or temples. Reports have pointed to an increase of women in temples, donations made to temples, and frequenting small businesses around temple areas.

In New Delhi, chief minister Arvind Kejriwal announced free metro rides for women in 2019. This brought more women to the metro network, had more of them see and be in parts of their city they had never been to, and generally opened up possibilities for education and work. Even before the metro rides were made free, the fact that the metro network enabled greater mobility – even a different kind of mobility – for women was studied. On the basis of her ethnographic work, writer Rashmi Sadana found that this greater mobility gave women the opportunity to change their relationship with the city itself.

Women's varied and complex – often circular – use of public transport in cities is certainly not unique to India. The pattern is seen almost everywhere around the world, as studies have shown. This is an inalienable part of what is now popularly called gender mainstreaming in cities – deliberately thinking how to make amenities more gender-friendly and, in fact, gender-just. In several cities, this has meant making access to public transport easier, making transport systems safer, building in the varied and complex use into transport design, and so on.

The foremost measure which cities did – including some Indian cities – was to introduce women-only compartments in metros and trains making it less intimidating and safer for women and other genders to commute. Beyond this, international cities offer other examples – Toronto started a “request stop system” in its bus network to enable women to get off closer to their homes especially late at night, Berlin broke down the distinction between home and office – residential and commercial – and made more mixed-use areas which suit women more, Argentina's Rosario city turned its public squares dominated by drug users and petty criminals into public squares with amenities which would allow women to bring their children and elderly there, and Vienna introduced the Frauen-Werk-Stadt which was to create safe areas around apartment blocks with kindergartens and clinics all located close to public transport stops.

Mumbai's suburban trains have had the ‘ladies compartment’ for decades, this was extended to more than one compartment when the rakes were increased from nine to 12, and later to 15. For millions of women and other genders, railway commute without the ‘ladies compartment’ is unthinkable. BEST buses, of course, have seats ‘reserved’ for women and the system allows women, especially the aged or with children, to use the front doorway to board buses avoiding the crush at the rear doorway. This is necessary but not sufficient. When it cut back on routes in 2018-19 to minimise its high losses, BEST management cancelled buses on inner routes in areas or those without a large ridership. Many of these adversely affected women, going by the anecdotal evidence available then.

What is needed are measures that move beyond the reserved compartments and seats – better pavements which enable safe and pleasant walking because women walk more than men do as they have local errands to run and work closer to their homes, well-designed and properly-lit bus stops with adequate overhead cover and signages considering that BEST buses run late into the night, routes which connect residential zones to the city's leisure areas which will encourage more women to step out for something other than work, circular routes within an area which fulfil their need of moving short distances for varied work close to their homes, and so on.

BEST and transport policy makers, mostly men, can take the easy route out that this can be addressed when other issues of the undertaking such as its financial stability have been sorted out, or they can get women representatives on board right away to begin the process of gender mainstreaming the bus service which remains the most dependable and accessible transport system for millions of women in the city. Planning and policy decisions do affect women.



Smruti, a journalist and urban chronicler for 35 years, co-founded "Question of Cities" in 2022, focusing on urban planning and gender. She also writes "MumbaiNaama" and teaches on journalism and development.

Link-

<https://www.freepressjournal.in/analysis/gender-mainstreaming-mumbais-best-buses>

3. "What An Evening At Purdah Bagh In Old Delhi Says About Women And Leisure"

Ankita Dhar Karmakar | BehanBox | Jul 6, 2023

Strap: Are segregated parks for women the solution to a city's heavily male-dominated leisure spaces? Even as urban planners and feminists argue, we take a walk in Old Delhi's historical zenana parks to find some answers

New Delhi: "Jahan chaar ladies ek sath hoti hain, toh samajh jao ki woh kya baatein karti hain (when four women come together, you know where the conversation will head)," says Sushila, as she and a group of seven women in their 60s and 70s burst into guffaws. "Aadmiyon ki buraiyan (criticise men)," someone responds, and the group is in splits once again.

Tucked into the walled city of Old Delhi, in the midst of the busy bylanes of Daryaganj, is a rare space – a park that is only for women, the Purdah Bagh. This is where we find a bunch of best friends who have been visiting this park for the last three decades, never missing a day.

"Buri aadat hai yeh hamari ab toh. Aaye bina reh nahi sakte (it has become a bad habit, one we can't resist). We enjoy this space because men cannot come here, and because we can talk about everything. We sometimes phone in the kulfiwala and have a field day," says Geeta Mehra, a resident of Daryaganj in her late 70s.

For most women like Mehra, leisure is a 'buri aadat', a guilty pleasure. Data show why: an average Indian woman spends 243 minutes on unpaid domestic work or caregiving, and a man 25 minutes. Leisure is a rare privilege for many women, as Surbhi Yadav has documented.

Here, behind the tall walls and hedges that veil them from the masculine spaces outside, you will find women and young girls unwinding, their burqas flung aside, pallus and dupattas carelessly draped. You may also spot a young woman walking in search of privacy and make a phone call.

Gender segregated enclaves are the subject of multiple debates. Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade in their book, *Why Loiter*, argue that while such spaces reinforce gender differences, the many women they interviewed said that their families would not allow them to relax anywhere else.

Creating limited spaces for women or dictating a curfew to ensure their "safety" does not resolve the issue of gender violence in public places either, it has been argued. Without a systemic approach, segregation will only partially address the issues of women's access, mobility and agency, as this Behanbox article had argued.

However, women-only parks are becoming an increasingly popular idea with urban authorities: Hyderabad, Bhopal and Mumbai also have exclusive parks for women.

Delhi ambitiously plans to build 250 odd women-only parks, or ‘Pink Parks’. One has already been piloted in Mata Sundari Road, near the Ramlila Maidan.

‘A Place To Loiter’

The Purdah Bagh is one of old Delhi’s three historic zenana/mahila (women-only) parks built in the mid-17th century. Apart from the one at Darya Ganj, there is another in Chandni Chowk, and one more near Jama Masjid. Men’s entry is strictly restricted and only children up to five years of age are allowed in.

When we walk into the Purdah Bagh at Chandni Chowk, three women and children are having a picnic at the park that is monsoon-lush with trees and grass and calm despite the noise outside. There are bottles of cold drinks, crisps scattered around.

Rehana (36), Aiman (28) and Heena (40)* live in Daryaganj’s cramped lanes. Rehana and Aiman are daughters-in-law of the same family, while Heena is their sister-in-law who lives in Chandni Chowk. The two of them often make plans to meet Heena outside the house. “We come here with our children because they love playing here. It also gives us some time off from sitting in our houses where there isn’t enough space for everyone. The weather now is so hot so we take off our burqas and sit here,” says Rehana.

There is a sense of abandon in the women’s enjoyment of the place. Their children spiritedly run from one slide to another and every once in a while the women burst into uproarious laughter. After this, the three of them plan to go to Jama Masjid. “We will just roam around and maybe get something to eat,” says Aiman.

Heritage structures in India show up several gender-partitioned public spaces. Zenanas and other kinds of enclosures were a common feature in the palaces of Rajput kings and Mughal emperors. The Jhanki Mahal in the 15th century Mehrangarh fort in Jodhpur is one example. The jharokhas (latticed windows) of the women’s quarters at the Hawa Mahal in Jaipur are another example as are the royal harems of the Mughals. In her book, *Royal Mughal Ladies And Their Contributions*, historian Soma Mukherjee writes of the Meena Bazar in Old Delhi, which used to be a market run by women and for women sometime between the 16th and 19th century.

Jahanara’s Pleasure Park

In South Asian societies, ‘purdah’ has several connotations. While it literally means a curtain or a veil, it also refers to the physical segregation of genders and the cultural and religious practice of women covering their face or/and body.

In the 17th century, Mughal princess Jahanara Begum, built several walled women-only gardens in Old Delhi. Amita Sinha and Ayla Khan in their book *Gender And The Indian City* document how Jahanara and her sister Roshanara led the building of many gardens, market squares and serais (rest houses) in Shahjahanabad (now Old Delhi), their father Shah Jahan’s newly built capital.

One such garden was the “Begum ka Bagh” built by Jahanara in 1650 CE for the exclusive use of royal women. Legend has it that a curious Persian poet in the court had disguised himself in a burqa and entered the park but gave himself away when he recited a poem on Jahanara’s charms. She is believed to have graciously handed him a purse filled with coins, and then asked him to make a run for it. City historians say the three zenana parks were likely a part of this expansive bagh.

‘We Exercise, Sometimes Break Into A Dance’

In Daryaganj’s Hindi Park, there is a women-only section, marked by only a tall hedge that doubles up as ‘purdah’. But no one is complaining. “We exercise, do yoga here. Saree hamari oonchi bhi ho jaye, toh parwah nahi. Koi nahi hain dekhne ko. Sometimes in the middle of our exercise, we break into a dance,” says Bimla (72).

Most of the older women who come here are neighbours or live in neighbouring areas. “This is also a space where we discuss our health issues and give tips to each other. We share our joys too and sorrows and when we talk then the pain doesn’t seem that insurmountable,” says Bala Tomar (65).

The park, the women say, gives them a space to come together to talk about things ranging from Prime Minister Modi’s political style to the Asia Cup. “Hanging out here regenerates us. We sometimes sit here and plan outings, to cinema, tambola games and golgappa sessions. We had recently gone to see the G20 decorations at the Shaheedi Park,” says Sushila (70). Fiza Haider is a researcher and women’s rights activist who has studied the use of public spaces by Muslim women. She recalls that the first time she went to the Purdah Bagh in Jama Masjid, she felt suffocated by its tall walls. “Jahanara’s intention behind these baghs were to strike a balance between women’s right to go out while being still ensconced within the tradition of purdah,” she says. “But after entering and seeing women inside, I felt much more at ease. It felt like a space where women can feel freer and build sisterhoods.”

She recalls being told by Muslim women in Delhi and Lucknow, her home city, that they sensed “hyper surveillance” when they entered a public space and they would wear the burqa to deal with this. “But I have also heard women say that unlike other parts of Delhi they feel free to go out at any hour in Old Delhi because yeh toh apna heen ilaka hain (this is our turf),” says Haider.

Space For Solidarity, Celebration

Writer and filmmaker Sohail Hashmi says that during the pre-Independence struggle his grandmother, Begum Hashmi, would hold political meetings inside the Jama Masjid park. A lot of women’s organisations, such as the Mahila Congress would also assemble there, he adds. Begum Hashmi went on to be the founding president of the Delhi committee of National Federation of Indian Women, the women’s wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

“One time, my grandfather, also part of the CPI, came home and found the house locked. He realised that my grandmother must be addressing a meeting in the park. He went to the park but wasn’t allowed inside. So he told the two Pathan woman guards on duty to inform his wife that he needed the key,” Hashmi recounts.

The park was also the location of neighbourhood celebrations of Basant Panchami, Sawan ka Tyohaar, and the Teej Mela, when women across communities congregated, says Hashmi.

While growing up, Rehana also remembers the Teej Mela being celebrated in the Purdah Bagh of Jama Masjid. “In the 70s, things looked different in the park. It used to be a more vibrant space – chaatwalas and chooriwalas would set up their stalls inside, and we would celebrate different festivals, like Teej. None of that happens any longer.”

Even today, public parks are a safe space to collectivise. For instance, domestic workers unions meet in parks to avoid eviction from their homes. Delhi University’s women students have used the Central Secretariat lawns to strategise their protest against hostel curfews. And domestic workers in Neb Sarai’s Freedom Fighter Enclave meet every month at the neighbourhood Chhatrawali Park to pool in money and help each other out.

‘Bring Women Into Urban Planning’

Despite stated plans to revive the Chandni Chowk park, parts of it are overgrown and neglected and the lighting is not reliable at all times. And the women say this makes them anxious. Puran Singh, the park’s caretaker, says the footfall has fallen considerably over the past decade. There was earlier a silai (tailoring) centre in the area and its trainees would drop in at the park but once that shut down, the lawns saw fewer visitors.

Aiman, Rehana and Fatima too don’t come to the park regularly, but sometimes when they are in the area. “It doesn’t have a lot of facilities. We wish there was provision for bathrooms and drinking water here. That would help a lot,” says Rehana.

Researchers Sinha and Khan also interviewed several women visitors to these parks in 2009-10. Most complained that the streets outside were crowded and the men stared at them till they entered the park. They also reported that the men living in the tall buildings around the parks would watch them. Because the parks are large and have no lighting, women said they felt unsafe after dusk. Even during the day if there were no other women around, they would feel uncomfortable, they said.

Among planners and architects, there is a lack of vision when it comes to gender-inclusive spaces, says Saleha Sapra, co-founder of the urban collective City Sabha. This is why when women prepare the maps of a city, it looks a lot different. “That’s what we found when we did a map-making practice with women street vendors of Raghubir Nagar. Their maps accounted for things that planners don’t look at –

neglected streets, neglected parks, well-maintained streets – information that is crucial for women’s mobility in public spaces,” says Sapra.

Aiman, Rehana and Fatima say they are happier going to the newly revamped Chandni Chowk for a late-night stroll. “Here the park closes at 7pm, so we can’t come here. But in Chandni Chowk, there is so much vibrancy, so many stalls, and many people around. We feel safer,” says Rehana.

Should there be more parks only for women? “It’s a good thing to have a space of our own. But it doesn’t change a lot of things,” says Rehana.

News reports tell us that Delhi’s planned Pink Parks will have toilets, CCTV cameras, selfie points, graffiti and gym facilities for women. The older women in Daryaganj’s park seem excited by the prospect. “It’s a good initiative. And selfie points are a nice addition,” says Bala Tomar.

Ankita Dhar Karmakar is a multimedia journalist at BehanBox, focusing on gender, labour, policy, and education. She led the "My First Vote" project, documenting the experiences of 60 women and queer first-time voters during India’s 2024 General Elections.

Link-

<https://behanbox.com/2023/09/22/what-an-evening-at-purdah-bagh-in-old-delhi-says-about-women-and-leisure/>



Navigating identity, ageing, and body images by the queer community

Media coverage of LGBTQI+ issues has evolved significantly over the years, making important strides in representation and awareness. However, despite this progress, notable gaps remain in the reporting, which prevents a full understanding of the diversity and complexity within the LGBTQI+ community. These gaps not only distort public perception but also fail to address the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups within the spectrum. To foster a more accurate and inclusive portrayal, it is essential to highlight the underrepresented narratives and experiences within this community.

One of the most significant shortcomings in media reporting is the uneven focus on specific identities within the LGBTQI+ spectrum. Gay and lesbian issues, especially those centered around urban settings, often dominate the conversation. This selective coverage marginalizes other identities, particularly transgender, intersex, and non-binary individuals, whose concerns receive far less attention. As a result, a narrow view of the LGBTQI+ experience is perpetuated, reinforcing societal biases and further marginalizing communities that already face heightened discrimination.

To address this imbalance, the media must make a conscious effort to tell the stories of all LGBTQI+ individuals. Transgender, non-binary, and intersex people experience unique challenges related to healthcare, social acceptance, and legal recognition, all of which deserve comprehensive coverage.

LGBTQI+ individuals often navigate multiple layers of marginalization, with many facing compounded discrimination due to their intersecting identities. The three articles in this section delve into these complexities, examining the intersections of aging, body image, and conversion therapy. Vijayta Lawani's report offers a profound analysis of aging within the LGBTQI+ community. She raises crucial questions: How does identifying as non-binary or non-heteronormative person impact one's life in old age? Will they have access to social and economic security, as well as senior healthcare and rehabilitation services?

Kinshuk Gupta explores the pervasive issue of body image and the pressures LGBTQI+ individuals face when seeking romantic relationships, particularly in the context of dating platforms. The article provides a thought-provoking analysis of how societal expectations around desirability affect members of the community, even as they navigate a world that perceives them as different.

In another article, Sukanya Shaji addresses the alarming prevalence of conversion therapy and its devastating impact on the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of LGBTQI+ individuals forced to undergo such treatments. By examining these personal stories, Yogesh highlights the persistent harm caused by practices that attempt to erase LGBTQI+ identities rather than celebrate them.

There is a felt need for ongoing, in-depth reporting that fosters greater public understanding, empathy, and dialogue about the daily lives of LGBTQI+ individuals. Addressing the full range of their experience will lead to a more inclusive and accurate portrayal.

4. Long Shadows in the Sunset

Vijayta Lalwani | Queerbeat.org | Jan 30, 2023

With limited support structures, India's LGBTQIA+ community has to work harder to plan for ageing and infirmity.

Maya Sharma, a gender rights activist and writer, visited many old age homes in Gujarat and New Delhi but did not find one that suits her needs. Some were not clean enough, others were too expensive or expected residents to follow religious rituals. But the biggest hurdle was that none of them felt safe enough to let her live her life as a queer person.

Now 71 years old, Maya has been thinking of moving to an old age home for more than five years. Since 2020, her search has become more urgent, hastened by some experiences during the pandemic—when she and her partner shivered with high fevers due to COVID-19, when she slipped in her bathroom and bruised her foot, and when she could not recall the names of close friends she met after a of couple years. The lapse of memory was “embarrassing,” Maya told me.

Although Maya currently lives with her partner in Vadodara, she anticipates spending later years of her life by herself in an old age home. For her this would be a place that can care for her, where she can read and write quietly, and where she does not have to hide her queer identity. So far, this idyll exists only in her imagination. She has found no place which would “validate us,” she told me.

Maya's siblings are scattered across the world, and her son from an earlier marriage lives in Delhi. Maya knows that these family members will take care of her but she is reluctant to be a burden on them. Moreover, she does not feel comfortable returning to heterosexual systems of living. She thinks that these systems may still not accept her and might be too rigid for her to be and express herself. “I chose a different path earlier on,” she said. In the 90s, Maya walked out of her marriage with a cis-man in Rajasthan. She described the marriage as “cloistered and closeted.” She turned to the women's movement to find her community and a little later fell in love with a woman.

Queer persons who leave or are forced out of their parental homes at an early age, or walk out of non-queer marriages, leave behind the conventional support systems. Their lives can become more uncertain when it comes to forming relationships and finding communities that will last into sunset years.

Maya said that just being queer could sometimes limit their support options as they plan their future. “Jo heterosexual log hain, unke liye aisa deewar hai jo woh pakad ke khade ho sakte hai. Bahut thos hai, bahut nazar mein aati hai. Humare jo saharein hain woh thos nahi hai.” (Heterosexual people have some sort of a visible support system around them, like a solid wall, which they can hold on to. Our support systems are not as sturdy.)

I spoke to many queer people, most of whom were 50 years old or above. Many of them said that anxiety about personal and institutional support structures, failing health, shrinking livelihood options, imminent loneliness and the feeling of being invisible in India's LGBTQIA+ community, largely perceived as young, were some of their common concerns about aging in the country.

In 2020, a study was published on the mental health of middle-aged and older queer men in India. The study is an outlier in academic research. Social science research about queer people in India is rare and older queer persons remain underrepresented in this small universe. The study said that more than 60% of the participants reported feeling lonely. "A feeling of alienation, particularly from the heterosexual universe, was very common," the study stated.

That feeling of alienation can persist in old age homes as well. These institutions tend to follow culturally normative societal standards, said Raj Mariwala, director of Mariwala Health Initiative in Mumbai, which provides accessible mental health services to marginalised communities including LGBTQIA+ persons. This default mode of operation forces some queer persons to grapple with questions that heterosexual people would not have to ask themselves. Can they access these homes based on their gender? Can they live there with their partner? Can they expect privacy? Can trans women access cis-women's shelters? "A shelter home can itself be a hostile space," Raj said.

Sometimes this hostility takes the form of probing questions. In 2015, the organisation LABIA—short for Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action, a collective of lesbians, bisexuals and trans men—published an anthology of stories called Labia Presents: Bees Saal Baad: Sangam Se Subversion Tak. One chapter narrates an uncomfortable interaction between two queer women in their 70s and the residents of an old age home they were considering moving into. The women wrote, "While screening us, they are most interested in how we are related to each other. So starts a barrage of questions.

Are you sisters? No.

So then you must be cousins? No.

Distant relatives? No, we are not related in any way, we are friends.

For how long have you been friends? Since a long time, we have been working together.

You must be living with your families? No.

Do you live close to each other? Exasperated, our curt reply comes — We live together — abruptly putting an end to the conversation."

That single incident, they said, brought up all their anxieties related to the life they had chosen to live.

I spoke to a queer couple who moved into a senior citizen home run by a religious charity on the outskirts of Pune in 2016. They were in their mid-70s. One of the women, who asked to stay anonymous because the couple is not out to their families, told me that although they feel safe in the home, they are not prepared to reveal their sexuality. Residents and staff at the shelter home do not seem open to accepting queer couples, she said.

After joining the women's movement, Maya became associated with Vikalp Women's Group, a non-profit organisation that works in western India advocating for the rights of marginalised women and sexual minorities. She became its programme director, conducting workshops in rural Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

"You know I love my work," she energetically declared once while on a phone call with me. She would sometimes be in the middle of her workshops when I called her. I would see her on Zoom, sitting on the threshold of her house or her office. As she spoke to me, she would sometimes look away from the screen to smile at or speak to her younger colleagues, mostly trans men. She would flick her cropped white hair and laugh at how carefree they were and then would return to our conversation. On my computer screen, her eyes would sometimes appear slightly cloudy behind the iridescence of her glasses. Her voice would choke intermittently due to chronic asthma.

"I am scared," she said. "What if I get bedridden? Will I be taken care of?"

Aging With Disability

Rajib Chocroborty spoke in a hushed voice as I sat in his living room with its walls in shades of pistachio green, strawberry pink and butterscotch yellow. Rajib lived with his mother in Baruipur, a semi-urban locality on the outskirts of southern Kolkata. He did not want her to catch her 53-year-old gay son discussing his sexuality with me, an outsider.

As we spoke, he would sometimes push his hands down, hoist himself up from the plastic chair he was sitting in, and squeeze his eyes shut as he sat back down. His legs are weak due to an accident in 2004. He uses crutches or the support of walls to walk around the house.

Rajib's siblings live far away, in other states. His mother, Uma Chakraborty, who is 77 years old, has been looking after him for 18 years since the accident. Uma prepares the bathroom for him every morning, cooks all his meals, and assembles an ice compress to soothe the ulcers on his legs. She does all this though age has hunched her back and slowed her movements. By the end of the day, her body is exhausted but her mind stays occupied with thoughts about Rajib's future.

"My worries are like a mountain," Uma said in barely audible Bengali. Rajib, who translated for me, chuckled but Uma continued. "Who will look after him? Who will take care of him?". Although Rajib laughed as Uma spoke, the questions she raised sometimes haunt him, more so as he gets older. For now, Rajib's biggest immediate

concern is his and Uma's growing dependency on others. He plans to hire a caregiver soon.

Rajib has never had a romantic partner. This is partly because of his disability, which limits his movement and social interactions. Living in Baruipur, away from the city life, further restricts his access to the queer community. Some of that, over the years, has lessened Rajib's desire for intimacy and companionship. He has started to wonder whether he identifies as an asexual person. "Everyone has to accept their circumstances," he told me. "There is a chance that if I did not have this accident I would have had a different life. I lost that chance. I know it's not going to be easy, but I don't feel the urge to be with someone now. I am satisfied with what I have."

Rajib spends part of his day as a teacher in a nearby school where he hides his sexuality, and ignores his colleagues' homophobic jokes. He fears being outed and consequently losing his job. He spends his days after work at home writing poems about being closeted, falling in and out of love, and coming to terms with his androgynous voice. Sometimes he watches gay flicks and his recent favourite was Heartstopper –a popular queer drama on Netflix. "It's nice to see the young free love," he said.

Rajib's few queer friends live in Kolkata city and he meets them only once or twice a year. He is part of a small queer group on WhatsApp where members share videos or news about the LGBTQIA+ community, wish each other birthdays, and sometimes "crack queer jokes that straight people won't appreciate", he said, laughing.

Occasionally, he interacts with a bigger queer group on Facebook. But, he does not have a close queer friend whom he can just call to talk. He said that he does not mind his solitary life but what would really make it happier was if he could have "dependable and trustworthy" queer persons to help him with physical tasks and share some of his day and his life. Rajib feels that there is little conversation about elderly queer people, especially those who are also disabled, outside and within the community.

Dhrubajyoti Bhattacharjee, a 46-year-old gay man living in Delhi, echoed this feeling. He has limited vision because of glaucoma.

"We don't know what challenges disabled queer people who are aging face. How do they face them? What do they need?" he said. "Our needs might be very specific but really nobody even bothers to ask."

Besides failing health and loneliness, Dhrubajyoti worried that queer people his age or older may lack financial security. His partner mostly depends on him for finances. They have been to multiple banks to open a joint account as partners so they can both access their combined savings. But they were told that the proof of family relationship is a prerequisite. "It's all bullshit that certain banks accept LGBT

partnerships. They don't," Dhruvajyoti said. "I worry how my partner will survive if something happens to me."

He remarked that unless institutional support structures were created for LGBTQIA+ persons, especially those older and vulnerable, they would continue to live with a sense of insecurity.

A Graying Minority

Fifty-year-old Sanjana Guru, a transgender woman and a resident of Pune, panhandles to make a living. She used to go out every day to beg at shops and would occasionally dance at weddings. In the last three years, she has had to reduce the number of times she goes out from every day to twice a week, hampered by severe pain in her hips. She has not danced at a wedding in five years.

Sanjana lives alone in a small room with minimal furniture in a Pune slum. When we met on a sunny afternoon in September last year, she walked slowly and with a limp. Her hip joints have degenerated, partly as a side-effect of the drugs she takes to manage her HIV infection.

Sanjana gets a regular income of Rs 3,000 every month for social work she does in her neighbourhood. This covers only part of her expenses—groceries, a gas cylinder and medicines. She has been putting off the hip replacement surgery she urgently needs. The surgery costs about Rs 1.75 lakh and would keep her in bed for about three months. She does not have that kind of money or time off her feet. Accessing affordable healthcare is a challenge for many trans persons, especially as their income sources dwindle with age. "I have just been depressed for the last three years thinking about this," she said. "I need to walk and dance to earn."

Sanjana's birth family have not been in contact with her since she left home in Pune at the age of 23. She has had two relationships with cis-men but neither lasted. Sanjana has some trans friends in the slum who care for her but nobody close enough who could stay many nights by her side in a hospital. They are also hustling every day to earn their livelihood. As we were talking, her neighbour, an elderly woman, walked in. She asked Sanjana about her health, and they started chatting about their and others' lives in the slum.

The pandemic made many transgender persons, especially older ones like Sanjana, even more vulnerable as curbs and lockdowns restricted their modes of income. A study published in 2021 stated that older transgender people were a "graying minority" at increased social and emotional risks, many of them facing the "dual burden" of age and gender.

I met a 55-year-old civil engineer in Hyderabad for whom growing old meant having less time to come out. She went by a male name with her family, including her wife and parents, and with the world at large. But with her trans friends whom she trusted with her gender identity as a trans woman, she adopted the name Julie Jennifer. She has given herself two more years to leave her marriage, after which she wants to

spend more time with her trans friends. “I need to satisfy my womanhood for a few years at

least,” Julie told me.

At home Julie hides in masculine clothes. “It is suffocating but I cannot ditch someone I have married,” Julie said. “That is the only thing holding me back so far. Otherwise I would have left a long time ago.” Julie hopes that her parents and family accept her as she is. She wants to have a relationship with her parents and spend time with them for as long as possible. While she yearns to set herself free, she wonders who will be with her as she gets older.

Julie recently bought an apartment in her wife’s name to insure her wife’s future. But she still has to figure out where to go when she moves out and later, when she is too old to live alone. She is not aware of any institutional support for older trans persons. The government’s shelter homes or Garima Greh for trans persons exclude those who beg, do sex work or are above 60 years, ruling out the most elderly and vulnerable.

A Different Life Span

Gender and sexuality researchers increasingly say that LGBTQIA+ persons experience aging somewhat differently compared to cis-heterosexual people. The lives of LGBTQIA+ people do not follow neatly charted graphs with conventional milestones of getting married, having children or becoming grandparents, said Chayanika Shah, a 64-year-old queer woman in Mumbai who studies and teaches gender and sexuality. “Our life spans are so different.”

Svati Shah, associate professor of gender and sexuality studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, said that this different life span impacts the support systems, responsibilities and concerns of queer people and even the age to which they get to live. “How many trans people do we know who did not even survive into their 30s because they took their lives?” asked Svati. Up to 31% of transgender persons in India die by suicide, and 50% attempt it at least once before their twentieth birthday, according to a 2016 study. The study noted that bullying, rejection by family and friends, violence, harassment by intimate partners, and social discrimination are some of the reasons, which could drive suicidal behaviour among transgender persons.

Within the LGBTQIA+ community, the experience of this life span including support systems changes based on peoples’ caste, class and gender. “What happens to those of us who chose to be single, whose disability is non-negotiable, or those whose body never got nourishment?” asked Vqueeram Aditya Sahai, a gender non-conforming writer and researcher at Ambedkar University, Delhi.

A common lament in the queer circles, Chayanika said, was that since there were so few older queer women, their lives and concerns have remained less understood and unaddressed. Most researchers I interviewed agreed that while there was a broad

consensus that the LGBTQIA+ people experience old age somewhat differently, both in relation to each other and to cis-heterosexual people, society and academia lacked a deep understanding of what that actually meant.

Building Support

In the absence of traditional family support systems, some older LGBTQIA+ persons rely on chosen families, which may or may not include queer people. “My queer friends are my default support instead of family members, especially when I get sick and need urgent help,” said Pawan Dhall, a 54-year-old gay man who lives with his 90-year-old mother in Kolkata. Dhall is the founding trustee of Varta Trust, a non-profit organisation promoting dialogue on gender and sexuality in Kolkata.

During the pandemic, when Dhall fell sick, he called queer friends who found hospitals, arranged beds and oxygen cylinders, and got medicines. “It was really heartening,” he said. He believes that queers are most likely to show up for older queers. “They are also more likely to understand and empathise with our problems such as loss of a partner or loneliness, and relate to our stories,” he said. That is why Dhall is currently raising resources to build community support groups in Kolkata to care for the older members.

In 2017, gay activist Ashok Row Kavi and oncologist Prasad Dandekar started a support group called Seenagers. It pairs young gay volunteers with older gay men who need help with activities like doctor’s appointments or shopping or to accompany them to do fun things like watching a movie. The group has more than 100 members.

While LGBTQIA+ persons are setting up their own support systems, Maya also wants the government to step up. “I am a taxpayer. I have contributed my services. The state should take responsibility for me,” she said. At the moment, even this reasonable demand seems to be wishful. The queer-friendly old age home that Maya is in constant search of, she said, is “an imagination, a romantic idea.”

Vijayta Lalwani is an independent journalist dedicated to exploring Indian democracy through her reporting on political violence, public health, and labour rights. Her accolades include nominations for the Mumbai Press Club’s Red Ink Awards and a Pulitzer Centre grant.

Link

<https://www.queerbeat.org/stories/long-shadows-in-the-sunset>



5. ‘Conversion therapy’ still continues in India, despite a ban

Sukanya Shaji | *The News Minute* | Mar 1, 2023

Blurb: The National Medical Commission (NMC) banned ‘conversion therapy’ and categorised it as professional misconduct in 2022. But the lack of legislation is a major hurdle in criminalising conversion therapy.



Abigail was only fourteen years old when her family first took her to a hospital to ‘cure’ her, sometime in 2014. At a psychiatric and rehabilitation hospital in Kerala’s Tirur, Abigail was administered medication and electric shock in the name of Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE), or what is widely known as ‘conversion therapy’ or ‘reparative therapy’ by certified doctors and medical staff. “They did not tell me why I was being treated so harshly. They thought they could beat the femininity out of me,” says Abigail, a transgender woman. More recently, in February 2022, she was again subjected to ‘reparative interventions’ at a hospital in Kerala’s Kunnampulam. “I sent an SOS message and was able to get out because of some community intervention,” says Abigail, who now lives in Bengaluru, away from her family.

In September 2022, the National Medical Commission (NMC) banned ‘conversion therapy’ and categorised it as professional misconduct. The NMC also wrote to all State Medical Councils, empowering them to take disciplinary action against medical professionals who conduct this kind of therapy. But conversion therapy continues in many hospitals, under the smokescreen of various established medical practices. In an interview given to TNM in July 2023, Sumayya Sherin and Afeefa, a lesbian couple from Kerala, spoke about the pseudoscientific treatment methods of conversion therapy that claim to ‘cure’ homosexuality, that Afeefa was subjected to at a prominent hospital in Kozhikode.

The legal move to ban practices that interfere with a person's gender and sexuality was set in motion in 2021 by Justice Anand Venkatesh of the Madras High Court in *S Sushma v.*

Commissioner of Police, where a lesbian approached the court seeking protection from their families. The court declared that any attempts to medically 'cure' or change the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBTQIA+ persons should be prohibited. The court also directed action against professionals involved in any form of conversion therapy, including the withdrawal of their medical licence.

Despite these interventions, conversion therapy continues - not just through manipulative medical methods but also spiritual, psychological, religious, and other pseudo-scientific elements. What is enabling this is the lack of a comprehensive legal definition for conversion therapy leaving it only as a ground for disciplinary action against doctors, and not the basis for criminalisation of the practice. The loopholes for perpetrators and facilitators to get away with these illegal practices are many.

Defining 'conversion therapy' to ensure criminalisation

In 2020, 20-year-old Anjana Harish died by suicide in Kerala following alleged conversion therapy that her family forced her into, and the case was widely reported in the media. Soon after, Queerala, an organisation working to help Malayali queer communities, along with a trans man who is also a victim of conversion therapy, approached the Kerala High Court, asking the court to define conversion therapy and form guidelines to be followed by medical practitioners in the state.

Rajashree Raju of Queerala tells TNM that though the NMC regulations may have created a fear of consequence among doctors, the lack of a definition is a major hurdle in criminalising conversion therapy. "It has been over two years since we filed the petition before the Kerala HC. We decided to do that because post Anjana's demise we received many distress calls from queer individuals asking for support. But we were unable to help many of them and felt we should move legally so that there will be more scope for us to intervene in such cases," she says.

Another conspicuous detail to note here is that doctors and hospitals that continue to do conversion therapy do not call it by the name anymore. For example, in Afeefa's case, she wasn't told by the doctor or the hospital that they were trying to 'convert' her. When she sought police intervention and asked to see her partner Sumayya, they told her that she seemed anaemic and injected her, after which she says she was sedated for two days. She only recalls a counsellor telling her that homosexuality is a disorder in a conversation.

In Abigail's case, she recalls being injected with what she thinks are testosterone shots, because she noticed increased body hair growth after. These kinds of hormone treatments per se are not illegal and hence, when LGBTQIA+ individuals are administered these with the intent to convert them, most often doctors get away with

it because as such there is no illegality unless proven otherwise. Even if the survivor manages to prove it, there is no specific law that applies to try such doctors. The maximum that may happen is the doctor is warned, especially if it is a hospital that is aware of such therapy being provided.

Rajashree says this is why conversion therapy must be separately legislated upon. “There is no legal order or legal document that really defines what conversion therapy entails, and we feel that if a law bans it, the order would define it, say what is punishable and how to pin criminality on those who practise it. Without that, doctors can only be subjected to disciplinary action or brought to court for extortion, kidnapping, assault, or whatever other charges apply,” she explains.

Murugan Muhilann, a survivor of this kind of therapy, says his family had taken him to a doctor who kept extorting money from them under the promise of ‘converting’ Murugan. “We went to a doctor’s clinic in Chennai’s T Nagar and at first, he didn’t say anything, just ordered some tests, including an abdomen Doppler test to check my penile function. He never told me what the test was. They gave me a pill to swallow and I agreed because I was under immense pressure from my family. It was humiliating and extremely conflicting for me. My mother is not so educated and she trusted what the doctor said. He kept telling her he could ‘cure’ me and kept telling me “it’s okay”, but insisted I do some sessions with him. This was very expensive. And later we realised he was extorting me and my family, ” he says.

Murugan also says that his mother had to pledge her gold to pay the doctor and that it cost her most of her savings simply because the doctor kept reassuring her that he could stop Murugan from being gay. “When doctors give such promises, desperate families believe them. I was also only 22 years old and to me, everything was confusing,” he adds.

Cases like Murugan’s where doctors loot families in the process of offering this pseudoscientific ‘remedy’, can only be tried before a court for extortion and not exactly for the attempt to convert one’s sexual orientation because of the lack of a legal definition, Rajashree explains.

Chennai-based advocate G Sathiya also points out that even in the Madras HC judgement by Justice Anand, conversion therapy is defined through references from foreign medical journals. “The NMC circular to State Medical Councils banning conversion therapy is the document that comes closest to saying what kinds of acts or methods can constitute conversion therapy in India. But even this is exclusive because it lays down what conversion therapy is but does not address how even established medical and psychological treatment modules like talk therapy, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), or any kind of ‘cleansing’, ‘healing’, or psycho-religious rituals also constitute conversion therapy,” she says.

L Ramakrishnan, a queer rights activist from the NGO SAATHII, explained to TNM how the NMC’s ban on conversion therapy has indeed made many doctors refrain from administering it, but he also said that someone he knew was referred for CBT

under the assurance of being ‘cured’ of his sexual orientation. Sathiya says that counselling and therapies have evolved to include the use of even performing arts like dance, music, theatre, and other activities. This creates more ambiguity, making reparative therapies thrive under many guises in the absence of punitive provisions.

“The current NMC ban only addresses doctors and medical practitioners who the medical councils have jurisdiction over. We live in an era where there are many online counselling courses that enable people to start sessions without due registration or monitoring. So what happens to those who use activities like natural healing, toxin cleansing, retreats, or even social media influencing for conversion therapy or to enable a positive attitude towards such therapy? This is why we need legislation that puts down what the course of action is and targets this practice in particular, taking into consideration all its possible manifestations under the guise of recognised medical or psychological practices. We can only fix accountability if we do this,” she says.

The lack of guidelines or a definition is not the only problem that makes it difficult to put an end to conversion therapy. Queerphobia, skewed social morality, and the lack of systemic will to consider the mental health of queer individuals beyond just reparative interventions further complicate the situation, disadvantaging queer lives.

Personal bias and professional conduct

Though doctors must not carry their personal biases into their professional interactions, Dr Hema Tharoor, senior consultant psychiatrist, at Alwarpet’s Apollo Spectra Hospitals, says that this is hardly the case in many situations. “The first thing is for someone to feel safe with a doctor or a mental health practitioner to come and speak about orientation and other things. But the problem is that there is still a lot of homophobia among the fraternity of medicine and this is irrespective of them being mental health professionals. There is a huge trade-off between their personal morality and their medical training,” she says.

Hema also says that queerness is treated harshly by many doctors including the use of methods like hypnosis and heavy medications, apart from magico-religious acts. She says that the NMC’s ban on conversion therapy fails to ensure that there are sensitisation mechanisms that trickle down to the individual doctor to educate them and pull them out of their own biases about LGBTQIA+ lives.

“Most often, doctors, psychologists and counsellors play the family card, or emotionally manipulate queer individuals into thinking that if they do not submit themselves to a ‘treatment for a cure’, their lives will be extremely difficult going forward. Being queer in our society in itself is difficult on many levels, and such medical interventions latch on to this sense of shame and fear that families have. Unfortunately, this also makes many individuals believe they have to change themselves. This may be why many do not feel safe to open up or come out of it, reducing the documented cases of conversion therapy,” she adds.

Vasu, a trans man who left his family after prolonged harassment about his gender identity, says that doctors did rely on their morality and not science when he was taken for reparative therapy. “My elder brother’s wife is a nurse. I think she consulted some doctors before my family took me to one. I told the doctor that I have been feeling some changes in myself from a younger age but I did not have the courage to express it. I slowly began expressing myself after understanding more about my identity and my family began questioning the changes in my behaviour. After that, I told them about my gender identity, but they did not accept me.

Only I knew the changes that I was experiencing. The doctors then spoke to my brother’s wife and told her that these changes are not usual. They also told her that I was doing this probably because I was mentally disturbed. Then they injected me with something,” he recalls. He also mentions having had very rude responses from the police after approaching them for help.

Hema says that there is a lack of sensitisation among mental health professionals. In theory, they may know that this is normal, and they must not be biased, but wherever they are getting trained, if these are not taught or talked about, it allows this ignorance to persist.

“Some queer individuals present with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), where they constantly doubt their sexuality. This, and other kinds of psychological stress or behavioural roadblocks come with the overwhelming fear of living a queer life, and sometimes becomes entangled with other psychological stress factors,” Hema adds. But many doctors use this as an opportunity to conduct reparative interventions, like in the case of Vasu.

Rajashree says that sensitisation of doctors and police personnel remains incomplete without the state first acknowledging the issue, pointing out that in response to Queerala’s petition to the Kerala HC, the state government made extremely disappointing claims. “The state said there is no proof for conversion therapy being conducted in Kerala because they have not received formal complaints. This was after Anjana Harish died by suicide after alleged conversion therapy and the case garnered wide media attention. When you refuse to address the problem, how do you ensure that you sensitise those who allegedly administer it as well as state machinery like the police who further stigmatise queer persons who approach them for help?” she asks.

Sathiya also agrees with Rajashree and says that in Tamil Nadu, an eleven-member committee has been formed following Justice Anand’s judgement to frame and finalise the LGBTQIA+ policy for the state. “Queer individuals are being given sedatives, high dosage antidepressants, and treated with no humanity across hospitals. But if we continue to rely only on them to come forward and complain, we won’t be able to help them at all. I hope this committee defines conversion therapy and pins specific accountability on those who perform and enable it. Legislation should also be pressed for, no doubt,” she says.

This must also be read with the Union government's responses to the marriage equality petitions that are now awaiting judgement from the Supreme Court. The government has raised quite many claims that are moralistic and extremely opposed to the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution, further putting the welfare of LGBTQIA+ individuals in ambiguity. Though the Madras HC passed a progressive judgement on conversion therapy asking for a ban, critics also ask why the court did not take suo motu criminal cognisance of it and instead, directed medical councils to take disciplinary action.

In effect, it seems that though the NMC's ban on 'conversion therapy' has some effect on medical practitioners and families who offer and enable it, for it to really benefit LGBTQIA+ individuals, we need more legal and state-led will that goes into the welfare of queer individuals and does not only limit the issue to therapy.

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Sukanya, a lawyer-turned-journalist focused on gender, law, and popular culture, won the Laadli Media Award in 2022 and a Special Jury Appreciation in 2023. She is now Associate Editor at The News Minute and a fellow with the Ground Truth Project's Report for the World programme.

Link:

<https://www.thenewsminute.com/news/conversion-therapy-still-continues-india-despite-ban-180485>



6. Body Checking

Kinshuk Gupta | *The Caravan* | Jun 1, 2023

“Not Fat, Not Femme,” was the reply my friend, a doctor, received after he sent his pictures, and kept following up desperately on the Grindr profile of a man he described as an ideal gay man to date, with a milky-white complexion, wind-tousled hair and a body so buffed it looked as if it had been lifted from a porn video. Only after getting that curt reply did my friend notice that the young man wanted only no-strings-attached sex, which he was not looking for.

The desire we feel when looking at a potential mate is rooted in evolution, allowing natural selection to operate subconsciously. Athletic, able-bodied males offer a better promise of longevity and protection from predators. It is from this aesthetic, compounded with social expectations, that images of an ideal man, such as Michelangelo’s David, are derived. This dissonance between the “ideal” and “real,” however, often weighs in on the body image of a man.

Body image is a multidimensional construct with psychosocial, cognitive, behavioural and perceptual implications. Most men have a mental image of their body and a fixed belief about its unattractiveness owing to the almost unattainable standards described within popular culture. This dissatisfaction with one’s body is further accentuated in queer men that translates into projecting the same standards onto the bodies of others. When gay men look for partners, the body, and its cuts and curves, become doubly essential.

“When one comes out, gay men have a whoring phase. As our bodies are denied intimacy and smeared with shame, our bodies react by wanting more sex,” Dr Saumil Shah, a resident at Delhi’s Guru Nanak Eye Centre, told me. Compounding this unhealthy mental relationship with the body, gay men often find themselves caught within the binary of masculinity and femininity. Owing to growing up in a heterosexual family and the lack of queer role models, they end up replicating existing gender binaries.

Gay men have been stereotyped as effeminate. A shift in this perception came about, perhaps, after the 1969 Stonewall Uprising against police raids on gay bars in New York. The appearance and popularity of the more manly “Castro clone”—men who dress like the idealised working-class man—during the 1970s also helped alter this perception, emerging as a contender to the cis-het macho man: biological male, masculine-presenting and heterosexual. And within this community exists internalised heterosexism. Take, for example, the case of bottom-shaming. “Bottoms,” who prefer to be penetrated, are often expected to replicate the social role of a woman in the relationship—soft, submissive and shorn of body hair—which often becomes a primer for abuse. And as a result, “femme” gay men find themselves at the bottom rung of this social hierarchy.

Gay men often face dual layers of discrimination: stemming from their sexuality and from social structures—as is the case within the elitist queer scene in India. “I’m ashamed to admit, but caste, class and religion continue to play significant roles in queer dating,” Ajay Singh, who hails from a small town in Punjab, told me. “My friend, Valmiki by caste, met an upper-class Hindu on Grindr, who told him that they could continue to have sex, but he would not be able to invite him to his home.”

My interviewees rated obesity as a close second to physical disability when describing factors that rendered a queer man as undesirable. Popularly called “chubs” in gay lingo, most of them have to face rampant rejections. “Early on in my childhood, I was body-shamed for fat,” Hemant Kumar Pradhan, a 20-year-old college student in Jharkhand, told me. “Boys would touch my hips, grab my breasts and laugh at me. On Grindr, people wouldn’t respond to my texts. Some would even send condescending messages that I must lose weight.” I asked him whether his queer identity contributed to his abuse. “I distinctly remember a boy in my class, heavier than me, who faced much less bullying,” he said. “Due to my flamboyance, I was seen as a soft target.”

Both obesity and thinness are strict noes in the gay dating world. Fat is thought to feminise male features and signifies a lack of self-control. Across the globe, fatness is related to low-income status and lack of competence. Chicken-legged and bony-faced men, on the other hand, are not thought of as sexy, as thinness remains an acute reminder of the wasting syndrome that wreaked havoc during the AIDS crisis.

Even the fascination with large penises, tall height, fair complexion or a trimmed body seems largely borrowed from the heterosexual dating scene. “Most people on Grindr ask for nudes before meeting up in person,” Shah said. “Tall, dark, handsome men dominate the dating world, except that, here, whiteness is considered sexier.” Singh made a somewhat similar observation. “Most gays I’ve encountered are obsessed with dicks,” he said. “They are always looking out for a larger and thicker one even when most can’t handle it.”

Krishal Prasad, a young bisexual man, who has experienced the dating scene in both Raipur and Delhi, told me that people in smaller towns “are less choosy because the options available are far fewer.” He argued that similar trends could be seen in bisexuals or trans women seeking men, which seemed no different from the case for cis-het women—except that straight people have a normative model to stick to, ultimately leading to marriage wherein other attributes such as finances and family take precedence.

Gay men are thought to be one of the fastest-growing client bases in the cosmetic surgery industry. Most of these men are aged above forty, by when age usurps their sex appeal and the prospects of finding love thin out. A middle-aged software developer, who did not want to be named, told me that when he turned 30, he “felt a deep urgency to find a partner. A clock ticked in my head. By 35, the gym felt like a second home. At 42, feeling even that was not sufficient, I went under the knife.”

The advent of plus-size models, drag queens or other such queer icons and influencers, who flaunt their bodies despite their atypicality helps assuage body image in a big way. Pradhan, whose first-ever semi-naked Instagram photoshoot, in April this year, garnered rave reviews, told me about its resounding success and how it not only helped him feel confident about himself but helped others too. “Many people messaged me on the app, some of which were from people I didn’t know at all,” he said.

“After the whoring phase wanes, a gay man enters the stable phase, when skin-deep love doesn’t suffice. Looks, then, become secondary,” Shah told me, cheerfully.

Kinshuk Gupta, an award-winning writer and editor based in New Delhi, authored *Yeh Dil Hai Ki Chor Darwaja*, Hindi's first LGBT short fiction, acclaimed upon its 2022 release. The English translation will follow in 2025, and he is the Managing Editor of *Usawa Literary Review*.

Link - <https://caravanmagazine.in/gender-and-sexuality/grindr-negative-body-image-queer-males>



Gender Based violence and Ethnic Strife

Gender-based violence (GBV) and ethnic strife are deeply interconnected, disproportionately affecting women and girls. GBV includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, rooted in patriarchal systems that perpetuate gender inequality. In ethnic conflicts, such as the one between the Kuki and Meitei tribes in Manipur, women's vulnerability increases, with rape, forced marriages, and abduction used as tools of war to degrade and destroy communities.

Tora Agarwal documents the harrowing experiences of four Kuki women who faced brutal violence during the ethnic strife. Their blood-curdling accounts reveal the depth of suffering inflicted, shedding light on how these women became both targets and symbols in the conflict. These articles also explore the complex roles women play, not just as victims, but as perpetrators and peace mediators in their war-torn communities.

7. Feminist icons or violent vigilantes? The contentious role of Meira Paibis in Manipur's conflict

Tora Agarwala | Scroll.in | Aug 4, 2023

Feminist icons or violent vigilantes? The contentious role of Meira Paibis in Manipur's conflict

Celebrated for long as the torchbearers of Manipur, Meitei women groups now stand accused of blocking the army and egging on violence against Kuki-Zo women

On an overcast July afternoon, a line of military vehicles piled up on a highway in Manipur's Bishnupur district. For hours, the commanding officer, seated in the vehicle leading the convoy, had been trying to get through to the other side. Blocking his way was a group of stick-wielding, resolute-faced women, holding his gaze, watching his every move.

The impasse continued till one woman broke away from the crowd, and angrily shouted at the officer: "We are hungry now, get out from here. Niklo yahaan se."

The officer, his expression stolid behind his sunglasses, observed them in silence for a few minutes, then revved up his car. The vehicles behind him followed suit. "They are defeating their own cause," he said, before making a U-turn.

On this stretch of National Highway 2, the only road that connects the Meitei-dominated Imphal valley to the Kuki-Zo hills of Churachandpur, it is the Meira Paibis – the women torch-bearers of Manipur – who are in charge.

Every passing vehicle – civilian or military – is stopped and inspected by the group of women. Even those coming in and out of the district hospital, a few hundred metres from the site of the blockade, cannot bypass their hawk-eyed scrutiny.

"We trust no one," said Thiyam Jovia, a 35-year-old housewife who is a part of the group.

While the initial searches were for "Kuki militants", whom they blame for starting the violence on May 3, much of their ire is now reserved for the Indian Army and paramilitary forces like the Assam Rifles.

"We are watching the news... these army forces are not with the Meiteis," said Jovia. "They have betrayed us, they are helping the other side."

It is a sentiment that echoes through the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley that for three months now, has been at war with the Kuki-Zos, the ethnically-related tribal communities that live primarily in the hills south of the valley. In this battle, hundreds of women like Jovia are out on the highways during the day, and patrolling

the streets of their localities by night. They are the first line of defence for their community, a role they take to heart.

“We Meira Paibis are not afraid of anything,” said Leibak Leima. On a July evening, the 65-year-old was the first to reach her Imphal locality’s all-women night vigil. In a small shed by the side of the road, she and her neighbours sat well past midnight to guard their leikai, or locality as it is called in Meitei. “Give us guns, and we will be ready to fight,” she said. “In difficult situations, do not underestimate the strength of a Meitei woman.”

That is borne out by history. From colonial forces to the mighty Indian state, the Meira Paibis have taken on many powers.

In the early 1900s, they successfully got the British to retract an exploitative colonial labour policy. Three decades later, they rose up against the maharaja’s oppressive economic regime in the erstwhile kingdom of Kangleipak. These revolts are famously known as the ‘Nupi Laan’, or the Women’s War.

In the 2000s, when the insurgency was at its peak in the state, as were alleged instances of human rights violations by the state then completely under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, their iconic protest against sexual violence gave them legend-like status.

However, in the divisive ethnic war that has engulfed Manipur for three months now, the role of the women icons has become contentious. The Indian Army has called out the Meira Paibis for disrupting peace-making efforts. On some occasions, the security forces alleged, they have shielded armed insurgents, blocked highways disrupting passage of food and other essential supplies to different parts of the state. On Thursday, a group of Meira Paibis clashed with security forces as they attempted to storm a proposed burial site for Kuki-Zo victims of the ethnic violence.

Most disturbingly, throughout this conflict, Meira Paibis have been accused of participating in violence against women.

In Manipur last month, Scroll met four Kuki-Zo women, who recounted in great detail the brutal assaults they had suffered at the hands of mobs. In two cases, the women told Scroll that Meitei women were part of the mob, egging the men on to hurt them. In one case, a 19-year-old alleged that the women themselves – dressed in traditional phaneks – beat her up. In a police complaint, the woman identified the assaulters as Meira Paibis.

Scroll spoke to several Meitei women about their participation in the conflict – and the disquiet expressed about their role.

A decentralised network

On a Tuesday morning, a 40-year-old government school teacher in Imphal’s Uripok along with hundreds of women in her locality diverted traffic from the road

for a rally to condole the death of a 19-year-old Meitei student – allegedly killed by Kukis a few days earlier.

Her traditional phanek tied to her waist, a paste of sandalwood smeared on her cheeks, she was ready for a long day ahead. For the last three months, she said, she has played multiple roles: wife to her husband, mother to her two children, teacher to her students – and most importantly, a “protector to my community”.

Yes, it was tiring, she said — “but I am ready to sacrifice my time. I want to be here.”

Critics may argue that she has little choice.

As an adult married woman, the 40-year-old is a Meira Paibi by default, and thereby, bound by the unwritten rules of Meitei society, where women have to rally together in difficult times. While it is married women who automatically become members of Meira Paibi groups, younger, unmarried women can also get involved.

An Imphal-based academic, a Meitei woman, explained: “A woman’s participation in Meira Paibi activity is mandatory.” Anything less, she said, was frowned upon, especially in times of conflict.

She, too, has been out on the streets, taking turns with two other women members in her house. The duty roster drawn up by her locality’s Meira Paibi group makes no distinction: by profession or age.

“It does not matter if you are a professor, an IAS officer or a doctor – in tough times, you have to stand with your community,” she said.

As the Meira Paibis did, during the four-month long protests for the enforcement of the Inner Line Permit regime in the state in 2015, or against the human rights violations when the state was under AFSPA.

The Meira Paibis had first banded together to fight social evils of alcoholism and drug addiction in the 1980s – back then they were known as “nisabandis”. The movement soon dovetailed into protests against the Indian state.

Almost 20 years ago, Ema Lourembam Nganbi had, along with 12 other mothers or “Emas”, stripped naked in front of the historic Kangla Fort, the then headquarters of the Assam Rifles, to protest the brutal killing and rape of suspected insurgent Thangjam Manorama.

Then in her fifties, standing naked in front of the fort’s gate, Nganbi had shouted in English: “Rape us, kill us.” The men in uniform awkwardly looked away, she recalled. The episode went on to become a watershed moment in Manipur’s long fight against the AFSPA.

“How can I ever forget that day?” Nganbi said, when Scroll met her at a blockade in Bishnupur district. “It was something we had to do. AFSPA had made too many widows, killed too many of our innocent men, raped our women. Manorama, Chanu

Rose...” – she counted them on her fingers – “Do you expect us to trust the forces after all this?” Nganbi said that the iconic protest “was not for Meitei women alone, but women across all the 30-plus tribes of Manipur”, adding that Meira Paibis fight for both women and community.

What then does she feel about the several damning allegations against Meira Paibis? Nganbi said, “If they [alleged perpetrators] are in the wrong, [police] investigation will find it.” Then, echoing her community’s view, she added: “But remember... in this war, Meiteis did not attack the Kukis first; they [Kukis] started it. We are innocent.”

A streak of vigilantism

The Meira Paibis, as we know them today, “came into existence to stop atrocities of the security forces committed against innocent civilians”, academic L Basanti Devi wrote in her 2021 article *Encountering the State in Manipur: A Political History of Women in Public Space*. In more recent times, with the insurgency on the decline, the women have assumed a more vigilante role, playing referee on a range of domestic issues, from land disputes to lovers’ tiffs.

Today, every leikai (colony) in Imphal is represented by a local unit of the Meira Paibis. The leikai is the first unit of organisation, and every Meira Paibi’s primary allegiance is to the person heading the leikai.

It is the leikai leader, often the oldest woman in the area, who calls for women to gather, usually by hitting an electric pole with a stick or a stone. The sound, the Imphal-based academic said, is a signal to the women in the neighbourhood to “drop whatever they are doing”, and come out. In the last three months, she said, the pole in her locality has clanged “innumerable” times, especially in the first few weeks of the conflict.

“It has been especially terrible to hear the sound these days – the situation is so tense that you know they can’t be calling you out for anything good,” she said. Still, she said, it is natural for women like her to want to help. “This is what our mothers and grandmothers have been doing for years. So why shouldn’t we?” she asked.

Moreover, she added, families who don’t send out women are charged a fine. More than the money, it is the shame associated with being the odd one out. “It will be definitely frowned upon if you don’t turn up,” she said.. “But to be honest, there are no families who do not want to send their women out... at least in my locality.”

A Meitei woman activist in Imphal – not actively involved with the Meira Paibis – said that sometimes the Meira Paibis’ actions tend to border on vigilantism. She recalled how a group of women arrived at her doorstep raising money to buy arms last month. “I refused initially but then ultimately had to give in,” she said. “If I don’t, I will get into trouble, my family will get into trouble.”

Not immune to pressures

Without a unified central command, hundreds of leikai-level groups dot the landscape of the Imphal valley, making the Meira Paibis a part of an amorphous decentralised network. The movement is not immune to outside pressures, either. It is quite common for the state's powerful civil society groups, often backed by politicians, to call the shots in local Meira Paibi units.

According to the Meitei activist, different groups can use their influence over the Meira Paibis to do their bidding. “Unfortunately, many get brainwashed, and easily influenced by the locality leaders,” she said.

To illustrate this, many people Scroll spoke to in Imphal referred to the incident on June 30 when Chief Minister Biren Singh was supposedly headed to Raj Bhavan to hand over his resignation. He was waylaid by hundreds of Meitei women, some of whom tore up his resignation letter. He ultimately did not resign.

“You would think the women are making the decisions – when it is actually the men who are controlling them,” said the Meitei activist, suggesting that the protest was not entirely organic. “Our women have incredible courage, they participate in every single struggle... that is why they are put on the front line. But, unfortunately, women are used as pawns in the game, while men remain in the shadows.”

Caught in the middle

Since the ethnic clashes between Meiteis and Kuki-Zo communities, the mistrust between the Meira Paibis and the central security forces has sharpened. In Imphal's Uripok, 70-year-old Tejapati, a Meira Paibi, spelt it out: “The forces do not support us, they only support the Kukis because they have a pact with them.”

She was referring to the Suspension of Operations agreement, the peace deal the Centre signed with the Kuki militant groups in 2008, as the reason for this bias. Meitei insurgent groups have never come to the table for talks. As a result, the Meira Paibis argue, the army handles the Kuki militant groups with kid gloves, often at the cost of the Meiteis. Calls to abrogate the pact have resounded across the Imphal valley since the initial days of the conflict.

The forces, in particular the Assam Rifles, which is the operational command of the Indian Army, say they are caught in the middle. An Indian Army official posted in Imphal, who declined to be identified, said they were facing “trying times”. “We are not Kuki's army, or the Meitei's army... we are the Indian Army, and we are only trying to ensure everyone's, regardless of community, peace and security,” he said.

According to him, partisan media reports and rumours had “fuelled mistrust against the security forces”, undermining their “hard-earned” credibility. In June, the rift came to such a head that the Army released a video statement outlining the challenges. It said a stand-off with a 1,200-1,500 women-led mob in Itham on June

23 forced them to “release” 12 cadres of banned insurgent group Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup – including the mastermind of a 2015 ambush case.

A few days later, the Dimapur-based III Corps of the Indian Army (also known as Spear Corps) put out a tweet, complete with video illustrations, of how the women were interfering in their operations by accompanying armed rioters in vehicles, blocking entry of forces in riot-hit areas, interfering in the movement of logistics by digging up roads, among other things.

Such actions, the Imphal-based Army official alleged, were meant to aid the valley-based retired Meitei insurgents who had reactivated themselves in this conflict. “The Kuki militants had already joined the fray, and the defunct valley-based ones saw it as a good time to jump in,” he said. “They want a safe corridor to go join the fight. Who to use to ensure that? The Meira Paibis.”

The insurgent groups, the army official said, are using various Meira Paibi groups to shield themselves. In the heyday of the insurgency, when the Indian state combed towns and villages across Manipur to pick up Meitei youths on suspicion of being insurgents, the Meira Paibi are reported to have played a similar role: they took the security forces head on to block their operations.

A movement ‘independent of gender’

On July 15, Lucy Marem, a Maring Naga woman, was killed near the foothills of Keibi Heikak Mapal village in Imphal East district, after a group of women allegedly handed her over to armed miscreants. Marem’s death elicited strong reactions from the Naga community in Manipur, the third major ethnic community in Manipur, one which has remained neutral in this conflict so far. The United Naga Council, the apex body of the Nagas, issued a statement, calling out the Meira Paibis. “It is unimaginable for a women’s organisation like Meira Paibis, who profess to be torch bearers of peace, partaking in acts of such killings,” the statement said.

Indeed, this has vexed many people, particularly those outside the state: How could a women’s organisation with such a rich history of standing up against injustice be party to crimes against women?

Senior Meira Paibis and Meitei civil society leaders Scroll met cited “lack of organisation” and the “decentralised structure” of the movement as a reason for the alleged transgressions.

Khuraijam Athouba, who is the spokesperson of the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, or Cocomi, an umbrella organisation of six groups representing Meiteis said: “What happened in Imphal [during the initial days] was a spontaneous response of common people.” He added: “That is why there are so many irregularities in the way people behaved.”

Ema Lungwaleima, a Meira Paibi in her sixties, agreed. “No one was prepared ... no one knew that a warlike situation was imminent. Since it happened suddenly,

people took up their own ways to protect themselves,” she said. “Maybe their own family members were killed and hurt, and it could have entirely been an emotional reaction... a lot happened in Churachandpur [where the Meiteis are a minority] too.”

However, conversations with many Meira Paibis made it quite clear that most of them were not guided by feminist principles. It was the community that took precedence over gender for most women’s groups in Manipur. As this article by Meitei academic Kapil Arambam notes, the Meira Paibi movement is “independent of gender”.

The Imphal-based academic also said she would “refrain from describing Meira Paibis as feminists”. “Sure, it is a women’s movement but most of the causes they espouse are for the community,” she said. “They hardly talk about themselves, their bodily rights, their reproductive rights. Perhaps the 2004 Kangla Fort protest was one of the few times that they spoke out against sexual violence women faced.”

Added the activist: “It’s not as much about women as it is about identity.”

The tide of allegations against the Meira Paibis has prompted other civil society organisations to intervene.

In May, the Cocomi formed a women’s wing to “streamline the movement”, among other things. Ema Lungwaleima, who is the general secretary of the wing, said she was going to neighbourhoods asking people not to indulge in mob violence. “I’m trying to mobilise them to work together.”

An activist, who works with Meira Paibis in Bishnupur, admitted that many women were involved in things “they were not supposed to be involved in”. “But they don’t speak for the whole community,” she said.

The other Meitei woman activist in Imphal, who is not actively involved with the Meira Paibis, said there was disquiet within the Meira Paibi groups, too. “Sometimes during our long conversations, some do admit their discomfort about the role of the Meira Paibis,” she said. “Behind closed doors, they condemn such incidents [against women] and tell me to continue to speak out. ‘It’s difficult for us to say certain things,’ they tell me.”

A breakdown of old alliances

Angom Nayani grew up in one of the Meitei-dominated pockets that dot the hills of Churachandpur, her home for more than half a century. She fled the violence that broke out on the evening of May 3 and reached Moirang in the neighbouring district of Bishnupur.

Nayani, an active member of the Meira Paibi community, has lived in Churachandpur since she was six; she is now 60. “I left my life behind,” she said. That included not just the grocery store she ran, but also friendships, mostly with women from the Kuki-Zo community. “Initially, when the violence first erupted, I

would still get calls from my friends asking me if I was okay,” Nayani recalled. But gradually, the calls reduced, before stopping altogether.

Nayani rues not just the loss of these personal bonds but also the solidarity of women across ethnicities that now lies shattered. A few years ago, Nayani, along with other Kuki-Zo women in the hills had founded the Joint Women’s Organisation, a collective that cut across ethnicities, to raise issues of shared civic interests.

As Ema Lungwaleima of Cocomi had explained, “All the ‘mothers’ associations’[an oft-used nomenclature for women’s civil society groups in the North East] would work together: Nagas, Kukis, Meiteis.”

Sitting on a bench outside the relief camp, Nayani said much of it seemed like a “dream now”. “That we even had an organisation, that at one point it was possible,” she said. “Everything changed after May 3.”

She is sceptical about the possibility of Meitei and Kuki women coming together to initiate a peacebuilding process. “This time the situation is very bad. They [the Kukis] are asking for a separate administration...total separation. So even the government cannot control anything, so what can we Meira Paibis do?”

“We can only appeal,” Nayani said. Then she quickly added: “If only I could reach out to the women.

Tora Agarwala is an award-winning independent journalist specializing in north-east India.

Link: <https://scroll.in/article/1053761/feminist-icons-or-violent-vigilantes-the-contentious-role-of-meira-paibis-in-manipurs-conflict>



8. ‘Everyone should know what happened to us’: Four Kuki women recount brutal assaults they survived

Tora Agarwala | Scroll.in | Amrita Dutta | Jul 21, 2023

The video showing Kuki women being paraded naked by a mob has brought national attention to the sexual violence that has taken place during Manipur’s ongoing civil war. Days before the video emerged, Scroll had travelled to Manipur to interview Kuki women who faced extreme violence at the hands of the mobs. We spoke to four women, including one whose ordeal, captured on video, finally forced the prime minister to end his silence on Manipur. All of the women recounted that the men who assaulted them said they were taking revenge for violence against their community. Strikingly, in two cases, the survivors said Meitei women were part of the mob, egging the men on.

Survivor: 19-year-old

Currently at: Relief camp, Kangpokpi district

Date of incident: May 15, Imphal

When a 19-year-old Kuki resident of Imphal’s New Checkon colony stepped out on the evening of May 15 to withdraw money from an ATM, she said she could have “never imagined” what lay ahead. In the hours that followed, she said she was abducted by a gang of men, dragged into a car, brutally assaulted in three different locations across Imphal, before she escaped by a miraculous stroke of luck.

In a relief camp in Kangpokpi district, exactly two months after the incident, she said she can barely “sleep at night”. “Sometimes I wake up crying...I remember what they did to me, I keep thinking of it,” she said, her voice low. In a classroom of a training institute, now converted into a relief camp for displaced Kukis, the survivor narrated the incident to Scroll for over an hour.

After clashes broke out between Meitei and Kuki communities on May 3, the 19-year-old’s parents and siblings, along with many others, fled the mobs in Imphal on May 4. The 19-year-old, however, could not accompany them.

When the violence had broken out, she was with a friend: a Kuki, too, who was married to a Muslim.

“Since it was so tense, I could not join my family and took refuge in the Pangal neighbourhood,” she said. The Meitei Pangals, residents of the Imphal Valley who follow Islam, are not involved in the conflict in Manipur, and hence, relatively shielded from violence from both sides.

For days, the 19-year-old hid in the Muslim household, careful not to step out or be seen.

When the first round of violence abated about 10 days later, things were still tense in Imphal. Her parents – then at a relief camp in Kangpokpi district – told her it was better she left Imphal. Some money was wired to her account, and the plan was for a Muslim driver to drop her to Kangpokpi.

On May 15, around 4 pm, the 19-year-old, along with the friend in whose home she had taken shelter, stepped out to withdraw money for the journey. Before they could even get to an ATM, two cars – a white Bolero and a purple Swift – appeared on the road. A few men got out, asking the two girls to produce their Aadhaar cards.

When they said they did not have it on them, the men began assaulting them – first, her friend, and then the 19-year-old. The men accused the friend of sheltering the Kuki girl, before they left her by the side of the road.

They proceeded to drag the 19-year-old into the white Bolero, she said. Inside, they beat her up, ignoring her protests, and drove her to Wangkhei Ayangpali, a Meitei locality.

There, her captors rounded up men and women from the neighbourhood. By the side of the road, the survivor said, it was the women who “first started beating me up”. “They were dressed in their traditional phanek... some old, some young,” she said, about the group of women assaulters.

As sticks and bare hands beat her up, she recalled seeing a pair of scissors in the mix. “Someone pulled my hair... with the scissors, they tried to chop my hair too,” she said.

All the while, the survivor pleaded with her assaulters in Meitei: “I told them: ‘Why are you beating me? Why are you slapping a girl like this? Am I not your sister?’”

But the mob was out of control. The survivor alleged that the women handed her over to the men, asking them to “kill her”. “The men asked me how I dared to still be here [in Imphal],” she said. “I told them that I was doing my best to leave, and to please let me go.” One of them then said to her: “Your tribal boys have killed us Meiteis and so we will not save you.”

Some men, the survivor recollected, started making calls to whom she believes were the members of the Arambai Tenggol, a radical Meitei group that has been accused of leading several attacks against the Kukis since the ethnic clashes broke out on May 3. “We have captured one tribal,” the men said on the phone.

Sometime later, another car, a Bolero, arrived, its occupants a group of men in black T-shirts, and armed with guns. The survivor was dragged inside the vehicle and taken to another location, which she recognised as Langol Hills, a range in the northern part of the Imphal Valley.

There, she was blindfolded, her hands tied. “I kept crying throughout... they threatened to shoot me if I did not quieten down,” she said. The mob again decided to move her to another location – this time further away from Imphal, to Bishnupur district. “They felt if they did it in Imphal, the police may catch them,” she said.

By that time, night had fallen. The survivor said she was taken to a hill. “They told me that if I wanted to live, I would have to do ‘as they said’,” she said, adding that they used “very bad words”, and told her they wanted to rape her. “They told me: ‘If you let us do it, we will save you.’ I told them I am not that kind of girl.”

When she resisted, they tried to “pull her shirt” and “grab her.” All the while, she said she could hear the men load their rifles, feel the weapons prodding her. At some point, she passed out, she later confided in a woman taking care of her in the relief camp.

She next remembers wanting to relieve herself. It was almost dawn by then. “When I asked them for permission, they laughed and said that if my wish was to urinate before I died, they would let me,” she said.

They untied her hands, and turned around, warning her not to go “too far away”.

The survivor pulled off her blindfold, walking a short distance away. “When I saw that their backs were towards me, I somehow...I don’t know how...managed to roll off the hill,” she said.

At the base of the hill, on the main road, an autorickshaw – belonging to a Muslim man – was passing by. The driver saw her, stopped his auto, and helped her into the vehicle. “I was in no condition to even stand,” she said.

By then, she said, the men could see her escaping and they ran down the hill shooting. “The auto managed to speed away,” she said.

She was first taken to a police station, where officers asked her to wait for the officer in-charge. But feeling uncomfortable since all the men in the police station were Meitei, she decided to leave with the auto driver, who dropped her to New Checkon, where some members of the Kuki community who were still in Imphal managed to receive her.

For the next two days, she took refuge in the home of a former Kuki legislator from the Bharatiya Janata Party, TT Haokip, a fact confirmed by his wife, Mary Haokip.

Worrying for her life, the 19-year-old said she did not go to a hospital, instead choosing to be treated with first aid at the Haokips’ house. She remembers her ears were bleeding, her eyes bloodshot, her body covered in bruises, her face swollen. “I could not even chew or swallow food,” she said.

Mary Haokip, now in Churachandpur, said she “fed and nursed” the girl. “I have no words to describe the condition,” said Haokip. “She could not even walk up the

stairs, she could not eat for two days. We were wondering how to send her to her parents, then finally we managed to arrange it.”

On May 20, the survivor was able to make it to the relief camp in Kangpokpi district, where her family had taken shelter.

She was then taken to a hospital in Kangpokpi district, which referred her to another hospital in the neighbouring state of Nagaland, after preliminary medical care.

A report signed by the medical officer of the Naga Hospital Authority, Kohima, dated May 24, which Scroll independently verified, describes her diagnosis as “alleged case of assault and rape”. Under the case summary, it reads: “Assault and rape on 15/05/23 during the Manipur tribal clash.”

Two months later, the survivor said she still remembers the faces of her assaulters. The family considered filing a police complaint, but then got scared and decided against it. She said she was not sure if the complaint was ultimately filed.

Scroll visited two police stations, Kangpokpi and Sapormeina, but no record of this case was found.

The survivor said she has lost touch with all her Meitei friends. “Some of them found my mother’s number and even asked to talk to me but I cannot bring myself to take their calls – I simply can’t forget what they [Meiteis] did to me – I cannot ever go back home to Imphal,” she said.

These days, her mother tells her to be strong. “She tells me that she has heard that there are other girls who suffered similar experiences. I should be strong for them,” she said.

A day after Scroll published this account, the young woman submitted a police complaint, alleging rape. A first information report has been filed.

Survivors: 19-year-old and 20-year-old

Currently in: Churachandpur district with their families

Date of incident: May 4, a nursing institute in Imphal

On the afternoon of May 4, panic spread among the residents of a girls’ hostel of a nursing institute in Imphal’s Porompat, when a mob started clanging the gates of their hostel.

As the students watched from the windows, the mob – comprising both men and women – managed to enter.

Two Kuki women – one, a first-year student aged 19 and the other, a second year-student aged 20 –were caught by the mob, thrashed and “left to die” by the side of

the road outside their hostel, till a police car picked them up and took them to a hospital.

Both have filed separate police complaints: the 19-year-old in Uttam Nagar police station in Delhi, and the 20-year-old in Churachandpur police station in Manipur. The latter has been registered as an FIR under charges of attempt to murder and outraging the modesty of a woman, among others – and forwarded to Porompat police station in Imphal. Uttam Nagar police station officials said they had forwarded the complaint to the office of the director-general of police, Manipur, on May 30. But the Porompat police station in Imphal said they had not received the complaint.

“Some radical mobs belonging to the Meitei community armed with sophisticated weapons...chanting anti-tribal slogans...barged into my hostel room and dragged me onto the road,” the 20-year-old wrote in her complaint, adding: “I was harassed, abused, tortured and beaten.”

The 19-year-old wrote that the mob accused her of being an “illegal immigrant from another country” and started beating her “brutally”. “They left me to die on the street,” she wrote in her complaint.

More than two months later, in their homes in Churachandpur, the women are still trying to come to terms with the assault. The two meet sometimes, but they never talk about the incident.

Scroll met them in their homes, where they, separately, recounted the incident in detail.

According to the 20-year-old, the mobs arrived a little after 4 pm – a fact confirmed to Scroll by a member of the hostel staff, a Meitei woman who lives in Imphal.

Two women, who were part of the mob, entered the hostel demanding identification cards of all students.

The hostel had a mix of women from the Meitei, Naga and Kuki communities. “There were eight Kukis – six of them had managed to hide in one part of the hostel, but my senior and I were not able to,” said the 19-year-old.

The 20-year-old said she tried telling the woman checking identity cards that she was Naga, to which the woman responded: “That’s okay – we are looking only for Kuki girls.”

However, when they were forced to reveal their identity cards, the mob realised that both were Kuki.

The 19-year-old said that a senior member of the institute’s staff, a Meitei woman, tried to reason with the mob, but to no avail.

The mob downstairs was getting even more agitated and shouting for the two women to be brought down. “What are you still doing there? Bring them out, bring them out,” the mob shouted, the 19-year-old recalled. Following which, the two were forced down outside the hostel onto the main road.

Downstairs, the two girls were trashed side-by-side. The senior member of the institute’s staff witnessed this in a state of helplessness, the 19-year-old recalled.

“I really tried to plead with the mob – but I just could not help them. I was so helpless,” the senior member of the institute’s staff told Scroll.

The 19-year-old remembers crying helplessly, as the mob kicked and punched her. Both the survivors said that the women themselves did not beat them, but incited the mob: “Why are you still keeping them alive? Rape them, cut their bodies into pieces and burn them alive,” a woman allegedly shouted.

“They beat me so much with their bare hands that I fell to the ground. They were beating my senior by my side. I don’t know what exactly happened to her but I was aware that she was being beaten badly,” the 19-year-old said.

The 20-year-old was punched “so hard” that three of her front teeth fell out. At her home in Churachandpur, touching her dental implants with the tip of a finger, she said her injuries are somewhat better. But her lips are still visibly swollen, even two months later.

“I still remember the face of the woman who shouted ‘Rape them, cut their bodies into pieces and burn them alive’,” she said. The 19-year-old said that it was especially “painful” to hear women utter such words. “I’m sure she [the woman who said those words] also has a daughter,” she said.

The two women were then asked by the mob to walk a little distance away. “By that time, there was blood flowing down, from my shirt to my chappals,” said the 19-year-old.

According to her, the mob was armed with stones, knives and even guns. “As we were walking, one guy pointed his gun at us. But another man told him that it was not the right time, and he put it down,” she said.

Then, the two were beaten again – and both fell unconscious thereafter. The next time they woke up they were in a hospital. Later, the 19-year-old was flown to Delhi and admitted to the intensive care unit of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences’s trauma centre. The 20-year-old was evacuated to an army hospital in Imphal, and later the district hospital in Churachandpur. The 19-year-old came back to her home in Churachandpur at the end of May. “I am better, but for days, I felt dizzy and nauseous,” she said.

Scroll spoke to a Meitei member of the hostel staff, who confirmed the incident. “These girls were not just students, they were like my children. I feel so bad that I could not do anything to save them,” she said.

Survivors: 44-year-old and 21-year-old

Currently at: A relief camp in Churachandpur district, and in Tengnoupal district, respectively.

Date of incident: May 4, near B Phainom in Kangpokpi district

When they heard that the Meitei mobs were “burning homes” in a nearby village on May 4, the residents of B Phainom began to pack their bags. Among them was a 44-year-old woman, the wife of the village chief. While most families had left, she and her neighbours were slightly delayed.

But they managed to escape. In the nick of time, both families hid in a forested path just a short distance from their home. As they hid, they could hear the rioters beat the gong of their village church. From a distance, they saw their homes being burnt. “But there was enough foliage to conceal us,” said the woman.

However, the mobs discovered them: their group split into two, and before her eyes, her neighbours, a 56-year-old man and his 19-year-old son, were lynched. The mob then turned their attention to their daughter, 21, and the woman herself. They were subsequently paraded naked by the mob, and groped – the graphic visuals of which have gone viral on the internet.

The 21-year-old got married soon after the incident, and now lives in Tengnoupal. The older woman, now a resident of a crowded relief camp in Churachandpur, narrated her story to Scroll on a July evening.

After being discovered, the men began to assault them, even as some [Meitei] men expressed their discomfort with hitting the women. “They were the nicer ones... some actually said, ‘Let’s not hit the women.’ But most in the mob did not care – they punched us, pulled our hair and beat us up badly,” she said.

In the vicinity, she said, there was a police vehicle. While three of them (she, the 21-year-old girl and her 19-year-old brother) got into it, the father was pulled away and lynched.

“We did not see how exactly they did it but we knew they had killed him,” she said, adding that they asked the policeman to start the vehicle to help them escape.

“In the beginning, the policeman did not move the vehicle,” she said. But just as he started the engine, the mob gathered around them. The three of them were pulled out and separated: the young boy was dragged away to the area in the paddy field where his father was killed. At a distance, she saw him being hit with a big stick, and he collapsed – on the body of his dead father.

In the meanwhile, the mob surrounded the two women, ordering them to strip. “When we resisted, they punched us and forcefully tried to pull off our clothes,” she said. The men warned the women: “If you don’t take off your clothes, we will kill you”.

The woman said she had no choice but to take off every item of clothing only in order to “protect herself”. All the while, the men allegedly slapped and punched her. She could sense her neighbour in the vicinity, but she did not know what exactly was happening to her.

The woman was then dragged to a paddy field near the road, as the mob accompanied her. There, she was asked to lie down. “Three men surrounded me... two on the side, one right in front of me. One of them told the other, ‘Let’s rape her’, but ultimately they did not,” she said. “But they did grab my breasts – twice,” she said.

The woman recalled her assaulters telling her that “Kukis had raped Meitei women in Churachandpur, that they had killed a Meitei child” and that they were taking “revenge”. The men subsequently left her in the field, and soon after another group of Meitei men came and gave her their clothes.

She headed to the spot near the police vehicle, when she was waylaid by another mob, who made her strip again. Later, she said, another group of men came, some of those who had expressed discomfort about attacking women, and gave her her clothes back.

Her neighbour – the 21-year-old – appeared by her side again. Both of them collected their clothes, and escaped to a village nearby.

She said she did not file a complaint herself.

But a relative did. Based on the complaint, the police said a zero FIR was registered in the Saikul police station of Kangpokpi district on May 18. The first information report mentions her age as 42. It also says that the 21-year-old woman was “brutally gang-raped in broad daylight”. A third woman, who was with the two women, was also forced to strip. An official at the Saikul police station said charges of rape and murder, among others, have been pressed against “unknown miscreants” numbering “800-1,000”.

More than two months after the incident, the 44-year-old said she did what they told her to only to keep herself alive. “I am anyway a married woman...I was helpless in front of a mob,” she said in a quiet voice.

Close to the relief camp, living with her relatives, the mother of the 21-year-old is beside herself with grief. She tried to narrate the incident, as told to her by the daughter, but broke down.

After the incident, her daughter's boyfriend offered to marry her, she said. "She is now with him in another district... she is away from all this," she said.

As for the 44-year-old wife of the village chief, she said it was important to recount her ordeal in front of the media, even if she was exhausted.

"Everyone should know what happened to us," the 44-year-old said, adding: "But despite what happened, I want to say all Meiteis are not bad... There were actually some men who tried to help me."

Tora Agarwala is an award-winning independent journalist specializing in north-east India.

Link: <https://scroll.in/article/1053761/feminist-icons-or-violent-vigilantes-the-contentious-role-of-meira-paibis-in-manipurs-conflict>



Coping with Gender Based Violence

According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), only 14% of women who experienced physical or sexual violence sought help, while approximately 77% continued to suffer in silence.

Escaping abusive and violent marriages is often challenging for women due to a combination of emotional, social, financial, and psychological barriers. These include fear and intimidation, isolation, emotional manipulation, financial dependence, cultural and societal pressures, lack of support services, and the hope that things will improve.

In a poignant narrative, a caseworker documents the violence she endures while helping other women facing domestic abuse. Her candid account reveals the layers of vulnerability and the dependence of many women on the institutions of family and marriage. The article highlights the complex decisions women make while coping with domestic violence.

A similar struggle is faced by women police personnel. In an article about the family conflicts experienced by female police personnel in Bihar, Sabita Kumari reveals how police women are forced to seek divorce and underscores the need for more gender-sensitive policies regarding job postings.

Both stories offer a nuanced understanding of how women cope with domestic violence.

9. The Bargain for a Room of One's Own

Caseworkers', Collective | The Third Eye | Jul 7, 2023



Artwork created using Dall-e

The easiest thing to tell a woman in a violent marriage is to just leave. But is leaving always that simple? From financial vulnerabilities to hopes, desires, dreams, fears and responsibilities, all collide in the decision to not leave and stay.

In this snapshot of a life filled with violence, the caseworker takes us through her own *samjhauta*, and narrates how she carved her own space to recover a sense of self-worth. Most poignantly, she writes about how she continues to make meaning of this contradiction in their lives—of being case workers handling gender-based violence, and living with violence in their own lives.

Ultimately, she asks the eternal question: which room is mine?

The Third Eye worked with 12 caseworkers in rural and small town Uttar Pradesh, and through a process that included immersive writing, theatre-based pedagogies and year-long workshops, the caseworkers became the lexicographers of The Caseworkers' Dictionary of Violence.

Will I spend my entire life moving from room to room? I do not know if there exists a room in the world that I will be able to claim as mine. Don't get me talking about the spaces I have lived in. There have been so many. I will begin with the two rooms I live in at present. One is the room in my in-laws' house, and the other is a rented room where I live alone.

Room 1:

When I got transferred from Mahoba to Fatehpur, I wondered how I would manage to stay here with my children because room rents were so high. Then I had the idea of shifting them to my sasuraal. It was only an hour away from Fatehpur. My in-laws' house was in a poor state; still I brought my three children to this house.

That very month, there was a division of property in my sasuraal. Our share was a small house and did not have electricity. All night, mosquitoes bit us and my children just could not sleep. I was up all night, fanning them, and in the morning I went to work, tired and sleep-deprived. I discussed the situation in my office. Someone talked to the company handling our provident funds about the possibility of withdrawing money from my account. I received it within a month.

The first thing I did was to go to the Electricity Department and get a connection in my name. I also talked to people who supply materials like sand, cement, brick and started building an extension to the house. My kids helped a lot in the construction process. They are very young—my sons are 13 and 15. My daughter is 17. Whatever needed to be done, my older son did it all.

I didn't even bother to involve my husband. Even if he did a little bit of work, he would have demanded money for liquor. Finally, when the house was complete, I felt great joy that I had built my home.

One side of the room has a cooler and an almirah, while a stack of ironed clothes occupies the other. After the plastering was complete, I stood in a corner and clicked a selfie thinking, "This is a house that I have constructed."

My children could now live properly. I got all three of them admitted to school. But they cannot focus on their studies because of that drunk. My daughter is training to be a nurse and it is so difficult for me to continue her education. Most times, she lives with her nani, my mother, and goes to her college from there. My children have many requests, some demands, which I am unable to fulfil. But when we all sit together in that room to eat, it makes me happy. They tell me, "Leave our father!" But how can I leave him? How will I raise my children if I leave that man? Even though I have built this room, the land belongs to him. So, I am not sure how much of this house actually belongs to me.

I only get to meet my children sometimes, because I also live in a rented room in Fatehpur.

Room 2:

This room has white walls and I keep my books smack next to the wall. On the wall there is a greeting card given by a friend. But my favourite part of this rented room is the terrace. Whenever I feel alone, I sit there to feel a sense of openness. Sometimes, a few friends from office also come and just hang around here with me.

I feel good living in this rented room but somewhere, I do miss my children. This room has a few belongings that hold memories for me. I look at them and they bring me joy. But, every few days, I also go back to my husband and kids. This is my samjhauta...

But when I am in this rented room, I find myself thinking of a different room. The room in my parents' home.

Room 3:

My mother built this room. I had picked sky blue for the walls. My younger brother and I shared this room, which had with a stack of greeting cards on one side and many photo albums on the other. I kept this room well-decorated. It also had a small cupboard in which I had kept my gods and goddesses to worship.

This room was close to my heart. Every morning, the rays of the sun filtered through the roshandaan and fell on my face. Amma would cover my face with the end of her saree so I could sleep a little longer.

I was married when I was in Class 8. I was married because my father, a long-time alcoholic, had started to suffer from a mental illness. My mother had some money at the time. She was uncertain about the future and thought it best to marry me off. In her mind, there was no guarantee as to how my brothers would turn out. Some of our relatives suggested a match and Amma agreed, even though the man was much older than me and belonged to a poor family. He was also an alcoholic but no one knew that then.

The day my baraat was to arrive, I also had to appear for an exam. My palms were filled with turmeric and henna. All the boys in my school laughed at me. By the time I came back from writing my exam it was evening. My friends who had come to attend my wedding had also stayed the night. When the procession arrived, they had a look at the groom. They ran up to me and said, "Sangeeta, is this how they have dumped you? You are so young while the groom is so old." I stood there, quiet, not saying a word. Soon it was dawn and time for me to leave, my bidaai. Everyone hugged me and cried, but my eyes were dry. At last, when my brothers hugged me and cried, it struck me that I was going away from home and then the tears just would not stop. By this time, Amma was also aware that she had pushed her young and innocent daughter into a terrible home.

And that is how I ended up leaving the room in my mother's house. I reached my marital home, and kept telling everyone this is not my home. My brother will come, take me home, and I will never return.

Are there rooms in this world where you are handed over to someone else?

Room 4:

A very small kutchra house made of mud. You have to bend to enter the home. No lights or fans. A dim lantern light fell just in one corner of the room. The smoke from burning cow dung cakes engulfed it such that you could die coughing.

When I reached my sasuraal, it was packed with people and my face was covered in a long veil. In that tiny house, I was made to sit in a small corner. My sister-in-law sat down beside me and began to wave a hand-held fan at me.

I was so young and so thin I was struggling under the weight of the heavy saree.

I kept asking everyone, “When can I go back home?” All the women there had the same reply, “This is your home now. You have to live here forever.”

In this manner, I had to stay there for five days. My husband forced himself on me on three of those five nights. I was filled with disgust and never wanted to come back again.

When I went home, I hugged everyone and cried so much more than I had on the morning of my bidaai. Everyone consoled me. My aunts assured me that eventually everything would be fine.

Fine? I don’t know if anything became fine but I soon found myself in a room in Delhi.

Room 5:

A small room that doubled as the kitchen, and the bedroom where seven or eight people slept. Constructed in the middle of a densely populated area, this room has no space, not even for a little more air! The rent was Rs. 700. It was this room where my children were born.

I continued my education. My in-laws took me to Delhi. I became a mother the same year and gave birth to a beautiful daughter. In Delhi too, I had to stay indoors. I fell mentally ill. People would keep on telling me that I did absolutely nothing. They wanted me to go and do domestic work in people’s homes but I did not go.

Soon, it was April. It was almost time for my B.A. examinations so I came back to my mother’s house. After writing my exams, I returned to Delhi and lived there for four years. I gave tuitions to students nearby. Taking care of my children, looking after the house, and continuing with my own studies all together was really tough. We moved a lot. I do not know how many rooms we changed!

When I finally left Delhi, I had made up my mind that no matter what, I would not come back to this city. I will live and work in my village.

Room 6:

A kutcha house made of bricks, where my children and I took care of each other. The roof of this room was made of tin. I spent hours staring at it and wondered, how did I land here?

I had heard about an organisation in Mahoba and applied for a job there. After a month, I received my appointment letter. I was elated. But I was always a quiet and simple girl and scared of speaking. My colleagues assigned the nickname Chupki to me because I hardly ever spoke. Whenever I reached home late from work, my husband would say, “What kind of a job is this! Even the DM (district magistrate) does not have such long meetings.” I needed this job and I had to live with my husband, so again, I chose to stay silent.

Working in the organisation changed my way of looking at many things. I stood up against the marriage of young girls in my own area. I bought a small phone with my earnings. I worked on women’s issues. I gave courage to women and in return, that gave me courage.

My parents’ home was close to my office so I often stayed with my mother.

One day when I returned from work and sat down, my mother came to me and said, “Sangeeta, your aunt’s house is up for rent, why don’t you take it?” I was shocked.

My parents’ home, where I was staying at the moment, had three rooms that my father had built before he died. They were all taken by my brothers. After my father’s death, Amma had very little. My older brother had a shop and that is how he paid for basic needs and for the education of the two younger brothers. Amma worked in the fields. After my brothers got married, Amma slept in my eldest brother’s room. When my sisters and I go home for festivals, we have to think hard about where to sleep. Usually, we all retire to the room where badi bhabhi, the eldest daughter-in-law, sleeps. But it is a small house.

When Amma asked me to rent my chachi’s house, I spent all day at work wondering how the people in my mohalla would react. “Sangeeta’s house is so big but she is renting a house!” I returned in the evening. The following day I rented the house owned by my aunt. This house was some distance from my maternal home. Every morning, when I left my rented house to go to work, I would pass by my house and think about how it once used to be my home. I could no longer claim ownership over my parents’ home as I had done before.

The reason I lived in a rented house in the same mohalla as my parents’ home was because of my children. Amma took care of them, and this would not be possible if I lived far away. My mother too faced humiliation because of me. My brothers’ wives often told the neighbours, “She works at her daughter’s house and she is a nanny to her grandkids. She does not care for our children. She’s all about her daughter.” Whenever the aunties in my neighbourhood said this, I felt bad. I have

never talked back to either of my sisters-in-law. If they say something, I just listen quietly.

After a year, I changed rooms again. This room was near the main road and a little far from the previous one because I wanted to avoid walking through the same street. Later, when I got posted out and, as I mentioned earlier, I sent the kids to the house my husband inherited, where I added a room for them with my money. Visits to my maika became less frequent.

At work, I never expressed the stress I was feeling. Even when there were quarrels with my husband, I never told anyone. Whenever after a fight I tell him that I want to leave the house, he says, “Go, take your room and go away. The land is still mine.”

How can one take their room and move out of the house?

My colleagues and friends from work often come over to my Fatehpur room to spend time; but slowly, they are all moving away from the city. I find myself alone on the rooftop.

Yet one can never see a hint of tension reflected on my face. I am always smiling. At the office, they say, “Sangeeta has such a smiling face.”

Perhaps, this is my bargain...

The Caseworker’s Dictionary of Violence, by The Third Eye and Nirantar Trust, offers a grassroots vocabulary for gender-based violence in India.

Link-

<https://thethirdeveportal.in/learning-lab/dictionary-of-violence/the-bargain/>



10. पुलिस की ड्यूटी ने परिवार से बढ़ाई दूरियां, रिश्तों में आ रही में खटास, तीन महीने में महिला सिपाही ने घरेलू हिंसा के 30 मामले दर्ज कराए

Sabita Kumari | Dainik Bhaskar | Shashi Bhushan | Oct 30, 2023

महिला आयोग, महिला विशेष कोषांग और हेल्पलाइन में अपनी पीड़ा लेकर आ रही महिलाओं में बढ़ी तादाद में महिला पुलिसकर्मी

राज्य में 28 हजार 960 है महिला पुलिस बल, यह कुल पुलिस बल का 29 प्रतिशत है।

देश में सबसे अधिक महिला पुलिस बल की संख्या बिहार में है।

भास्कर इंवेस्टीगेशन। पटना

चेहरे पर वर्दी का रौब। आवाज में खनक। जय हिन्द करते एक महिला सिपाही महिला आयोग में दाखिल हुई। लेकिन अगले ही पल वह टूट सी गई। आंखें आंसुओं से डबडबा गए। आयोग के पदाधिकारी ने जब उससे वजह जानना चाहा तो वह फूट पड़ी। आंखों में आंसू और परिवार टूटने के गम के साथ उसने पति और ससुराल वालों के खिलाफ शिकायत का आवेदन देने की बात कही। पूछने पर कहा-मैडम मेरे पति की पोस्टिंग मुंगेर में है और मैं पटना में तैनात हूं। उसका आरोप था कि पति का दूसरी महिला के साथ रिलेशन है। वह उससे ठीक से बात नहीं करते हैं। पिछले एक साल से घर नहीं आ रहे हैं। पति कहते हैं-सारे आरोप गलत है। सिर्फ शक करती है। इससे तंग आ गया हूं। गुस्से में घर नहीं आ रहा हूं। यह सिर्फ एक मामला नहीं है बल्कि महिला आयोग और हेल्पलाइन और थानों में बनाए गए महिला कोषांग में हर दूसरे दिन महिला सिपाही, दारोगा पति और ससुराल वालों के खिलाफ शिकायत लेकर पहुंच रही हैं। हमने ऐसी 25 महिला सिपाहियों से बात की है। जो अभी ट्रेनिंग अवधि में हैं और जिनकी नई-नई शादी हुई है या फिर उन्होंने बच्चे को जन्म दिया है। उनके पति दूसरे जिले में रहते हैं या फिर जाँब करते हैं। महिला सिपाहियों की पीड़ा है कि उन्होंने बहुत कठिनाइयों के बाद पुलिस में नौकरी हासिल की है। ससुराल वाले नौकरी भी करने को कहते हैं और सारी जिम्मेवारी भी निभाने को कहते हैं। कई महिला पुलिसकर्मियों की शिकायत है कि अपने पति से अलग रहना उनकी मजबूरी है। अगर सरकार 50 किलोमीटर के दायरे में पोस्टिंग कर दे तो कम से एक सप्ताह में एक-दो दिन परिवार के साथ रह सकती हैं। राज्य में महिला पुलिस कर्मचारियों की संख्या 28 हजार 960 है। यह संख्या कुल पुलिस बल का 29 प्रतिशत है और महिला पुलिस की संख्या देश में सबसे अधिक है।

बिहार राज्य महिला आयोग की अध्यक्ष अश्वमेध देवी से सीधी बात:

पति-पत्नी के बीच मनमुटाव या तकरार के पीछे चार प्रमुख वजहें हैं जो सामने आ रही हैं।

इसमें पति-पत्नी के बीच दूरी एक बड़ी वजह है। दूसरा यह देखने में आ रहा है कि शादी के तुरंत बाद या नौकरी लगते ही लड़की की शादी होना। उन्हें रिश्तों को समझने का मौका ही नहीं मिलता। इसके अलावा पति-पत्नी के बीच छोटी-छोटी बातों को लेकर मनमुटाव होना भी एक बड़ा कारण है। इन समस्याओं के निपटारे के लिए उनकी काउंसिलिंग की जा रही है ताकि रिश्ते टूटने न पाएं।

0.साल 2022में हुई शादी पति ने छोड़ दिया

महिला हेल्पलाइन में एक महिला सिपाही ने पति के खिलाफ प्रताड़ना की शिकायत दर्ज करायी है। महिला सिपाही ने आवेदन में कहा है कि उसकी शादी 2022में हुई थी। अभी पटना में पोस्टेड है। शादी के महज चार महीने तक ही दोनों बीच अच्छा रिश्ता रहा। अब पति कहता है साथ में नहीं रहेगा। दहेज मांगता है। वह पति के साथ रहना चाहती है। काउंसिलिंग के दौरान पति ने आरोप लगाया कि उसकी पत्नी ससुराल में रहना नहीं चाहती है। वह अपने माता-पिता के साथ रहता है। माता-पिता को कैसे छोड़ सकता है। पत्नी अक्सर दूसरे लड़कों से बात करती रहती है। ऐसे में वह कैसे साथ में रह सकता है।

0. मैडम,पत्नी बुरी तरह पीटती है, मैं नहीं रहूंगा उसके साथ:

महिला आयोग में महिला सिपाही ने शिकायत दर्ज करायी है कि पति साथ में नहीं रहता है। महिला सिपाही बेगूसराय में पोस्टेड है। पति पूर्णिया में निजी कंपनी में कार्यरत है। छोटी-छोटी बातों को लेकर पति लड़ाई झगड़ा करता है। काउंसिलिंग में आए पति ने कहा कि उसने पसंद की लड़की से शादी की थी, लेकिन शादी के बाद पत्नी बुरी तरह से पीटने लगी। विरोध करने पर बोलती है कि केस कर दूंगी। ऐसी महिला के साथ कैसे हर सकता हूं?

0.पति पैसे मांगता है और घर नहीं आता:

महिला आयोग में एक महिला सिपाही ने पति पर प्रताड़ना की शिकायत दर्ज करायी है। महिला कहना है कि उसका पति पटना में रहता है। वह नालंदा में ड्यूटी कर रही है। शादी के डेढ़ साल हुए हैं। उन्हें एक बच्ची है। पति देखने तक नहीं आया। ससुराल वाले भी देखना पसंद नहीं करते हैं। पत्नी का कथित आरोप है कि उसके पति का भाभी से अवैध संबंध है। वह पति के साथ रहना चाहती है। ससुराल वाले सिर्फ पैसे मांगते हैं। पति से पूछा गया कि तो कहा कि- उसकी पत्नी का व्यवहार अच्छा नहीं है। हर बात पर गाली-गलौज करती है। इसके कारण साथ नहीं रहना चाहता है।

0.गाइडलाइन:

पति-पत्नी की एक जिले में पोस्टिंग हो सकती है, लेकिन गृह जिले में पोस्टिंग नहीं हो सकती है। एक साथ पोस्टिंग के लिए पति का भी कामकाजी होना अनिवार्य है। गृह जिले में पोस्टिंग सेवानिवृत्ति के अंतिम साल में हो सकती है। इन तीनों विकल्प में समस्या का समाधान नहीं।

0.एडीजी हेडक्वार्टर जीतेन्द्र सिंह गंगवार से सीधा सवाल:

प्रश्न: पति से दूर रहने के कारण महिला पुलिसकर्मियों के रिश्ते में खटास आ रही है?

जवाब-इस तरह की समस्या न हो, इसके लिए विभाग प्रयास कर रहा है।

0.क्या पुलिस विभाग कर्मियों की पोस्टिंग को लेकर कोई पहल कर रहा है?

जवाब-महिला पुलिसकर्मियों की पोस्टिंग को लेकर पॉलिसी बनायी जा रही है।

0.क्या पति-पत्नी को एक जिले में तैनात देने का प्रावधान है?

जवाब-पति-पत्नी अगर जॉब में हैं तो उन्हें एक जगह पोस्टिंग दी जाती है। इसके लिए पुलिस मुख्यालय में आवेदन देना होता है।



Sabita Kumari has spent thirteen years in grassroots journalism in Bihar, primarily with Dainik Hindustan and now at Dainik Bhaskar.

Response to Gender Based violence

AGender-Based Violence (GBV) in India is deeply entrenched in the country's religious, political, and governance systems, creating a protective shield around powerful individuals. Religious leaders often wield substantial influence over political figures and this connection can enable figures like 'God Man' Virendra Dev Dixit to evade justice. As reported by Apoorva Madhani, despite numerous allegations against Dixit, law enforcement has been largely ineffective, hindered by the political and religious backing he enjoys. This reflects the broader pattern where religious conservatism and political interests intersect, often to the detriment of women seeking justice.

The recent protests by women wrestlers against a well-connected sports administrator also highlight the systemic flaws in addressing GBV. Despite the gravity of the allegations, the response from police and administrative bodies has been slow and inadequate, reflecting institutional bias. As detailed by She the people, these delays are driven by political considerations, where protecting allies and maintaining power takes precedence over justice. Survivors, particularly women in public life, are often left to fight long, arduous battles against an entrenched system that prioritizes the protection of influential figures over accountability, revealing the deep-rooted challenges of holding perpetrators accountable in cases of GBV.

11. 5 yrs since Rohini ashram raid, CBI can't catch rape accused 'godman'. But you can find him on YouTube

Apoorva Mandhani | *The Print* | Jul 5, 2023

Ashrams run by 'godman' Virendra Dev Dixit under court & CBI scanner since 2017 raid at one ashram in Delhi's Rohini where 100+ girls were living in 'animal-like conditions'.

Virendra Dev Dixit's YouTube channel has remained active

New Delhi: Up until 2015, Dr Santosh Rupa Dumpala, then 33 years old, was on an enviable professional journey — having earned a PhD degree in nanotechnology from a university in the US in 2011, she was living the proverbial American dream, teaching in the country.

However, a backache led her back to India that year — to an ashram in Delhi's Rohini with rickety stairs, dark and narrow passages and metal grills on the windows.

Under the aegis of 'Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya', the ashram was run by self-styled godman Virendra Dev Dixit.

In December 2017, the ashram, one of seven in Delhi and among many such others in India, found itself in the eye of a storm.

An inspection team appointed by the Delhi High Court visited the ashram and detailed "horrible" living conditions for over 100 girls and women residing on the premises, housed in "animal-like conditions with no privacy even for bathing".

Since Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya first came under national scrutiny, Dixit has been absconding.

Over the years, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Delhi government, Delhi Police, University Grants Commission (UGC), North Delhi Municipal Corporation, and a court-appointed committee supervised by former police officer Kiran Bedi have all tried to either nab Dixit or bring down his ashrams.

The CBI has filed chargesheets against Dixit in two rape cases. It issued a lookout notice for him in January 2018 and February 2019, a blue corner notice through Interpol in March 2018, and non-bailable warrants through a Rohini court in April 2018 and January 2019.

And while Dixit doesn't show up for the authorities, he continues to appear online on YouTube for his followers, imparting teachings on the Bhagavad Gita and 'Murlis' or "Godly directions".

The ashrams of Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya across India continue to house women inmates, and Santosh Rupa Dumpala and several other women continue to have faith in Dixit. In documents submitted in court, they maintain that they are "voluntarily residing" at the ashrams which have "an atmosphere that is pure, peaceful and congenial".

Dumpala stated to the CBI that she was suffering from intense back pain when she visited the ashram of Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya in Rohini in July 2015. She has never looked back at her old life and is now backache-free, she claimed.

Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya has, over the years, continued to pursue its aim of "transforming the world in general and Bharat in particular...where there is only one religion, one kingdom, one King and one clan", according to a response it filed in court.

While the larger questions over the functioning and funding of Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya ashrams remain unanswered, the institute has stated in court that it believes in remaining independent, "just like Muslim basic schools (Madrse) and many organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh carrying out their activities independently".

'Lord Krishna and his gopis'

It all began on 12 December, 2017, when an NGO, Foundation for Social Empowerment, filed a PIL in the Delhi High Court, highlighting "various shady and illegal activities going on at Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya under the garb of providing a spiritual path to enlightenment".

It claimed that "in reality, the so-called ashrams...have become a jail of sorts where women (both minor and major) are being detained and exploited".

The PIL cited several FIRs, including rape FIRs, filed by some former inmates and families of current inmates against Dixit. It stated that "women are being subjected to a lot of indoctrination at the hands of ashram officials which portrays that the head of the organisation (Dixit) is Lord Krishna and places the women inmates in the category of his 'Gopis'".

The court acted swiftly in response to the PIL.

On 19 December, 2017, taking note of the potential "danger to the lives and limbs of several girls stated to be illegally confined" in the ashram, the court directed an inspection team to visit the premises of the Rohini ashram the same day and videograph the inspection.

The inspection team comprised advocates Nandita Rao and Ajay Verma, representatives from the Delhi Commission for Women, and the Deputy Commissioner of Police, nominated by the Commissioner of Police.

The status report filed by the team revealed a state of affairs that shook the country.

It stated that the inspection team observed a building with multiple doors with locks, housing over 100 girls in “animal-like conditions with no privacy”. It submitted that, during the inspection, passages in the building were so narrow and low in height that the team had to bend to pass through. There were metal doors at short intervals, and the women were kept in dark spaces with metal grills, without sunlight.

The team also suspected that several of the inmates appeared to be under the influence of some kind of drug or narcotic, and spoke of a large amount of medication and injections lying in the ashram, according to the report.

The same month, advocate Verma and chairperson of Delhi Commission for Women Swati Maliwal visited another ashram of Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya in Delhi’s Palam Colony.

The inspection report, seen by ThePrint, stated that the team “found objectionable literature posted on the wall with obscene words”.

According to court records, the Vijay Vihar ashram also had a separate wing for male inmates.

Two rape chargesheets

In December 2017, the high court also directed the CBI to constitute a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the cases against Dixit.

The CBI then registered three cases involving Dixit and Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya in January 2018, and constituted an SIT. According to various responses by the CBI in the high court, it has filed chargesheets in all the three cases.

The first chargesheet has been filed under Section 376(2)(n) (repeated rape) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) against Dixit, and under Section 109 (abetment) read with Section 376(2)(n) against one Gyaneshwar Mali.

The second chargesheet has been filed against Dixit for rape. Dixit has been declared a proclaimed offender in these two cases.

The third case pertains to alleged manhandling of the inspection team which had visited the Rohini ashram on 19 December, 2017. The team told the court that they were “obstructed” by certain members of the ashram and, therefore, an FIR was lodged “in regard to the violence faced by the committee”.

The matter was referred to Samadhan (Delhi High Court mediation and conciliation centre) through an order passed in July 2018 by the court.

The settlement agreement between the ashram and its members on one side and advocate Rao on the other confirmed that a scuffle on 19 December was a result of a “misunderstanding” and an unconditional apology was tendered to Rao.

Rao accepted the apology on the condition that the ashram bring out guidelines for its functioning.

All parties then filed an application before the high court in September 2018, demanding quashing of the FIR in view of the settlement arrived between them. However, the CBI “vehemently opposed” the quashing of the third FIR on the basis of the settlement agreement.

It told the court in October 2018 that it had already filed a chargesheet against 59 ashram members in regard to the alleged violence, for criminal conspiracy and rioting.

However, a lawyer familiar with the case told ThePrint that the committee chose to settle the case because “the last thing that they wanted was for any of these women to go to jail.”

‘We are the children of one father’

On 20 December, 2017, the high court also asked the chairperson of the Child Welfare Committee to visit the ashram to check if there were minors there and take steps in accordance with the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015.

Reports filed by the committee in the high court, seen by ThePrint, stated that when a CWC member visited the Rohini ashram, she found a total of “163 inmates” residing on the premises. They added that out of these, 41 inmates “looked minor on appearance”, and were sent for medical examination. The CWC order also said that after the medical examination, the children were to be placed at a child care institute in Delhi.

According to status reports filed by the CBI in court in 2018, the 41 girls were found to be aged over 18 years.

In October last year, Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya told the high court that “almost all” the 41 girls, after being released by the CWC, “joined Adhyatmik Vidyalaya once again and are pursuing their spiritual studies”.

Complying with another high court order, a team of medical and mental health experts from the Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences and AIIMS visited the Rohini ashram on 30 May, 2018. The team screened and interviewed each of the “162 inmates” in groups as well as individually.

Their report, seen by ThePrint, said that in individual interviews, all the inmates “in a mechanical manner” said “we are children of one father (Shiv Baba). We have

come to unite to save the world from biggest disaster which is approaching; for which we need to maintain sanctity”.

The report added: “They individually asserted that people across the world will ultimately follow them for this divine cause.”

Overall, the report ruled out any behavioural oddities, signs of psychological distress or psychiatric disorders, and said that nobody was living at the ashram under coercion. However, it added: “The residents as a group had overvalued ideas (religious belief system) which could be attributed to their long-term association with the organisation.”

Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya has made similar claims in responses filed in the high court. For instance, in one response of October 2022, it explained its aims and objectives.

One stated aim pertained to “transforming the world in general and Bharat in particular from the Hell (World that gives sorrow) to Heaven (Happy World) where the political power & religious power is in one hand and where there is only one religion, one kingdom, one King and one clan”.

In a response filed before the high court in January 2018, Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya also attached affidavits of 71 spinsters — all of them attesting to the fact that they were voluntarily living in the ashram and were all aged over 18 years.

YouTube videos from UK, Bulgaria

The Delhi High Court constituted yet another six-member committee in April 2022 to examine “all the establishments (of the ashram)...in the NCT of Delhi”.

When the new committee, formed under the supervision of former Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry Kiran Bedi, visited the Rohini ashram last year, it was confronted with a small room on the third floor of the building.

The inmates allegedly “resisted the inspection” of this room, according to the panel’s September 2022 report, seen by ThePrint.

Inside, the team stated, they found around 300-350 mobile phones, batteries and chargers. One of the inmates was in the room with two laptops. The room also had a locked cupboard, which had to be opened with the assistance of the local police. Inside, the committee found another big batch of new mobile phones.

When the inmate in the room was asked to switch on the laptop, the team found a lecture delivered by Dixit in 2021 on the laptop. The committee claimed that in another Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya ashram in Nangloi, a lecture delivered by Dixit in August 2022 was found playing on the TV on 31 August, 2022.

The report recommended: “The inmates are continuously receiving the latest discourses of Baba Virendra Dev Dixit digitally. Despite being absconded, affairs

of the ashram are being managed by him. An investigation be directed regarding the chain of communication to get hold of the absconded Baba.”

Raising objections against the recommendations of the committee, Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya told the court in October last year that the inmates and spiritual followers did not know Dixit’s whereabouts, and that they accessed his “latest discourses” from YouTube channel ‘AWAJ 2018 Adhyatmik Gyan’ and ‘Vasudhaiv kutumbkam’.

A look at the two channels showed that Dixit has been appearing for his followers through a continuous supply of videos on YouTube.

The high court’s most recent order passed on 31 May this year also noted that Dixit was regularly uploading videos himself or through his followers. It was highlighted that several of these videos had been “uploaded from March 2018 onwards on at least six YouTube channels and social media handles, from countries including the UK, Bulgaria and Nepal”.

The court suggested that the CBI initiate the process for issuance of Letter of Requests under Section 166A of the Code of Criminal Procedure to the UK, Bulgaria and Nepal.

Section 166A allows a criminal court in India to issue such a letter of request to any court or authority in a foreign country to examine and get evidence from anybody abroad. This can be done if the investigating authorities find out during probe that evidence related to the offence may be available in a place outside India.

‘Spiritual family, not an institute’

Since December 2017, several authorities have tried to cast a net on Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya, targeting its name as well as the buildings housing its followers.

In January 2018, the UGC issued a show-cause notice to the organisation, asking why “Spiritual University alias Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya” should not be included in the list of fake universities.

In a response filed in February 2018, Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya asserted that the “UGC lacks jurisdiction in Spiritual University”.

It explained: “UGC has power to recommend any University the measures necessary for the reforms and improvement in University Education. It is submitted that the followers of Spiritual University have strong spiritual faith that the education in this university is being delivered by the Supreme Soul i.e. God himself.”

In February 2018, in response to an objection, the high court asserted that Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya could not use the term ‘Vishwa Vidyalaya’ or ‘University’ in any manner, and barred it from using the terms in its name.

In May 2018, the organisation told the court that in compliance with the court's February order, it had removed the word 'Vishwa' from its name, and that "the spiritual family is now being called 'Adhyatmik Vidyalaya'".

However, Adhyatmik Vidyalaya also challenged the high court order in the Supreme Court in July 2018. This appeal is still pending.

On 20 December, 2017, the high court had also directed the Commissioner of North Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) to investigate the ashram buildings.

An engineer from NDMC visited the Rohini building on 28 January, 2018.

His report, dated 3 February, 2018, seen by ThePrint, stated that the property was situated in an "unauthorised colony... where no building plans have been sanctioned for any construction".

The NDMC then passed orders for sealing as well as demolition of the building which, the order stated, "is like a cage which had given rise to safety hazard."

The order has, however, been challenged by Adhyatmik Vidyalaya in a Rohini court.

In April last year, the high court directed the ashram to comply with the provisions of Women's and Children's Institutions (Licensing) Act, 1956, and get registered under the Act.

This order for complying with the provisions was challenged by the organisation in the Supreme Court, which rejected its petition on 25 July last year.

However, the Delhi High Court order wasn't complied with by Adhyatmik Vidyalaya till October last year, according to another court order. In October 2022, the organisation told the high court that the 1956 law was not applicable to it since its ashram was a "spiritual family and not an institute".

'Spiritual practices relieved backache'

After Santosh Rupa Dumpala joined the Rohini ashram in July 2015, she wrote a letter to the police in Hyderabad and Delhi, intimating them about her whereabouts and requesting protection from any harassment from her parents.

The letter, seen by ThePrint, claimed that her parents wanted to get her married and "they don't like my voluntary choice of living spiritual life".

According to a high court order passed in January 2018, the police were told by the inspection team (of 19 December, 2017) that they had found bags full of written complaints by ashram inmates, in almost identical language, against their close family members.

In her February 2018 statement to the CBI — seen by ThePrint — Santosh Rupa, now Prajapati Brahma Kumari Santosh Rupa, said that she was suffering from acute backache in June 2015, from which no medicine could relieve her.

“...during PhD, I was facing many types of stress which caused to increase backache. After consultancy with Naturopath Doctor and on his suggestion I started spiritual practices with Brahma Kumaris (spiritual movement) due to which I got relief from backache (sic),” she stated. Adhyatmik Vidyalaya claims to be an offshoot or a splinter group from the spiritual organisation, the Brahmakumaris.

However, since 2015, her parents — retired Food Corporation of India inspector Ramreddy Dumpala and homemaker Meenavathi Dumpala — have been approaching authorities, ranging from the local police in Rohini to the Ministry of Home Affairs, alleging that their daughter has been illegally confined in the Adhyatmik Vidyalaya ashram.

In April 2022, the parents filed an application in the Delhi High Court, demanding Santosh Rupa’s immediate release from the ashram.

They also demanded that the ashram be probed for “women trafficking, illegal confinement”, verification that the money in Santosh Rupa’s bank account was transferred to the ashram, medical tests on Santosh Rupa and other women on the premises to check influence of drugs on them, as well as strict action against the ashram for “keeping women in an illegal building without basic amenities, under surveillance, in unhealthy conditions”.

In the same application, the parents have also relied on dictionary meanings of “overvalued ideas” and have demanded that they should be allowed to provide treatment to Santosh Rupa for this condition.

The bigger questions

The ashrams of Adhyatmik Vidyalaya continue to run in Delhi as well as other states like Uttar Pradesh. The same was noted on 31 May this year by a Delhi High Court bench of chief justice Satish Chandra Sharma and Justice Subramonium Prasad.

Meanwhile, the larger questions over the functioning and the funding of the ashrams remain unanswered.

The high court has asserted in its latest order that “the CBI is certainly required to investigate who is the owner of the ashrams, from which account the funds have been released towards payment of rent to the owners of the ashram and the documents on the basis of which the properties have been let out to the residents of the ashram”.

The matter will next be heard on 12 September, and the CBI has been asked to file a fresh status report before that date.

As for Santosh Rupa, her parents continue to fight the legal battle for her “custody” in the high court. However, lawyers involved in the case are faced with a dilemma.

While the parents continue to make allegations ranging from indoctrination to drug abuse of their daughter and other women at the ashram, the court is often reminded of the fact that all these women are adults.

The women have also filed several affidavits and undertakings in court claiming that they are living in the ashram “voluntarily” and “happily”. In court, Adhyatmik Vidyalaya has claimed that the “management of Spiritual Centres is handled by all the female inmates collectively”.

“These women seem perfectly mentally sound... It may be a way of life we can’t associate with,” a lawyer involved in the litigation told ThePrint. Another lawyer added, “This is the same Article 21 quandary that we have faced before, with other similar cases. At the end of the day, these girls are major.”

However, the lawyer highlighted that there are other “larger issues” that might need more focus. “Like who is funding the outfit? Is it really the case that each one of them gets money and pools it together and that this is some kind of a bohemia?”

Santosh Rupa turned 40 in March this year. Two years ago, she had told the high court that the motive of her parents was “to obstruct (her) spiritual path”.

Her response to the court, seen by ThePrint, asserted that she had joined Adhyatmik Vidyalaya after getting “influenced by the spiritual teachings given”.

She has now “decided to devote her whole life for spiritual services”, it added.

Apoorva Mandhani is an Assistant Editor at ThePrint, with focus on law and courts. She also makes several explainer videos and anchors key weekly shows on ThePrint’s Youtube channel.

Link: <https://theprint.in/india/5-yrs-since-rohini-ashram-raid-cbi-cant-catch-rape-accused-godman-but-you-can-find-him-on-youtube/1655523/>



12. Wrestlers v/s The System

SheThePeople.TV | May 31, 2023

The distressing sight of wrestlers facing police brutality while protesting sexual harassment serves as a stark reminder of the battles yet to be won. Their voices continue to be silenced by a system that favours the powerful.

As Mr Modi basked in the grandeur of the new Parliament's inauguration on a Sunday, many of us saw a distressing sight. Images of women, formidable wrestlers and champions, being subjected to police brutality while protesting at Jantar Mantar flooded our screens.

In January, the women called off their protest as the Government provided assurances of setting up a panel to investigate their claims. Former Boxing Champion, and member of Parliament Mary Kom headed the investigation. But the report was never made public.

While supporters of Sharan Singh, and apologists for the government's inaction in the face of mounting criticism say that you cannot allow street protests to determine the guilt of a person, the fact remains that the wrestlers had followed the full process before their protests began. They initially reported the matter to the police, followed by the Indian Olympic Association, and ultimately approached Sports Minister Anurag Thakur. However, faced with persistent inaction, they turned to the highest judicial authority in the land, the Supreme Court. Responding to their plea, the court directed the police to register the case. The Delhi police that is so remarkably fast when it comes to unleashing charges against students, environmental activists, journalists and others – made a show of complying with the Court's orders in extremely slow motion

Wrestlers vs The System

Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh is a powerful man with powerful friends. Friends who can unleash the power of the state against those who oppose them. Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh is not just the strong man of wrestling, but also the strong man of Ayodhya. He is the current sitting Member of Parliament for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Incidentally, on the day of the inauguration of the New Parliament, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh was present, while the women who accused him were carted away to prison.

We can look at the sexual harassment charges against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh with the same lens that we look at all other sexual harassment cases. Powerful man, not so powerful women. The result is almost always the same. The powerful man has the capacity, and the backing of very powerful friends, to wait out the charges. This is the same thing that happened with a bunch of very famous men in India and

elsewhere. Most of them faced a bit of social ostracisation and a few months later all is forgiven, and they are back ruling the roost. The women who accused them, however, are out in the cold – labelled troublemakers, and finding it difficult to find work, or the ability to sustain themselves.

With Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh there was not even the temporary ostracisation. Both he and the BJP decided to brazen out allegations of sexual harassment, from not 1 but 7 separate women – one of whom was a minor – and instead cast allegations on the women who were complaining.

In 2017, the Me Too movement shook the world. In a world where the onus of sexual harassment or sexual assault was on the woman – you must have done something to provoke him – the floodgates opened, as women across nations, across age groups, across race and religion, came out to say “Yes, I was sexually harassed”. And other women added their voice – Me Too. It was an incredibly powerful moment in history, as women finally could open up about their deep pain on not just having to cope with the harassment, but also the silence that followed. In a world where silence was the norm, a powerful movement emerged, starting as a whisper, growing into a resounding shout that continues to echo across the globe. It all began with courageous women come out and sharing their experiences, talking about their deep sense of shame and humiliation. Talking about the deep hurt that came from a world that would not believe them. And, a power structure that would stand by those who molested.

Today 6 years later, nothing has changed. The power structure – powerful men, and women who enable sexual harassment by their implicit silence, and explicit support – is back in full force shielding men in powerful positions from the consequences of their actions.

On Tuesday as the wrestlers stood by the banks of the River Ganga at Haridwar, and swore to drop their medals as they began a fast unto death. Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh got the mahants of Ayodhya to speak up for his ‘good conduct’. They reported that ‘as far as they know’ he couldn’t have done this kind of act. In a world still marred by gender inequality and a power structure that shields the mighty, the objectification of women persists. The distressing sight of wrestlers facing police brutality while protesting sexual harassment serves as a stark reminder of the battles yet to be won. Despite following the proper channels and enduring the slow march for justice, their voices continue to be silenced by a system that favours the powerful.

The Me Too movement offered a glimmer of hope, but six years later, little has changed. The pain of women remains unheard, overshadowed by a society that fails to believe, support, and protect them. As courageous women continue to share their experiences, the resounding cry for justice echoes across the globe, demanding an end to the pain endured by countless women who dare to speak out.

SheThePeople is India's leading platform for women, highlighting their stories and achievements.

Link: <https://www.shethepeople.tv/columns-shethepeople/wrestlers-vs-the-system-harini->



Understanding the patriarchal underpinnings of Crimes Against Women

Crimes against women remain a significant global issue, with acid attacks and deep fake videos impacting them physically, psychologically, emotionally, and socially.

Acid Attacks: Acid attacks are used to maim, disfigure, or even kill women. These attacks are often driven by motives such as rejected romantic advances, disputes over dowries, or personal vendettas. The impact on victims is devastating, frequently leading to permanent physical disfigurement, blindness, and severe emotional trauma. Acid attacks not only affect the individual but also reinforce a culture of fear and control over women, perpetuating inequality and violence. Sneha Richhariya documents the journey of an acid attack survivor's resilience and her efforts to attain a semblance of normalcy despite her dire situation.

Deep Fake Videos: The rise of digital technology has given birth to a new form of cybercrime against women: deep fake videos, which use artificial intelligence to superimpose a person's face onto another's body, often in compromising or explicit scenarios. This non-consensual manipulation is primarily used to shame, blackmail, or harass women, leaving victims vulnerable to reputational damage, psychological harm, and social stigma. Pooja Rathi provides an overview of deep fake videos and their impact on women. As deep fakes become increasingly sophisticated, they blur the lines between reality and fabrication, making it difficult for victims to prove their innocence. The slow pace of legal frameworks in addressing this emerging crime adds to the complexity of combating it.

Sensitising children and youth by providing sex education that goes beyond mere biological processes to promote an understanding of consent, choice, and the identification of toxic masculinity and acts of violence could greatly reduce violence against women argues Ankita Anand. She provides a convincing argument for promoting sex education not just for healthy sexual and reproductive choices but also as a means to stop sexual violence.

13. PART 1: ‘Can I have blue eyes?’: An Acid Attack Survivor’s Journey To Regain Vision

Sneha Richhariya | *IndiaSpend* | Mar 6, 2023

‘Can I have blue eyes?’: An Acid Attack Survivor’s Journey To Regain Vision

Acid attacks can be debilitating both mentally and physically, leading to long years of struggle to regain basic bodily functions. We trace the fight of one such acid attack survivor in Odisha and Tamil Nadu.

Rani was attacked with acid in 2009, leaving her blind. Here, she gets an eye check up at Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai.

Cuttack/Bhubaneswar/Chennai: A smiling face framed by a black dupatta looks up, startled at my visit. She walks slowly, navigating her way through the room as she welcomes me in. Rani lives with her family in Cuttack, a city in the east Indian state of Odisha. “Meet Saroj, my husband—and she is my mother,” she points at the other woman in the room.

Rani, (whose full name is Pramodini Roul, but she prefers Rani) is a 30-year-old who survived an acid attack on April 18, 2009—a day she remembers as clearly as if it happened yesterday. It happened in Kanakpur, her village, 40 km from Cuttack. When she was 16, a paramilitary soldier, visiting an army camp near her school, would ‘eve-tease’, the colloquial term for sexual harassment in India. He claimed to have fallen in love with her.

“I told my family, and we explained to him in all possible ways that this is an unacceptable proposal, but he kept chasing and following me,” says Rani. That day, she was out walking with her cousin brother when the attacker came by on a bike and poured a bottle of acid on her head.

At first, she didn’t realise it was acid. She then felt her hair burn, and her skin peel off like liquid. “I fell on the road and cried for my life,” Rani tells me, as she shows me a picture of her without the head covering. For Rani, life as she knew it till then had ended. Today, she is blind in her right eye and has 18-20% vision in her left eye; it is a fight to hold on to that little window of sight.

“This is a battle that strips you and your family of everything,” says Rani.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) recorded 1,066 acid attacks in the five years from 2017 to 2021. Of these, over 60% of the attacks were on women, data from the NCRB show. Organisations, such as the Acid Survivors Trust International, say these numbers are underreported; the real number is likely to exceed 1,000 attacks a year. Around a third of the victims (31%) suffer complete or partial blindness, experts estimate.

Experts say India has a history of acid attacks being carried out as an extreme form of revenge, the intention being to humiliate and debilitate rather than to kill. In most cases, when thrown on a person's face, acid speedily eats into the eyes, ears, nose and mouth. The pain is agonising. The healing of acid attack burns leaves thick scars and causes skin to tighten or turn leathery, which exposes victims to further deformity and makes them vulnerable to blindness. This is the story of Rani, and of other acid attack survivors like her who fight to regain their vision.

For four years, Rani, who went blind because of an acid attack, could not see her husband.

As Rani and I walked through Bhubaneswar's LV Prasad Eye Hospital, I saw water bubbles forming in one of her eyes. "Relax," she laughs. "I see the world with eyes that release water bubbles."

In 2009, Rani suffered 80% burns, leaving her blind and paralyzed. After five years, she overcame the paralysis. But for nine years she had no sight, and her eyes bulged out. After a cornea transplant in 2017 in her left eye, at Sankara Nethralaya in Chennai, she regained 18% of her vision.

For the last five years, she has been undergoing treatment at the Chennai hospital. With complete vision loss in the right eye, Rani can only see to a distance between three to five feet from her left eye. Every two months, she has to keep visiting Chennai, where Sankara Nethralaya offers cheap eye treatment to acid attack survivors.

On September 30, 2022, Rani's right eye was removed because it had fully bulged out. She now waits for a new cosmetic eye.

On a cold February night, Rani [who is six-months pregnant], is preparing to travel with her husband to Chennai for cosmetic eye replacement surgery. They agree to let me join them.

As Saroj packs Rani's luggage, I stand with her mother, Kavita, in the kitchen as she prepares dinner. Our conversation is about Rani.

"When acid was thrown on my daughter, her skin came off in the form of yellow liquid, and I collected it with these hands and filled it in a bucket," she says, as she collects water from the kitchen tap mimicking what she had to do that day.

'I wanted to see the world again'

For seven months, from April until November 2009, Rani was in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). In August that year, she was in a coma for 24 hours, and when she emerged from it, she was paralysed. In the initial months, doctors battled to save her life but they could not protect her vision.

“Most of the girls who survive an acid attack live a compromised life,” Rani tells me, as she brings her phone close to her left eye to check her Instagram feed. “But I took a strong resolve. I wanted to see the world again.”

In 2016, armed with this resolve, she began her battle to regain her lost vision. In October that year, she went to Chennai for the first of many rounds of operations at Sankara Nethralaya. By then, she had completely lost her right eye. “I can never forget that time in my life,” Rani says.

“The doctor told us that we will have to wait till someone donates an eye for a transplant,” her mother adds. “He told us that we won’t know how long the wait would be—as short as two days, as long as two months, or maybe more. There was nothing to do but wait. I kept Rani in Chennai, in a hostel, where I slept on the floor.”

Dr Shweta S Agarwal, associate consultant (cornea) at Sankara Nethralaya, has been handling Rani’s case from the beginning. “Probably if we could have seen Rani in the early stages, we could have saved her right eye,” she tells me. “By the time Rani reached Chennai, she could not perceive light in the right eye because the eye pressures were very high and the nerve behind it had become completely dead. So nothing could be done there.”

The corneal transplant: Using stem cells to restore eye-sight

On October 9, 2017, Rani had a corneal transplant. The transplant of an eye damaged in an acid attack is a complex process. “Her left eye was also quite bad,” Dr Agarwal says. “But luckily her lids were fine, we were able to do a corneal transplant, take cells from the right eye and transplant them to help her see with the left eye.”

The stem cells surrounding the cornea help maintain its health. In patients with acid injury, these stem cells get damaged. Such patients therefore need a stem cell transplant. Rani’s right eye was non-functional, but a small part of it had somehow survived, uninjured. It was from this part that the doctors were able to take the stem cells and transplant it to the left.

Rani recalls gradually going under the anaesthetic, while various machines monitored her heartbeat, lung function etc. After the operation was over, and the dressing in place, the anaesthetist disconnected the machines and gradually restored her to consciousness.

“However,” says Dr Agarwal, “her graft [transplanted cornea] is slowly getting weaker as time passes, so there is a very high possibility that she is going to require another corneal transplant.”

Since Rani has no more undamaged stem cells in the right eye that can be transplanted she—like a lot of other sufferers from acid attacks—is going to require a donor, someone who has passed away and left behind documentation permitting organ harvest. Surgeons take stem cells from such dead donors and transplant them

to the acid victim – and in such cases, the patient has to be on prolonged oral immunosuppressive drugs to prevent the body from rejecting the transplanted cells.

For eight years of her life, Rani has been going for regular visits to the hospital to help her regain part of her vision.

“I really love travelling on an aeroplane,” says Rani, as we board the flight to Chennai from Bhubaneswar. She barely saw anything in the first couple of months after the corneal transplant. Even though the doctor assured her that she will gradually regain some vision, she says, “I used to wait every single day. On some days, I used to imagine how the world would actually look.”

She vividly recalls September 14, 2017. “I was on a flight when I suddenly saw some colours,” she says, her voice rising in recalled excitement. “I shouted out loud to my husband, and everybody around looked at me. We told everyone that I had just regained my vision, and everyone applauded.”

Rani and Saroj on the flight from Bhubaneswar to Chennai. “I really love travelling on an aeroplane,” says Rani, who lost her vision when she was attacked with acid in 2009.

The gift of sight came with a welcome bonus. She had never seen her husband before that day. “Saroj was the first person I saw with my new eyes,” she says.

“Can I have blue eyes?”

On a Thursday afternoon, Rani has an appointment with oculoplasty specialist Dr Kirthi Koka.

As we wait to enter Dr Koka’s cabin, Rani talks to me about her life before the attack.

She shows me the only pre-attack photo of hers that she has. She was 16 at the time. It is a passport-size photo with Rani staring into the camera with a poker face. “Kabhi kabhi zindagi mein kya ho jata hai na! Sab kuch original part nikal gaya, sab kuch.” [Sometimes we don’t know what happens in life. All original parts of my body have been taken out.]

Rani’s treatment will not increase the minimal vision she now has. “All this has to be done just to keep the eyes intact and to maintain whatever vision she has,” says Dr Agarwal. “She will never see more than this.”

Dr Koka arrives and Rani walks into the consulting room, dressed in a black salwar kameez with her bald head covered by a red dupatta. Dr Koka asks Rani to be seated for a quick eye check up.

“OK,” says Dr Koka. “We removed your right eye in September last year, right?”

“Yes, this side” said Rani, indicating her red, watery right eye.

Ocularist Prabhu designs Rani’s new cosmetic eye at Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai.

The doctor works her way round Rani's right eye, matching it with the transplanted left eye. "Your left eye is doing fine, no?" she asks.

"Yes. You are putting a new artificial eye on the right side. My left eye is slightly blue so for the other side too...Maybe, can I have blue eyes?" Rani asks.

At the prosthetic clinic where Rani is taken to get her artificial eye prepared, she meets Prabhu, the ocularist who is to make her the "blue eye" she wants. As he takes the measurements and colours the eye in a bluish shade, he asks Rani, "Does it look blue enough?"

"Can it resemble my left eye a little more?" asks Rani.

"Yes, it will take some more time but we will get it right," says the ocularist.

Understanding acid injuries to the human eye

Rani was attacked with concentrated sulphuric acid. In the "Encyclopedia of Toxicology", sulphuric acid has been called a "dangerous dehydrating agent" that removes water from tissues. In the chapter titled 'Ocular Toxicology' it explains, "when concentrated sulphuric acid reacts with water in the tear film of the cornea, heat is released, causing both thermal and chemical burns to the eye. Very severe burns may cause complete opacification of the cornea or perforation of the globe with loss of significant ocular fluid. Complications include glaucoma and cataract formation."

Simply put, and as the 2009 Law Commission Report submitted to the Supreme Court, said direct acid contact or acid vapours can damage eyes, causing blindness. "Thrown on a person's face, acid rapidly eats into eyes, ears, nose and mouth. Eyelids and lips may burn off completely. The nose may melt, closing the nostrils, and ears shrivel up."

According to Dr Samir Mohapatra, consultant ophthalmologist at Bhubaneswar's LV Prasad Eye Institute, acid can affect the eye from front to back. To begin with, he says, the patient might lose the eyelids. If the eye doesn't close because of exposure, the cornea starts melting. The skin of the cornea is lost, and the loss of this protective cover creates the possibility of infection. The entire eye can be lost in cases of acute injury.

In most cases, if it's an acid attack, it is usually a bilateral injury. "Very rarely do we find that one eye has got saved—probably, the position of the person at the time of the attack was such that, you know, one eye got lucky – but usually it's bilateral," says Dr Mohapatra.

"If an immediate intervention is not done, there is a big possibility that the eye will develop a whole lot of perforation, and then we lose the eye if it is not managed at the appropriate time."

According to him, even after a corneal transplant surgery, There are three possibilities that will lead to a failed transplant: suture-related infections, rejection and infection. The new cornea will get rejected and the eye pressures will spike. If the new cornea is accepted, the sutures in the eyes have to be removed, with regular follow ups, but there is a chance of infection.

Medical response to an acid attacked eye

Rani after her right eye was removed to replace it with a cosmetic eye at Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai. Rani now has a blue-coloured stone eye, and one eye with a transplanted cornea that can barely see a face five feet away.

“We didn’t know at first that it was acid,” Rani’s mother recalls. “So I picked Rani up in my hands as I saw her crying in severe pain. My skin also burned – see?” She points to scars on her right hand, and her waist. “We took her to the hospital, where she lay on a stretcher for the whole day. She kept crying.”

In most cases of acid attacks, delayed medical response becomes a significant reason for loss of vision. This is because, as Dr Mohapatra explains, “Our priority is always to first save the patient’s life. The rest comes much later.”

While saving the life of the patient is of prime importance, if she is admitted to a multi-speciality hospital, they can at least call an ophthalmologist and have the eye examined at the same time.

The problem is that, in many cases, if there is a lack of blood supply, then the key surgeries cannot be immediately performed. The bare minimum that can be done, Dr Agarwal explains, is to make sure that the eyes are closed. In that way, there is at least a certain extent of natural healing.

“We can save some part of the eye from getting completely damaged, but if the injury is so severe that they have lost the eyelid and the eye is not able to close, then they definitely will need some kind of an intervention,” she adds.

Psychosocial support

Rani and her husband, Saroj, wait for Dr Shweta Agarwal at Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai. It is no easy task for acid attack survivors to spend a large part of their lives waiting in hospital corridors or undergoing surgeries.

“As far as medical science is concerned, I don't think there is anything lacking in India, whether it is stem cell work, Keratoprosthesis [corneal transplant], or surgery,” says Dr Agarwal. “What we really need is funding and support from the government and NGOs, to take care of patients like Rani.”

Psychiatric counselling is also required, not just to psychologically motivate such patients but also to help them come to terms with the physical and cosmetic changes that have resulted from the attack.

This is key—while Rani managed to go through the arduous process of frequent trips to the hospital and multiple medical interventions thanks to her resolve, in most cases the survivors lose hope. It is no easy task, spending a large part of your life waiting in hospital corridors or undergoing surgeries. “If I calculate the total time I have spent waiting in hospital corridors, it would be too much to take,” Rani says of her seven-plus years to regain a semblance of normalcy.

On February 22, 2023, Rani’s damaged right eye was replaced with a cosmetic one. She now has two eyes – one, a blue-coloured stone eye, and the other with a transplanted cornea that can barely see a face five feet away.

As I reach my home in Delhi after the Chennai trip with Rani and her husband, I receive a text: “I have got a new blue eye. I have posted a picture. See how it looks.”

Rani saw a smartphone for the first time in 2016. She is now a known Instagram account, with a blue tick.

I log into my Instagram account and find this:

The photo on Instagram on the left, and the photo, showing the blue of Rani’s eye, on the right, that Rani shared with the writer.

“They are blue and you look beautiful,” I text back.

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Sneha Richhariya is a multimedia journalist focusing on environmental reporting and hosting for Suno India Podcasts.

Link

<https://www.indiaspend.com/health/can-i-have-blue-eyes-an-acid-attack-survivors-journey-to-regain-vision-855381>



14. भारतीय अभिनेत्रियों के वायरल डीपफेक वीडियो, तकनीक के ज़रिये लैंगिक हिंसा का एक नया तरीका

Pooja Rathi | *Feminism In India* | Nov 8, 2023

सोशल मीडिया पर एक वीडियो तेजी से वायरल होता है जो चर्चा का विषय बना हुआ है। अमिताभ बच्चन समेत कई लोग इस पर अपनी चिंता जाहिर कर रहे हैं। दरअसल इसकी बड़ी वजह यह है कि यह एक डीपफेक वीडियो है जिसमें तकनीक के ज़रिये एक महिला को अभिनेत्री रश्मिका मंदाना की तरह दिखाने की कोशिश की गई। उसके बाद चारों तरफ प्रतिक्रियाओं का दौर चल ही रहा था कि कल बीते शाम इसी तरह का एक नया वीडियो सामने आता है। अभिनेत्री कैटरिना कैफ का भी एक डीपफेक वीडियो वायरल किया जाता है। उनकी आने वाली फिल्म के एक दृश्य को डीपफेक करके वायरल किया जा रहा है। एक के बाद एक अभिनेत्रियों के ऐसे वीडियो आना महिला सुरक्षा के लिए एक बड़ा चिंता का विषय है।

द किंट में प्रकाशित ख़बर के अनुसार पांच नवंबर को फिल्म अभिनेत्री रश्मिका मंदकाना की वीडियो वायरल होती है जिसमें असल में अभिनेत्री खुद है ही नहीं थी। जारा पटेल नाम की एक ब्रिटिश भारतीय महिला द्वारा उनके सोशल मीडिया पर पोस्ट किए गए वीडियो में अभिनेत्री मंदाना के चेहरे के साथ जोड़कर उसके साथ छेड़छाड़ की गई। भारतीय सूचना तकनीक मंत्री ने वीडियो को डीपफेक बताते हुए गलत “सूचना का बहुत अधिक हानिकारक रूप” कहा है। यह मामला जब सामने आया था जब ऑल्ट न्यूज़ के पत्रकार अभिषेक कुमार ने सबसे पहले बताया था कि अभिनेत्री का यह वीडियो एक डीपफेक वीडियो है। उन्होंने सोशल मीडिया एक्स पर पोस्ट किया था।

डीपफेक सामग्री को सबसे पहले 2014 में सिंथेटिक मीडिया कहा गया था। बाद में धीरे-धीरे जैसे इसकी लोकप्रियता बढ़ती गई 2017 में एक रेडिट यूज़र ने एक अश्लील वीडियो बनाने के लिए इसका इस्तेमाल किया था। वीडियो में मशहूर हस्तियों के चेहरे पोर्न कलाकारों के चेहरे पर बदल दिए गए थे।

इस घटना पर दुख जाहिर करते हुए अभिनेत्री रश्मिका ने कहा है, “यह निश्चित करना बहुत ज़रूरी है कि आगे से किसी के साथ ऐसा कुछ न हो। अपने सोशल मीडिया एक्स हैंडल पर उन्होंने लिखा है, वास्तव में यह बहुत डरावना है न सिर्फ मेरे लिए हम सबके के लिए जो तकनीक का इस्तेमाल कर रहे हैं। उन्होंने आगे लिखा है कि एक औरत और एक अभिनेत्री होने के कारण मैं अपने परिवार, दोस्तों और शुभचिंतकों की शुक्रगुजार हूँ जो मेरे लिए एक सपोर्ट सिस्टम की तरह खड़े हैं। लेकिन अगर ऐसा मेरे साथ तब होता जब मैं स्कूल या कॉलेज में होती तो सच में मैं नहीं जानती इसका कैसे सामना करती। इससे पहले की हममें से अधिक लोग इस तरह की पहचान की चोरी से प्रभावित हो हमें सामूहिक रूप से और तत्परता से इस पर ध्यान देने की आवश्यकता है।”

डीपफेक क्या है

डीपफेक ऐसी तकनीक है जिसमें एआई का इस्तेमाल करके मल्टीमीडिया कंटेंट यानी तस्वीरों, ऑडियो और वीडियो में बदलाव किया जाता है। किसी भी व्यक्ति के चेहरे या शरीर को एक अलग व्यक्ति के चेहरे या शरीर के रूप में दिखाने के लिए संशोधित किया जाता है। यह नकली होने के बावजूद भी इतनी वास्तविक लगती है कि लोग बहुसंख्यक आसानी से इसे पहचान नहीं पाते हैं। डेक्कन हेराल्ड में प्रकाशित जानकारी के मुताबिक डीपफेक सामग्री को सबसे पहले 2014 में सिंथेटिक मीडिया कहा गया था। बाद में धीरे-धीरे जैसे इसकी लोकप्रियता बढ़ती गई 2017 में एक रीडिट यूजर ने एक अश्लील वीडियो बनाने के लिए इसका इस्तेमाल किया था। वीडियो में मशहूर हस्तियों के चेहरे पोर्न कलाकारों के चेहरे पर बदल दिए गए थे।

डीपफेक तकनीक कैसे काम करती है

डीपफेक तकनीक के तहत बदले गए वीडियो, ऑडियो या तस्वीर को बनाने में कुछ स्टेप लगते हैं। द गार्जियन में प्रकाशित लेख के मुताबिक ऐसे कंटेंट बनाने में एल्गोरिदम का इस्तेमाल किया जाता है। एनकोडर नामक एआई एल्गोरिदम के माध्यम से दो लोगों के चेहरे के बीच समानता ढूँढी जाती है और अन्य इमेज संपादित की जाती है। दूसरे एल्गोरिदम डिकोडर से क्रॉमप्रेस्ड तस्वीरों से चेहरे को दोबारा प्राप्त करना सिखाया जाता है। एनकोडर और डिकोडर के अलग-अलग कमांड से काम किया जाता है। डीपफेक बनाने का एक अन्य तरीका जेनरेटिव एडवरसैरियल नेटवर्क बनाते हैं जिसे जीएनएन कहा जाता है। डीपफेक में कई स्तर पर फीडबैक के सहारे गलतियों को सुधार करके उसे बेहतर बनाया जाता है।

» और पढ़ें: लैंगिक पूर्वाग्रहों को मज़बूत करते 'स्मार्ट वाइफ' जैसे घरेलू डिजिटल डिवाइस मुख्य तौर पर महिलाओं को बनाया जा रहा है निशाना

समय के साथ-साथ डीपफेक का विस्तार भी हो रहा है। तकनीक में बदलाव और बढ़ोत्तरी के साथ यह और बेहतर होती जा रही है। इस तरह के बदलाव एक तरफ जहां चौकाने वाले हैं साथ ही दूसरी ओर ऐसे डीपफेक बनाए जा रहे हैं जिनका आसानी से पता लगाना असंभव होता जा रहा है। कई रिपोर्ट के अनुसार इस तकनीक से शुरू में अश्लील कंटेंट बनाया गया था। पोर्नोग्राफी में इसका इस्तेमाल किया गया था। आज नेता, अभिनेता, अभिनेत्री या अन्य मशहूर हस्तियों के डीपफेक वीडियो बनाए जा रहे हैं जिसमें मनोरंजन से लेकर राजनीतिक मकसद तक शामिल हैं।

साल 2018 में पत्रकार राणा अय्यूब को निशाना बनाते हुए डीपफेक पोर्नोग्राफी कैपेन चलाया गया था। जो इतना बढ़ गया था कि उनके इसकी वजह से उन्हें अस्पताल तक में भर्ती होना पड़ा था। महिला पहलवानों के जंतर-मंतर पर यौन हिंसा के खिलाफ हो रहे आंदोलन में भी डीपफेक तस्वीरों का इस्तेमाल किया गया। इसी तरह यूक्रेन की प्रथम महिला ओलोना ज़ेलेन्स्का के डीपफेक जारी किए गए। उस समय जारी इस तरह की तस्वीर और वीडियो का मकसद पूरी तरह राजनीतिक था। रूस और यूक्रेन युद्ध के दौरान भी कई डीपफेक वीडियो सामने आए। अमेरिका में भी चुनाव के दौरान अलग-अलग डीपफेक सामने आए थे।

एक रिपोर्ट के मुताबिक 90 फीसदी डीपफेक की वीक्लिम महिलाएं हैं, जिनके कारण बदला, बदनाम करना आदि है। समय के साथ-साथ ये बहुत घातक भी होते जा रहे हैं लेकिन सवाल साथ में यह है कि सोशल मीडिया कंपनी और देशों में इस मुद्दे को उस गंभीरता से संबोधित नहीं किया जा रहा जितने की इस पर आवश्यकता है। साथ ही यह सवाल भी बनता है कि ये अभियान कैसे इतने प्रभावी होते जा रहे हैं। अक्सर मौजूदा मीडिया एल्गोरिदम और मनोविज्ञान इसमें भूमिका निभाते हैं।

सेंसिटी एआई की रिपोर्ट द स्टेट ऑफ डीपफेक 2019 लैडस्कैप, थ्रेट्स एंड इम्पैक्ट में पाया गया है कि 96 फीसदी डीपफेक गैर-समहति वाले सेक्सुअल डीपफेक थे और उनमें से 99 फीसदी महिलाओं पर बनाए गए थे। डीपफेक लैंगिक हिंसा का एक नया रूप है जिसमें आर्टिफिशियल इंटेलिजेंस तकनीक के सहारे महिलाओं की स्वायत्ता को खत्म किया जाता है। उन्हें अपमानित और उनका शोषण किया जाता है। डीपफेक के जरिये महिलाओं को निशाने बनाने की खबरे अलग-अलग देशों में देखने को मिल रही है। अमेरिका और दक्षिण कोरिया में महिला हस्तियां मुख्य रूप से सेक्सुअल डीपफेक का टारगेट है। दक्षिण कोरिया में ये वीडियो इतने प्रचलित हो गए थे कि वहां के लोगों ने सरकार से इस मुद्दे के समाधान के लिए कदम उठाने तक का आह्वान किया था। इस तरह की घटनाओं में महिलाओं के खिलाफ बढ़ते मामलों को देखते हुए कई देशों में इससे बचने के लिए कदम उठाए हैं और कानून बनाए हैं।

क्या है भारतीय कानून में प्रावधान

हिंदुस्तान टाइम्स में प्रकाशित हाल में हुए एक सर्वे के अनुसार भारत में 94 फीसदी डीपफेक एडल्ट कंटेंट मनोरंजन इंडस्ट्री की हस्तियों को टारगेट करके बनाया जाता है। डीपफेक वीडियो के विस्तार लगातार बढ़ता जा रहा है। भारत में भी ऐसे मामले लगातार बढ़ रहे हैं जिस वजह से एआई तकनीक को रेगुलेट करना बहुत ज़रूरी है। भारत में डीपफेक के खिलाफ कानून में इस तरह के अपराध के मामले में किसी व्यक्ति की इमेज को बड़े स्तर पर मीडिया में कवर करना भी शामिल है।

आईटी ऐक्ट 2000 के तहत धारा 66ई के तहत उसकी निजता का हनन करने का उल्लंघन है। इस अपराध के लिए तीन साल की सजा और 2 लाख से ऊपर के जुर्माने का प्रावधान है। इसी तरह के संदर्भ में आईटी मंत्री राजीव चंद्रशेखर ने अप्रैल 2023 में कहा था कि यह प्लेटफॉर्मों के लिए यह एक कानूनी दायित्व है कि वे सुनिश्चित करें कि किसी भी यूज़र्स द्वारा कोई गलत जानकारी पोस्ट न की जाए और यह सुनिश्चित करें कि जब किसी यूज़र्स या सरकार द्वारा रिपोर्ट की जाए तो गलत सूचना को 36 घंटों में हटा दिया जाए।

» और पढ़ें: कैसे तकनीकी क्षेत्र के इतिहास से औरतों के योगदान को गायब कर दिया गया

अभिनेत्री रश्मिका ने कहा है, “यह निश्चित करना बहुत ज़रूरी है कि आगे से किसी के साथ ऐसा कुछ न हो। अपने सोशल मीडिया एक्स हैंडल पर उन्होंने लिखा है, वास्तव में यह बहुत डरावना है न सिर्फ मेरे लिए हम सबके के लिए जो तकनीक का इस्तेमाल कर रहे हैं।

मीडिया को बरतनी होगी सावधानी

एक अध्ययन में पाया गया है डीपफेक पर आधारित मीडिया रिपोर्ट में मुख्य रूप से डीपफेक के नकारात्मक इस्तेमाल पर ध्यान केंद्रित किया गया है, न कि सेक्सुअल डीपफेक के गैर-सहमित निर्माण से होने वाले नुकसान पर जो इस तरह के वायरल का सबसे आम रूप है। अध्ययन के मुताबिक मीडिया ने इस समस्या को और बढ़ाने और प्रचारित करने का काम किया है। ऐसे में पारंपरिक मीडिया की जिम्मेदारी बनती है कि वह ऐसी घटनाओं का बिना विवरण दिए और बिना लिंक दिए जानकारी प्रसार कर सकता है न की अपने खबर देने में इस तरह के कंटेंट को विस्तारित करने में और मददगार साबित है। हाल के मामलों में अगर हम भारतीय मेनस्ट्रीम मीडिया की रिपोर्टिंग देखे तो वहां इस तरह की सावधानी की भरपूर कमी देखने को मिली है।

आर्टिफिशल इंटेलिजेंस का प्रभाव आम जीवन पर लगातार बढ़ता जा रहा है इसलिए इसको रेगुलेट करना समय की सबसे बड़ी आवश्यकता है। हमें यह नहीं भूलना चाहिए एआई तकनीक भी मनुष्यों द्वारा निर्मित की गई है जो पक्षपाती, पूर्वाग्रहों को बढ़ावा देने वाले हो सकते हैं। इस प्रकार यह असमानता और भेदभाव करने के लिए प्रेरित कर सकते हैं। एआई तकनीक डेटा विश्लेषण आधारित सिस्टम के तहत काम करता है जिसके लिए डेटा लीक ना हो यह सुनिश्चित करना ज़रूरी है। एआई तकनीक के द्वारा होने वाले अपराध बहुत गहरे मुद्दे बनते जा रहे हैं जो केवल गलत तस्वीर साझा करने या गलती से गलत चीज़ पर भरोसा करने तक सीमित नहीं है।

Pooja Rathi is an Assistant Editor at Feminism In India (Hindi).

Link

<https://hindi.feminisminindia.com/2023/11/08/deepfake-is-a-gender-issue-and-indian-actress-targeted-by-deep-fake-content-hindi/>



15. Call Me by My Name: How the lack of Sex Education in India is Impacting Society

Ankita Anand | *Unbias the News, News Sense, News Kashmir* | Oct 30, 2023

Trigger warning: Rape, assault

In an Indian mini-series called *Who's Your Gynac*, the doctor exhorts her patients to chuck euphemisms and say vagina and penis when referring to those body parts. A Hindi film, *Oh My God 2*, shows a father taking on the education system, the judiciary and the society at large for shying away from sex education. These examples, though, still remain the exception when it comes to accepting sex education as essential. While the conservative/religious views remain that marriage and reproduction are sacrosanct, even married couples face a lot of issues because they received zero, little or the wrong information about sex while growing up. Over ten such people in their thirties that *Unbias the News* spoke to confirmed that sex ed in their schools was absent or nervously glossed over.

“You probably already know from movies”

Reet Sharma* is a marketing consultant for American Fortune 500 companies and a mother of two. She recalled: “I distinctly remember my ninth-grade teacher [in India] skipping the human reproduction part of the book saying ‘no giggling and you probably already know from movies’. I did not know from movies.” Anya Vishwas*, an equity, diversity and inclusion manager in the UK with two kids, said: “I didn’t understand orgasms . . . And it did affect my sex life, of course.” Urmi Srinivasan*, a Bangalore based digital marketing strategist, turned to porn in her teenage to inform herself. Yet, she added,

“I did not know how condoms help prevent pregnancy until I was, say, 18. I don’t remember having such talks with anyone in the family who could help me learn about these things.”

But teachers who understand the importance of sex education also exist. Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) based Kati Cysarek, an educational psychologist and teacher-trainer who works for children with traumatic experiences, would teach about sex ed in the eighth grade as prescribed in the government curriculum. The task of sex education is not easy, admitted Kati, because it has to be culturally appropriate, and language wise it is tough. She had a hard time finding words in Hindi that weren’t either obtuse or abusive. But she kept working on her aim of “normalising bodies” and making her students understand that “we [men and women] are basically equal. I wanted them to learn that our bodies are not a matter of shame.” While some of these discussions were held separately, many were held in a common space for all genders. The result of all these efforts was that the sexual harassment of girls there stopped.

Union of equals or forced submission?

Soon the women in the school also started approaching Kati for advice. A teacher who had married a man of her choice was horrified when he came and sat on her bed after their wedding. “I did not know he was such a terrible person,” the horror-struck newlywed reported, though the groom had only approached her to talk.

In other cases, Kati’s married colleagues had to face what can only be termed as rape and coercion, after having fought off their husbands’ advances for weeks.

To one woman, her spouse had shown videos of rape and told her sex was supposed to happen in that manner. The man assaulted his wife several times till she finally divorced him.

After Kati’s wedding day, her colleagues were extremely sympathetic towards her for what she must have “suffered”. When Kati insisted that sex did not always have to be painful, they concluded that white women probably have different bodies. Ultimately Kati started a kind of communication therapy, which she called “the most important thing for a couple”.

Dr Ankeeta Menona Jacob, associate professor with the department of community medicine in K.S. Hegde Medical Academy in Mangalore, Karnataka, also stressed on the need for pre-marital counselling: “In some religions, people are taught about these things. I don’t know how much the couples understand but at least they get some idea.” Otherwise, she lamented, couples have an “inability to talk about their sexuality or their desire to have sex. It is seen as something you do before going to bed with the lights off.”

Know thyself

This lack of knowledge even in married people is also something Aisha George noticed in her work. Aisha works with Hidden Pockets Collective, a non-profit “using various forms of digital tools to educate young people and advocate for policy changes around sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice.” Her frustration was: “Women did not know what was happening in their bodies. There should be a language to talk to them. Medical terms are complex and doctors are busy.”

There is an assumption that people with high, formal education would know more. But amongst the women who got in touch with Hidden Pockets, only about 15 percent had some knowledge about their own bodies. Aisha shared:

“Even married women assume that they can get pregnant anytime of the year if they are having sex. They do not know about ovulation.”

The taboo around education on sex, sexuality and reproduction has also led to women dissociating with their own bodies. Hidden Pockets found that when doctors asked women about the colour of their vaginal discharge or menstrual blood women did not know because they did not like to notice: “When it comes to something out of the vagina, it feels awkward and scary to women.”

Challenges in accessing information

Organisations like Hidden Pockets might do their best to spread awareness. But the access route to this information is also full of hurdles.

For couples staying in joint families, even going out to get the information is hard as they are not comfortable telling their parents about it. Even with pregnant women, often the husbands or mothers-in-law query the doctors, and women stay silent.

To know about medical termination of pregnancies, young men would approach the organisation with questions. But it would be difficult to give specific answers without having complete information from the woman herself.

A small number of these men also had questions about how to keep their partners “happy”. Some asked about how they can help their partners through their abortions. “But they never ask about contraception,” Aisha fretted.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing

But amongst those who approach Gytree, a women's health and wellness platform, a greater number of male partners are willing to talk about sex related issues. They bring up a range of challenges from fertility to intimacy taking a backseat in the relationship. Swarnima Bhattacharya, Gytree's co-founder, attributes these issues to a lack of sex education: “I am speaking of educated, well-to-do people who travel internationally. They can't believe that something like vaginismus exists.

'If there's love, how can sex not happen,' they ask. They feel these issues are not Indian, and happen only in the West.

I have had to tell people, 'When other organs have problems, you accept it. So why this stigma around sexual organs?'"

On the other hand, men also have difficulty accepting women's sexual desires as being natural. Swarnima shared, "Two to three men said, 'It makes me wonder about her [sexual] history.' Other men were even violent to women who articulated their desires or initiated sex.

Since many men are opposed to using protection or contraceptives, again because of the myth that these things adversely impact “male sexual prowess”, the entire burden of sexual safety and avoiding unwanted pregnancies fall on women. When,

because of it being a taboo subject, women cannot discuss this with their partners, let alone doctors, they are the ones to suffer the most. Hidden Pockets has experience with women who wanted to learn about contraception and had similar, uncooperative partners. When these women use contraception without their partners' knowledge, they also have to live under the constant threat of being discovered and the subsequent violence they might suffer at the hands of the husbands and their families for taking a decision about their own bodies.

Women and pain

That's why when early on in her career Swarnima met women with injuries it made her wonder if they were trying to hide assault: "But actually some of these were accidental injuries because of ignorance.

There are women who have given birth but never had painless sex."

Swarnima also met women with endometriosis who had to suffer painful penetrative sex. The doctors they met also focused on solving the problem for the sake of fertility, instead of seeing the alleviation of pain as the primary and urgent goal.

This does not help especially when women have a tendency to be guilty and shameful of such problems, and have been conditioned to minimise or dismiss their pain.

Ruptured relationships

A trust deficit in couples interrupts intimacy. There is also no understanding of how intimacy can exist without sex as well. Plus in India, Swarnima said, "There is a desexualisation of married couples. They are seen only as sanitised family builders. Then there are phases when one might go without sex for various reasons. At such times, partners should be helping each other in their journeys."

But where basic sex education is missing such nuanced education of each other as sexual beings hardly happens. The Gytree founder mentioned the rise of apps coming up for dating for married people, and the survey conducted by these companies showed sexual void and discontent in married relationships as a common feature. Despite that, says Swarnima, "The language around compatibility still does not include sex."

When no one is watching

It is not like everyone is relying on porn and quacks to get their sexual concerns addressed. Swarnima mentioned that of the two companies she knows of working on sexual health, one has closed down and one is active. That one targeted men and women in its advertising, and 94 percent of their business ended up coming from men.

The problem is in the world of startups, if you're a sexual health one you're seen as perverted. There are advertising restrictions, and pages get banned. Google searches flag the businesses. Slowly these companies are trying to change the language they use so that the information they provide can still be accessed by people without the pages getting blocked by platforms.

Earlier such startups struggled with getting likes and comments. Now they have a metric of “secret engagement”, wherein people do not like the post because they don't want to be seen engaging with such content. But they save these posts. Companies have now started seeing this as an accepted metric of growth.

Mend the gap

To mend the gap of sexual education in India, the experts interviewed for this article suggested several measures. The public messaging around health in India has grown more accurate. The same needs to happen around sexual health, which should not cover only reproduction. Gytree gave the example of Africa where some sexual health campaigns started with talking about rape because that topic was considered acceptable. Similarly if there is resistance in India to a discussion on sexual awareness, first an entry point has to be found. Discussions around menstruation have become more widespread than they were a few years ago. Kati Cysarek mentioned how she used comics like Menstrupedia to educate her students. Hidden Pockets noticed that contraception and abortion are subjects their audiences were relatively open to hearing about.

Some workshops might be organised separately for different genders. But many of these discussions need to happen with everyone together so that the shame and stigma around sex being publicly unmentionable reduces. These presentations must be clear and specific, and the audience should not be infantilised. If videos are shown with words bleeped out, the subliminal messaging is still one of shame.

There is a need for strong political will to implement many of these campaigns. A strong awareness of sexual health needs to be seen by governments as a life skill, something that is a part of physical and mental health, and can help prevent violence and abuse.

When there is talk of women's health, the central point should not be only on fertility but on their sexual health too, which includes education on consent and bodily autonomy. Counsellors and therapists need to be trauma informed, and queer inclusive. For those not comfortable with talk therapy, art therapy can help. For awareness campaigns as well, Hidden Pockets used creative methods including podcasts where people shared real life experiences, and songs in the local languages. Going to schools for them still remains the toughest challenge as they have to hear things like “children are here to study” and “this is not part of our culture”. It would take time for the education system to realise that they cannot hope to have mature,

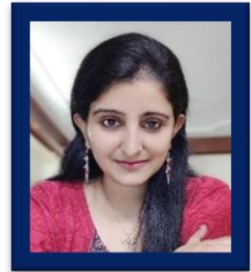
well-educated adults who do not cause harm to themselves or others if they bypass sex education.

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*Names have been changed to protect identities.

Ankita Anand is a Delhi-based journalist, poet, and editor at Unbias the News. She has received numerous awards, including the International Labour Organisation's Media Award.

Link - <https://newssense.in/2023/11/22/call-me-by-my-name-how-the-lack-of-sex-education-in-india-is-impacting-society/>



Gender and Health: Barriers to Women's Healthcare in India

Cultural beliefs and healthcare practices deeply impact women's health, especially in patriarchal societies. In India, women face numerous challenges in managing their health, from menstrual hygiene and diabetes to accessing life-saving vaccinations and diagnostic services. These barriers stem from gendered socio-cultural norms and systemic healthcare inequalities, compromising women's well-being and autonomy.

Nithya Pandian reports on the menstrual hygiene and health in rural Tamil Nadu, where menstrual segregation is still common. Communities like the Rajakambalam Naickers and Dalits confine menstruating women to unhygienic huts, posing serious health risks. Similarly, Ritu Sharma reports on how in Maharashtra, inadequate menstrual hygiene facilities in schools are leaving girls in unhealthy conditions, further reinforcing their marginalization.

Bringing the patriarchal norms that influence medical practices into focus, Tanishka Sodhi reveals how unmarried women are denied much needed diagnostic tests, such as transvaginal ultrasounds, reinforcing discrimination and delayed care.

Similarly, the gender divide in organ donation reflects deeper societal norms. Women, typically caregivers, account for 80% of living organ donors, while men are more reluctant due to their perceived role as breadwinners, reveals Steffy Thevar. This imbalance perpetuates gender inequality, with women disproportionately becoming donors and men the primary recipients.

Additionally, social expectations and care responsibilities affect how women manage chronic conditions like diabetes, often prioritising caregiving over self-care due to stigma, costs, and lack of access to facilities as the article by Saumya Kalia reveals.

The media can play a crucial role in examining how caste, class, location, sexuality, and gender identity intersect to influence women's access to healthcare as the articles in this section demonstrate.

16. How menstrual segregation thrives in rural and urban households in Tamil Nadu

Nithya Pandian | *The News Minute* | Aug 10, 2023

Many women see sequestering inside a house as empowering and may ask what is wrong when women can rest while on their period. But this ‘rest’ is only for household chores, and not for agricultural work.

At Naicker Theru in Ariyagoundampatti, a village in rural Tamil Nadu, a 13-year-old girl who was on the first day of her period was sitting on the steps of a designated ‘resthouse’ – a place meant for menstruating girls and women to be isolated and kept in while on their period. The resthouse has a dilapidated bathroom and the water tank was filled with algae. Inside the dusty, cobweb-ridden room which could hardly accommodate three people, eight people are often crammed in. These ‘rest houses’ are called muttuveedu or muttutharai.

The building was inaugurated in 2007 by former Adi Dravidar Welfare Minister A Tamizharasi and was meant to serve as a community hall but is instead used as sequestering room for menstruating women.

Many women see sequestering inside a house as empowering and may ask what is wrong with the practice when they can rest with co-menstruators and don’t have to do housework. But this ‘rest’ is only for household chores, and not for agricultural work. Most villages in Tamil Nadu largely depend on rainfed cultivation for livelihood. Rainfed cultivation, unlike irrigated agriculture, requires hard labour. Both men and women have to equally toil to grow and harvest crops in the drier part of this state. Regardless of whether women are on their periods or not, they must show up every day to work. Sequestering only keeps them away from their houses, and it is not meant for them to take rest for five days.

TNM visited several villages in three districts of Tamil Nadu – Namakkal, Madurai, and Virudhunagar to find out how prevalent muttuveedu is and why it’s still being practiced. Most often, the muttuveedu was nothing but a single-doored, clay tile-roofed room, located in the centre of the village, which means anyone can find out who is on their period and who is not.

Rajakambalam Naickers and their ‘secret’

In July 2023, a female vlogger caused huge social media outrage for glorifying the regressive practice of menstrual segregation. She showcased a menstruating woman sitting on the road while her mother-in-law brought her food on a banana leaf. The woman was on the first day of her period and was not allowed to rest at home. Instead, she had to stay at the muttuveedu. The video was later taken down, but it shed some light on how menstrual segregation is prevalent in many parts of Tamil Nadu even today.

The particular street featured in the viral YouTube video is located at Naicker Theru (Naicker Street) in the Rasipuram taluk of Namakkal district. The residents of the street were not happy about the presence of the media in their village as they feared further attention on their 'secret'.

The Rajakambalam Naicker community, a land-owning, agrarian community, is categorised as Most Backward Class (MBC) in Tamil Nadu. The practice of sequestering women in a separate house or space is common among the sub-castes of Naickers which include Thotti, Irakula, and Kambalathu Naickers.

During our conversation with the residents of the Naicker Theru, TNM learned that menstrual sequestering is a common practice among the Naicker communities. Residents of the street confirmed that other villages too practised segregation, but were reluctant to name them. "It is a part of our tradition. If we do not follow it, it would bring bad luck to our family members," a woman from the village said. "The girls from poor family backgrounds, who cannot afford to take rest in their houses go there. Not every woman goes there during their period," the residents claimed. However, menstruating women who stay back in their homes are banished to the veranda.

Meanwhile, 300 km away from Namakkal, the Kambalathu Naickers in the Kariapatti village of Virudhunagar district have done away with the practice. "It was common 30 years ago. But our generation went abroad to study and pursued careers outside our towns where there was no such practice of segregating women during their periods. Now this trend has almost vanished in our area," a person from the Kambalathu Naicker community in Kariapatti told TNM. However, many women in the five other villages that TNM visited, who do pursue higher education and employment, have been unable to give up this problematic practice.

Tamizhselvi, a Kambalathu Naicker woman, who is also the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) Panchayat President, recalled how menstrual segregation was prevalent in her village up until 2000. "The sequestering home was right in front of my house. The village residents would build a hut in a designated area for young girls who hit puberty. They would be accompanied by their grandmothers or aunts for one week. Later, it was made mandatory for menstruating women to stay sequestered in that house. Many villages in Rajapalayam where the Rajakambala Naickers live still follow this practice. They usually do not talk about this to outsiders and they maintain it as a secret," said Tamizhselvi.

Advocate Selvi, a state-level organiser of Manithi, an independent and secular organisation that fights against gender-based violence in Tamil Nadu, said that superstitions are rampant and that there are more social restrictions for the Rajakambala Naicker women. "In the villages where I work, women are still not allowed to wear blouses in their clan temples during poojas. Up until a decade ago, family planning was restricted simply because it was against the teachings of their clan's deities. Whenever we try to implement something for their welfare, they

would reject it saying that it is not aligned with their community's traditions. From stopping girls getting an education, to restricting boys from travelling further, they even stopped the bus services in one village where I worked," Selvi explained.

Women in all the villages TNM visited used the stock response of culture and tradition to justify menstrual sequestering. Speaking to TNM, Priya, a resident of Naickar Theru, said that the practice of sequestering women during their menstrual period is not a forced one at the outset. "We voluntarily go to that house. The video that went viral typecasted us and called this practice outdated and unnecessary. But we are doing it for the welfare of our families," she said.

"It is just our tradition and we want to keep it alive forever. Bringing this to the media would be an insult to our women who strongly believe in culture and tradition," said Vasantha, another resident of the village.

When asked about feeding the menstruating women on the road, Vasantha normalised the practice by saying that eating just outside the house is very common in the villages and that people who know the 'customs' of villages never make an issue out of it. When asked whether she would ask her son to sit and eat on the open road, she said that her son doesn't have 'menstrual problems'.

Speaking to TNM, folklorist AK Perumal said that Telugu-speaking communities in Tamil Nadu practiced muttuveedu for many centuries. The legend of Madurai Veeran, a Tamil folk deity, confirmed that the practice of muttuveedu was prevalent in the 1600s. Perumal said that as per the legend, Madurai Veeran was appointed as a guard to the place, where Bommi, the daughter of chieftain Bommanna Nayakan, was sequestering. It was there that Madurai Veeran fell in love with Bommi.

Perumal also pointed out that menstrual segregation was not only practised among the Naicker communities, but also that many privileged communities in Tamil Nadu still consider women 'impure' during their menstruation. "The only difference being that instead of muttuveedu, the seclusion happens inside their houses," he noted.

Dalit villages that follow muttuveedu

TNM visited five Dalit villages in Virudhunagar and Madurai, on the foothills of the Watrap Hills, and found that menstrual segregation is practised among the communities residing there. A 35-year-old muttuveedu located at the centre of the Pottalpacheri village of Madurai district has weeds growing inside and out. An inscription on the building's inauguration block calls the construction a 'Pengal Nala Viduthi', which translates to women's care centre, that was built through crowdfunding.

Forty-five-year-old Shanmugathai, a resident of Pottalpacheri, said that because the muttuveedu is defunct, menstruating women are forced to sleep outside. "Now, we have to sleep outside our houses. See, I sleep next to the iron stove," she said, pointing to an iron stove that is fixed outside her house in the open. She said that her neighbour sleeps inside the goat shed during her menstrual period.

When TNM asked what she would do for food during her period, she said that either her husband or her sons cook for the family. “Usually, daughters would cook for their mothers. But, I have two sons. My son, who is an engineering graduate, cooks for me,” she said, worried to see men like her son having to cook.

Over the last decade, Koovalapuram and its neighbouring villages – Chinnayapuram Pottalpacheri, K Pudupatti, Saptur Alagiri, and Govindanallur – have been in the news for sequestering menstruating women for five days, mothers and newborns for 30 days in muttuveedu. Women from these villages, like the Naicker women, also reiterate that they are ‘not forced’ to go to the rest house, but that they are simply ‘following their traditions’.

Muttuveedu is an undeclared norm in the five villages TNM visited, with women who married into these communities also expected to follow the practice. “I went blank after they asked me to stay inside the muttuveedu, when I got my first period after my marriage. It was shocking and very new. As an outsider to this village, it was quite difficult to understand the practice but now, I’m quite okay with that,” said a resident from the Koovalapuram village of the Madurai district.

Mangalam (48) of K Pudupatti boasts that her two daughters-in-law from Kerala use the muttuveedu without questioning the practice. Notably, in these villages, women from the Pallar community – categorised as Scheduled Caste (SC) in the state – follow the practice uncompromisingly. Social pressure and superstition have conditioned women from 300 households to accept this centuries-old practice to stay inside the asphalt-sheet-covered sequestering rooms in their respective villages.

“The practice was there for many years even before my grandmother hit puberty. Back then, it was a hut with coconut fronds and bamboo. Later, when I started to menstruate, we demanded a solid structure with a roof and electricity. A structure with a roof and electricity is not capable of accommodating many women at a time now. So we built a new one three years ago,” Paappa (53), a resident of Koovalapuram told TNM.

The old construction she mentions still exists in a dilapidated condition. Behind it is a newly constructed building with polythene sacks in which women keep their plates, tumblers, and all the necessary items including a mirror as they frequent the muttuveedu every month. The door was left open to let fresh air in, while two women were taking rest on the empty floor.

When TNM asked about the toilet facilities, the women's faces fell. “All of us use the nearby acacia grove for defecation, so it is normal for menstruating women too to use the same,” said 23-year-old Deepa, a mother to a one-year-old girl, who added that residents did ask the panchayat to construct a toilet for them.

New mothers have to live in the muttuveedu as well. “During our menstrual period, our husbands or in-laws prepare food for us and keep it here. During postpartum, if the kid’s father and grandparents want to see the kid, they will come and take the kid

with them for some time. Then, they go back home and have a bath and continue with their regular work," Deepa said.

Accepting that the muttuveedu is not equipped to support women who have just given birth, Deepa said that now many women who go for Caesarean deliveries ,(C-section) spend their first month inside their houses and repaint them as a part of the theettu kazhikkuradhu, a ritual to make an 'impure' thing 'pure'.

Muttuveedu and health issues

The muttuveedu in Tamil Nadu may have caused several health issues for menstruating women, but it remains under-documented since the practice is kept a secret by these communities.

Research has shown how menstrual sequestering has led to childlessness among the Muthuvan tribes of Tamil Nadu, with 30.65% of couples childless. The study noted that in Muthuvan culture, menstruating women were considered impure and sequestered in a small hut called thinnaveedu, located in an isolated corner of the hamlet, with minimal space. It is often unhygienic and unkempt, with limited facilities for cooking. Women and girls were reported to feel scared during their time inside the huts because the Muthuvan settlements are located inside dense forests. "To overcome this situation, they started to consume oral contraceptive pills with the aim of avoiding the thinnaveedu," the study noted, pointing it out as one of the main reasons for the Muthuvan community women having no children of their own. The oral contraceptive pills were made available by the government through its National Programme for Family Planning.

In Pandalur and Gudalur of the Nilgiris, the Kaattunaikar tribes have dedicated huts called gudda for menstruating women. Sixty-three Kaattunaikar settlements in the Nilgiris have guddas. Besides, the Kattunaikar and Kota tribes also follow the practice of having separate houses for menstruating women in their villages. The Muthuvar tribes of the Anamalai Reserve also follow the practice of maintaining menstrual segregation huts called thinnaveedu. This practice is also prevalent in the Badaga community in the Nilgiris and they called such houses Olegidy.

The practice of menstrual sequestering is not limited to Tamil Nadu alone. According to The Guardian, the Gond and Madiya tribes in Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha still practice banishing women and girls during their menstruation, and their menstrual huts are called gaokors or kurma ghar. In these areas, tribal women are often unprotected from the attacks of wild animals. The practice of sequestering women on their periods is also reportedly more common in communities that follow Hinduism. Practising chhaupadi, someone who bears an impurity, is prevalent among Nepali Hindus. In 2018, after many women died of harsh weather, smoke inhalation, and being attacked by wild animals, the Nepal government announced that forcing menstruating women into seclusion is a punishable offense that warrants three months in jail.

Dr Kalpana, a Madurai-based gynaecologist said that the compulsion to be in the sequestering house for three to five days makes women ignore their health conditions, especially when they have irregular periods as they would go there and pretend that they are in their menstrual periods and risk not getting early-stage treatments for menstrual disorders. “The government should educate women against internalising such conditioned practices,” she observed.

Menstrual stigma is a topic that needs comprehensive intervention to normalise discussing the menstrual period and menstrual dignity, so that more women are not conditioned into believing that sequestering themselves during menstruation is their duty.

Nithya Pandian began her career as a sub-editor at Indian Express’s Tamil site in 2018, later covering indigenous and environmental issues.

Link -<https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/ground-report-menstruating-women-are-still-banished-their-homes-rural-tn-180854>



17. ‘Are you married?’: Across India, unmarried women are denied access to an essential ultrasound

Tanishka Sodhi | Newslaundry | Mar 20, 2023

12 women said they couldn’t comfortably get transvaginal ultrasounds, which detect abnormalities in the pelvic region

Radhika was in her mid-twenties when she visited a gynaecologist in Bengaluru for her painful periods and was recommended an ultrasound. A radiologist in a multispeciality hospital conducted an abdominal ultrasound, but couldn’t see anything clear enough to detect.

He told her a transvaginal ultrasound would reveal a lot more, but he wouldn’t be able to do it for her as she was unmarried.

Radhika did not go to any other hospital. She continued to experience painful periods and painful intercourse for the next 10 years. In 2022, after losing two pregnancies in two years, she got fertility tests done in the UK, where she now resides. A transvaginal ultrasound revealed that her uterus was tilted and had signs of adenomyosis – something she suspects was an issue all these years.

“I was more angry than relieved,” she told Newslaundry. “I’ve had to suffer from painful periods and painful sex for a long, long time without understanding why. I’m so angry at the bullshit construct of virginity and the heavy price we pay for it.”

Radhika’s struggle to get a transvaginal ultrasound isn’t an isolated incident. Women across India are denied these procedures when they are or pelvic areas. It looks at organs from inside the vagina using a narrow, wand-shaped device that uses sound waves to provide detailed imaging. A condom is put over the device or probe and lubricated. It gives a much clearer view of the pelvic organs as compared to an abdominal ultrasound.

Newslaundry spoke to 12 women across Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Gujarat who said they were denied transvaginal ultrasounds since they are unmarried. In some cases, they had to argue with their radiologists to get it done, or get their gynaecologists to intervene.

In a tier-2 city in Gujarat, Anjali was in her 20s when she was denied a transvaginal ultrasound by a radiologist at a clinic. She eventually never got the procedure done.

“There is no repercussion for doctors misdiagnosing or failing to diagnose something,” said Anjali, who did not want Newslaundry to reveal the name of the city due to anonymity concerns. “Our issues don’t end when a doctor says no – we have to keep living our lives with them with nobody to help us. It is very frustrating

to know there's a procedure that can tell me I have PCOS, but it won't be done on me."

"He said it was against his own laws"

The median Indian woman's first sexual experience is actually not as high as one would think. According to the latest National Family Health Survey data, it's 18.9 years. The data indicates that one in 10 women in their late twenties have not yet had sex.

But the NFHS also noted that a woman's first sexual experience is closer. Doctors use the "are you married" question as a substitute for directly asking women if they are sexually active. But studies have noted that due to the extensive gap between puberty and marriage, there is a higher chance that young women will have sexual relationships before marriage. Data also shows that a woman's higher education level plays a big role in her getting married later rather than sooner.

Saumya's experience of visiting a south Delhi clinic, which was rated 4.8 stars on Google, cost her dearly. After a long conversation at the reception, the clinic billed her and sent her inside. But the radiologist refused to do the transvaginal ultrasound and told her it was "against the law".

When Saumya, 24, told him that article 21 of the constitution states that being denied medical treatment is a violation of the right to life, the radiologist said it was against the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act – which isn't true. Saumya then told him it doesn't say anywhere that he could not perform a transvaginal ultrasound on an unmarried woman, but he told her it was against "his own laws".

"To clear his inhibitions, I told him to not think that he was taking away my virginity as I was sexually active so he could relax. He still refused, saying he won't do it to unmarried women," said Saumya, who was made to do an abdominal scan instead. The scan revealed irregularities but her doctor couldn't specifically treat the issue because it didn't offer the level of detail that a transvaginal ultrasound would have given. Saumya still hasn't got the ultrasound done and is contemplating filing a legal clinic against the clinic. " They deny you a medical Agni was 24 when her gynaecologist recommended getting a transvaginal ultrasound. Agni went to a clinic in Delhi's GK II.

"I was asked if I'm married. After I told them I'm not, the nurse said they can't do the ultrasound," she said. "She called the doctor who told me the ultrasound was not meant for unmarried women as there will be an issue when I'm married. I told them that if they're worried about my virginity, there's no need to be."

She added, "Even if the girl is a virgin, isn't saving her life more important than saving the construct of a hymen?"

Back at the clinic, Agni insisted on getting the ultrasound done. The clinic reluctantly agreed, but allegedly made her sign an affidavit saying the status of her vagina would be “altered” and that she would take full responsibility for it. She no longer has a copy of the affidavit.

A radiologist from an upmarket suburb in Mumbai told Newslaundry, “We don’t do ultrasound on unmarried women as, in our country, it is a taboo. It’s not a law. But everyone’s approach is different. And since I am at the other side of my career now, I’d rather let a patient go than let it lead to an unnecessary issue.”

According to him, the concern is that a patient’s future husband will create a scene – not just with the woman but with the doctor too. But if an unmarried woman insists, he said she and a relative – any relative – can sign a consent form. He also claimed gynaecologists are required to state in writing that the ultrasound is needed.

In Delhi, Priya had a 10-year-old daughter and was nearly 40 when a lab asked for her husband’s signature to “consent” to the ultrasound. Priya, who is divorced, insisted that the lab submit in writing that it wouldn’t do the ultrasound without her husband’s consent. The lab then reluctantly performed the ultrasound.

“If you don’t have a husband, are you expected to not have an issue with your vagina?” Priya asked. “I am a fully functioning adult and I am signing a consent form anyway. They are robbing you of your autonomy. It’s your body, it’s your decision – the matter should end there.”

‘Every single person there was judging me’

Dr Mugdha Raut, a gynaecologist in Mumbai, told Newslaundry a transvaginal ultrasound provides a much better diagnosis as the probe is closest to the pelvic organ and has clear visualisation.

“I recommend the ultrasound when a woman is sexually active,” she said. “Nowadays, women get married late and are sexually active before that. We have to accept it rather than treat it like a taboo. We don’t need to be judgemental about it. Things are changing and we need to be accepting towards it.”

Importantly, the denial of these ultrasounds relies on patriarchal ideas of virginity and sex, and unreliable theories about hymens being indicators of sexual activity. None of these are more important than a woman’s health.

In Delhi, Isha visited a radiologist on her gynaecologist’s recommendation

Meanwhile, her bleeding didn’t stop and her gynaecologist suspected an ectopic pregnancy. The gynaecologist spoke to the radiologist and insisted on a transvaginal ultrasound. Isha said she was then grilled for personal details, including her parents’ names and her Aadhaar card details. She also had to sign a no-objection certificate stating that she had been prescribed the ultrasound by her doctor, along with her age and the fact that she was unmarried.

She said the receptionist at the radiologist's clinic told her "they don't usually do it for unmarried women" but were "considering her case" since her doctor had insisted. Meanwhile, sundry admin personnel debated what to do.

"A group of men, who have no idea what it's like to have a uterus, are discussing whether or not I should get this examination done, which is very essential for my life," Isha said. "Every single person there was judging me. They made a huge scene about an unmarried woman coming to do a transvaginal ultrasound."

Isha was panicking and crying at this point, she said. So, she left and returned later with her male partner. She was put in an examination room but the radiologist still refused to perform the ultrasound.

"I'm lying on the bed, wearing hospital clothes having removed my underwear. I told the radiologist to just be careful as I'm bleeding. And then he refused to perform it on me," she said. "He called two young interns to do it. He guided them but they didn't seem to know what they were doing. They were whispering and giggling throughout." transvaginal ultrasound," Jiya said. "They did the ultrasound once they received confirmation from the gynaecologist."

The women Newslaundry spoke to said the ultrasound is invasive, uncomfortable and, for a lot of them, painful. This makes it all the more important for it to be done sensitively, and have it explained to patients before it takes place.

Dr Anjali Wagh, a gynaecologist in Mumbai said that radiologists must explain the ultrasound in detail and in the respective local language to the patients. She said having woman sonographers do the procedure could also ensure more comfort.

"Sometimes when I am looking for something specific, I recommend a transvaginal ultrasound for its accuracy. Sometimes, women may not be comfortable with this ultrasound, even married women. But if she agrees and gives her consent, then there should be no issue," she said.

*All names of patients changed to protect identities.

A typo has been fixed in Agni's quote; 'saving her life' was misspelled as 'saying her life'.

Tanishka Sodhi is a reporter based in Mumbai/Delhi. She has reported on social justice, media, gender, and human rights for the last 5 years, via deep-dive stories. She is currently a senior reporter at Newslaundry.

Link

<https://www.newslaundry.com/2023/03/20/are-you-married-across-india-unmarried-women-are-denied-access-to-an-essential-ultrasound>



18. 4 of 5 living organ donors in India are women, 4 of 5 recipients men: Study'

Steffy Thevar | *The Times of India* | Aug 10, 2023

For every woman who received an organ, four men got transplants in the country. Data from 1995 to 2021 shows 36,640 transplantations were carried out, of which over 29,000 were for men and 6,945 were for women.

The stark difference, experts said, was because of economic and financial responsibilities, societal pressures and ingrained preferences.

Director of NOTTO Dr Anil Kumar said more men are cadaver donors but more women are living donors. “Of the total organ donations in the country, 93% were living donors. This by itself is a statement that many organ donors in the country are women donors,” he said.

A paper published in *Experimental and Clinical Transplantation Journal* in 2021 found a huge gender disparity in the country when it comes to living organ transplantation. The data analysed organ transplants in 2019 and found that 80% of the living organ donors are women, mainly the wife or the mother while 80% of the recipients are men.

The study also found that the primary reasons for more women donors are the socio-economic pressure on them to be the caretakers and givers in the family and as men are the bread winners in most cases, they hesitate from undergoing any surgery.

Mayuri Barve, an organ transplant coordinator from DY Patil Medical College, Hospital and Research Centre in Pune, said that in the last 15 years that she has been working in this field, only once did a husband come forward to donate his organ to his wife. Usually, wives, mothers and even fathers donate, she added.

She said mothers and fathers are happy donors to their children. When both are unavailable, wives come forward. Often, if the daughter is unmarried, she becomes the donor. However, if a wife needs an organ, then it is most likely that she would be put on a waiting list.

“If the recipient is a man and the breadwinner, then the wife or the parents feel the responsibility of donating the organ. Women who are recipients feel guilty if their family members have to donate their organs and they refuse to take them from their families,” she added.

Data from 1995 to 2021 in India shows that for every woman who received an organ transplant, four men got transplants. Experts attribute this stark difference to economic and financial responsibilities, societal pressures, and ingrained preferences. While more men are cadaver donors, more women are living donors. A

study found that 80% of living organ donors are women, mainly wives or mothers, while 80% of recipients are men. The primary reasons for this gender disparity are socio-economic pressure on women to be caretakers and men hesitating from undergoing surgery as breadwinners.

In 10 years, organ and tissue donations in state up 6.5 times

Karnataka has experienced a significant increase in organ and tissue donations over the past decade. The number of donations has risen from 102 in 2013 to 765 in the first 10 months of 2023. This year alone, there have been 417 organ donations, including kidneys, livers, hearts, and lungs. The state has also seen a rise in tissue donations, with corneas, heart valves, and skin being donated. The increase in donations is attributed to growing awareness of brain death and organ donation. Karnataka is second only to Telangana in organ donation rates.

Liver from deceased donor in Bhubaneswar set to save life of Kolkata man

A liver from a deceased donor in Bhubaneshwar was successfully transplanted into a 55-year-old recipient in Kolkata. This is the first time a liver from outside Bengal has been used to save a patient's life in Kolkata. A medical team from Apollo Multispecialty Hospital flew to Bhubaneshwar to retrieve the organ and performed the surgery in Kolkata. The recipient had been suffering from cirrhosis of the liver since 2013. This was also the first multiorgan harvest in Bhubaneshwar.

Steffy Thevar, a senior correspondent for the Times of India in Pune, reports on health, urban infrastructure, and gender disparity.

Link

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/4-of-5-living-organ-donors-in-india-are-women-4-of-5-recipients-men-study/articleshow/105173848.cms>



19. Part 2: A ‘silent’ burden | Who cares for women living with diabetes?

Saumya, Kalia | The Hindu | Aug 18, 2023

In patriarchal households where women are weighed down by care work, women are conditioned to put their needs last, jeopardising diabetes management and their mental health.

Let’s say the average human takes X decisions on a given day. A person living with diabetes will likely take X+180 decisions, a famous 2014 research showed. That is one decision every five waking minutes. What is safe to eat? When to measure your blood sugar? How much insulin to inject? Go too low, one risks feeling violently dizzy and nauseous due to hypoglycemia. Go too high, and one can be hospitalised for diabetic ketoacidosis.

Then there are decisions reserved for caregivers of a family. Vandana Chatterjee, 56, tries to achieve a decent count of steps and eat healthily to keep her type 2 diabetes in check. But should she go for a walk in the morning? Only if she wakes up an hour before her husband and children; that way, no one’s tea, breakfast, lunch is compromised. She thinks twice before buying a specific flour — low in carb, high in protein — for herself. “Buying a separate atta just to make two rotis for yourself is a problem - it’s also a drain on the family’s budget.”

Diabetes demands discipline — sustained self-care, an unwavering vigilance over how one lives, financial autonomy to meet treatment costs. But this prescribed discipline presents a clinical and moral dilemma for women, whose choices are moulded by gender norms, family expectations and economic inequalities. It births a paradox of care: who will attend to women, now caught between domesticity and disease?

‘Women put their needs last’

“For a caregiver to receive care, that’s an alien concept in the Indian household,” says Nupur Lalvani, a type 1 diabetic and founder of the support group Blue Circles Diabetes Foundation. “If the mother is unwell, everything comes to a stop. Who takes care of them? Do they even have that kind of environment?” Once diagnosed, diabetics take a crash course in biology, nutrition and physical health. But the curriculum glosses over a crucial lesson, that diabetes is also a disease of gender, caste and class. Gender norms dictate that women eat last, and the quality of leftover food is lower than what other members eat — even in wealthier households, per Food Security for Equitable Futures (FSEF) research. Uttar Pradesh and Goa found

skewed food distribution: women ate towards the end, saved for others, skipped a meal, ate leftovers (only rotis and chutneys, rice and salt).

Charumita Vasudev, a researcher with FSEF, says, “This becomes severe if families are facing financial stress that can come with a wide variety of external factors,” considering crop losses, inflation, family illness, job loss or health emergencies such as COVID-19. Moreover, women engaged in household-production activities at home often delay eating their first meal (research shows family members involved in work outside eat before leaving), and the long periods of hunger fed into their diabetes risk.

Notions of labour and productivity also dictate food allocation within families, shaping women’s dietary choices. In a household with limited economic resources, nutritious foods (which are also costlier) -- eggs, milk, fruits, meat -- are directed to fathers and sons, not wives and daughters, ample evidence shows. The latest round of the National Family Health Survey also pointed to a protein deficit in women’s diet, who were found to be consuming more simple carbohydrates over protein. “Managing a chronic condition like this takes a lot more out of you as a woman, especially in very traditional families,” says Vandana. “We just don’t have the agency to say: I have to have my meals on time.” Food insecurity heightened the risk of metabolic syndromes, such as diabetes and heart diseases, among Latina women in the U.S., a recent study found. “Contributing to the prevention of metabolic syndrome would be ideal over treating the cardiovascular and metabolic outcomes associated with it,” one of the authors said.

India’s Public Distribution System (PDS) provides subsidised food grains to nearly two-thirds of India’s population living below the poverty line. Families are entitled to 5 kg of rice/wheat/millet — high glycaemic value cereals that carry more calories than needed and cause the blood sugar to dip. Some States have introduced healthier alternatives of millets and jowar, but rice remains ubiquitous, and there is currently no guideline that mandates a different diet for a woman with diabetes or prediabetes compared to an individual without diabetes. “We don’t have any nutritionist or dietician at the secondary care level to explain these things to women,” notes Dr. Balaji Gummudi, a field epidemiologist working in Andhra Pradesh’s Srikakulam district and a renal researcher from Geroge Institute for Global Health. The women he surveyed reported eating leftovers of the one dish prepared in the house. Women are “conditioned” to put themselves last — a product of society’s devaluation of care work. “This has an effect...on the self-worth of women who prioritise over themselves the needs of those perceived as more ‘productive’ contributors to the household,” explains Ms. Vasudev, leading to women “neglecting, enduring and/or misunderstanding well-known symptoms which men would seek immediate care for”. Money matters “Women prioritise their health much less,” Dr. Sona Abraham, a Kerala-based doctor notes, in comparison to other members of the household.

One culprit is money. On average, a diabetic spends about ₹6,000- ₹17,000 per month, with drugs, lifestyle expenses, diagnosis and consultation, and surgery if needed. A glimpse from Vandana's ledger: Metformin (twice a day) + supplements to manage complications such as hypertension + glucose meter + single-use strips (a box of 50 is averagely priced between ₹600 - ₹1,200) + continuous glucose monitors (₹5,000 - ₹7,000 per month) + doctor's fee + blood tests. This excludes the cost of travel and investment in diet and exercise. An analysis found the median annual direct and indirect cost for diabetes care is increasing in India, from ₹15,460 and ₹3572 in 1999 to ₹34,100 and ₹4200 in 2021; the cost was also higher among women than men for outpatient care. This racked up out of-pocket expenditure for people in urban poor areas, per a Chennai-based study, whose expenses primarily included hospitalisation, medicines and investigation (Out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure in India is the highest in the world). India plans to expand Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centres to screening, prevention, control and management of non-communicable diseases like diabetes. While medicines and equipment are currently available free of cost at India's Jan Swasthya Kendras, sometimes a shortage of specific insulin or doses means people resort to private vendors at a higher cost. Suradha, a type 1 diabetic, uses a glucose monitoring system, and finds 70% of her monthly expenditure goes into medical care "I have never been able to completely rely on myself for medical care, just because the costs are high, inconsistent and super unpredictable."

Patriarchal norms and lack of financial autonomy, especially in low-income households, often mean money is rarely allocated to treating and managing a woman's diabetes, literature on healthcare spending shows. One out of every six married women with an income had no say in how the money is spent in the house, per NFHS-5. The average in-patient health-care expenditure is also substantially lower among women than men across socioeconomic groups.

There are also competing priorities: Ms. Weaver's book *Sugar and Tension* documents multiple instances of women having to choose between purchasing medicines and glucometer strip tests; the rest goes into children's education and household needs. Looking at diabetes as a disease of gender, caste and class is crucial, experts note, given that the diabetes epidemic is expected to peak most in low-income States.

Stress and stigma

"For most families, diabetes stops at getting the medicine for the wife or mother," Dr. Gummudi says. "There is no care or follow up; they will not bother about diet, physical exercise, stress." Physical exercise was a "zero" for the women he worked with. Many count domestic housework as the required physical activity, others feel "shy" about being mobile and walking around in their areas. "Women also don't have facilities -- properly built roads, pavements or community facilities." Exercise

is no walk in the park: Suradha, who lives with her parents, is often told ‘it’s not safe’ to step out at night. Vandana shares a similar concern. Late evenings and early mornings, when the sweltering heat withdraws, impose both “hostile weather and hostile environment, which is not safe for women”. Stress evokes an instant response from the body: hormones raise blood sugar levels in response to any emotionally taxing trigger. Managing stress, then, is central to managing diabetes. “Stress regulation, however, is not dealt with at all among women,” Dr. Abraham notes. It is not only the stress of a disease, but the stress of long working hours and managing familial responsibilities. Evidence, anecdotal and scientific, has found that patriarchal expectations, gender roles and intimate partner violence all take a toll on women’s mental health. Even household responsibilities and unpaid household work are linked to contribute to high-stress level diabetes. “Women sometimes tell me their husbands yell at them if things are not in place or some feel the pressure of being perfect. People are living in this constant fearful environment,” Dr. Abraham says. “Diabetes is about watching what you eat and exercise, but there are emotional and financial stressors, things beyond the biological condition which influence sugars to a large extent.” In a household where a woman is weighed down by care work, they are saddled with the additional responsibility of caring for themselves, which is documented in research: the stress and sleep deprivation of attending to the family always intensified their diabetes.

“The government is currently concentrating on testing and providing medication. But what after that? They should also focus on giving diet food and finding ways how to make exercise and stress management a part of diabetes care.” Dr. Balaji Gummudi There is a ‘social cost’ many pay for being diabetics too. Women are often told to ‘hide their diabetes’ from prospective partners, lest they will struggle to prove their worth as a ‘good wife and mother’. Diabetes is a high-investment, chronic condition, one that not only poses financial constraints but threatens women’s role as a caregiver in the family. Within the peer support systems in Blue Circles, Ms. Lalvani notes many women face social discrimination and stigma. When she disclosed her diabetes diagnosis, Suradha felt like she let out a “dirty little secret” out in the open. Ms. Lalvani worries that the ‘diabetes epidemic’ may offset another health concern: eating disorders. Young women recently diagnosed have expressed hesitance about taking insulin, which may result in weight gain. Jaishree, 24, takes semaglutide, a type 2 diabetes drug that helps with blood sugar levels, but is also known to cause weight loss. “I have noticed random repulsion to food - something about the food -- the texture, the smell, the way it is plated -- makes me want to gag a little.” She is working with her gynaecologist to get off this medication and find alternative ways to manage it. “Diabetes can be deeply isolating,” says Jaishree. 40% of patients with NCDs including diabetes, cancer and hypertension reported having depression while 30% with these chronic conditions have anxiety. Arun Kandasamy, a psychiatry professor at NIMHANS, previously told The Hindu that “the presence of depression worsens NCD symptoms, adversely impacts the

quality of life, and increases the financial burden for patients and their families,” making it important to address mental health. Studies have also documented ‘diabetes burnout’ among people with type 1 diabetes. “They often suffer in silence, they have nobody to share it with. It affects their sleep, their weight, other things which also indirectly leads to obesity and diabetes,” Dr.

Abraham notes. The guilt of caring for oneself The ability to engage in ‘self-care’ work is mediated by social factors: gender, income, caste location. Blanket biomedical advice, which shifts the burden of care on the individual to ‘responsibly’ manage their diabetes, can be alienating. Evidence shows people felt infantilised for “being bad” or “cheating on their diets”, and “guilty” about failing to manage their diabetes routine. But the guilt strikes both ways for women. Ignore your diabetes, and you’re not doing enough. Manage it too well, and you’re neglecting the share of care work. Women find themselves operating from a tight range: How do you weigh a 20-minute walk against cooking for your family? “We are raised with this guilt,” Vandana remarks. “How can you abandon your family, just because you want to go for a walk?” In some cases, women are also shamed for not being disciplined enough or for consciously disregarding their own health. Suradha often feels like a “delinquent” in the eye of her doctors. “They assume it is my fault if I am not a certain weight at any given point”. She avoids doing cardio because her sugar drops almost instantly. Other times she deals with ‘shock and awe’ when mentioned she needs four insulin injections in a day sometimes. “When both these responses exist in the same breath, there is no winning,” says Suradha. Women also cite a lack of privacy within the household also as a deterrent to taking insulin or medicines on time, evidence shows. “Being a woman and having a chronic condition means there are a lot more balls to juggle in the air.” Nishtha Kanal, 33

A study found that a woman’s ability to maintain a healthy diabetes lifestyle was influenced not just by exercise and good diet, but also the confidence to manage their disease. But the confidence chips away when the burden of care falls solely on them, and they are told they are doing it wrong. Some may also minimise the gendered stressors of a chronic condition. Nishtha Kanal, 33, says, “You’re dealing with diabetes 24x7, your hormones are on a 28-day cycle which affects not just your mood but also your blood glucose levels throughout the month. Every day sometimes feels like a battle that gets you exhausted by bedtime.” It irks her when someone says ‘It’s okay, diabetes happens to everyone. Just get on with it.’

Vandana acknowledges her family’s support: no one questions when she goes to the gym, or a doctor for blood tests. But her vigilance over her health has earned her the label of the family ‘hypochondriac’. Why do you keep checking your sugar? What’s the big deal? How does one work around this paradox of care, when the syntax recognises the guilt that comes with placing diabetes at the centre of your life? “Women don’t take care of themselves, but they usually are much more receptive when you give them a purpose,” says Dr. Abraham. In an ideal world, the purpose

would be self preservation, of having the privilege to look after oneself. But the reality is cruder, where the ‘purpose’ of diabetes care is sometimes articulated as a means to an end -- a goal where women can earn, support their families, care for their children. Imagine warning young mothers, in their late 20s and 30s, what would happen if diabetes related complications were to put them on dialysis. The woman usually agree: if they were to fall sick, no one would be a caregiver to them.

Saumya Kalia is a writer and researcher covering health, social inequity, cities, and gender. Her work has found home in The Hindu, Al Jazeera, BehanBox, and The Caravan, among other publications.

Link - <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/a-silent-burden-who-cares-for-women-living-with-diabetes/article67086825.ece>



Denied opportunities and recognition - Women in education and STEM

Restrictions, glass ceilings, and social norms have long denied women the opportunities and recognition they deserve, hindering their advancement in education, careers, and leadership roles. Despite progress in gender equality, deep-rooted societal expectations, institutional barriers, and outright discrimination continue to limit women's potential across various fields.

In education, restrictions—often rooted in cultural or religious beliefs—prevent millions of girls and women from pursuing academic aspirations. Johanna Deeksha Victor reports on the Hijab Ban in Karnataka, India, and its impact on the educational prospects of girls. Such policies force Muslim women to choose between their faith and education. This not only disrupts their academic journey but reinforces systemic inequities, particularly in marginalized communities. Such policies contribute to widening the gender gap in education and exacerbate social inequalities.

In the professional sphere, the glass ceiling continues to be a persistent barrier, particularly in male-dominated fields like science and technology, says Anuradha Mascarenhas. Citing data, she says, that In India, the prestigious Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize for science has largely been awarded to men, with only 20 women recognized since its inception in 1958. The lack of female representation in such awards highlights how systemic biases and patriarchal structures limit women's recognition in their fields, even when their contributions are significant.

On a similar note, Soumya Shankar, draws attention to how the attire of the women scientists was the point of discussion on social media after the Chabdrayan launch and not their scientific achievements. The inspiring picture of the women scientists is turned into a sexist commentary on traditional values of the women, she laments.

Media needs to call out gender biases and sexism to dismantle patriarchy and make the world an equitable space.

20. One year of Karnataka's war on Muslim women's right to learn

Johanna Deeksha Victor | Scroll.in | Jan 11, 2023

Ayesha Sayed was in the middle of a bachelor's degree programme when her family received a marriage proposal for her. Sayed worried that her studies would be disrupted. Her education had already been halted a few years earlier, after graduating from Class 12, because her family faced financial constraints. She had then worked at a call centre to support her family – it was only four years later that she could sign up for a bachelor of arts programme in sociology, economics and history at a college in Udupi. So, when the marriage proposal arrived, Sayed accepted only after extracting a promise from the groom's family that she would be allowed to continue studying afterwards. She graduated in 2019. She then decided to pursue her dream of studying law. From a young age, Sayed said, she had had a special interest in the Indian Constitution and had dreamt of one day practising law in the Supreme Court.

When she decided to apply for her law programme in 2021, she had to sit her in-laws down and convince them to allow her to take up the course. The nearest college was an hour away. By this time, she also had a young child, aged three, to look after, so the logistics were not going to be easy.

But she persuaded them, and found a neighbour to babysit the child. Her classes started in January 2022. Every morning, Sayed would leave her child in the neighbour's care and take a bus to her new college. Despite the long travel hours, she managed to study and look after her child and her home.

She found her studies thrilling. But that wasn't all she enjoyed – Sayed was also a sportsperson. She showed me a video on her phone of herself in the college sports field with a javelin in her hand.

But the happiness she felt on her return to academics was short-lived. In early January, protests broke out in parts of Karnataka, beginning in Udupi, against a long-accepted practice of allowing Muslim women students to wear their hijabs, or headscarves, to college. While most colleges prescribed uniforms, their administrations typically accepted that the headscarves were an integral part of Muslim students' identity and religious practice, and did not object to them.

In late December, the Government Pre-University College, in Udupi, prohibited Muslim students from wearing hijabs inside the classroom. Six students protested this move. The administration refused to change its new rule, leading to further protests from Muslim students. Subsequently, in January, hundreds of Hindu students arrived at their colleges with saffron scarves around their necks, demanding that students with hijabs be denied entry into campuses. They argued that hijabs violated their institutions' rules on uniforms.

Some other colleges, too, decided to ban students from wearing the headscarves. In the following days, several videos emerged of Muslim female students being stopped at college gates, being forced to remove their burkas and hijabs outside, being harassed by teachers and right-wing student groups, and in some cases, being sent home if they refused to take off the headscarves.

On February 5, the Karnataka government issued an order stating that colleges should adhere strictly to uniform rules, and that no exceptions would be made for hijabs.

Several Muslim organisations and students filed petitions against this order. On February 10, a little over a month after Sayed had started her course, the Karnataka High Court issued an interim order restraining students from wearing “saffron shawls, scarves, hijabs, religious flags or the like inside the classrooms”.

The order left many in shock and disbelief. Muslims already enjoyed relatively low access to education – according to the All India Survey on Higher Education, 2017-’18, the enrollment of Muslims in higher education is the lowest among all disadvantages groups, including Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. Now, faced with the threat of being barred from their colleges, some students were forced to remove their hijabs to continue their studies. Some shifted to colleges that did not impose a ban on the scarves, most run by Muslim organisations, while some dropped out of college.

When the protests had started, Sayed, who was the only student in her class who wore a hijab, hadn’t been too worried. She felt sure that her college would not be affected by the problem. She was partially right. Her college administration did not impose a ban on hijabs after the high court’s interim order. But things changed in March, when the Karnataka High Court delivered a verdict in the matter, upholding the rights of colleges to prohibit students from wearing hijabs – a slew of colleges across the state began to enforce bans on hijabs, in what broadly began to be referred to as the “hijab ban.” The court stated, “Petitioners have miserably failed to meet the threshold requirement of pleadings and proof as to wearing hijab is an inviolable religious practice in Islam and much less a part of ‘essential religious practice’.”

The court also claimed that the prescription of dress codes would be a “step in the direction of emancipation”. The judgement read, “It hardly needs to be stated that this does not rob off the autonomy of women or their right to education inasmuch as they can wear any apparel of their choice outside the classroom.” The petitioners appealed to the Supreme Court — in October 2022, a two-judge bench delivered a split verdict, following which the matter was referred to the Chief Justice of India. Effectively, from the time of the high court verdict, to the present, when petitioners await the constitution of a new bench to hear the matter, the hijab ban has effectively remained in place.

Following the high court verdict, the college authorities told Sayed that she would be allowed into class only if she removed her hijab. “I tried to convince them several times,” she said. “But they just would not listen.”

A few weeks later, Sayed was back at home, doing household chores and taking care of her son. It had already been a struggle to convince her in-laws to allow her to go out to pursue an education; she did not feel up to the challenge of persuading them to let her study without a hijab.

For that matter, it wasn’t even a battle she believed in. “Every woman from every kind of background should be allowed to study,” she said. “It doesn’t matter whether she is wearing a bikini or is clothed from head to toe. Everyone deserves access to education.”

But Sayed is angry that she had been robbed of her dream. “I am not meant to be stuck inside these four walls,” she said, glancing around at the bright yellow walls of her bedroom, as she cradled her four-year-old son in her arms.

“There must have been a reason why my mother gave birth to me, right?” she added. “It couldn’t have been to just slog it out in the kitchen and scrub the bathrooms.”

While Muslims across India have long had low access to education, those in Karnataka have struggled particularly hard for it. A government survey released in 2013 found that of all states, Karnataka had the highest dropout rate of Muslim school students between classes 1 and 8, at 6.3%. The survey also found that among all the Muslim students in India in the upper primary stage who dropped out of school that year, 73.9% were from Karnataka.

The hijab ban sharply exacerbated the difficulties of women students – responses to RTI queries in June 2022 showed that in the aftermath of the ban, 145 out of 900 Muslim women students in colleges affiliated to Mangalore University in Udupi and Dakshina Kannada districts had collected transfer certificates from their colleges, suggesting at the very least that their education had been disrupted, if not completely stopped. A recent report on admission at the pre-university level for the 2022-’23 year found that enrolment of Muslim students in government institutions at this level had halved, while enrolment of Muslim students in private institutions had risen by about 40%.

“What pains me the most is that it is only recently that young Muslim women have started to get an education,” said Humaira Karkala, who has worked as an activist in Karnataka for over 20 years. She recalled that throughout her career, she had knocked on the doors of Muslim households to persuade families to allow their daughters to obtain a formal education.

“They would ask us how to send their children, especially those who have hit puberty, out on the streets,” she said. “But we convinced them that their daughters could wear the hijab and go to class, at least until they are of marriageable age.”

She added, “The daughters from these very same families called me up in tears after their colleges banned the hijab and asked me what they are supposed to do now.”

It was only in the last couple of decades that the numbers of Muslim women students had increased significantly, Karkala noted. And just as they did, “the government shut out these avenues for them to become career women”, she said.

Unlike Sayed who had just started her degree in January 2022, 21-year-old Gulnaz Ali, the fifth of eight siblings, was on the brink of completing her BSc degree at the time.

Ali had been a strong student throughout her school years. (Other than Sayed, all the other students referred to in the story asked to be identified by pseudonyms, fearing repercussions if their identities were revealed.) In both her Class 10 board exams and her pre-university board exams, Ali passed with distinction.

Her academic rigour did not stop her from participating in extracurricular activities. She signed up for elocution competitions both in English and Kannada, as well as essay writing contests, and also did art in her spare time. “I enjoyed all activities,” she said when I spoke to her in December.

Ali started her bachelor of science course in 2019, studying physics, chemistry and mathematics at a government institute in Mangaluru. A few months later, the Covid-19 pandemic brought normal life to a standstill. Like millions of students across the world, she adapted to the unprecedented situation, and continued her studies online. She remained a determined student, and made sure she cleared all her exams with strong scores.

When the high court issued its verdict in March, Ali’s fifth semester had just started. But the protests had not reached the gates of her campus yet. Her college did not impose any new rules and continued as it had for decades, allowing students to wear their hijabs to class. “But we were told by the college administration that since there will be external supervisors for the exams, they could demand that we remove our hijabs,” Ali recalled. But no such demands were made. The students wrote their fifth semester exams without incident.

Now, Ali had only a few months to complete her degree, after which she would become the first science graduate in her family.

During their fifth-semester vacation break in August, however, Ali received a message on her phone from the college stating that Muslim students would not be allowed to wear hijabs to college anymore. “It was not even an official announcement,” Ali said. “We just got a text saying we would not be allowed into the campus with the hijab on.” Ali was taken aback. “We were all very confused by this sudden change in the attitude of the administration,” she said. Ali added that during a press interaction in August, her college’s principal had admitted that the administration had received a letter from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad –

a student group that is a sister organisation to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party – demanding that the college ban hijabs from the campus.

On the first day of their sixth semester in August, Ali and 22 other Muslim girls from the college gathered up their courage and turned up to their college wearing their hijabs.

The students were denied entry into the classrooms. “There were two policemen on campus too, because I guess the administration anticipated that we would come with hijabs despite the WhatsApp message,” Ali said.

They marched up to the vice-chancellor’s office, with letters in their hands, demanding to be allowed to attend class. Ali said her college prospectus mentioned that students were allowed to wear hijabs to class. “The vice-chancellor said that they could not do anything about it because it was a government rule,” she said. “But anticipating that answer, we showed him the copy of the verdict we carried in our hands, and said that that was not what the government had said.” Ali pointed out that the verdict did not mandate that colleges stop students from wearing the hijab, but rather allowed colleges to create such rules, or retain them if they had already been made. The matter was at the discretion of each college, the students argued. “Nowhere did the judges say that institutions should impose this rule,” she said. “But still, the vice chancellor said it was out of his hands.”

Ali and her peers even met with the deputy commissioner of police of the district and demanded that they be allowed to attend classes. “He told us to take it up with the vice-chancellor,” she said. For the next couple of weeks, the students were sent from one authority to the other, none of whom helped them. “This went on for the whole month of August,” she said.

During this time, the students tried to negotiate with their teachers. “I told them I would sit outside the class and only listen in, but they refused,” she said. “Then we asked if we could sit in the verandah, which they refused again.” Finally, the students asked if they could at least sit in the library and study. “Initially, we sat there, then a few days later, they threw us out,” she said. She added that this happened “after ABVP members in our college protested against our presence on campus.”

When the protests grew worse in the following weeks, Ali said the administration barred the students from even entering the campus with their hijabs.

With only three months left to finish her degree, Ali begged the administration to allow the students to continue studying on the campus with their hijabs on until they finished their semester. “We were so close to finishing,” she said. “They could have easily just made an exception for us for those few months.” But the women were asked to transfer to another college if they wanted to continue wearing their hijabs.

The controversy over women students' right to wear the hijab erupted in December 2021 after a college in Udupi, prohibited Muslim students from wearing their hijabs inside the classroom. Photo: PTI

“Even the transfer process was not easy,” Ali said. “They wanted to make even that a hurdle-filled path for us.” She explained that it took two months of relentlessly pursuing the matter in the college before, she was given her transfer certificate – now, she will have restart the year in the new college.

She said she was the only student among her group of female Muslim students to have obtained a transfer to the same course that she had been studying. Others “had to join a completely different stream”. she said.

Ali is scheduled to begin classes in her new college in April, a whole year after she was meant to graduate. But she needs to save Rs 20,000 for her fees. So these days, Ali leaves her home at 9 am, rides a bus for over an hour and then works as a part-time teacher in a small school in Mangaluru. On holidays and other occasions, she works as a mehendi artist at weddings – the first time I contacted her, she mistakenly sent me a set of photos from a wedding she had been attending. “All my friends are already doing their Masters,” she said. “But I’m just stuck.”

For the twin sisters Faria and Faiza Mohammed, the high court’s verdict was particularly bitter because, as law students, they had the training to recognise what they saw as glaring flaws in it. “At no point did the verdict direct institutions to implement a hijab ban,” Faria said. “It only said institutions would be allowed to do so if they wished to.”

The 23-year-olds were law students at a private college in Mangaluru when the protests started in early 2022. They, along with two other relatives, Ayesha and Aliya, all studied in the same college. While Ayesha was in her third year, the other three were all in their final year, with only a few months to go before they graduated as lawyers.

When they started their course in 2017, they fell in love with the subject instantly. They also thoroughly enjoyed the free atmosphere of their college. “Not even in our wildest dreams did we think the college would turn on us like this,” Faria said.

But after the high court delivered its verdict in March, these four students, along with a few other hijab-wearing Muslim students, were asked to assemble separately in one room. A few teachers and the principal were present in the room. The principal told the students that they would no longer be allowed to wear their hijabs. “We were given two options – either remove the hijab or leave college,” Faria said. “Imagine, those were our two options at the end of an almost five-year-long law degree course.”

The students pleaded with the administration to reconsider the decision. Like Ali’s friends, they argued that the court did not direct institutions to enforce any such rules, and that it had left the matter to the discretion of college administrations. “But

our principal said that there were different ways to interpret the verdict and what he had taken away from it was that there was a ‘no-hijab’ rule on campus,” Faria said.

The next day, the students arrived in college in hijabs again. They were desperate – their exams were to begin in March, only a few weeks later. “We had ensured that we did not have a single arrear all through our course,” Faiza said. “We were not going to start having arrears in the ninth semester!” When all the pleading failed, the students began to ask their teachers and the principal to at least let them write the exams, even if they would not be permitted to attend classes.

“These were teachers who had taught us for four-and-a-half years,” Faiza said, “They knew us and knew how much studying meant to us. But nobody offered to help us.”

There was only one teacher, she said, who was an exception. “She broke down when she saw us looking so petrified and scared that we would not be allowed to write our exams,” Faiza said. “So she went and spoke to the principal, asking him to just let us do the exams.” But the administration did not reconsider its decision.

In fact, the students said, the college even misled them into thinking it could provide them with a compromise. “They said they would allow us to write the exams in a room only filled with female students,” if the women agreed to take off their hijabs, Faiza said. The students did not think this was fair solution, but agreed. But when they were taken to the room on the day of the exam, they found that half the students in it were male. “We left,” Faria said.

Some teachers sought to play down the student’s despair. Faria recounted that they said “we were just doing natak”, or melodrama, “and that it wasn’t such a big deal that we were being asked to remove our hijabs”.

But the sisters saw the headscarf, which they had been wearing for 12 years, as important to them. “If a certain section of people were just suddenly asked to remove one of their main pieces of clothing, would that be fair?” Faria asked. “Our hijabs are a part of our clothing. It is humiliating to be asked to remove it.”

Still, she added, there were students who removed their hijabs and wrote their papers, some of them with tears flowing down their cheeks.

Ayesha was among them – worried that she would have to give up on her dream of being a lawyer, she decided to attend one exam without her hijab. She was acutely aware that people around her, who had known her for four years, were staring at her, since they had never seen her without her hijab. “For three hours people kept looking at me,” Ayesha said, her eyes welling up.

The twins explained that there was one exam that they had to complete that year, and could not carry over to the next year. The students took their parents to the college to request the administration to make an exception for them and allow them to wear their hijabs for the exam. “But our parents were treated so badly,” Faria said.

Finally, the administration offered them a harsh compromise. The hijab-wearing students were summoned to a meeting, and told that they could write their exams with their hijabs – on the condition that immediately after, they would procure transfer certificates from the college and leave. “They had these forms with the conditions written on it, and asked us to sign the form giving our consent to this arrangement,” Faria said. “We were not allowed any time to think, or to consult anybody, not even our parents, or even leave the room, or call our friends, or even take a picture of the form.”

They were left with no choice. “They just trapped us there with no other option,” Faria said.

Ayesha recounted that the students were confused and did not know what to do. One student attempted to offer the teachers alternatives to the hijab. “She kept asking if she could use a cap or something else to cover her head,” she said. “She was trying so hard to convince them.” But the administration did not budge.

Ayesha said she walked up to the student and hugged her to try and comfort her. Then, the students signed the documents. “And we all had to sign as witnesses for each other,” Ayesha added, with tears in her eyes. “So I signed for her.”

The transfer was far from easy for the students. Despite a frantic search, they did not find any law colleges in Mangaluru that would admit them. Finally, a cousin studying in a college in Bengaluru, managed by Muslims, contacted them to say that the college was willing to accept transfer students in the new semester. “In the afternoon we got the news, and by night we were on a bus to Bengaluru,” Faria said.

In the middle of the academic year, the students had to uproot themselves and restart their lives in a new, unfamiliar city. The twins and Ayesha found an apartment with two other students – the twins oversaw all the cooking.

The shift also impacted their training. In their previous college, all their practical work had been scheduled for the final year. This was the crucial period when the students would gain real-world experience of the legal profession. But in the new college, the practical module of the course had already concluded. “We completely missed that phase,” said Faiza.

The students were also under considerable stress because their formal transfer from the university with which their previous college was affiliated did not come for almost the entire year – the transfers finally arrived just in time for the graduation ceremony. “Until the very end we were so paranoid that five years of our lives would just go to waste if the transfer did not come through,” Ayesha said.

The three students are now back in Mangaluru and are planning their next steps. But they fear that the disadvantages they have had to battle because of their hijabs will not end with their education. The twins recalled that just a few days after the hijab controversy broke out, they were required to go to court for their practical work. They were in for a shock when they tried to enter the premises.

“The security stopped us and asked if we had permission to enter the court premises with our hijabs,” Faria said. “The court! Since when did it become a rule in the court?” All their friends were already inside, and the students were forced to wait outside for someone to help them get past the security. “After that happened we knew that things for us were going to change drastically,” she said.

The women said that they had felt as if Mangaluru changed overnight after the hijab controversy.

“I’m quite an outgoing person, but I think twice before I step out,” Faria said. “Often I just convince myself that it is better to stay indoors.” The students felt that people’s attitudes towards them had changed. “People are rude to us,” Faiza said. “There is a lot of hostility.” This included friends in college they had known for four years, Faria noted.

This impression is borne out by a People’s Union for Civil Liberties’ interim report released in September 2022. The report noted that after the high court verdict, “the entire Muslim community is living in a state of panic and fear, unable to understand what this situation will lead to, how the court verdict on hijab will aggravate the climate of hostility and hatred that the community has been facing for quite some time in Karnataka”.

The surveyors who worked on the report found numerous instances of Muslim students being targeted with harassment and discrimination in the form of “social boycotts, threats (including rape) and other prohibitions”. They were also subjected to “intrusive surveillance and, are being ‘outed’ in social media,” the report stated. “For Muslim women students, the loss of contact and friendships with fellow students from other communities has engendered a deep sense of isolation and depression.” A more recent report by the organisation, released this month, stated, “Many students added that they were overwhelmed by the barrage of lewd behaviour and sexual harassment against them from anonymous men in the form of text messages.” It also noted, “Social media platforms by their intrusion into the women’s online accounts effectively served as a second public space for the humiliation of Muslim women even when they were in their own homes.”

This change in the atmosphere is also influencing women’s career choices. “Both of us need to do internships, but we want to look for female Muslim advocates to train under,” she said. “I don’t think we will be able to find secular chambers to work in.” Before the controversy, the twins had dreamt of arguing in court – but now, they are considering office jobs so that they won’t have to frequent the court, where they fear they will face hostility. “For civil cases, most of the work happens in the office,” she said. “So that has become an option now.”

While the twins and one relative, Ayesha, fought through these adversities to graduate, their other relative, Aliyah, dropped out midway – unlike them, she had fought this battle once already. A few years ago, when Aliyah was a pharmacy student in the second year of her degree programme in Mangaluru, anti-hijab

protests had broken out in the city. Her college decided to impose a ban on the headscarf soon after. Aliya was forced to drop out. One year later, she enrolled at the same law college as the twins, only to then find herself confronted with the same problem.

“I think because it was the first time it was happening to us, we were able to gather the strength to fight it and move ahead,” Fazia said. “For her, it became very overwhelming to fight it again.”

The sisters also worry about younger students. “Our younger sister is now looking for colleges and we realised that the options we had just a few years ago were so many,” Fazia said. “But for my sister, there are barely any options because most colleges don’t allow hijabs anymore. How is that fair for the younger generation of Muslim women?”

Some students, like Shaima M, a 21-year-old fashion technology student from Udupi, gave in to the pressure of the hijab ban. “I just wore the scarf loosely around my head, revealing a bit of my hair when anyone was looking,” she said. “When no one was looking, I would cover my entire head fully.”

She explained that some of her peers found some comfort in the face masks that became mandatory during certain periods of the pandemic.

“Somehow, we would hide our faces and keep our scarves wrapped around our head loosely,” she said. Still, she explained, some of her teachers in her college were not happy. “They demanded that we remove the masks,” she said. “Imagine, asking us to remove something that is used as a prevention against Covid?”

Karkala noted that the inconsistencies in rules and their enforcement suggested a kind of hypocrisy on the part of institutions. She noted, for instance, that she knew of no engineering colleges that had introduced rules barring students from wearing hijabs. In some colleges, like Shaima’s, with students from different disciplines, engineering students were not stopped from wearing hijabs, but BA students like herself on the same campus were banned from wearing them. “Wherever the fees are high and students are likely to pay at least a few lakhs per year, they are not under any pressure to give up the hijab,” Karkala said. “These educational institutions don’t want to lose any money in the process of imposing such rules.”

However, she noted, there were some private arts, science and commerce colleges that refused to give into any pressure. “They continued to invite their students with open arms and refused to give in to any political pressure or pressure from right-wing student groups,” she said.

She cited the example of one college which had left its gates half open while the controversy was raging – Muslim students stood outside the gates, unsure what to do. “They were worried that it was an attempt to prevent them from coming in,” Karkala said. “Then their principal called them in and said that he was only trying to keep out protestors and that the Muslim students were welcome as usual.”

This was a rare instance of a college without a Muslim management standing up for its students. Elsewhere, many students were forced to shift to Muslim management institutions after their colleges implemented bans on hijabs. “Hostels have filled up quickly and applications have increased drastically,” Humeira said. “I’ve heard some colleges are not able to accommodate as many male students as they previously did because of the large number of female applicants.”

Muslim organisations have taken some measures to meet the increased demand from Muslim students. On November 29, the Karnataka Waqf Board, a government body tasked with the proper administration of waqf, or official charitable donations under Islamic law, announced that it was planning to establish self-funded schools and colleges in the state where students will be allowed to wear hijabs. It was stated that this would include ten colleges for female students. But on December 1, CM Basavaraj Bommai stated that he had not approved of such a plan.

Even if more such institutions are established, some students worry that at them, they will have less opportunity to interact with a diverse student body. Nazriya Salim, a 19-year-old student from Udupi, had studied in Muslim institutions for most of her life. So when it came to choosing a college for her undergraduate course, she wanted to go to a mainstream institution. “I wanted to have the chance to interact with people from different backgrounds,” she said. “I wanted the chance to explore another kind of atmosphere.” Now, after being forced to drop out of college after the hijab ban, she is not enthusiastic about returning to a Muslim institution.

Salim, the oldest of four children, grew interested in psychology in the last few years after reading news stories about young children addicted to online games like PUBG. Her mother, who is uneducated, was excited about her daughter stepping into college.

Salim was in her first year of college when the controversy broke out. Before she joined college, her mother had made enquiries about whether the hijab would be permitted on campus. “They said that it would not be an issue at all,” her mother said. A neighbour, who was present for my conversation with Salim’s mother, added that her own daughter had studied in the same college a few years earlier, and had not faced any problems. “Many Muslim students have not stepped out of their homes without their hijabs for 10-15 years and to suddenly make this demand of them is unjustified,” Salim’s mother said.

When the parents approached the administration and asked them to reconsider the hijab ban, Salim’s mother recounted, they were spoken to very rudely. “They refused to hear our side,” she said. “They talked to us in a very insulting tone, and scolded us too.”

Salim explained that after the ban, “teachers said that they would give us attendance but that we would not be allowed to sit in class.” She added, “The boys also started to rag us about our hijabs when we walked on campus, but nobody took any action against them.”

Like the twins, Salim, too, said she noticed a dramatic change in the streets of her city during and after the controversy. She recounted that recently, she heard someone on a street yell out “terrorist” at her.

Salim’s mother rued the fact that her hopes for her daughter had been crushed. “I did not have the opportunity to go to school or college,” she said. “It was a dream to make my daughter independent and give her those opportunities. Now they’ve been taken away from her too.”

Johanna Deeksha holds a Master’s in Journalism, War, and International Human Rights from the University of Lincoln, UK (2014). With nine years of experience, she covers education and health at Scroll’s Common Ground, focusing on marginalisation, caste, and gender issues affecting access to these services.

Link - <https://scroll.in/article/1041529/one-year-of-karnatakas-war-on-muslim-womens-right-to-learn>



21. The biggest science awards go to ...the men

Anuradha Mascarenhas | The Indian Express | Oct 25, 2023

When the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar (SSB) awards for 2022 were announced in New Delhi on September 11 this year, recognising 12 of India's "exceptional" young scientists under the age of 45, there was one noticeable let-down.

Like in 2021, there were no women among the award winners.

In fact, since the awards were first given out in 1958 by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and over six decades since Asima Chatterjee became the first woman to win the coveted prize, only 20 of the 592 Bhatnagar prizes have gone to women scientists.

The absence of women awardees is particularly jarring since the annual Bhatnagar awards cover seven scientific disciplines: biology, chemistry, mathematics, physics, medicine, engineering, and earth, atmosphere, ocean and planetary sciences – part of the larger STEM disciplines where women have increasingly made their presence felt.

Leading from the front

In April last year, in a written reply to a question in Rajya Sabha, Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Science & Technology Jitendra Singh said the percentage of women in R&D is 16.6% of the total number of scientists working in science and technology organisations.

That number is set to go up with more girls taking up STEM subjects in colleges. According to the latest All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report, more girls (53.1%) than boys enrolled in science courses in 2020-21, up from 51.7% in 2019-20. Of those who enrolled in sciences courses at the undergraduate level, 52% were women; at the PG level, that stood at 61.3%.

Despite these encouraging numbers, for women in science, awards and recognition at the highest levels are an uphill climb. Some of India's top women scientists say it's time the ground evened out.

Rohini Godbole, physicist, Padma Shri recipient and professor at the Centre for High Energy Physics at the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru, points out that the under representation of women awardees doesn't add up.

"The most obvious reason for the small number of women awardees would be that there are very few women practising science at the cutting-edge level – about 15-25% of the total. However, the fraction of women winning awards and recognition at the highest level is not even commensurate with that small fraction of women in science. For example, since the inception of the SSB awards, in the Physical

Sciences category, there has only been one woman awardee (Aditi De, 2018) whereas at least over the past 20-30 years, the fraction of women doing research in physics in India has been a healthy 10-15%. Similar statements can be made, with similar force, for subjects like Biological Sciences and Chemical Sciences – traditionally considered to be favoured by women scientists,” says Prof Godbole, suggesting that CSIR should analyse the underrepresentation of women by making available gender data for the past 20-25 years on nominations, age of nominees, and gender composition among committee members and referees/experts.

According to the official website of the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar prize, names of potential award winners can be proposed by a member of the CSIR governing body; vice chancellors of Indian universities; directors of IITs; Directors General of major R&D organisations such as DRDO, ICMR, ICAR IMD; directors of CSIR laboratories and institutes; secretaries of the government science departments member in- charge (Science) in the NITI Aayog; and former Bhatnagar Prize awardees, among others.

Speaking to The Indian Express, Dr Shubha Tole, neuroscientist, senior professor and Dean of Graduate Studies at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), says those who nominate candidates for awards must first attend sensitisation programmes before their nominations can be accepted.

Dr Shubha Tole of TIFR says those nominating candidates for awards must first attend sensitisation programmes before their nominations can be accepted. (Special Arrangement)

“Such programmes should be aimed at sensitising people to recognise that qualities that are associated with a successful career – creativity, novel research directions, leadership – may work differently in the case of women as opposed to men. Those nominating must learn to recognise that women may not ‘sell’ their work as confidently or prominently in conferences as their male counterparts, that negative social perceptions of women who speak up, or have opinions different from those around them, also colour the perception of their leadership qualities. All these factors possibly play a part in why people nominate fewer women candidates,” says Dr Tole, who has chaired the Women in Science panel of the Indian Academy of

Sciences and is a winner of the Bhatnagar award in 2010 for her “fundamental contributions to our understanding of brain development...”

CSIR Director General N Kalaiselvi is, however, hopeful of change. “It is not just about there being few women SSB awardees. As we know, the ratio of women to men is lower in many areas, especially in scientific research. However, the situation in recent years is changing for the better. I am sure that in the years to come, with more women taking to science, there will be many more women receiving awards and accolades. There have been more women in leadership positions in CSIR in the last five to seven years than perhaps in the entire history of CSIR taken together before that.”

Dr Shekhar Mande, who was CSIR-DG from October 2018 to April 2022, is categorical that the selection process for the Bhatnagar awards is transparent. “There are seven disciplines and a senior scientist is appointed as chair of each of these disciplines. When I was CSIR-DG, I made sure that there were at least two women (chairs). There would be approximately 10 members (in each of the seven disciplines) with a fair representation of women members... As CSIR-DG, I would interact with the seven chairpersons before the meeting to ensure equal opportunities on the basis of geography, gender, university/labs, and so on... There are no external criteria except for merit,” Dr Mande told The Indian Express.

He adds that during his tenure, there were efforts to encourage leadership among women. “There were 37 CSIR labs and not a single one was headed by a woman. During my tenure, we made sure that seven highly qualified women were appointed as head of CSIR labs.”

Time to rethink age cutoff?

Dr Vineeta Bal, Professor Emeritus, Biology, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune, calls the upper age-limit – 45 in the case of the Bhatnagar awards – to qualify for awards “problematic”.

“Often, women cannot wait until 45 to become mothers, thus leading to active breaks and/or periods of suboptimal work that hinder their achievements. Mothers do not like to claim that they had difficult years while the child/children grew up, but factors such as these do need to be included in the selection process to compensate for the underprivileged status of women and other groups,” she says.



(L) Dr Vineeta Bal, Professor Emeritus, Biology, IISER Pune, says the age limit of 45 can be

“problematic” for women scientists. (R) Debjani Paul of IIT Bombay says, “When I take short breaks, I switch off my work mode and focus on recharging.” (Special Arrangement)

Dr Tole points out that while it is often thought that child-bearing and child-rearing years are generally associated with low productivity and that women need special allowances for this, she says these need not be treated as “problems of women; rather they need to be framed as problems of institutions and spouses that fail to support women students, postdocs and faculty so that their productivity is minimally affected. Raising children is a decades-long job. Parent-friendly policies will help all parents, not just women”.

Dr Godbole suggests that the loss of career years for women can be made up by either increasing the age limit and/or considering the “academic age” – years spent

after setting up one's lab, for example – for women instead of their biological age to determine cut-offs.

“This latter measure can even be implemented in a gender-neutral fashion and can apply to men who take time off from a science career for some reason and rejoin later. I hope that this can be introduced at least now for the new avatar of the Bhatnagar Awards, the Vigyan Yuva-Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar,” Prof Godbole says.

Debjani Paul, Professor, Department of Biosciences and Bioengineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, suggests that instead of proposing an age limit for awards, committees can specify the number of years that a nominee needs to have spent as an independent principal investigator and consider the candidate's achievements in that period. Considering the academic age of candidates is one of the recommendations in the Equity and Inclusion chapter of the Science, Technology and Innovation Policy 2020. “Ageism-related issues and minimisation of career breaks are to be addressed for effective retention of trained women into the STI (Science, Technology & Innovation) workforce. In the case of professional career milestones such as recruitment, awards and funding schemes, age cut-offs will be implemented considering academic age rather than biological/physical age,” states the policy document.

On its part, the government has come up with a string of measures to correct the gender skew – from a Standing Committee constituted in 2016 “to identify and correct any imbalances” that hinder women in science and technology; the GATI (Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions) programme to “create an enabling environment for equal participation of women” in STEM disciplines; and the ‘National Award for Woman Scientist’ instituted by the Ministry of Earth Sciences since 2018.

CSIR also gives a five-year relaxation in the upper age-limit to women candidates to be eligible for award of fellowships and associateships to pursue doctoral and postdoctoral research.

In a written response to The Indian Express, CSIR-DG Kalaiselvi said, “Recently, aligned with the Government of India's initiative to empower women and promote ‘Nari Shakti’ in the country... CSIR, for the first time, announced a Special Call for Research Grants for Women Scientists (CSIR-ASPIRE). In this, only women scientists across the country are eligible to apply for research grants to carry out R&D in major disciplines of science and engineering. We have initiated the process of evaluating the grant proposals received under the scheme.”

Forever a tight-rope balance

One of India's most accomplished mathematicians and science educators, the late Mangala Narlikar, while reflecting on her career, “lack of ambition” and her life with her husband, the celebrated astrophysicist Jayant Narlikar, once wrote,

“Fortunately, my husband...respected my wish to study mathematics although he too did not wish me to prioritise career over family.”

While in Cambridge with her husband, where Jayant made a name for himself globally, Mangala attended a few graduate lecture courses and supervised some undergraduate students, but full-time research remained difficult with the birth of two daughters.

“My story is perhaps a representation of the lives of many women of my generation who are well educated but always put household responsibilities before their personal careers,” she wrote.

Only 20 of the 592 Bhatnagar prizes have gone to women scientists



Year	Scientist	Awarded in Subject
1961	Asima Chatterjee	Chemistry
1975	Archana Sharma	Biology
1983	Indira Nath	Medical Sciences
1987	Raman Parimala	Mathematics
1989	Manju Ray	Biology
1991	Sudipta Sengupta	Earth Sciences
1991	Shashi Wadhwa	Medical Sciences
1996	Vijayalakshmi Ravindranath	Medical Sciences
2004	Sujatha Ramadorai	Mathematics
2007	Rama Govindarajan	Engineering
2009	Charusita Chakravarty	Chemistry
2010	Shubha Tole	Biology
2010	Sanghamitra Bandyopadhyay	Engineering
2010	Mitali Mukherjee	Medical Sciences
2013	Yamuna Krishnan	Chemistry
2015	Vidita Ashok Vaidya	Medical Sciences
2018	Aditi Sen De	Physics
2019	Neena Gupta	Mathematics
2020	Jyotimayee Dash	Chemistry
2020	Bushra Ateeq	Medical Sciences

Bhatnagar prizes awarded to women scientists

Some of India’s top women scientists will tell you not much has changed since then with most of them slipping into familiar roles once they get home – as the primary caregiver shouldering responsibilities of children and the elderly.

Prof Godbole, who was conferred with the Ordre National du Merite, one of the highest distinctions granted by France, says her “scheduling discipline” came in handy. “I recall the words of an older colleague, Prof Preeti Shankar. She used to say since I know I have to leave the workplace at 5 pm and that it is a hard cutoff, I have trained myself to minimise the time for coffee breaks,” she says.

Dr Tole says juggling work-life dynamics is always “complicated”, but the flexibility her career offered came in handy. “Research is not typically a 9-to-5 job. One can

run experiments/ write papers/see students’ data and write feedback at one’s own convenience. In India, scientists often live on or near the research campus. Parents can manage parent-teacher meetings, mid-day school closings etc more easily than in corporate jobs. Infant care, too, is easier. I would breastfeed my son and return to work. Or, if I had to wake up for a midnight feeding session, I would use that period of sleep disruption to write emails to students or to foreign collaborators who would see it during their working day. It all worked out,” Dr Tole says.

Dr Debjani Paul, whose research interests are on microfluidic devices for bioengineering and health care applications, says that she struck a balance by choosing what to work on. “While there would be frequent periods when my work would get all my focus, when I take short breaks, I switch off my work mode and focus on recharging,” she says.

Anuradha Mascarenhas is a senior editor at The Indian Express, based in Pune. Anuradha writes on health, research developments in the field of science, and environment and takes a keen interest in covering women's issues.

Link - <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/the-biggest-science-awards-go-to-the-men-8999062/>



22. Not Science But Sarees: India's Moon Landing Overshadowed By Sexism

Saumya Shanker | *Youth Ki Awaaz* | Aug 25, 2023

On Wednesday, 23rd August 2023 India erupted with celebrations as Chandryaan - 3's lander module successfully touched down at the south polar region of the moon. With this remarkable achievement India became the first country to soft land in the south polar region and once again asserted its prowess in the field of space exploration.

This achievement resonates not only as a scientific triumph but also as a testament to the dedication and resilience of India's space community. The nation's collective pride swelled as it took this giant leap forward in unravelling the mysteries of the cosmos.

Amidst the jubilation surrounding the Chandrayaan-3 mission, a concerning trend emerged on social media platforms. Some X (Twitter) users have chosen to divert the spotlight from the mission's scientific excellence to the attire worn by women scientists involved in the mission.

An image of women scientists at ISRO was viral across the internet for all the wrong reasons. The powerful image of the women scientists associated with ISRO and mission Chandrayaan was shared with captions like "Girls, this is what real feminism looks like" among a few.

Ironically, this narrative was shared by the verified handles of women users on X.

One user named Sakshi wrote "Dear girls, this is what feminism looks like."

Another user named Deepika wrote :

"Saree Bindi Gajra Sindoor Mangalsutra Women of #Chandrayaan3 proving that cultural values & success can go hand in hand & these ain't symbols of oppression but strength !!!"

The iconic image of women scientists, which has the power to inspire a generation of girls to take up STEM; was used as a sexist commentary on women's clothing. It should not come as a surprise that only women's clothing was at the centre of the scrutiny and not the male scientists who were comfortably wearing Western formal shirts and pants for the event.

These X users have been consistently notorious when it comes to defining a "real woman" – the one who is traditional and rooted to her culture and manages her home and work perfectly. One verified user named 'swatic12' even wrote 'Sab important hai, moon bhi, ghar ki responsibilities bhi and no one better than Indian woman who can handle it all. Respect!'

While these users were busy bashing, attacking and teaching “uncultured, jeans-wearing women” the meaning of “real feminism”, they forgot that they themselves are reducing the achievements of women scientists at ISRO to their attire.

These users forgot that they were celebrating the attire of the women scientists instead of their immense contribution to the space mission itself. They inadvertently downplayed their achievements, undermining the education, training, and hard work behind the mission’s success. Applauding attire over professional achievements belittles expertise and contributions. It implies attire is more deserving of celebration than scientific feats.

Time and again what such social media “influencers” fail to understand is that feminism is not just defined by attires; it’s a fight for gender equality that spans generations. A generation of outspoken, non-traditional, unconventional and rebellious women who fought for our generation to have the rights and freedom that they wished for.

So instead of preaching what real feminism is, such users should focus on reading and becoming more gender sensitive. They can probably learn a thing or two from ISRO Chairman, S Somnath who after the successful landing of the Chandrayaan 3 proudly shared the stage with the core team behind the mission which had Kalpana K, deputy project director of the mission.

Instead of using the occasion of great scientific achievement to belittle other women these social media ‘influencers’ should have used the power of their purchased blue ticks to tell the world about the Chandrayaan mission, and its objectives and send a message to aspiring scientists to dream big.

Saumya Shankar is a seasoned public relations and communications consultant with six years of experience collaborating with the Delhi and Punjab state governments. An alumna of the Delhi School of Economics, she also works as a freelance writer and illustrator.

Link -<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2023/08/not-science-but-sarees-indias-moon-landing-overshadowed-by-sexism/>



The Unseen Burden of Justice: Crackdown on Child Marriages in Assam

The crackdown on child marriages in Assam, initiated in February 2023, has sparked widespread debate and media attention. This section features three insightful articles that delve into the consequences of this crackdown, with a focus on how it has affected the lives of child brides. Each piece offers a nuanced understanding of the complex social, cultural, and health-related repercussions.

The enforcement of child marriage laws has led to the arrest of nearly 3,000 individuals. While aimed at curbing this harmful practice, the retrospective nature of these legal actions has raised critical concerns, particularly regarding their impact on women's reproductive health and access to safe medical care and the political motives behind the drive

The articles highlight the challenges women face in accessing reproductive health services, including safe abortions. With many husbands arrested or in hiding, pregnant women fear seeking medical care due to potential legal repercussions. This fear has led to a decline in antenatal visits and an increase in unsafe, non-institutional deliveries, further endangering the health of young brides. Some women are even contemplating unsafe abortions to avoid drawing attention to their underage marriages.

23. Why Assam's drive will weaken the movement against child marriage

Ghasiram Panda | Down to Earth | Feb 16, 2023

Over-emphasis on prosecution, like in Assam, will not bring any sustainable change when the issue is deeply rooted in culture and social norms

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. Photo: @himantabiswa / Twitter

Around 3,000 people accused of solemnising child marriage have been arrested by Assam Police since February 3, 2023. It has made headlines across India. The crackdown is continuing. The arrests are being carried out based on 4,135 first information reports (FIR) registered across Assam.

The drive by the Assam government to end child marriage has, however, generated mixed reactions. Some are of the view that mere enforcement of the law cannot be the solution. Others argue that the law has at least been enforced now and will prove to be a deterrent in the future.

Legal provision

The issue of child marriage has been dealt with through policy discourse, various social movements and legislative measures in India since the pre-independence period.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act was introduced way back in 1929. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006, was brought to effect November 1, 2007, with a view to make marriages below the age of 18 years voidable and to provide relief in the matter of child marriages.

A male adult above 18 years of age who contracts a child marriage or any person who performs, conducts, directs or abets child marriage, shall be punishable under the Act. No woman shall be imprisoned.

Cases under PCMA

Ineffective implementation of PCMA has always been under the scanner, as the number of cases registered under this Act has been negligible since the Act was enacted.

However, in the last one decade, a continuous increase in the registration of cases was observed in Karnataka and Assam. The National Crime Records Bureau's *Crime in India Reports 2021* indicates that 273 cases were registered in Karnataka in 2021.

Also in 2021, Assam, Haryana, Maharashtra, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand and West Bengal have also registered the highest number of cases in a decade.

In Assam, the number of cases registered under PCMA in 2013 was 1. It was 4, 14, 23, 58, 88, 115, 138 and 155 in the years 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021, respectively.

The total number of FIRs registered in the state when the current crackdown began was 4,135. In a recent development, the state on January 23, appointed Gram Panchayat secretaries as child marriage prohibition officers (CMPO). They might have been instrumental in lodging these FIRs.

Child marriage and teenage pregnancy

The argument in support of the ongoing drive against child marriage is that it is a public health issue as the teenage pregnancy ratio in Assam is 16.8 per cent.

India has the largest adolescent population in the world. There are 253 million adolescent Indians and a considerable proportion of them are sexually active.

The recent National Family Health Survey indicates that 10 per cent of women in the age group of 25-49 years had their first sexual intercourse before the age of 15, and 39 per cent had their first sexual intercourse before the age of 18 years.

The consequences of child marriage are adverse for both sexes, but more significant in the case of girls. Child marriage among girls has resulted in early pregnancies and complications during child deliveries.

Young mothers, who are improperly nourished, give birth to immature and unhealthy children. They also suffer frequent abortions. Child marriage has a long-term impact on school attainment, maternal and infant mortality.

Child marriage exposes adolescents to several other complications. Many girls who are married young are exposed to domestic violence, gender discrimination, HIV/AIDS etc.

In many ways, early marriage restricts the normal transition process of a child to her /his adolescence and limits the scope of informed choices, avenues for skill building and pursuing individual aspirations. That's how early marriage restricts the survival, development, protection and participation of young children.

Factors influencing child marriage

Apart from the ineffective implementation of PCMA, the phenomenon of child marriage is attributed to a variety of other reasons such as poverty, culture, traditions and values based on patriarchal norms.

It is an established fact that the economics related to raising girl children and vulnerability owing to poor economic conditions have often pushed families to consider child marriage as a viable solution.

The costs of higher education also drive poor families to marry their daughter at an early age.

The element of safety and security of a girl, especially in her adolescent period, has also contributed to the rate of prevalence of child marriage. The fear of losing family honour in case adolescent girls elope with boys from other castes has also influenced the decision of families to give their daughters in marriage at an early age and get rid of the ‘tension’.

Child marriage has been accepted as a social norm rather than exception in most Indian tribal communities. Lack of literacy, awareness and most importantly unchallenged customs and practices are responsible for child marriage in tribal and rural areas as well as slums of urban localities.

Prevention better than prosecution

The PCMA emphasises more on prevention and protection than prosecution.

Prosecution may only be a last resort, particularly if the child is taken away from their lawful guardian by enticement, force or use of deceitful means, or is sold or trafficked for the purpose of marriage. However, over-emphasis on prosecution like in Assam will not bring any sustainable change when the issue is deeply rooted in culture and social norms.

As in clauses (a) to (g) of Sub-Section (3) of Section 16 of PCMA (6 of 2007), CMPOs are to be appointed in every state for sensitisation and awareness creation in the community, preventing child marriages, ensuring protection of the victims.

The law makes child marriages voidable by giving a choice to the children in the marriage to seek annulment. It provides for maintenance and residence of the female contracting party.

It gives a legal status to all children born from child marriages and makes provisions for their custody and maintenance. The law provides for all support and aid including medical aid, legal aid, counselling and rehabilitation support to children once they are rescued.

The CMPO has been empowered to provide necessary aid to victims of child marriage and to produce the children in need of care and protection before the Child Welfare Committee.

As per Sub Section (1) of Section 16 of PCMA (6 of 2007), the State should appoint a chief CMPO who is responsible for developing a state strategy to end child marriage, preparation of an annual report on child marriage and monitoring the effective implementation of the law.

Ensuring prevention and protection makes the State accountable for establishing a responsive system, building collective consensus and increasing public investment whereas prosecution shifts the burden on the public. Assam has adopted the shortcut by emphasising on prosecution.

Role of police

The solemnisation of child marriages is a cognisable and non-bailable offence. Hence, police have a role to play in prosecution of the accused.

Breaking the stereotype, the Odisha government has involved the police to spread awareness on child protection. The police in Jharsuguda district have adopted 44 villages to make them child marriage-free. Similarly, the Nabarangpur district police has identified 50 child marriage-prone villages for this purpose.

Police officers are assigned to conduct meetings in the community to discuss issue of child marriages, out-of-school children, teenage pregnancies and the empowerment of adolescent girls with representatives of the panchayat, parents and children themselves.

There has been a behavioural change among the police personnel because of this shift in their role which has brought them close to the community.

The sudden police action in Assam of arresting thousands of people in a couple of days has created a crisis. Instead of bringing a solution to the issue, it has generated further problems by increasing vulnerability of the marginalised, especially women and girls. Cases of suicide, abandonment of girls and family members leaving home are being reported.

Such short-term measures will never be helpful for a sustainable positive change. Rather, it will weaken the existing social movement against child marriage.

Ghasiram Panda is the programme manager of the Ending Child Marriage Programme of Action Aid India

Views expressed are the author's own and don't necessarily reflect those of Down To Earth.

With over 25 years of experience in grassroots development, Ghasiram Panda specialises in child rights, particularly the Right to Education and the prevention of child marriage. He advises the Odisha State Commission for Child Protection and contributes to state-level committees on child welfare and homelessness.

Link:

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/governance/why-assam-s-drive-will-weaken-the-movement-against-child-marriage-87737>



24. In Assam, a police crackdown on child marriage leaves a trail of crying women and broken families

Rokibuz Zaman | Scroll.in | Feb 7, 2023

In Assam, a police crackdown on child marriage leaves a trail of sad and broken families. Many claim that the action is politically motivated, targeting Muslims of Bengali origin. Women in Guwahati protest against the Assam government's crackdown on child marriage.

On February 4, the disturbing videos of a bawling Ayesha Khatun, rolling on the ground in apparent distress, in front of the Howly police station in lower Assam's Barpeta district, were all over social media.

The 45-year-old woman was protesting the arrest of her husband and son. They had been taken into custody in the early hours of the morning as part of the Assam government's crackdown on child marriage with retrospective arrests.

In the winter of 2021, Khatun's 21-year-old son Lalchan Badshah reportedly married a minor girl. She is now 19.

"The marriage was a majboori – compulsion," said Khatun when Scroll met her at her thatched-roof home in Helapakuri village, 2 km away from the police station, a day later, on Sunday.

According to Khatun, his son and the woman were in love. "The girl had run away from her house without the permission of her parents," she claimed, adding that the woman had refused to return.

Khatun continued, "Even when we contacted her parents, they refused to take her back and said they gave up their child. The girl threatened to end her life – what will you do then?"

The arrests have broken Khatun, a domestic worker. "We are illiterate and poor people getting by on daily wages," she said. "My husband has not done anything wrong. He should not be arrested at least. How will I survive?"

Broken families

Khatun is not alone in her misery. The last couple of days have seen hundreds of women gathering outside police stations across the state, demanding, at times begging, for their husbands and sons to be released from custody.

On February 4, the police in the western Assam district of Dhubri police used batons and teargas to disperse women protestors.

As of the morning of February 6, the police had arrested 2,441 men even as resistance and criticism mounted: many claimed that the action was politically motivated and communal, targetting Muslims of Bengali origin.

It all began on January 23 when Chief Minister Himanta Sarma referred to the “alarming” results of the National Family Health Survey-5 that was conducted in 2019-’20 and released last year. According to the survey, Assam had an underage pregnancy rate of 11.7 % – signic antly higher than the national average of 6.8%.

Sarma said the government would initiate a drive against child marriage, charging men marrying girls below 14 years of age under the Protection of Children from

Sexual O nces Act, or POCSO, and those marrying girls aged 14-18 under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act.

“Our drive against child marriage is for public health and public welfare as teenage pregnancy ratio in Assam is quite alarming,” he said. “We are resolved to continue this drive until we full our objective. I urge the people to cooperate with us in controlling this harmful trend.”

Regional variations

Starting February 3, the police got cracking.

Police data seen by Scroll shows that districts with high Muslim populations have seen more arrests than others. The districts of Biswanath, Barpeta, Baksa, Dhubri, Hojai, Bongaigaon, and Nagaon districts have all seen over 100 arrests each. While Barpeta, Dhubri, Hojai, Nagaon, and Bongaigaon are Muslim-majority districts, Biswanath and Baksa too have a sizeable number of people from the community.

Muslims of Bengali origin, often branded as “illegal migrants”, are one of the most marginalised communities in Assam.

Unsurprisingly, many of those who have been arrested are unlettered.

“We don’t understand anything about the law, who will guide us?” asked a woman in Barpeta whose husband and brother-in-law were picked up from the local market.

Her brother-in-law, Mustaq Ali, a 35-year-old tailor, is accused of marrying a 17-year-old.

‘There is definitely discrimination’

Nazifa Ahmed, a social researcher from the state, accused the Assam government of “co-opting social issues to suit their ideologies”. “The introduction of punitive elements under POCSO and the higher number of arrests made in districts dominated by Bengal-origin Muslim populations is not a coincidence and undermines the purported claims of this drive as being ‘secular’ in ethos,” Ahmed said.

Many others made similar accusations.

Dhubri-based advocate Masud Zaman, who is representing several people in the district, said the police had applied the more stringent POCSO Act against men belonging to the Bengali-origin Muslim community. “Twenty-four people arrested in Majuli got bail within 24 hours, but why are people not released here?” he asked. “There is den itely discrimination.”

Majuli in upper Assam is home predominantly to ethnic Assamese communities.

Even so, accounts from the ground suggest many from other marginalised communities in the state have also faced action.

“He [Sarma] misjudged it,” said Uddipan Dutta, a social scientist based in Guwahati. “He thought that it was a community-specific thing and that the crackdown will boost his image and lead to further polarisation. But the arrests show that [child marriage] is more about class than community.”

Besides, elopements, which often culminate in underage marriages, cut across communities, said Dutta.

Another love story ends in arrests

Consider, for instance, the story of Bajali district residents Pritilata and her husband Pulok Roy – both members of the Koch Rajbongshi community.

Pritilata is 18, Pulok 23.

The couple got married in February 2022 after having eloped. Parental approval soon followed.

In the early hours of February 3, though, the police landed at their home to arrest Pulok and his father, leaving a heavily pregnant Pritilata distraught.

“We have been in a relationship since 2019,” she said, “I love him and that’s why I eloped and married him in 2022. I want my husband back.”

Pritilata added, “The government’s intention may be right but they are doing injustice not only to me but to all women. They are trying to break our relationship, house and love. Himanta doesn’t have any right to do that.”

Her 40-year-old mother Himani Das was even more furious. “We don’t need Orunodoi money or free rice,” she said, referring to Assam’s government cash assistance scheme for underprivileged women. “They have made us su er...my pregnant daughter has been crying non-stop.”

‘Not a law and order problem’

Many activists and observers say the retrospective punitive action will do more harm than good. Abdul Kalam Azad, a researcher-activist from Barpeta, said that the crackdown is “whimsical” and “counterproductive”. “It will break the ongoing strong social movement against the menace of child marriage,” he said. “The intent of the move is being questioned and many see it as yet another attack on the Muslim

community.” Azad pointed out that the reason behind the high rate of child marriage among Bengali-origin Muslims was “patriarchy, poverty and limited or no opportunity for education and livelihood for girls in remote areas”. Rokibul Hussain, a Barpeta-based journalist, concurred. “The parents want to get rid of their girls as early as possible because of their poverty,” said Hussain.

Hussain, however, was not as critical of the police action. “The crackdown has also created a huge awareness,” he argued. But others advise caution. Former Assam police chief Harekrishna Deka said child marriage was “not a law and order problem”. “Using force to null past child marriages will only cause law and order issues over a social practice continuing customarily due to ignorance and orthodoxy,” he said.

Rokibuz Zaman is a reporter with scroll.in, covering India’s North-East region. Since the winter of 2021, he has been reporting on this diverse and complex region for Scroll, and has worked with The Telegraph and The Times of India.

Link: <https://scroll.in/article/1043378/in-assam-a-police-crackdown-on-child-marriage-leaves-a-trail-of-crying-women-and-broken-families>



25. Assam Arrests: Fear and suspicion keep pregnant teenagers away from hospitals

Sukrita Baruah | *The Indian Express* | Feb 12, 2023

Of the 2,763 people who have been arrested as of February 9, the highest number — 216 — has been from Hojai. With their husbands arrested or absconding, a sense of panic has taken grip, with young or expecting mothers too afraid to seek out the reproductive help they need.

Eight months into her pregnancy, an 18-year-old in Assam's Hojai district has sought refuge in her maternal grandfather's house, in a village more than seven kilometres away from her matrimonial home. Her husband, two brothers-in-law and father-in-law have all fled, fearing arrest in the Assam government's crackdown against child marriage.

"She doesn't eat, doesn't sleep, sick with worry," said her aunt while the girl sat on the porch of the house. The 18-year-old's delivery is due in the first week of March. She is terrified to meet a doctor or make her way to hospital. "If I go, will they come after my family?" she asks.

Of the 2,763 people who have been arrested as of February 9, the highest number — 216 — has been from Hojai. With their husbands arrested or absconding, a sense of panic has taken grip, with young or expecting mothers too afraid to seek out the reproductive help they need.

The 18-year-old was dropped off at her grandfather's home by her husband more than a week ago, the day the police began its crackdown on child marriages on February 3. She has also lost touch with the ASHA worker at her village and has not been in touch with the ASHA worker in her grandfather's village.

At the small Doboka Community Health Centre, where the 18-year-old would have got her check-ups and delivery done, Dr Abu Sharif Akanda, Senior Medical and Health Officer, said, "Over the last week, every day, I have had one or two pregnant teenage girls come in asking to have abortions done. In all these cases, they have been saying that they are scared that if the baby is born, it will serve as some kind of proof or evidence against them. I have been counselling them, telling them that they don't need to do this. I hope that once they go back home, they don't try unsafe abortion practices instead."

In another district, Barpeta Civil Hospital Superintendent Dr. Najirul Islam has a sobering observation: that the number of women visiting the ante-natal services at the hospital has dropped.

“There is a fear of the police, that they will get arrested if they come to the hospital, that we will report them. At our ante-natal set-up, daily we used to have a long queue of around 50 women every day. Now that has come down to 15-20,” he said.

A lack of trust in the medical system and a fear of their families being tracked down through pregnancy-related information has seeped deep down. Across villages in Hojai, ASHA workers talk of the suspicion – and hostility – that has been directed at them since the start of the police action. As grassroots community health-workers, they are the ones who keep track of pregnancies and inoculation in villages and collate data on the same.

“While a lot of people have been blaming me for bringing the police into their homes, one villager has even been harassing and threatening me. They think that I’m the one who has been feeding information to the police,” said Niharul Nisa, the ASHA worker for Changmaji Tiniali where arrests have been made in six families.

She says that this suspicion has also been taking the form of women hesitating to approach her for their health requirement.

This Wednesday, she had called 33 women and children for various vaccines to the anganwadi centre. Only 18 turned, an unusually low number according to her.

“I was surprised at the low numbers and asked neighbours of some of the missing women why they hadn’t come. They said the women are afraid to come to me because they think that I’ll get them arrested,” she said.

In Bhelowguri village, too, ASHA worker Rafia Begum complains of similar allegations. “There was a girl who told me that she is pregnant and that she needs to get her vaccinations done. I scheduled her for the first dose on Wednesday but she didn’t show up. When I asked her why she didn’t come, she said that her periods have started. There are murmurs that there is a child marriage case against her husband. Both husband and wife have been gone from the village since,” she added.

To try and address this trust deficit, a meeting was held at the Doboka CHC on Thursday with all ASHA workers, asking them to counsel villagers into trusting them and the medical system.

EXPLAINED

Possible fallout

With young or expecting mothers too afraid to seek out the reproductive help they need, there have been fears that they might turn to non-institutional deliveries, which is already a concern in several districts of Assam.

“We told them to ensure that all pregnant women continue to come to the centre as always and to counsel the villagers to convince them that we have nothing to do with the police action,” said Dr. Akanda. In the midst of the panic, 19-year-old Rabia Khatoon gave birth at the Doboka Community Health Centre on February 6. In her

home in Pub Rowarpara village, the five-day-old baby lay beside her on blankets on the floor on Saturday, next to a fire her mother lit with the aim of easing her post-delivery pains. She has not seen her husband since she has given birth and is living with her parents. Around a month ago, her husband Mukhtar Hussain had left for Golaghat for work. Then, a day before her delivery, police entered their home past midnight looking to make arrests for her marriage. Not finding Mukhtar in the house, they arrested her brother-in-law. “Now he’s not come back fearing that he’ll be arrested, so I have no idea if he will come back anytime and if I will have to look after the baby myself,” she said. Her father Fazul Haque is afraid that he might be arrested too. So like men across villages in the district, he has been spending his nights in the fields, hiding out in anticipation of police raids on their homes at any time.

Sukrita Baruah, a Guwahati-based reporter for The Indian Express, covers North East India, focusing on politics, policy, conflict, and Assam's citizenship issues. Previously, she reported on education from New Delhi.

Link:

<https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/assam-arrests-fear-and-suspicion-keep-pregnant-teenagers-away-from-hospitals-8439485/>



In the clutches of harmful Social practices

This section brings together three powerful articles that explore the intersection of gender, caste, and cultural practices in contemporary India, throwing light on the struggles of women and men against harmful traditions and societal norms.

The first article by Seema Agrawal focuses on the plight of women named Draupadi, an iconic name with strong mythological roots in Indian culture. Agrawal reveals how these women become symbolic victims of deep-seated patriarchy, burdened by cultural expectations and discriminatory traditions. This piece calls for urgent social reforms to challenge regressive practices that limit the freedom and rights of women, drawing attention to the persistence of gender inequality in modern India.

The second article by Manish Mishra brings to light a disturbing practice in rural Bihar, Pakodauwa marriage, where men are abducted for forced marriage. The case of Gautam Kumar, a teacher who was forcibly married, illustrates the devastating consequences of these forced unions. Despite legal intervention, societal pressures often prevail, compelling abducted couples to stay together. This article sheds light on the persistence of harmful traditions that deny individuals their basic right to consent, highlighting the enduring challenges of forced marriages in Bihar.

The third article by Varsha Prakash highlights the ongoing caste-based discrimination faced by Dalit women in inter-caste relationships. Despite forming relationships outside their caste in the hopes of escaping prejudice, these women often encounter the same social ostracism, rejection, and abuse. Their experiences reveal the pervasiveness of caste hierarchies, even in intimate spaces, underscoring how deeply ingrained social divisions continue to affect their emotional and mental well-being.

Together, these articles offer a nuanced look at the intersection of tradition, gender, and caste, exposing the societal pressures that perpetuate inequality in contemporary India.

26. Draupadi of Lakhamandal, victim of the evil practice of polyandry (Translated from Hindi)

*Seema Agrawal | Prajatantr Indore, Janwani Uttar Pradesh, Dainik Hawk Hindi
| Oct 30, 2023*

Draupadi of Lakhamandal, victim of the evil practice of polyandry

In the Jaunsari tribe of the mountains of Uttarakhand, there is still a tradition of making one woman the wife of all the brothers, in which the women of the Jaunsari tribe are still suffocating. The women of Lakhamandal of Uttarakhand are still facing this evil practice. The custom of polygamy is still prevalent in the Jaunsari tribe in Lakhamandal. The wife marries one man in the house, but she has to maintain marital relations with all the men in the house.

The whole world knows the name of Draupadi of Mahabharata. Draupadi, a wife of the five Pandavas. It is mentioned in the Mahabharata that whatever alms the Pandavas brought during their exile, Kunti, without even looking, ordered to distribute it equally among the five brothers. Following the mother's orders, the Pandavas divided everything among themselves. The same thing happened on the day when Arjun brought Draupadi to Panchal country by winning his swayamvara on his own strength. Kunti ordered the Pandavas standing at the door to distribute whatever they had brought equally. At that very moment Draupadi became the wife of not just one but five men. Draupadi continued to maintain the polygamous relationship throughout her life. Pandavas made a rule that every night Draupadi would go to one brother's room, his wife would give him happiness. More than five thousand years have passed since the Mahabharata. People say that Draupadi also went away with the Mahabharata, but Draupadi, who had five husbands, is still alive.

Even today, in the Jaunsari tribe of the mountains of Uttarakhand, there is a tradition of making one woman the wife of all the brothers, in which the women of the Jaunsari tribe are still suffocating. The women of Lakhamandal of Uttarakhand are still facing this evil practice. The custom of polygamy is still prevalent in the Jaunsari tribe in Lakhamandal. The wife marries one man in the house, but she has to maintain marital relations with all the men in the house. She automatically becomes the wife of all the brothers. He has to maintain relations with each brother and keep him happy. The role of a wife has to be played in his life.

Even today women of Jaunsari tribe have to become Draupadi. According to the senior people of Lakhamandal, the practice of polyandry is a big cultural part of our tribe. This is our identity. We can't leave it. The women of the tribe say that this custom is a bad custom for us. It has torn our social, personal, mental and family life apart. Polygamous women have to satisfy not just one but many husbands. One has to bear every responsibility for their nutrition. Till the end, the woman remains

confused as to whom she should consider as her husband in the house, with whom she can share the joys and sorrows of life.

According to the 2011 census, there are only 863 females per 1000 males in the Jaunsari tribe. In the last several decades, the situation of sex ratio has worsened due to increase in cases of female foeticide. Sociologists say that the main reason for this practice being prevalent in these areas even today is the increasing sex ratio. Even today in these areas the number of women is very less compared to men. Due to low ratio of women, here boys do not get girls for marriage, hence one girl becomes the wife of every brother.

Actually, people of Jaunsari tribe consider Pandavas as their ancestors. Due to calling themselves descendants of Pandavas, polyandry i.e. having more than one husband is prevalent in this tribe. The people of Jaunsari say that the practice of polyandry is our offering to our ancestors, the Pandavas. Unless the practice of polyandry is practiced in our homes, life is considered incomplete, hence the practice of polyandry is imposed on women in a way. Women have to live with it even if they don't want to, from which the woman cannot recover. According to a report, this practice is still alive today among the people living in the areas around the Himalayas in Northern India and in the region of Tibet.

A major reason behind the practice of polyandry is the distribution of property and the disputes related to it. People believe that if every brother has his own wife and children, then their lands will be divided like common people. There will be a fight over property. If there is a woman in the house, the property will go to her children. Preventing fragmentation of agricultural land in the mountains is a big challenge. The Jaunsari tribe survives by farming and animal husbandry. To avoid division of ancestral property and animals, all brothers get married to one wife. People believe that having too many women disturbs the peace of the house. There should be a woman so that there is no discord in the house. This maintains love among brothers, because every brother's life revolves around a woman. Jaunsari call polyandry a fundamental part of their culture. These tribes sacrifice women's feelings to save their land.

The elders of Jaunsari tribe may believe in many reasons for adopting this practice, but somewhere this practice has become a big pain for the women of this tribe. Such pain, which this woman cannot tell to anyone. Every woman has to follow this tradition from generation to generation. In polyandry, the woman does not have the right to marry again, but the man has the right to marry one after the other. If a husband dies, the woman has to live as his widow. A woman plays two roles - married and widow - in the same life. A woman has to have relations with many men simultaneously, which is a big blow to her feelings. Whose wife a woman is cannot be decided until death. Children born to women also remain deprived of their real father throughout their life. If the wife lives with one brother, the other brother becomes violent, discriminatory and jealous, due to which the woman becomes a victim. In this way, there are many difficulties which Jaunsari women face.

Women also have to suffer a lot physically. They become victims of many types of sexual diseases. A research conducted in America revealed that children of women who have more than one husband are victims of emotional and physical abuse. Such girls themselves become victims of emotional abuse after seeing their mothers trapped in a life of polygamy. Negativity and fear arise in their mind regarding marriage. She considers this as rape. This practice is exploitation of women. According to research, among women in polygamous marriages, emotional distress is present at 86.8 percent, feeling of fear at 17 percent, lack of self-esteem at 58.4 percent and feeling of loneliness at 64 percent.

Many diseases like marital dissatisfaction, depression, feeling of hostility, feeling of doubt, stress, lack of self-esteem and loneliness are found in women associated with the practice of polyandry. Women of Jaunsari tribe are deprived of living a dignified life as mentioned in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which is a big example of gender inequality. These women are deprived of health, education and respect. The Uttarakhand government had recently said that after Diwali, it will call a special session of the Assembly and pass a bill to implement Uniform Civil Code in the state to ban the evils like polygamy and polyandry prevalent in Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand will be the first state to do so, but till now the government has not considered it. The population of Jaunsari tribe in Uttarakhand is more than 1 lakh 37 thousand, who also vote. Despite this, till date no political party or leader has thought of giving freedom to these women from polyandry. Freedom from this practice is the need of the hour, on which we all will have to not only think together but also work.

Seema Agrawal, a freelance journalist from Dehradun and 2024 Reach Media Cancer Fellow, writes on gender sensitivity, health, and climate change. Her work appears in leading papers like Jansatta and Dainik Jagran.

Link - <https://www.thehawk.in/news/draupadi-of-lakhamandal-victim-of-the-evil-practice-of->



27. बिहार में 24 घंटे की दुल्हन के गांव की कहानी: पिता का भी पकड़ौआ विवाह, गांव में ऐसी 50 शादियां; BPSC टीचर्स की निगरानी बढ़ी

Manish Mishra | Dainik Bhaskar Digital Patna | Dec 9, 2023

बिहार में शादी के लिए अपहरण कोई नई बात नहीं। यह यहां का पुराना ट्रेंड रहा है। लड़का पसंद आए तो अपहरण फिर जबरन शादी। वैशाली में BPSC से चयनित टीचर गौतम कुमार को नौकरी जॉइन करने के 12वें दिन ही स्कूल से उठा लिया गया। चांदनी से शादी करा दी गई।

मामला पुलिस और कोर्ट पहुंचा। अब दोनों अलग-अलग हैं। दोनों सिर्फ 24 घंटे तक साथ रहे पाए। जिस परिवार और गांव में गौतम कुमार का पकड़ौआ विवाह हुआ है, वहां की कहानी कम दिलचस्प नहीं है।

लड़की के पिता समेत परिवार के 5 सदस्यों का पकड़ौआ विवाह हुआ है। 25 हजार आबादी वाले पंचायत में ऐसी शादियों की संख्या 50 से अधिक है। यह ट्रेंड कई पीढ़ी से चला आ रहा है। दैनिक भास्कर की इंवेस्टिगेशन में ऐसे कई चौकाने वाले राज सामने आए हैं। इस बार संडे बिग स्टोरी में पढ़िए बिहार में शादियों के लिए अपहरण और फिर समझौते की कहानी..।

बिहार की खास पकड़ौआ शादी को जानिए

बिहार में पकड़ौआ विवाह काफी प्रचलित है। इसमें लड़का-लड़की किसी की भी सहमति की जरूरत नहीं होती है। यह शादी सिर्फ दबंगई से होती है। इसमें बैड-बाजा और बाराती नहीं, बस दबंग टाइप के लोग चाहिए, जो लड़के को किडनैप कर सकें। लड़की वाले ऐसे लड़कों पर नजर रखते हैं, फिर आदमी लगाकर उठवा लेते हैं।

अधिकतर मामलों में अपहरण ही किया जाता है, कुछ में बहला-फुसलाकर भी लड़कों को बंधक बना लिया जाता है। लड़कों को बंधक बनाकर दबंगई के साथ रीति-रिवाज से लड़की के साथ शादी करा दी जाती है। इसके बाद लड़के को छोड़ दिया जाता है।

थाने से लेकर कोर्ट तक मामला जाता है, लेकिन अंत में समाज समझौता कराकर दोनों पर साथ रहने का दबाव बनाता है। अधिकतर मामलों में समय के साथ किडनैपिंग का घाव भर जाता है, लड़का-लड़की पति-पत्नी की तरह साथ रहने लगते हैं। दोनों परिवार भी एक हो जाते हैं।

आसान नहीं पकड़ौआ विवाह के जाल से निकल पाना

पकड़ौआ विवाह के जाल से निकल पाना आसान नहीं होता है। हम एक उदाहरण से आपको पकड़ौआ शादी को रद्द कराने की लड़ाई बताते हैं, जिसमें सेना के कॉन्स्टेबल को 10 साल लग गए।

रविकांत को 30 जून 2013 को लड़की के घर वालों ने उस समय अगवा कर लिया, जब वह लखीसराय के एक मंदिर में पूजा कर रहे थे। इसके बाद जबरन उनकी शादी करा दी गई। शादी खत्म होने से पहले रविकांत लड़की के घर से भागकर झूटी के लिए जम्मू-कश्मीर चले गए।

रविकांत इस घटना से काफी परेशान थे। बॉर्डर पर दुश्मनों से लड़ने के साथ वह पकड़ौआ विवाह वाले सिस्टम से भी लड़ रहे थे। झूटी से वापस छुट्टी पर घर आते ही उन्होंने लखीसराय फेमिली कोर्ट में शादी को रद्द कराने के लिए याचिका दायर की थी। लेकिन उन्हें बड़ा झटका तो तब लगा

जब लखीसराय की फैमिली कोर्ट ने 27 जनवरी 2020 को याचिका को ही खारिज कर दी। रविकांत पहली लड़ाई हार गए, लेकिन हिम्मत नहीं हारी।

रविकांत पटना हाईकोर्ट गए और न्याय की गुहार लगाई। पटना हाईकोर्ट में न्यायमूर्ति पीबी बजंथरी और न्यायमूर्ति अरुण कुमार झा की खंडपीठ ने लखीसराय कोर्ट के 3 साल पुराने फैसले को रद्द कर दिया। हाईकोर्ट में सेना के कॉन्स्टेबल की जीत हुई, कोर्ट ने जबरन हुई शादी को रद्द कर दिया।

रविकांत को 10 साल तक लड़ाई लड़नी पड़ी, हर पीड़ित ऐसा नहीं कर पाता है। अक्सर ऐसे मामलों में वह टूट जाता है, फिर समाज के दबाव से लड़का-लड़की को साथ रहना पड़ता है।

अब कहानी रिटर्न ऑफ पकड़ौआ मैरिज

गौतम कुमार वैशाली जिले के महेया मालपुर गांव के सत्यनारायण राय के बेटे हैं। साल 2023 में गौतम का सिलेक्शन बीपीएसपी टीचर के लिए हुआ है। गौतम की नियुक्ति गांव के पास ही रेपुरा मध्य विद्यालय में हुई। सरकारी नौकरी गौतम के गले की फांस बन गई।

तैनाती के साथ ही गौतम के अपहरण की तैयारी होने लगी। हर दिन की तरह 30 नवंबर को भी वह स्कूल पहुंचे। दोपहर में दो लोग आए और स्कूल से खींच कर गेट के बाहर लगी बोलैरो में बैठाने लगे।

बोलैरो में पहले से सवार लोगों को पिस्टल लगा दी और पीटकर उन्हें जबरन लादकर लेते गए। सारा कुछ फिल्मी स्टाइल में हुआ। स्कूल की टीचर चंदा देखती रह गई, बदमाश गौतम को लेकर चले गए।

घटना से आक्रोशित परिवार वालों के साथ क्षेत्र के लोगों ने महुआ ताजपुर स्टेट हाइवे को दो-दो बार जाम किया। गांव वालों ने पुलिस पर मिलीभगत का भी आरोप लगाया। घटना के लगभग 26 घंटे बाद गौतम कैमरा के सामने आए और अपहरण की पूरी कहानी सुनाई।

गौतम के मुताबिक उन्हें स्कूल से जबरन ले जाया गया और शादी करा दी गई। इसके लिए उन्हें खूब मारा-पीटा गया, पिस्टल से डराया गया। स्कूल से उन्हें हथियार के बल पर जन्दाहा नारायणपुर डेढ़पुरा ले जाया गया। वहां मारपीट कर राजेश राय की बेटी चांदनी से जबरन शादी करा दी गई। फिर अगले दिन महिसौर थाने में छोड़ दिया गया।

गौतम का कहना है, 'घटना से इमेज खराब हुई है। वह लड़की को साथ रखने को तैयार नहीं है। स्कूल लड़की के घर के पास है, इसलिए बार-बार धमकी भी मिल रही है। अब दोबारा अपहरण या किसी घटना की आशंका है।' हालांकि पुलिस ने इस मामले में केस दर्ज करते हुए लड़की के चाचा ब्रजभूषण प्रसाद को जेल भेज दिया है, घर के अन्य सदस्य फरार हैं।

भास्कर की इन्वेस्टिगेशन में अपहरण वाली शादी का सच

10 साल पुराने पकड़ौआ विवाह पर पटना हाईकोर्ट का फैसला आने के बाद वैशाली में अपहरण कर शादी की घटना की जमीनी हमीकत जानने के लिए दैनिक भास्कर की इन्वेस्टिगेशन टीम वैशाली पहुंची। सबसे पहले हम पीड़ित टीचर गौतम के घर पहुंचे।

घर पर गौतम के दादा से मुलाकात हुई, लेकिन शादी की बात पर वह मुंह खोलने को तैयार नहीं हुए। गौतम के दादा की चुप्पी में कई सवाल और राज छिपे हुए थे। हालांकि गौतम के चाचा रंजीत यादव ने घटना की कहानी सुनाई और कहा अब कोर्ट फैसला करेगा।

गौतम की मां ने घटना पर साधी चुप्पी

गौतम के दादा की घटना पर चुप्पी का जवाब तलाशने दैनिक भास्कर की टीम गौतम की मां से मिलने राजकीयकृत मध्य विद्यालय सह उत्कर्मित उच्चतर मध्य विद्यालय महेया प्रखंड के पातेपुर पहुंची। यहां हमारी मुलाकात गौतम की मां आशा से हुई। शादी के सवाल पर मां के जवाब देने से पहले साथ बैठे टीचर ने बात काट दी।

तबीयत खराब होने की बात कहकर वह गौतम की मां को कुछ नहीं बोलने दिया। गौतम की मां से कई बार अपना पक्ष बताने को कहा गया, लेकिन वह कुछ भी नहीं बोली। गौतम के बाबा और मां की चुप्पी ने मामले को संदिग्ध बना दिया। अगर गौतम की मां बीमार हैं, तो विभाग उन्हें स्कूल क्यों बुला रहा है? जब घटना हुई तो वह बताने में क्यों डर रही हैं? जिस परिवार के साथ घटना हुई, उसकी चुप्पी ऐसे कई सवाल खड़े कर रही थी।

गौतम के स्कूल के प्रिंसिपल और टीचर की चुप्पी

घटना की हकीकत जानने के लिए जब हम गौतम के स्कूल मध्य विद्यालय रेपुरा पातेपुर पहुंचे। यहां गौतम से हमारी मुलाकात नहीं हुई, हालांकि यहां घटना की दहशत साफ दिख रही थी। घटना के बाद से ही बच्चों की उपस्थिति कम हो गई। यहां हमारी मुलाकात घटना की चश्मदीद टीचर चंदा और प्रिंसिपल से हुई।

ऑन कैमरा दोनों भागते रहे, वह कुछ बोलने को तैयार नहीं थे। प्रिंसिपल तो घटना के समय वीसी में शामिल होने की बात कहकर निकल लिए, जबकि चंदा ने मुंह ही नहीं खोला।

प्रिंसिपल ने कहा घटना के बाद गौतम की सुरक्षा को लेकर ध्यान दिया जा रहा है। जिला शिक्षा पदाधिकारी की तरफ से आदेश है, उन्हें स्कूल में कम समय देना है। इस कारण से गौतम कहां है, सही पता भी नहीं बताया गया।

गौतम के स्कूल के स्टूडेंट्स ने खोले कई राज

काफी तलाश के बाद गांव के एक बाग में क्रिकेट खेल रहे गौतम के स्कूल के बच्चों से हमारी मुलाकात हुई। इसमें से अधिकतर बच्चों को पूरी कहानी पता थी। बच्चों ने बताया घटना के बाद जब गौतम स्कूल आए तो उनके हाथ में रंग लगा था। ऐसा लग रहा था, वह शादी के लिए तैयारी से गए थे।

बच्चों ने यह भी बताया कि गौतम सर ने क्लास में बच्चों को खड़ा करके पूछा था- बताओ हमारे साथ जो हुआ वह गलत हुआ या अच्छा? बच्चों ने जवाब दिया, अगर जबरदस्ती शादी हुई तो गलत हुआ है।

स्टूडेंट्स के मुताबिक टीचर के हाथ में शादी वाला रंग भी लगा था। ऐसा लग रहा था कि वह तैयारी से शादी करने गए थे। बच्चों ने यह भी बताया कि घटना के बाद अब स्कूल में पढ़ाई नहीं हो पा रही है। लड़के कम आ रहे हैं, टीचर भी पढ़ाई पर ध्यान नहीं दे रहे हैं।

लड़की के घर सन्नाटा, रिश्तेदार ने कहा धोखा हुआ

स्कूल से महज 200 मीटर की दूरी पर ही चांदनी का घर है। जब हम चांदनी के घर पहुंचे तो यहां सन्नाटा पसरा था। घर पर ताला लगा हुआ था, जबकि लड़की के चाचा ब्रजभूषण के घर मातम जैसे हालात थे। यहां हमारी मुलाकात ब्रजभूषण की बुआ गीता देवी से हुई।

गीता देवी इसी साल उसी विद्यालय के हेड मास्टर के पद से रिटायर हुई हैं, जहां गौतम टीचर हैं। गीता ने कहा कि बड़ा धोखा हुआ है, गौतम के साथ उसकी सहायक महिला टीचर ने गलत बयान देकर ब्रजभूषण को जेल भेजवा दिया है। इस घटना में बड़ा खेल खेला गया है।

अब जानिए कहा हैं 24 घंटे की दुल्हन

अब हमारी तलाश 24 घंटे की दुल्हन को लेकर थी। पुराने घर में ताला लटक रहा था, पुलिस के डर से घर वाले फरार चल रहे हैं। काफी पड़ताल के बाद हम वहां पहुंच गए जहां लड़की को रखा गया है। काफी रिक्रेस्ट के बाद भी लड़की और उसकी मां ने बात नहीं की।

वह बार-बार इज्जत का हवाला देती रहीं, लेकिन यह साफ कहा कि शादी रजामंदी से हुई है। इसका प्रमाण उन लोगों के पास है। समय आने पर वह सामने लाएंगे। घर वालों ने साफ कहा कि लड़की अब उसी घर जाएगी, एक बार गौतम से शादी हो गई है। अब बार-बार शादी नहीं होगी, अब जैसे भी हो लड़की को उसी घर में जीवन बिताना है।

लड़की के पिता भाई और चाचा की पकड़ौआ शादी

दैनिक भास्कर की इन्वेस्टिगेशन में चौकाने वाला खुलासा हुआ। काफी प्रयास के बाद जब लड़की और उसकी मां बात करने को राजी नहीं हुई तो हम चांदनी के भाई से मिले।

भाई ने बताया कि घर में एक दो नहीं 5 से अधिक शादियां ऐसे ही हुई हैं। चांदनी के पिता राजेश राय, राजेश के भतीजे कुंदन कुमार की भी शादी अपहरण के बाद बंदूक की नोक पर हुई थी। चांदनी के चचेरे भाई पंकज की भी शादी पकड़ौआ हुई।

शादी के लिए बेहोशी के 10 इंजेक्शन दिए

चांदनी के घर वालों ने बताया कि उनके ही परिवार के बिपिन कुमार हैं। रिश्ते में चांदनी के भाई हैं। शादी के लिए पहले उनका अपहरण किया गया, इसके बाद बेहोशी के लिए 10 बार इंजेक्शन लगाया गया। इंजेक्शन देने के बाद उनकी जबरन शादी करा दी गई। गांव में जितनी भी शादियां इस तरह से हुई हैं, आज सभी लड़का-लड़की साथ रह रहे हैं। शुरुआत में बवाल मचा था, लेकिन सब एक जाति-बिरादरी के हैं, इसलिए आपस में समझौता के बाद केस खत्म हो गया।

दुल्हन के पिता की जुबानी पकड़ौआ शादी की कहानी..

इंवेस्टिगेशन के दौरान हमारी बात चांदनी के पिता राजेश राय से हुई। पुलिस के डर से वह फरार चल रहे हैं, लेकिन काफी प्रयास के बाद हमसे फोन पर बात करने को तैयार हुए। राजेश ने शादी को रजामंदी वाला बताया है।

राजेश राय ने कहा- 'बेटी की एक बार शादी हो गई है, अब दूसरी नहीं होेगी। अब लड़की वहीं रहेगी। हमारा आपस में समझौता होगा। बात चल भी रही है। भाई जेल में है, आरोप जबरदस्ती का है। हम लड़की के बाप हैं, हम तो सब कुछ सुन रहे हैं। वह रिश्ता तोड़ने में लगे हैं, लेकिन हम लड़की वाले हैं इसलिए रिश्ता जोड़ना चाहते हैं। शादी राजी-खुशी से हुई है। कुछ लोग बीच में हैं, जाे दरार डाल रहे हैं।

मामला आपस का है, रिश्ता दूसरा करना ही नहीं है। लड़की को तो हर हाल में वहां ही रहना है। अभी लोग गुस्सा हैं, सब ठीक हो जाएगा। हालांकि उन लोगों की कोई डिमांड नहीं है, अगर होगी भी तो पूरी की जाएगी। वह गुस्सा हैं, लेकिन इनकार नहीं कर पाएंगे। समाज हम लोगों का है, समाज के लोग ही बैठकर इसे निपटा लेंगे।'

चांदनी के पिता की अपहरण वाली शादी की कहानी

राजेश राय ने अपनी शादी की बात कहकर खुद चौंका देते हैं। उन्होंने कहा 'मेरी ही शादी ऐसे हुई है। हमको भी सब पकड़कर ले गए थे। जिस गांव में लड़का गौतम का ननिहाल है, उसी गांव में मेरी शादी अपहरण करके कराई गई थी। मैं तो भागकर आ गया था, लेकिन दोबारा फिर ले गए और जबरन शादी की है। मेरी बेटी की शादी तो रजामंदी से हुई है। अब मेरी बेटी उसी घर में जाएगी, वहीं उसे जन्म भर रहना है।

मेरे भतीजे की शादी महेया गांव में पकड़ौआ से हुई। घर में 5 शादी हुई है। पूरे पंचायत में ऐसी 500 से कम शादियां नहीं हुई होंगी। यह तो यहां का सिस्टम ही रहा है, पहले ऐसे शादी होती है फिर समाज समझौता कराकर गुस्सा शांत करा देता है। इस शादी में ऐसा ही होगा, हम लोग लगे हैं।

लड़का वाला भी चाहता है, इसलिए वह लोग अब कहीं कुछ बोल नहीं रहे हैं। हमको उस घर में लड़की देना है, दो बात सुनकर भी बदर्शित कर रहे हैं। हमें बेटी का रिश्ता बनाना है, बिगाड़ना नहीं है। हम लोग प्रतिष्ठित आदमी हैं, बच्ची के भविष्य का सवाल है। अब एक बार शादी होने के बाद बेटी की दूसरी शादी कहां होगी।'

गांव के बुजुर्ग ने कहा..यह तो यहां का सिस्टम है

दैनिक भास्कर की इन्वेस्टिगेशन के दौरान गांव के दुन्ना यादव ने बताया-‘ यह तो यहां का सिस्टम है। यहां जाति बिरादरी में लोग ऐसे ही लड़कों को देखते रहते हैं, जैसे मौका मिलता है। अपहरण कर शादी करा देते हैं। शुरू में बवाल होता है, थाना कोर्ट कचहरी होता है लेकिन समाज जब एक जुट होता है तो सब शांत हो जाता है। लड़की का पिता भी ऐसे ही पकड़ा गया था।

शादी के लिए अपहरण हुआ तो भाग आया लेकिन फिर पकड़ा गया और शादी करनी ही पड़ी। एक दो नहीं कई शादियां गांव में हुई हैं। सब ऐसे ही दबंगई के साथ लड़के को पकड़ता है, शादी करके छोड़ देता है। बाद में लड़के वालों पर इतना दबाव बनता है कि लड़की को साथ रखना ही पड़ता है।’

पकड़ौआ शादी को लेकर परिवार अलर्ट

हाल में बीपीएससी से नियुक्त पाने वाले अविवाहित टीचरों को लेकर परिवार काफी अलर्ट हो गया है। वैशाली में घटना के बाद अब राज्य के अन्य जिलों में भी अलर्ट की बात सामने आ रही है। वैशाली के बाजितपुर में तो एक टीचर को लेकर परिवार इतना डरा है, घर से कोई न कोई सुबह स्कूल जाता है। शाम को टीचर को लेने भी जाता है।

कई स्कूलों में तो अब दिन में मेन गेट में ताला लगा दिया जाता है, जिससे कोई बाहरी व्यक्ति प्रवेश नहीं करने पाए। गौतम के स्कूल में भी टीचर ऐसे ही डर सहमे रहते हैं। वैशाली के पातेपुर प्रखंड से लेकर पूरे पंचायत में तो कई ऐसे स्कूल हैं जहां लड़कों के साथ ऐसी घटना नहीं हो इसके लिए उनका परिवार पूरी तरह से अलर्ट है।

Manish Mishra, Special Correspondent at Dainik Bhaskar Digital since 2020, has over a decade of experience covering politics, crime, and gender issues, with 1,500+ stories published across leading platforms.

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28. अंतर्जातीय प्रेम संबंधों में जातिवाद से गुज़रती दलित युवतियों के अनुभव

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अंतर्जातीय प्रेम संबंधों में जातिवाद से गुज़रती दलित युवतियों के अनुभव

हिस्टेरेक्टॉमी जैसी प्रक्रिया के इन परिणामों की इस वास्तविकता को पितृसत्तात्मक समाज नहीं पचा पता। इससे गुज़री महिलाएं पितृसत्ता के इस विचार का आसानी से शिकार हो जाती हैं, “अब हम औरत कहलाने लायक नहीं हैं, क्योंकि बच्चादानी निकल चुकी है।”

जातीय बंधनों को तोड़ते हुए सामाजिक सुधार के उद्देश्य से बाबा साहब आंबेडकर के अंतर्जातीय विवाह से जुड़े विचारों का आधार अंतर्जातीय प्रेम संबंध से होकर गुज़रता है। बात चाहे अंतर्जातीय प्रेम संबंधों की कि जाए या अंतर्जातीय विवाह की, दोनों ही कठोर सीमाओं को पार करते हैं जिनके परिणाम हिंसक होते हैं। ऐसे में जातिवाद से गुज़रने का सिलसिला शादी से पहले भी चलता है और शादी के बाद भी। एक शोध के मुताबिक, कई दलित महिलाओं ने ऊंची जाति के पुरुषों से शादी करने के बाद छुआछूत और जातिगत भेदभाव झेला है। हम इस लेख में अंतर्जातीय प्रेम संबंधों में रहीं दिल्ली शहर की दलित युवतियों के उन अनुभवों की चर्चा करने जा रहे हैं जहां जाति आज 21वीं सदी में भी एक प्रबल कारक है क्योंकि ये संबंध आज के समाज में अंतर्जातीय विवाह के रास्ते तय करते हैं।

अंतर्जातीय प्रेम संबंधों के भीतर जाति, वर्ग, नस्ल आदि रुझान के साथ जेंडर के अंतर्संबंध को संबोधित करने वाले विषय आज भी शोध की दृष्टि से बाहर हैं। हमें इस बात को समझना होगा कि जब दो अलग-अलग जाति के लोग प्रेम की ओर बढ़ते हैं तो उनके बीच केवल भावनात्मक और शारीरिक अंतरंगता ही नहीं बल्कि सामाजिक अंतरंगता भी शामिल होती है। इस लेख में हमने ऐसा ही एक प्रयास किया है। यहां हमने दिल्ली शहर में रह रही दलित महिलाओं से बातचीत की है। इस बातचीत का विषय अंतर्जातीय प्रेम संबंधों के भीतर, इन महिलाओं के साथ उनके तथाकथित उच्च जाति से संबंध रखने वाले पार्टनर के द्वारा किए जाने वाले जातिवाद के बर्ताव का खुलासा करते हुए अपने अनुभवों के बारे में है।

प्रेम की पहली सीढ़ी में जाति को डर से छिपाए रखना

पढ़ी-लिखी दलित महिलाएं जो जाति के बंधनों को चुनौती देती हैं वे निस्संदेह ही हमारे समाज के लिए अनमोल हैं। ऐसी दलित महिलाएं अपनी तथाकथि हाशिये जाति के प्रति सामाजिक तिरस्कार के संबंध में गहराई से सजग होती हैं। इस सजगता के कारण ही, वे किसी तथाकथित उच्च जाति के पुरुष के साथ प्रेम में पड़ने पर मजबूरन डर से अपनी जाति को छिपाए रखती हैं। वे शिक्षा, ऑफिस, आदि सार्वजनिक क्षेत्र में हाशिये जाति से होने की अभिवृत्ति और भेदभाव से गुज़र चुकी होती हैं।

दिल्ली के महारौली में रहने वाली एक दलित युवती रचना (28) (बदला हुआ नाम) बताती है, “मैं तथाकथित उच्च जाति के एक पुरुष से बेहद प्यार करती थी। मैं निचले तबके की जाति से आती हूँ, मैंने यह सच्चाई तीन-चार साल तक नहीं बताई। मैं डर में जीती रही की कल को पता चल जाए तो सब खत्म हो जाएगा। कई पुरुष होते हैं जिन्हें जाति की उतनी परवाह नहीं होती। पर एक दिन मैंने उसे बता दिया। मेरी जाति जानने के बाद उसका जबाब था, मैं जानता था पहले से ही, सबसे पहली बात तुम्हारा सरनेम ‘गौतम’ जो अक्सर ब्राह्मण लोग लगाते हैं। तुम्हारे व्यवहार में ‘गौतम’ होना जैसा कुछ नहीं था।”

जयंती (31) (बदला हुआ नाम), गुडगाँव के एक कॉर्पोरेट ऑफिस में काम करनेवाली दलित महिला हैं। वह तथाकथित उच्च जाति के पुरुष के साथ अपने प्रेम संबंधी इंटरैक्शन से जुड़े अनुभव हमारे साथ साझा करती हैं। वह बताती हैं, “अपनी लाइफ में जिन्हें डेट किया वे समाज की तथाकथित उच्च जाति से वास्ता रखते थे। मैंने यह निर्णय कर लिया था कि जब तक रिलेशनशिप शादी की अवस्था तक नहीं पहुँच जाता, मैं अपनी जाति नहीं बताऊँगी। जाति न बताने का एक प्रमुख कारण यह था कि जिसके साथ मैं रिलेशनशिप में हूँ उस व्यक्ति का कुछ ज़िंदगी के कुछ ज़रूरी विषयों पर विचार क्या है। मैं बातों ही बातों में उससे यह जानने की कोशिश करती थी कि वह आखिर में हाशिये की जाति और इंटरकास्ट मैरिज के बारे में क्या विचार रखता है। अगर वह जाति के बारे में नकारात्मक सोच रखता है तो ऐसे में मैं उससे किनारा करके निकल जाती थी। ऐसी स्थिति में मैं कई बार पहुँची हूँ। जाति आज भी एक हकीकत है। जिसकी वजह से मैं कई बार अपने अंदर से टूटी हूँ। ऐसे रिश्तों के अंत गहरी मानसिक और भावनात्मक क्षति पहुँचाते हैं।”

जाति ‘एक्सपोज़’ होती है

जाति एक ऐसा कारक है रिश्तों में जिसे ‘बताया’ नहीं बल्कि ‘एक्सपोज़’ किया जाता है। दिल्ली के महारौली में रहने वाली एक दलित युवती रचना (28) (बदला हुआ नाम) बताती है, “मैं तथाकथित उच्च जाति के एक पुरुष से बेहद प्यार करती थी। मैं निचले तबके की जाति से आती हूँ, मैंने यह सच्चाई तीन-चार साल तक नहीं बताई। मैं डर में जीती रही की कल को पता चल जाए तो सब खत्म हो जाएगा। कई पुरुष होते हैं जिन्हें जाति की उतनी परवाह नहीं होती। पर एक दिन मैंने उसे बता दिया। मेरी जाति जानने के बाद उसका जबाब था, मैं जानता था पहले से ही, सबसे पहली बात तुम्हारा सरनेम ‘गौतम’ जो अक्सर ब्राह्मण लोग लगाते हैं। तुम्हारे व्यवहार में ‘गौतम’ होना जैसा कुछ नहीं था।”

सुंदरता के शारीरिक प्रतीकों से जातिगत पहचान छिपाने पर मजबूर करना

कई बार तथाकथित उच्च जाति के पुरुष अपनी दलित पार्टनर पर सुंदरता के कुछ शारीरिक प्रतीकों को थोपकर उनकी जातीय पहचान को अलग करने की कोशिश करते हैं। ऐसा लगता है जैसे शारीरिक प्रतीक युवती की जातीय पहचान जैसे तथ्य से पहुँचने वाले नुकसान की भरपाई करने का तरीका हो। कई जोड़ों/कपल्स के बीच अक्सर महिला पार्टनर की गोरी त्वचा उसे जाति से ऊपर उठने के रूप में कारगर होता है।

जयंती बताती हैं, “मेरे दूसरे रिलेशनशिप में, मैं जिस तथाकथित उच्च जाति के पुरुष के साथ थी, वो यह बात जानता था की मैं दलित जाति से हूं पर उसका परिवार इस बात को अस्वीकार करता था। कई बार मैं अपने पार्टनर के ज़ोर देने पर हर संभव कोशिश करती थी कि मैं लुक्स और सुंदरता से बेहतर दिख सकूं। ताकि जब शादी की बात आगे बढ़ाने के लिए उसके परिवार से कभी मिलने का मौका बने तो उनके आगे ‘लोअर कास्ट’ न दिख सकूं। क्योंकि लोग हमारे बारे में सोच ही ऐसी रखते हैं। ऐसे में हमे उनकी नज़रों में खुद को स्वीकार करने के लायक बनाने का दूसरा एक तनाव है।”

“जाति के कारण हमेशा नीचा दिखाया गया”

पितृसत्तात्मक और जाति आधारित समाज में दलित महिलाएं शक्ति संबंधों में आज भी पुरुषों के अधीन हैं। समाज में तथाकथित उच्च जातियों के पुरुषों द्वारा दलित महिलाओं के साथ हिंसा बरती जाना काफी सामान्य-सी बात है। ऐसे अंतर्जातीय संबंधों में वे अक्सर शारीरिक और मौखिक हिंसा का सामना करती हैं। अंतर्जातीय संबंधों में शारीरिक हिंसा झेलने वाली जयंती बताती हैं, “मैं एक रिलेशनशिप में रही, वह सात साल चला। इन सात साल में ऐसा कोई साल नहीं था जब उसने मेरी जाति को गाली न दी हो। एक बार लड़ाई के दौरान मुझे कहा गया कि तेरे जैसे चमार लोग हमारे चंडीगढ़ में गली-गली जाकर नाले साफ करते हैं। जयंती आगे बताती हैं, मैंने अपने घर में अपने मम्मी-पापा के बीच बहुत लड़ाई झगड़े देखे हैं, कई बार हिंसा होते हुए भी देखी है। इसी कारण से मैंने अपने कंफर्ट को अपने घर और जाति से बाहर निकलकर ही खोजा है। ऐसे में रिलेशनशिप सुकून से भरे लगते हैं पर जातिवाद सारे सुकून को पलभर में छीन लेता है।”

जयंती बताती हैं, “मेरे दूसरे रिलेशनशिप में, मैं जिस तथाकथित उच्च जाति के पुरुष के साथ थी, वो यह बात जानता था की मैं दलित जाति से हूं पर उसका परिवार इस बात को अस्वीकार करता था। कई बार मैं अपने पार्टनर के ज़ोर देने पर हर संभव कोशिश करती थी कि मैं लुक्स और सुंदरता से बेहतर दिख सकूं। ताकि जब शादी की बात आगे बढ़ाने के लिए उसके परिवार से कभी मिलने का मौका बने तो उनके आगे ‘लोअर कास्ट’ न दिख सकूं।

रिश्तों में शारीरिक, मानसिक और भावनात्मक शोषण जैसी परिस्थितियों के नॉर्मलाइज़ होने जैसे अनुभवों को साझा करते हुए रचना के अनुसार, “मैं देखती थी मेरे घर में लड़की-लड़के के बीच साफ़ असमानता दिखाई देती थी। बाहरवीं पूरी करने के तुरंत बाद शादी कराने की बात अक्सर की जाती थी। घर में कदम रखने की समय सीमा से लेकर कपड़े पहनने के तौर-तरीके परिवार में नियंत्रित थे। ऐसे में जब हम इंटरकास्ट रिलेशनशिप में होते हैं तो भावनात्मक रूप से अपने पार्टनर से ज़्यादा उम्मीद रखने लगते हैं और बहुत-सी बातों पर समझौता भी करने लगते हैं।”

अगर यहां बात करें 2005 के महिलाओं से जुड़े घरेलू हिंसा संरक्षण अधिनियम की तो यह विवाहित महिलाओं पर होने वाली हिंसा के साथ-साथ, अविवाहित महिलाओं के विरुद्ध हिंसा की भी बात करता है। अधिनियम इस बात की ओर इशारा करता है कि दलित महिलाओं के द्वारा सामना की जाने वाली हिंसा की विशिष्टता काफी हद तक अज्ञात बनी हुई है। ये हिंसाएं मानसिक, भावनात्मक और शारीरिक हिंसाओं को चिह्नित करती हैं।

पीढ़ीगत बदलाव और जातिगत भेदभाव से मुक्ति

जयंती बताती हैं, “हम जिस तरह के पारिवारिक माहौल में पले-बड़े होते हैं वहां हम जातीय और लैंगिक दोनों तरह के भेदभाव से गुज़रते हैं। मैंने देखा है हम जिस उम्मीद से इंटरकास्ट लव रिलेशनशिप में आते हैं वहां भी ये भेदभाव बने हुए होते हैं।” जहां एक ओर जेंडर असमानता पहले से ही मौजूद होती है तो वहीं दूसरी ओर दलित होने के कारण, इन युवतियों के संबंधों में उनकी हीन परिस्थिति दोहरे शोषण को दर्शाती है। इसके अलावा अतीत में झेला गया भेदभाव कहीं फिर से न दोहराया जाए इसलिए जातीय भेदभाव से मुक्त होने की आशा में कई दलित युवतियां अंतर्जातीय प्रेम संबंध के चयन को प्रभावशील मानती हैं। जिसे वे जातिवाद के अंत के साथ पीढ़ीगत बदलाव के साधन के रूप में देखती हैं।

जयंती (31) (बदला हुआ नाम), गुडगाँव के एक कॉर्पोरेट ऑफिस में काम करनेवाली दलित महिला हैं। वह तथाकथित उच्च जाति के पुरुष के साथ अपने प्रेम संबंधी इंटरैक्शन से जुड़े अनुभव हमारे साथ साझा करती हैं। वह बताती हैं, “अपनी लाइफ में जिन्हें डेट किया वे समाज की तथाकथित उच्च जाति से वास्ता रखते थे। मैंने यह निर्णय कर लिया था कि जब तक रिलेशनशिप शादी की अवस्था तक नहीं पहुंच जाता, मैं अपनी जाति नहीं बताऊंगी। जाति न बताने का एक प्रमुख कारण यह था कि जिसके साथ मैं रिलेशनशिप में हूँ उस व्यक्ति का कुछ ज़िंदगी के कुछ ज़रूरी विषयों पर विचार क्या है।

इन युवतियों के साथ हुई उपरोक्त निजी बातचीत इस बात को साफ़ जाहिर करती है कि अंतर्जातीय प्रेम संबंधों में दलित युवतियों को वह सम्मान नहीं मिलता जिसकी वे हकदार होती हैं। वे जातिवाद पर आधारित सामाजिक संरचना को चुनौती देती हैं। लेकिन दुर्भाग्य से प्रेम संबंधों में जाति से जुड़ा प्रश्न उन्हें उसी सामाजिक संरचना में फिर से लाकर खड़ा कर देता है।

Varsha Prakash works as a freelance Hindi writer, translator, and independent researcher. Her focus areas include Education and intersectional gender studies, with a focus on Dalit and other subaltern perspectives.

Link:

<https://hindi.feminisminindia.com/2023/10/24/experiences-of-dalit-women-in-intercaste-relationships-hindi/#>



Crafting Change: Women's Economic Roles in Rural and Urban India

In examining the intricate relationship between women and work, the stories in this section reveal the diverse, yet interconnected, challenges and triumphs of women across various sectors in India. From traditional artisans to agricultural pioneers, health workers, beauticians, and entrepreneurs, each story underscores the multifaceted role women play in driving both economic growth and social change in rural and urban spaces.

The Lambani women artisans are one such group, striving to sustain their cultural heritage through traditional embroidery. However, the decline in demand for their craft due to economic, environmental, and cultural factors highlights the struggle for recognition and fair compensation in a rapidly changing world. Their plight speaks to the broader issue of economic empowerment, where traditional skills are undervalued despite their cultural significance. The need for sustainable solutions that balance cultural preservation and economic viability is critical to ensure these women can thrive.

Similarly, women in agriculture are making strides through self-help groups, particularly in Andhra Pradesh, where they champion climate-resilient farming. Writing about them Roli Srivastav says that these women are at the forefront of sustainable agriculture despite facing systemic barriers such as land ownership and lack of recognition. Their leadership in adopting eco-friendly practices not only combats the rising climate pressures on small-scale farmers but also redefines the role of women in a male-dominated industry.

Maitri Porecha showcases how on the health front, ASHA workers in Madhya Pradesh are offering vital mental health interventions in rural areas, beyond traditional boundaries. These frontline workers are critical in supporting vulnerable individuals, particularly women, in navigating mental health challenges, often in regions with limited access to professional healthcare services.

In a heart-warming story, Rajesh Khandelwal and Ankita Apoorva take us through the stories of beauticians and grassroots entrepreneurs highlighting how women are carving out spaces of independence and resilience. Whether it's a beautician like Shiuli Mitra, who empowers women by offering both an income and a brief respite from societal constraints, or Swati Shringi, whose kitchen initiative has provided employment and affordable meals to hundreds, these stories underscore the impact of women-led ventures in fostering both economic independence and social solidarity.

29. Threads of life: Lambani women see their art fade away with rigours of time and climate change

Uzmi Athar | *The Indian Express* | Jul 31, 2023

Women of the Sandur Lambani tribe, many in their twilight years, who skilfully stitched together their lives – and livelihoods — with the textile art that made their name famous now watch helplessly as that tapestry slowly comes undone.

Buffeted by winds of change with the climate crisis, economic challenges and evolving customer tastes, their lives are changing literally by the day. And

Karnataka's Lambani women face the difficult truth – their craft honed through generations may perish with them with the young more interested in walking a different path.

Lambani art, which once flourished in the heartland of the state, weaving in culture and tradition into the very identity of the nomadic community, is intricately linked to rituals and rites. Lambani embroidery, known as 'khilan' and 'toon', is a symphony of colours, patterns, and symbols that tell stories of ancient legends and celebrations. Sitting under the shade of a gnarled banyan tree in Mariyammanahalli village, about 30 km from this Karnataka town, 80-year-old Rukmini voiced her despair.

"Embroidery is our soul, our connection to our ancestors and our way of life. But the younger generation is drawn to modern pursuits that promise economic stability. They see little value in learning our craft. It breaks my heart to think that our cherished art might fade away," she said.

Rukmini is amongst the hundreds of women who have spent much of their lives creating stunning textiles and garments using colourful needlework, decorative mirrors, beads, and intricate stitches.

According to locals, of the 400 odd Lambani artisans in Mariyammanahalli, about 300 are over 50 years old – all who have spent decades learning and perfecting the craft.

Rukmini's sentiments find wide echo. Many other women attribute the dwindling interest in the art to poor payment and economic hardships.

Netravati, 72, explained how the payment system works.

"As a senior artist, I may receive Rs 5,000 per saree, but it takes me a month to complete one. The younger artists receive only Rs 500-600 per day, along with some rations. It's difficult to sustain a family on such meagre earnings," she said.

Gauri, 53, added eloquently, "Embroidery is our language. Each stitch tells a story, a part of our history. It is our duty to pass down this legacy to the next generation.

But it's not easy. We struggle to find a balance between our love for the art and the need to provide for our families." Despite the challenges, the Lambani community has found hope through collaborations with self-help groups in the region. This has to some extent reduced the role of middlemen who would pay them about 10 percent and pocket 90 per cent.

These groups provide the Lambani artisans with cloth to embroider on, which is then sold through fair trade practices. Although the payments are still modest, this partnership offers a lifeline for the artisans to continue their craft and earn a more sustainable income.

"People have aspirations for foreign brands and the value of our art is not much. There is not enough consciousness and awareness. We have the capability of taking more orders but there is not much demand. To add to that, there is a changing climate due to which the natural resources we depended upon are becoming scarce," said Shanta Bai, a member of a self-help group.

The community is also reeling under the impact of climate change.

Women belonging to the Lambani community gather at the village courtyard and stitch together, in Mariyammanahalli. Lambani artisans, intimately connected to their environment, have noticed subtle shifts in their ecosystem. The flowers that once provided vibrant pigments for their threads are now scarce, while the water sources they relied upon are drying up at an alarming rate. These changes directly impact their ability to sustain their craft and maintain the authenticity of their embroidery.

"In the past, we would rely on the changing seasons for the materials needed for our embroidery—natural dyes, plant fibres and other resources. But now, with erratic rainfall and rising temperatures, our once abundant natural resources have become scarce. It has become increasingly challenging to source the materials we need to create our art," said Lakshmi.

The Lambani artisans, deeply rooted in their ancestral traditions, understand the importance of adapting to the changing climate. They have begun exploring sustainable practices and alternative materials to ensure the longevity of their craft. Some are embracing organic dyes and utilizing recycled materials, while others are experimenting with new stitching techniques that require fewer resources.

Said Savita Bai, another passionate Lambani artisan, "We are innovating, ways to create beautiful pieces while minimizing our impact on the envi is a delicate balance—preserving our cultural heritage while also embracing practices that promote sustainability. We must work hand in hand with nature to ensure that our craft survives for future generations." As the sun sets, casting a golden hue over the village, a group of Lambani women gather in a modest courtyard to discuss their future, their colourful attire and rhythmic clinking of needles against beads and sequins creating a happy symphony. But it's a way of life disappearing fast, admitted

Vijayalakshmi, a young Lambani woman who inherited the art from her grandmother and embodies the struggles faced by the younger generation.

“While I am passionate about our art and determined to preserve it, the reality is that it is not a very lucrative career choice. We face economic challenges that make it difficult to sustain ourselves solely through embroidery. Many of my peers are compelled to seek alternative means of income, leaving our traditional craft behind,” she said. Recognising the urgent need to address these challenges, Prof D B Naik, an eminent expert in Lambani art and former vice chancellor of Karnataka’s Folklore University, emphasised the importance of valuing and supporting traditional crafts.

“Lambani art is a testament to the richness of our cultural heritage but it is a dying art. We must strive to create an environment where the younger generation sees the value and potential in continuing this legacy. By providing them skill training and giving them opportunities for economic growth and recognition, we can encourage their involvement in preserving this exquisite art form,” he told

According to him, Karnataka is home to around 40 lakh Lambanis. The nomadic tribe, about one crore in total, are found all over India, except for some northeast states. Around one-third of Lambanis in Karnataka were artisans but that number has significantly reduced over the years. In a bid to create awareness and inspire a newfound appreciation for their craft, the Lambani artisans recently set a Guinness World Record for creating the highest number of embroidery patches in a single day. On the day, around 450 Lambani artisans together wove 1,755 unique embroidery patches.) This remarkable achievement garnered international attention and brought pride to the Lambani community. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, lauded their efforts, recognising extraordinary talent and commitment displayed by the Lambani artisan.

Uzmi Athar, a journalist with over a decade of experience, has contributed to global agencies like Reuters and Associated Press. Specialising in environment, health, and social issues, she excels in crafting impactful narratives across various media formats.

Link -

<https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/threads-of-life-lambani-women-rigours-time-climate-change-8868845/>



30. Women farmers shine as 'super-heroes' in India's climate fight

Roli Srivastava | *Context.news of Thomson Reuters Foundation* | Nov 22, 2023

CHEVATURU, India - Farmer K. Rama Devi spends her days teaching climate-resilient agriculture skills, an unassuming champion of women's rights in a rural part of south India where men still take key decisions.

The head of a self-help group in Andhra Pradesh state, Devi has never marched in a climate rally nor lobbied world leaders, instead focusing her efforts on the practical details of growing crops in a world suffering the effects of more extreme weather.

The 34-year-old advises fellow female farmers on how to mix manure and grow multiple crops on their land and issues warnings that chemical fertilisers can harm their fields and health.

Despite her efforts, breaking male dominance in agriculture is hard in a sector that relies on women's labour but does not recognise them as "farmers" - an identity linked to land ownership which most rural Indian women lack.

"(Men) farmers didn't listen to us when we started, as they felt we didn't know anything," said Devi, sitting cross-legged at a farmers' support centre, showing a colourful chart documenting her project's performance in Chevaturu village.

She and others are trying to shift gender norms by building a movement of rural women's collectives that are helping non-profits and local governments promote crops and methods to combat climate pressures and cut planet-heating farm emissions.

For five years, members of Devi's group have demonstrated how to make manure and screened videos about "natural farming" which avoids synthetic pesticides and fertilisers and instead utilises cow dung mixed with other ingredients.

They have managed to get 312 of 786 farmers in their village to adopt natural practices on cotton, paddy and mango farms. "Men can't do this kind of awareness. They only look at earning money. Women have a lot more patience. I feel happy doing this work," Devi told Context. More than 75% of India's rural women workers are in the agriculture sector but just 12% of them own land, according to government data. Most women work as farm labourers or unpaid workers on family-owned fields. Their lack of status as farmers means they cannot access government support including subsidised loans, special credit cards and cash aid.

Yet women are pivotal to the expansion of new agricultural techniques to tackle climate change - for instance growing crops that are more resistant to heatwaves, downpours and droughts. "Women self-help groups are the game-changers. About 55% of our trainers are women," said T. Vijay Kumar, who leads a natural farming

project in Andhra Pradesh and is also executive vice-chairman of a state corporation for empowering farmers.

As the women's groups can access bank loans, it has given them financial clout and improved their standing in villages. "Their involvement in decision-making in the household has improved. They are important to take this initiative (of natural farming) forward," Vijay Kumar said. Women show the way on solutions

Agriculture is India's biggest employer - supporting the livelihoods of 250 million farmers and informal workers - but farming is getting harder as climate change hits harvests, fuelling debt, migration and farmer suicides. In response, natural farming projects have taken root in the country, but experts say their scale and success hinges on how well they can protect incomes among poor rural producers.

Women's collectives, with their extensive networks, are playing a pivotal role in convincing those farmers to go green. Of India's 12 million self-help groups, serving 140 million households, 88% are all-women, government data shows.

To combat climate change, women's collectives in eastern Odisha are bringing back millet - a long-forgotten drought-resistant crop - while in northern Uttar Pradesh they are changing sowing techniques to help retain soil moisture.

Many farmers in Andhra Pradesh, meanwhile, have long grumbled that they cannot find markets for their naturally grown vegetables, which are more expensive than regular produce. That situation motivated farmer Parisineni Thirumala, 29, to pile her vegetables onto her scooter and try her luck at selling them to school teachers in Maddhulaparva village.

She is now hailed as a marketing genius thanks to her success in creating a new customer base of teachers, government officials and even local police.

"I tell them the benefits of buying my produce - it's healthier and tastier," she said as the sun set on her farm. Women in self-help groups are a precious asset in outreach for climate-friendly farming because they work in the business, speak the villagers' language and understand their challenges. "Climate solutions will be incomplete and unsuccessful if they leave out women farmers. And women are finding an opportunity to get into leadership roles," said farmers' rights campaigner Kavitha Kuruganti of the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture. Worldwide, agriculture accounts for 17% of total global greenhouse gas emissions, with Brazil, Indonesia and India the top three emitters, according to a 2021 U.N. report citing data from 2018. Emissions from agriculture in India began to rise after the introduction of high-yielding rice and wheat varieties about six decades ago, as part of a drive to combat hunger and poverty. "Farming became market-intensive and men dominated it," said Shiraz Wajih, president of the nonprofit Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group.

But increasingly fickle weather linked to climate change and rising spending on chemical fertilisers have made farming ever more risky as a profession. That has

spurred many men to migrate to cities, hoping to find more reliable and better-paid work.

As a result, women left behind in villages have assumed responsibility for farming, Wajih said.

"They are the actual managers of the farm but they are not yet treated as farmers. They are gradually being recognised, but (there is) still a long way to go," he added.

Rural-to-urban migration has added to women's domestic burden - be it on farms or looking after their families at home. "Women are better workers ... but there can't be complete invisibility of what's already on their plate," said gender expert Monika Banerjee, a senior consultant with nonprofit Mobile Creches, which works with marginalised children.

"Women are expected to be climate super-heroes, but lack support and their work is often devalued." Warnings about extreme weather, for instance, are sent to mobile phones mostly owned by men, with fewer than half of rural women having access to a phone, while big decisions like choosing crops or seeds still rest largely with male relatives.

But farmer Devi remains undeterred - even if it means asking women to convince their husbands to change cultivation methods.

"We are getting a good response," she said. "Our importance is growing."

Roli Srivastava, a Mumbai journalist and founder of The Migration Story, covers climate change, gender, and migration in India's marginalised communities. Her awards include the Fetisov Journalism Award (2020) and the Laadli Media Awards for Gender Sensitivity (2020).

Link- <https://www.context.news/just-transition/women-farmers-shine-as-super-heroes-in-indias-climate-fight>



31. Talking Therapy: ASHA workers offer hope in rural Madhya Pradesh

Maitri Porecha | The Hindu newspaper | Varghese George | Nov 22, 2023

It's a hot summer afternoon in Begumganj block of Raisen district in Madhya Pradesh, a town built up with homes and shops. Inside the civil hospital's dysfunctional paediatric intensive care unit that houses baby warmers turned upside down, and mattresses used just the day before for sterilising men, a handful of women are holding a meeting.

These are accredited social health activist (ASHA) workers, and they are exchanging notes on the people they have screened and are now helping to cope with depression. From identifying a pregnant woman to hand-holding her through her term, and ensuring vaccination for the newborn, ASHAs are the foot soldiers of India's rural public health system.

Through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by the State government of Madhya Pradesh with non-profit Sangath, project Empower, now in its third year, has been implemented to train ASHAs to become the first point of contact for people in mental distress. Over the last two years, 462 trained ASHAs have screened 18,000 people for depression, enrolled up to 2,200 patients for counselling, and delivered over 13,000 sessions of therapy across three districts: Raisen, Vidisha, and Narmadapuram.

Vandana Vishwakarma, 37, is one of them. She 'home delivers' treatment to 6,000 people, both women and men, and has learnt to differentiate depression from being dukhi (sad) or nirash (despondent). "Every day, for about four hours, 20 days a month, I visit five or six homes, asking about the health of the family," she says.

The stressors in the village are many: alcohol consumption, men out of work, irregular weather patterns that cause crop disruption. "This leads to tension, fatigue, and dull aches that move across the body," says Ms. Vishwakarma. "We often normalise responses to adverse situations calling it sadness, but that was before our initiation into mental health training," she adds.

After the meeting, Ms. Vishwakarma steps out of the hospital, wraps her face and head with a cotton scarf to protect against the heat, and revs the engine of her two-wheeler. About 12 km away in the rural heartland, characterised by kuchha roads and verdant fields, is Mundla Chhawal village. She is going to check on Rishika, 23, whom she had diagnosed with depression last year.

Ms. Rishika had dropped out of school in Class IX and was married at 17 to someone in the neighbouring village. Last July, she gave birth to a baby. "Within eleven days, he succumbed to pneumonia," Ms. Vishwakarma recalls, adding that she was

worried because Ms. Rishika was holed up in a small room of the family hut, devoid of fresh air or sun.

Ms. Rishika slipped into depression and Ms. Vishwakarma's training in mental health screening came in handy. "A girl who was earlier full of life just went silent. She stopped talking to anyone and refused to eat for a few weeks, classic signs of depression," Ms. Vishwakarma says, confidently. For the next six to eight weeks, Ms. Vishwakarma visited her once a week: "I would just go and sit beside her. She would not say a word, but visiting her was important."

After every session, Ms. Vishwakarma would neatly jot down feedback in her case notes. Her booklet carries basic cues to help her conduct a counselling session; simple empathetic questions like, "How are you feeling? What do you do when you're feeling this way?"

Slowly, Ms. Rishika started responding. "She even started looking forward to my weekly check-in visits and started opening up," she says.

Today, Ms. Rishika engages with life and the people around her. "Vandana didi convinced me to engage myself in activities that would make me happy. Recently, I went to see a play in the nearby village. The mother-in-law's character was evil, but the daughter-in-law was resilient," she says, chuckling.

Delivering care at the grassroots

Far from semi-urban Begumganj, psychiatrist Dr. Vikram Patel, Sangath's founder, who currently serves as professor of global health at Harvard Medical School, U.S., asked himself a question: with the country's stark dearth of psychologists and psychiatrists, who would be the most competent to deliver basic treatments for the most common mental health conditions?

Results of the national mental health survey conducted in 2015-16 were startling. They found that one in eight or nine Indians suffered from mental health disorders and that 83% of them did not receive any treatment or help. While countries like Germany have anywhere close to 13 psychiatrists for a population of a lakh, India does not have even one psychiatrist per 1,00,000 people, according to data compiled in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry. Most mental health professionals are concentrated in urban centres.

During the same time, Dr. Patel found in field trials in nearby Sehore district that patients who received six sessions of talk treatment showed a positive clinical response that was long lasting. The effects sustained at the end of a year, and a five-year follow-up still showed benefits. He realised that people living in rural areas were the most deprived of mental healthcare.

He turned the model of psychiatric care on its head by taking it to the doorsteps of people who need it the most. "In an acute episode of depression (like that of

Rishika's), studies have shown that taking medication (antidepressants) and simple, but evidence-based forms of talk therapy are both effective, but over the longer term, talk therapy outperforms medication in keeping people well," Dr. Patel says.

Where few psychiatrists tread

People like Ms. Rishika recuperate from episodic depression and get by with hand-holding from ASHAs. But 27-year-old Sita (name changed to protect identity) was different. Last year, on her daily rounds, the local ASHA worker of the Silwani block, Shobha Verma, became concerned about Ms. Sita's insomnia. "She would not sleep for days on end, shout, and be seen on the streets in her blouse and petticoat," Ms. Verma says.

Ms. Sita's family thought she had been possessed by spirits. In folk parlance, anuppari chakkarwas involved. But Ms. Verma coaxed them to give her some time with Ms. Sita.

She ran a screening test for depression: a patient health questionnaire (PHQ-9), gently nudging her to answer nine questions, including to what extent she felt there was a loss of interest in pursuing her daily routine, how her appetite was, and her interactions with people. In the end, Ms. Verma slipped in a critical question that was crucial to the screening. It involved asking her subtly if she had any thoughts of self-harm.

Dr. Patel explains that PHQ-9 is widely used to screen for depression. Totalling scores for the responses, Ms. Verma found that Ms. Sita had scored a 15, pointing to moderately severe depression. Anything above 19 is severe depression. In addition, "Sita showed signs of psychosis, and I needed to refer her to a psychiatrist," she says. She sat down with Ms. Sita and her husband, and over many counselling sessions convinced them to see one in Jabalpur, almost 200 km away, the closest city that would have one.

Ms. Sita, who is now pregnant with her fourth baby, says Ms. Verma's support helps her get by, one day at a time. She fishes for her psychiatric medication in a basket that also has her pregnancy staples: iron, vitamins, and calcium tablets.

Dr. Patel says, "For severe mental health conditions, like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, psychosis, medication has robust effects when combined with the human element of counselling."

ASHAs overburdened

The programme is now facing a challenge. ASHA workers across Madhya Pradesh — all 65,000 of them — have stopped work and have been protesting low wages over the past couple of months. At ₹2,000 a month, their pay is lower than that of a daily wage labourer. In Raisen, the women have been camping outside the local tehsil office and chanting angry slogans.

“Mama tera kaisa shashan, ASHAaon ka kha gaye ration(How unfair is your legislation, Chief Minister; your government is eating away at our ration).” Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan goes by the monikerMamaor maternal uncle. The slogans only get angrier. “Darte nahi hai hudki se; Sarka denge khursi se(We do not fear threats; we will uproot you from power).” Poll dates for the State election are expected to be announced for later in 2023.

In this pilot implementation project of Empower, Dr. Anant Bhan, the project’s co-lead, says trained ASHAs are being paid incentives for screening and counselling people at ₹100 per session. They receive separate incentives ranging from ₹10 to ₹1,650 for filling screening forms, orientation, refresher training, and more. These are being paid from the project funds (nearly ₹3.5 crore for the first two years).

“The project is scheduled to end after a year, so we are scoping for additional funding and also hoping that the State health department will absorb the project, scale it up, and embed it within the government framework for larger dissemination and uptake through all ASHAs,” he adds.

Vishwas Sarang, Madhya Pradesh’s Minister for Medical Education, says the State government may consider making trained ASHAs master trainers. They can train more ASHAs, to institutionalise the process.

Faith, hope, and healing

Last month, Ranu Chandrawanshi, an ASHA worker, trained in screening patients for schizophrenia in Amlaha village of Sehore district, woke up to a commotion. Her 40-year-old neighbour Omprakash had become uncontrollably aggressive. “I remember the horror on his children’s faces as he became violent,” she recounts.

Mr. Omprakash has been scarred by frequent road accidents on the highway, where his tea stall used to be. Dragging the injured or the dead to the side of the road had become almost routine for him. “This led to a lot of tension,” he says.

Through her training Ms. Chandrawanshi has learnt that “these are classic symptoms of psychosis and mania”. But Mr. Omprakash and his family believe he is possessed by a spirit. They take him to a local faith healer.

In the nearby village of Bishan Kheda, Hemraj Jagannnath sits on a pedestal in an orange dhoti and a marigold garland, swaying while loudly mumbling a mantra. Mr. Jagannnath, who is also known as Baba Baawan Veer, is a popular faith healer in the area.

A woman has brought her eight-year-old granddaughter with a disability in her leg to see the baba. Mr. Jagannnath sprinkles some ‘holy’ water, waves a peacock feather fan over her, and assures them that all will be well. Villagers stand in a queue, some with offerings of wheat, others with money, waiting to see him.

Dr. Patel has tried to ensure that the ASHAs in villages inspire the same degree of faith as traditional ‘healers’ do. Mr. Omprakash says he will do both. He has agreed to see a psychiatrist at the Sehore district hospital after repeated nudges from Ms. Chandrawanshi.

Maitri Porecha is a Senior Assistant Editor at The Hindu in New Delhi. Previously, she worked with The Ken and The Hindu Businessline, focusing on health policy, technology, and public infrastructure.

Link -

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/talking-therapy-asha-workers-offer-hope-in-rural-madhya-pradesh/article66786995.ece>



32. What beauty parlours in Jharkhand villages tell us about gender caste and hope

Ankita Apurva | Behanbox | Sep 8, 2023

Shiuli Mitra owns an air-conditioned parlour in Sili village in Jharkhand. It is a space for both beauty treatments and female.

“My parlour customers often request me to finish their work quickly, saying they have yet to get their goats back home,” says Shiuli Mitra with a chuckle as she moves from one customer to another, threading their eyebrows. The beautician, dressed in a plain cotton sari and her face makeup free, is from the Moira community of Bengali sweet-makers.

Mitra’s parlour, built in the early 2000s in Silli village of Ranchi district, is on a plot where her mother-in-law’s hut once stood. The air-conditioned parlour, a rare luxury in rural Jharkhand, is located in the verandah of the family home.

I visit Mitra at her parlour on a Thursday afternoon. Her clientele ranges from women who carry bricks and sand at construction sites in Ranchi district to those who gather firewood from the neighbouring forests to sell in the market. Every time they step out of their homes, the women carry the burden of their family’s “honour”

I have been visiting beauty parlours in rural, semi-rural and semi-urban pockets of Jharkhand with the women of my family since I was a child. I have always found these parlours to be small pockets of rebellion and assertion. Here, young girls who had been instructed to keep their heads down and their tongues quiet, find the freedom to giggle as they get their hair trimmed minimally so their families would not notice. Perhaps the trim would not be visible if they were to wear their hair in two braids?

As they get their legs waxed on the torn seats of parlour chairs, often with foam spilling out of covers, they talk about going to a friend’s birthday party in a black dress. To a room full of enraptured strangers, they describe how they hide the dress under the History books and then leave home wearing a loose salwar-kameez. Later, inside the washroom of their college canteen, they hastily change and tuck the salwar kameez among the books.

It is mid-July, and the monsoon has yet to arrive in these villages though other parts of northern and western India are marooned in floodwaters. Sowing hasn’t begun yet, the farms are empty, and the saplings prepared by farmers are wilting.

Rare Refuge

Most parlours stand in spaces where homes have been turned into shops over time. Some share a wall with male-dominated homes, separated by just a wall or a curtain. In these setups, it is not unusual for the women to be frequently summoned inside in the middle of work to entertain guests or do various chores. In one case, a beautician was interrupted so often she could not find the time to work or be photographed. Was her refusal to be photographed also a way to protect her husband's ego, I wondered.

In these small-town, rural pockets, women do not get to demand leisure time. They do not go out, eat out, “take a break”, find “me-time” or demand space to “focus” on themselves. And where else but in a parlour can they get to sit with their legs falling apart as they relax? These salons hold the deepest secrets of women, complaints and thoughts which, if fate forbid, reaches their husbands or in-laws could result in abandonment, thrashing, and even murder.

At Mitra's parlour, customers share an easy camaraderie. Saloni, a young customer dressed in a trendy white crop top and a pair of loose, high-waisted pants enters and touches the beautician's feet, the norm here when you meet someone older. Her meticulously braided hair circling her face, Saloni starts chatting with the others about how she had once come to the parlour after shopping for a bucket and had gone home to find that it did not fit her mother's expectations.

It is also a custom to take off one's slippers outside before entering these parlours. “Often, customers count the number of slippers before they enter to ascertain the crowd inside,” says Mitra with a laugh.

Independence, Mobility, ‘Reputation’

The beauticians here source products from the neighbouring towns. Despite their small profit margins, they have managed to boost household earnings, they tell me. “Today, I earn more than my husband and have been able to send my son to Latvia to pursue hotel management. It is a beautiful country,” says Mitra. “COVID destroyed his career prospects there, but I still aim to expand my business gradually. I have decided to open a shop that sells readymades right next to my parlour. My son can run it and settle here with his wife.”

Heeramani Tirkey, too, is the sole earner of her family. Her parlour is a cramped, one-room arrangement on the outskirts of Ranchi, a small town that became a state capital when Jharkhand became a new state barely two decades ago, in 2000. The paint on the asbestos roof of the salon has worn off, and it now looks more brown than grey. The name ‘Heena Beauty Parlour’ is hand-painted and misspelt in red on a dusty wall outside. A table fan sits before the dressing mirror and, just like the tube light above, works in tandem with the sudden but regular disappearances of the

power supply. But Tirkey, a Christian convert from a Scheduled Tribe community, remains unflappable.

Hiramani Tirkey in her parlour in Samlong, Jharkhand

“Do families send you a vehicle to go to the wedding venue to do bridal make up or do you have to arrange for your own travel?” I ask. “I won’t sit on a bike with any man to go to these homes. If anyone has a car and sends it, then I go. If not, I pay the auto-fare myself and go,” she says firmly, asserting the idea that “purity” is more important than safety. “Money is not the big thing, but reputation is.”

Female access to vehicle ownership or mobility is still rare here. “I don’t take on weddings that are far away. Also, some communities such as yours(Kurmis) have late night weddings that won’t allow me to return till 8 or 9pm,” she tells me. There is also the fear of the elephants who live in the forests that flank the roads between villages. So, even if it means losing out on a bridal deal, she sometimes opts to go only for receptions. “I have to consider my honour, too. I can’t return home at midnight or stay elsewhere overnight,” she says.

A young woman who appears to be in her early 20s walks into Mitra’s parlour and asks her to do her eyebrows. She is in a hurry to get back home to her one-year-old baby. As per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 6 for Jharkhand, almost 32% of women below the age of 18 years and 54.6% below 21 years of age had been married at the time of the survey.

“Can I click your picture while you are doing your work?” I ask Mitra. “My face is not presentable at the moment. Shall I cover myself more?” she asks though she is wearing a sari. I assure her of her beauty and my camera quality. And she remarks while laughing that she is not beautiful.

Confessor Figures

Tirkey is a confessor figure to many of her customers. “Once, I casually asked a customer how she was doing, and she started crying because she had lost her husband to Covid. Another time, someone started wailing about her husband’s extramarital affairs and how he abused her,” Tirkey tells me on a pre-monsoon afternoon.

A day earlier, when I had asked my mother what time would be the best time to visit the parlour to talk to the owner, she replied instantly: “Afternoon. That is when most women are busy cooking and serving lunch to their husbands, in-laws and children. So the parlour would be empty.”

Tirkey says that in many homes, women are treated with little respect but divorce or separation are not options in her – or their – book. “Some women tell me they do not want to live any more but have to carry on for the sake of their children and

parents. These things [extra marital affairs] are happening in all castes, and some women too have extramarital affairs.”

Escaping Patriarchal Norms

Tirkey’s parlour has a tiny separation marked by a faded curtain where women change into nighties to get a facial. This is one place where the women undress with ease unlike their homes where the act is either a part of a hasty bath timed for the family’s convenience or a prelude to spousal intimacy that is often forced.

A lot of customers come to the parlour only so they can talk on their mobile phones. At home or on the road, a girl conversing on a mobile phone is looked at with suspicion or disapproval and shamed. So, they often schedule their calls during parlour visits. Only 49% women in Jharkhand own mobile phones that they themselves use, as per the latest NFHS-5 data.

“There are several women who are not allowed to visit their parental home post-marriage. There are married customers who are educated and employed. But when they step out of home, they have to be chaperoned by their mothers-in-law. Otherwise, she has to seek her mother-in-law’s permission and answer many questions about where she is going, why, and for how long,” says Tirkey.

These parlours do not follow the system of appointments and work on a first-come, first-served basis. “There are times when a woman who has been waiting for her turn for hours has to get up and leave because she gets a call summoning her home. And when they get home, they are interrogated on why they were out so long,” says Tirkey.

She says that many of her customers are the first in their families to visit a parlour. Many of them are young students or women who are the first in their families to start earning, and they could be school teachers or daily wagers.

On the street outside, men can often be found sitting around playing cards and holding forth on politics and every subject under the sun with supreme confidence. But the women from their families are not allowed to have a say, not on who they would like to marry or on the number of children they want to have.

Tirkey is okay with women seeking beauty treatments but she would like them to not cross certain conventional social boundaries – she is firm about women respecting rules of chastity, for instance. She complains that “pure” relationships between men and women are a thing of the past. “Nowadays, everything begins with a romantic relationship. Not all girls do ‘such things’, though. Those who do think that they can do whatever they wish, and whatever they feel is right. That it is their own body,” she remarks derisively, and then states with approval, “Though some girls are loyal to the notions of staying pure.”

“Can I click your picture?” I ask her. “The photo won’t come nice now,” she replies, even as she gets ready to pose. I show her the photographs I take and she beams with joy at what she sees. ‘Beauty Business Was Considered Menial’

In a parlour with no door of its own but one shared with a home and opening onto a road, Vinita Sahu has been running a small parlour since 1995. At that time, it was the first parlour in rural Ranchi. She recalls that people would be insulting about her work.

“When I had started, my father-in-law had commented that once you start doing this work, you will have to cut the hair of ‘lowly castes’ (Scheduled Caste communities) too, of those who wash our utensils,” says Bina Sahu*, a parlour owner who belongs to the merchant caste. “I didn’t pay much attention to him and replied that when a doctor learns to treat, he doesn’t discriminate between patients. My in-laws used to taunt me, declaring that I was doing menial work. Even today, my relatives do not like that I do this work, and they keep pointing out that I cook with the same hands that I use to cut hair.”

Vinita Sahu recalls being ashamed to even ask her clients for payment. “I started by asking for Rs 6 for threading eyebrows. For a facial, I would only charge Rs 50,” she said.

But Bina is more than aware that times are changing, as is her customer base. “Those who served us earlier are the ones coming for facials and bringing us money. They pay with a lot of respect because, for them, going to a parlour is something new and exceptional. They feel highly esteemed when they get a [beauty] treatment done. But the privileged don’t have that attitude.”

As a child, I remember a Muslim woman walking into a parlour to get a facial. Once done, she paid, put her burqa back on and left, and as soon as the door closed, other women pointed out that she was hiding her freshly done face behind a veil.

Bias In Beauty

There is also a lot of body shaming in these parlours, where women stare openly at those who are of a darker skin tone or are plus-sized. This time too, when I walked into Heeramani Tirkey’s parlour, someone asked me what I had come for. When I said I came for other reasons, she said: “Yes, you are beautiful like this only. Why would you need to get anything done?” Had I been three sizes bigger, or if the melanin in my skin had been a few shades richer, how would she have responded?

Another acquaintance from a small town in Uttar Pradesh told me: “I wanted to get my hair cut really short to reaffirm my queer identity. The parlour people not only made me feel extremely under-confident with their comments, but they also made me feel ugly.”

I ask Mousomi* Mitra, another beautician, if she goes to the homes of those from other castes and communities for bridal makeup.”Yes, all communities,” she replies.

But then adds, “I have even gone to a Musalmaan’s house. But I haven’t ever been asked to go to the homes of the lower castes, such as the Ghasi, Mochi and Chamar communities. They don’t usually book me to do their make-up, and it is not possible to go to their place either. But if they come to my parlour, I do service them. Even if given lakhs of rupees, I won’t go to their house because, see, I am a pure Bengali, and if I do go there, everyone else will ostracise me. But those from these communities who hold proper jobs, have money, people have no problem touching them, going to their weddings.”

In all the parlours I visited, my caste always came up in conversations.”The maximum my clients get done are eyebrows and facials. People in villages work with cow-dung in and around their homes as well as in fields. They cannot worry about their feet,” says Sunita Devi, who runs a parlour in rural Jharkhand. Sunita is from the Kurmi caste that is engaged in farming. She has rented two rooms out of which she runs a tailoring unit and sells assorted merchandise and services – face creams, bangles and cosmetics and jewellery.

Learning The Ropes

Sunita Devi has a young tailoring trainee, Lakshmi Kumari, who is around 18 years of age. She is listening to us as she learns how to cut fabric for blouses by practising on paper. Lakshmi wears a floral-printed pastel shade salwar-kameez and lipstick, a rare thing in these parts. It seems to speak of bodily autonomy and financial independence.

Lakshmi Kumari is a young tailoring trainee in Sunita Devi’s parlour

Devi occasionally lapses in broken English. She is open to getting clicked wherever I request her to pose. Lakshmi giggles and poses shyly for the camera. We all chuckle at the situation. The parlour is very clean, and every object is in its place. The mirror is decorated with plastic flowers and leaves. I compliment her on this, and Sunita replies: “I have tried to make it beautiful. There is still some work left. The business needs to flourish before I can spend more. This is just the beginning. The lighting is yet to reach.”

“Would you hire women from any community to work in your shop?” I ask her. “Yes, whoever does good work, and whoever needs financial help, I hire them. Any individual, especially women, should definitely be independent. The teacher I had learned from used to earn more than her husband and motivated us all so much to work hard.” All of these women are excited to share how over the years, they have taught thousands of women in skilling camps run by NGOs and other organisations.

Parlours here also sell items of interest to women customers. Sanitary napkins can be bought here without any embarrassment. You could also buy fake hair buns to give volume to your hair or pretty hair clips for children.

“Has a trans woman ever visited your parlour?” I ask several of these women. “They come to take money. They sing and bless. But no, never have they come for a treatment, though they have bought some items from here.” I ask if they have ever had trans women as students anywhere. “No, never, but I have had disabled students.”

Like all business owners, these women too, face customers of all kinds. Tirkey tells me that while some are immensely soft-spoken, there are those who squabble over price or service. But she is also thrilled with the love, respect and attention she gets. “I am a celebrities,” Tirkey says. The grammar might be misplaced, not the emotion.

[*Some names have been changed to protect identities.]

Ankita Apurva, a cultural and social advocate, explores themes of intersectionality, health, and history. As the founder of 'Language Adage', she champions accessible English learning and practices the traditional Sohrai art from Jharkhand. She also curates the newsletter 'Right to Rest and Excel'.

Link - <https://behanbox.com/2023/09/08/what-beauty-parlours-in-jharkhand-villages-tell-us-about-gender-caste-and-hope/>



33. दिहाड़ी मज़दूर की पत्नी का कमाल, 200 महिलाओं को दिया रोज़गार

Rajesh Khandelwal | Gaonconnection | Anushka Roy | Aug 25, 2023

राजस्थान के छोटे से गाँव की 9वीं पास ब्रजेश भार्गव 250 से अधिक जूट का उत्पाद बनाती हैं। कभी दो वक़्त की रोटी के लिए सँघर्ष करने वाला उनका परिवार आज 200 महिलाओं को रोज़गार दे रहा है।

भरतपुर, राजस्थान। एक समय तक दिहाड़ी मज़दूरी करने वाले सत्यप्रकाश भार्गव को आज अपनी पत्नी पर नाज़ है। वो कहते हैं, "जब तक मेरी पत्नी ने अपना व्यवसाय नहीं शुरू किया था, तब तक हमारे पास अपना कोई घर तक नहीं था, बड़ी मुश्किल से घर चल पाता था। दोनों बेटों की पढ़ाई किसी सपने से कम नहीं था।" "चहुँओर पत्नी के काम की तारीफ़ सुनने को मिलती है तो बहुत अच्छा लगता है, उसकी मेहनत और काम से मेरी भी किस्मत बदल गई है। अब मैं भी उसके काम में हाथ बँटाता हूँ।" राजस्थान के भरतपुर ज़िले के खानवा गाँव के सत्यप्रकाश गाँव कनेक्शन को बताते हैं। ब्रजेश भार्गव मुस्कुराई क्योंकि उनके पति ने उनकी तारीफ़ की। वह न केवल एक साल में 12 लाख रुपये तक मुनाफ़ा कमाती हैं, बल्कि करीब 200 अन्य ग्रामीण महिलाओं को रोज़गार भी दे रही हैं।

ब्रजेश ने केवल नौवीं कक्षा तक पढ़ाई की है और अपना छोटा व्यवसाय शुरू किया है, जूट से 250 अलग तरह के घरेलू सामान बनाती हैं। जैसे बैग, मैट, टेबलमैट, हैंडपर्स (पुरुषों और महिलाओं के लिए), और प्लांटर्स। उन्हें दिल्ली, जयपुर और आगरा जैसे शहरों से थोक ऑर्डर मिलते हैं। हाल ही में महिलाओं के कपड़ों की सिलाई भी शुरू की है।

ब्रजेश गाँव कनेक्शन को बताती हैं, "मैंने सपने में भी नहीं सोचा था कि कभी खुद कमा भी पाऊंगी। एक समय था जब सुबह का खाना बनाने के बाद नहीं मालूम रहता था कि हमारे पास रात में खाना होगा या नहीं। लेकिन, अब और नहीं।" उन्होंने कहा।

स्वयं सहायता

कई साल की कड़ी मेहनत के बाद, ब्रजेश और उनके परिवार के लिए चीज़ें तब शुरू हुईं जब 2016 में राजस्थान ग्रामीण आजीविका विकास परिषद् (आरजीएवीपी) के सदस्य स्वयं सहायता समूह (एसएचजी) बनाने के लिए खानवा गाँव आए। गैर-लाभकारी संस्था ने महिलाओं को आजीविका के बारे में बताया और समझाया कि कैसे वे घर से काम करके कुछ पैसे कमा सकती हैं। उन्होंने ग्रामीण महिलाओं को बैग बनाने और सिलाई का प्रशिक्षण भी दिया। एनजीओ राजस्थान में ग्रामीण गरीबों के आर्थिक अवसरों और सशक्तिकरण को बढ़ाने के लिए कृषि और गैर-कृषि क्षेत्रों के क्षेत्रों में छोटे और सूक्ष्म उद्यमों को बढ़ावा देता है।

ब्रजेश ने बताया, "लगभग चार या पाँच लोगों ने बैग, मैट, टेबल मैट, हैंड पर्स और प्लांटर्स बनाना शुरू किया था, लेकिन जल्द ही कारोबार बढ़ गया और अब खानवा के अलावा आसपास के दूसरे गाँवों से भी लगभग 200 औरतें एसएचजी में हैं।"

ब्रजेश इन महिलाओं को ट्रेनिंग देती हैं और उन्हें पर्याप्त काम देती हैं, जिससे उन्हें हर रोज़ करीब 600 रुपये कमाने में मदद मिलती है। राजस्थान ग्रामीण आजीविका विकास परिषद के अलावा, उद्योग विभाग ने भी राज्य में कई प्रदर्शनियों में हाथ से बने उत्पादों को ले जाकर मदद की। महिलाओं ने वहाँ अपने उत्पाद बेचे और तब से पीछे मुड़कर नहीं देखा। "पिछले आठ साल में ऑर्डर के साथ ही हमारी कमाई भी बढ़ी है। प्रदर्शनियों और मेले में एक साल में लगभग 25-30 लाख कमाई हो जाती है। कच्चे माल की लागत और वेतन काटने के बाद मेरे हाथ में आठ से 12 लाख हैं।" ब्रजेश ने कहा। उनके मुताबिक, नवंबर से मार्च में उनके उत्पादों की अच्छी खासी माँग रहती है।

उनके पति सत्यप्रकाश अलग-अलग जगहों से कच्चा माल लाते हैं। जूट पश्चिम बंगाल में कोलकाता से आता है जबकि कपड़ा गुजरात में सूरत से आता है। उन्होंने कहा कि हर कदम पर ध्यान रखना होता है, कच्चे माल से लेकर आखिर में बने उत्पादों पर ध्यान रखना होता है। "हम आपस में काम बाँट लेते हैं। और अंत में हम उत्पादों को सावधानी से पैक करने से पहले फिनिशिंग की बारीकी से जाँच करते हैं।" दो बच्चों की माँ ब्रजेश बताती हैं।

दिखने लगा है असर

ब्रजेश की साथी गाँव की सुशीला शुरू से ही उनके साथ काम कर रही हैं। "मैं घर से बँधी हुई थी और सिर्फ घर का काम करती थी, और कुछ नहीं। लेकिन ब्रजेश के साथ काम करके अब मैं परिवार की आय में योगदान देती हूँ, जो एक बड़ी मदद है।" सुशीला ने गाँव कनेक्शन को बताया। खानवा की एक अन्य निवासी कुसुमा ने गाँव कनेक्शन को बताया, "पैसे के अलावा, ब्रजेश के साथ काम करने से मुझे आत्मविश्वास, आत्मसम्मान और मेरे रिश्तेदार मुझे अधिक सम्मान की दृष्टि से देखते हैं।"

राजस्थान ग्रामीण आजीविका विकास परिषद के ज़िला परियोजना प्रबंधक किशोरी लाल ने गाँव कनेक्शन को बताया, "ब्रजेश ने न केवल अपने लिए बल्कि अन्य महिलाओं के लिए भी गाँव में सहायनीय काम किया है। गाँव, घर परिवार और समाज में नाम भी रोशन कर रही हैं। अब वह कई प्रदेशों का भ्रमण कर चुकी हैं, जो उनके लिए किसी सपने से कम नहीं। ज़िला कलेक्टर, राजीविका मिशन के प्रदेश स्तर के अधिकारी और नाबार्ड की टीम उनका कामकाज देख चुकी है।"

राजीविका मिशन (राजस्थान ग्रामीण आजीविका मिशन) ने ब्रजेश को 15,000 रुपये के अनुदान से मदद की। किशोरी लाल ने कहा, इसके बाद इसने उन्हें पाँच लाख रुपये का कर्ज़ दिया, जिसे उन्होंने पूरा चुका दिया है। राजीविका मिशन ग्रामीण महिलाओं को सहायता प्रदान करता है जो एसएचजी की सदस्य हैं। साथ ही उन्हें राज्य और देश में मेलों और प्रदर्शनियों में ले जाकर, उनकी यात्रा, रहने और भोजन की व्यवस्था के साथ उनके उत्पादों को बेचने में मदद करता है।

राजीविका भरतपुर के जिला प्रबंधक (आजीविका एवं कौशल) हेमंत धाकड़ ने बताया कि राज्य में राजीविका के सभी उत्पाद राजसखी के नाम से अमेज़न और फ्लिपकार्ट पर लिस्टेड हैं और ब्रजेश भार्गव के उत्पाद भी इनमें शामिल हैं। “ब्रजेश के जूट उत्पाद फ्लिपकार्ट और अमेज़न पर ऑनलाइन लिस्टेड हैं।” किशोरी लाल ने कहा, ऑनलाइन उन्हें इतनी प्रतिक्रिया नहीं मिली है, लेकिन हम इंतज़ार कर रहे हैं और देख रहे हैं। ब्रजेश को भरोसा है कि ऑनलाइन बिक्री जल्द ही रफ्तार पकड़ लेगी।

Rajesh Khandelwal, a 52-year-old independent journalist accredited by Rajasthan's Information and Public Relations Department, has won multiple awards, including the Shree Chandrabhan Award for Best Human Story in 2014.

Link -

<https://www.gaonconnection.com/thechangemakersproject/muskan-ki-rasoi-swati-shringi-kota-rajasthan-food-social-service-charity-52368/>



UNFPA @ 50 AWARDEES

DR HARJANT GILL

CONSISTENT ENGAGEMENT WITH REDEFINING MASCULINITIES



Anthropologist Dr Harjant Gill's research at Towson University examines the intersections of gender, sexuality, transnationality and popular culture in India. This award-winning filmmaker's acclaimed ethnographic films include *Roots of Love* which looks at the changing significance of hair and turban among Sikh men in India; *Mardistan (Macholand)* which explores Indian manhood focusing on issues of sexual violence, son preference and homophobia;

and *Sent Away Boys* which examines how provincial communities across northern India are transformed by the exodus of young men giving up farming to seek a better life abroad. This recipient of multiple prestigious fellowships, who also heads the Society for Visual Anthropology (SVA) is working on his forthcoming book, *Coming of Age in Macholand: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Violence in Post-Conflict Punjab*.

NIDHI JAMWAL

CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER AND CLIMATE CHANGE ISSUES



Though independent journalist Nidhi Jamwal is based out of India's financial capital Mumbai, her reportage dwells on rural and environmental issues, including climate change to which she has brought a unique gender perspective for more than 25 years, making her work stand out. She often highlights how the major brunt of climate crises is borne by women who must either fight or find ways to adapt in order to help their families and communities survive.

DR. SHEILU SRINIVASAN

PIONEER OF ELDERLY CARE INITIATIVES IN INDIA

The Founder President of Dignity Foundation Dr Sheilu Sreenivasan has been tirelessly working for the past 40 years with the Elderly to bring about a positive change. The Foundation directly supports over 500 senior citizens in three urban slums of India – with over 150 members in each city. Whether it is through her work in the area of elderly care now or through her earlier stint in research and publishing, she has unfailingly contoured her interventions with gender-sensitivity.



PAROMITA VOHRA

EMPOWERING ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE



Acclaimed filmmaker, screenwriter, columnist, and author Paromita Vohra wears each of her hats with equal poise. Whether engaging with youth on subjects as varied as urban life, desire, pop culture or cinema, she unfailingly holds a mirror to patriarchy and its treatment of women. Agents of Ishq the website about sexuality, love and desire Vohra founded in 2014 "creates a positive and enabling conversation around sex," cutting across different sexual orientations has a reach of 24 million and has not only won five Laadli awards for gender sensitivity but is also recognised as one of 10 global sexuality projects of excellence by UNESCO.

BISHAKHA DATTA

BUILDING CONVERSATIONS AROUND RIGHT TO BODILY AUTONOMY

Film-maker, activist and journalist of yore, Bishakha Datta who co-founded and heads Point of View, a Mumbai non-profit working in the area of gender, sexuality and women's rights has continuously furthered discussion on Bodily Autonomy and agency. On the board of several nonprofits including Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action and the Wikimedia Foundation where she was the 1st Indian trustee, Datta has also edited *And Who Will Make the Chapatis?* - a 1998 overview of the all-women political panchayats in Maharashtra. Five years later her documentary *In the Flesh: Three Lives in Prostitution* was released.



ANITA GURUMURTHY

CONSISTENT ADVOCACY TO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE



Anita Gurumurthy, the founder and executive director of IT for Change (ITfC), oversees research on the platform concerning digital justice frameworks for women, democracy in the digital age, and data and AI governance. Engaged in national and international advocacy for digital rights, she frequently contributes to academic and media spaces. She also leads a variety of research projects, such as Recognize-Resist-Remedy, an initiative to address gender-based hate speech in the online public sphere, and Centring Women in India's Digitalising Economy, a policy research and learning exchange project spanning India, Africa, and the EU on women and the future of work. She has spoken as a keynote speaker at the AAAI/ACM conference on artificial intelligence and ethics and has represented civil society in many capacities throughout the world, including the UN Internet Governance Forum.

ADVERTISING, BOOKS, FILM AWARD WINNERS



CONSISTENT GENDER ADVOCATE
TANISHQ

Tanishq consistently promotes gender sensitivity, celebrating women's strength, turns traditional stereotypes on the head and emphasises equality. Their campaigns, from Heera Ho Tum to questioning post-marriage changes, reflect progressive values and challenge traditional gender norms.



WINNER | CSR
LEO BURNETT INDIA
WHISPER | *KEEP GIRLS IN SCHOOL* |
PERIOD SONG

Whisper's Period Song campaign highlights the impact of poor menstrual health and hygiene awareness on the girl child and her prospects. By addressing menstrual health and hygiene and using little girls' voices to convey the message, this ad exemplifies strong corporate social responsibility and commitment to gender equality.



WINNER | CORPORATE FILM
AUTUMNGREY
LUMINOUS INDIA | #WOMENINENERGY

This Luminous Power campaign celebrates women's contribution to the energy sector. By highlighting their achievements on International Women's Day, it underscores the company's commitment to gender diversity and empowerment within a traditionally male-dominated industry.



WINNER | PRODUCT

BBDO INDIA

ARIEL | *HOW STRONG IS YOUR HOME TEAM?*
HOMETEAMS #SHARETHELOAD

This campaign effectively promotes gender equality in household responsibilities. By encouraging shared chores, it takes on the traditional Indian patriarchal mindset on gender roles, fostering a shared, well-balanced division of domestic chores and makes a strong case for social change



WINNER | PRODUCT

EDELMAN INDIA

STARBUCKS INDIA | *IT STARTS WITH YOUR NAME ARPITA*

This campaign featuring a transgender model, champions inclusion and respect for gender identity. By focusing on personal names and identities, it effectively promotes diversity and sets the tone for starting conversations about a topic swept under the carpet thus far. In doing so it sets a high benchmark for acceptance and representation in advertising.



WINNER | SERVICE CATEGORY

TALENTED

CHHOTI SOCH? | URBAN COMPANY

This campaign powerfully portrays a young masseuse's pushback against attempts to stigmatise her work and makes a strong case for her personal and professional dignity. It underlines the cruel attempts to belittle and shame the work done by women and champions women's right to take pride in their work taking on societal prejudices, making a significant statement on inclusion and respect.



WINNER | SPECIAL DAY

SHAADI.COM

THE #REVOLUTIONAARIS CAMPAIGN
BY SHAADI.ORG AND UDAYAN CARE

This campaign highlights the urgent need to increase women's participation in India's workforce. Addressing this critical issue, aligns with Nobel Laureate Claudia Goldin's research on women's labour market challenges, driving impactful change and advocating for greater gender equity in employment.



WINNER | SPECIAL DAY

GREEN CHUTNEY FILMS

DABUR VATIKA | #WOMENOFSUBSTANCE

The Vatika Enriched Coconut Hair Oil campaign for International Women's Day highlights the achievements of women in their workforce. The ad celebrates women driving excellence in a factory run entirely by women, showcasing their journey and leadership. It emphasises breaking barriers, promoting inclusion, and inspiring women to lead across various fields.



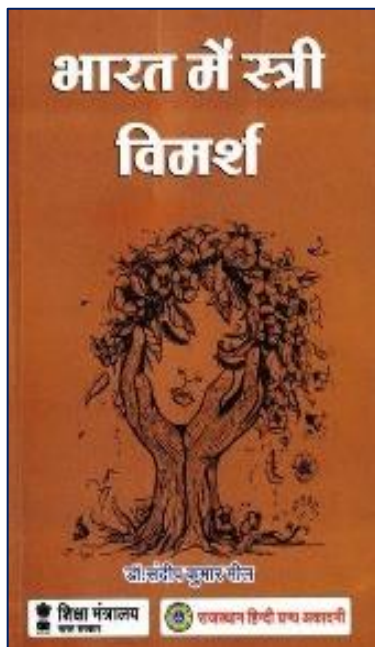
JURY APPRECIATION CERTIFICATE | CSR

TGTHR

HARPIC | HARPIC LOCATOR APP

Harpic's Be Free to Pee Locator App effectively highlights the problems Indian women face in accessing restroom facilities and provides a solution approach by telling them of a way to access clean restrooms. This initiative showcases a strong commitment to corporate social responsibility and addresses the crucial and critical needs of women, which exposes them to health risks.

BOOKS



BOOK | HINDI | NON-FICTION

DR. SANDEEP KUMAR MEEL

**BHARAT MEIN STREE VIMARSH |
RAJASTHAN HINDI GRANTH
ACADEMY**

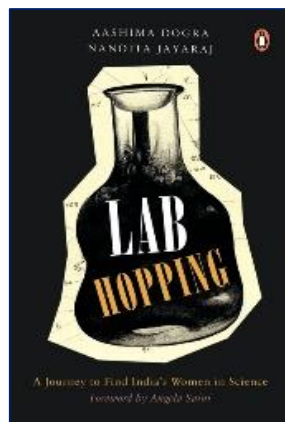
Dr. Sandeep Kumar Meel's *Bharat Mein Stree Vimarsh* provides a detailed and insightful analysis of women's issues in India, covering social, economic, and political challenges. He emphasises the intersection of gender with caste, class, and religion, stressing the importance of understanding women's rights through this lens. Though complex, the clear and accessible writing makes it an engaging read. The book is a vital contribution to the conversation on gender equality, offering both historical and contemporary perspectives on the ongoing struggles for women's empowerment

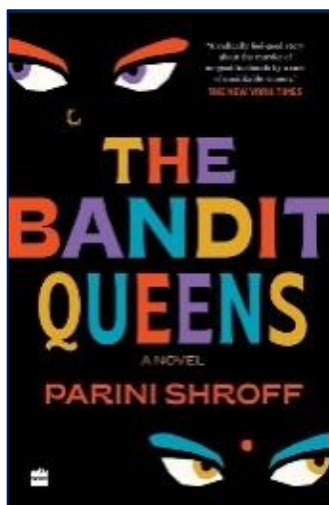
BOOK | ENGLISH | NON-FICTION

NANDITA JAYARAJ AND ASHIMA DOGRA

**LAB HOPPING: A JOURNEY TO FIND
INDIA'S WOMEN IN SCIENCE | PENGUIN
RANDOM HOUSE INDIA**

Lab Hopping highlights obstacles women scientists encounter and sheds light on the ongoing gender disparity in Indian science. Through interviews and stories, authors Nandita Jayaraj and Ashima Dogra explore the experiences of women in various scientific fields, revealing how they navigate a male-dominated space. The book provides insights into the persistent gender gap in India's scientific community, despite some recent progress.





BOOK | ENGLISH | FICTION

PARINI SHROFF

THE BANDIT QUEENS | HARPER COLLINS PUBLISHERS

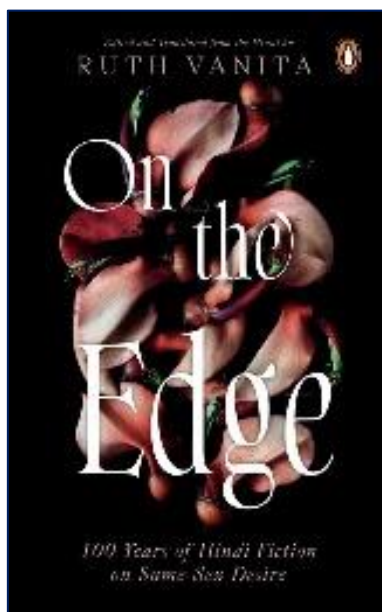
Bandit Queens celebrates the strength and resilience of women. It explores themes of courage, hope, gender roles, loneliness, and love through the story of women facing life's challenges with wit and determination. The book offers a heartfelt and humorous take on their struggles and victories, creating memorable characters that linger with you long after finishing the final chapter. Simple yet profound, it's a tale of survival, agency, and the power of female friendships.

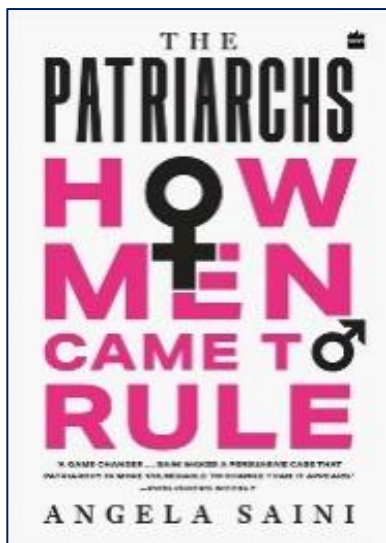
BOOK | ENGLISH | TRANSLATION | SHORT STORIES

RUTH VANITA

ON THE EDGE- 100 YEARS OF HINDI FICTION ON SAME-SEX DESIRE | PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE INDIA

Ruth Vanita's *On the Edge* is a fascinating collection of translations exploring same-sex desire in Hindi fiction over the past century. Featuring stories from some of India's finest writers, this book is a treasure. Ruth's careful selection highlights the rich complexity of the narratives, which are nuanced rather than straightforward. Instead of forcing a message, the stories gently engage readers, providing deep emotional insights. This thoughtful approach not only enriches the literary landscape but also contributes meaningfully to discussions on gender.





BOOK | ENGLISH | NON-FICTION
ANGELA SAINI

**THE PATRIARCHS: HOW MEN
 CAME TO RULE | HARPER COLLINS
 PUBLISHERS INDIA**

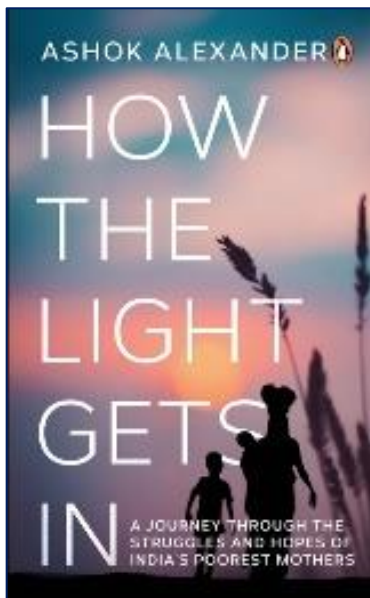
Angela Saini's *The Patriarchs: How Men Came to Rule* explores the origins of patriarchy, challenging the notion that cavemen were simply stronger. This thought-provoking book is a must-read for everyone. While it effectively examines the historical power struggles between genders, it could benefit from a deeper analysis of contemporary examples, like China and India. Saini's ambitious approach parallels that of other influential thinkers, making her work stand out.

BOOK | ENGLISH | MEMOIR

ASHOK ALEXANDER

**HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN | PENGUIN
 RANDOM HOUSE INDIA**

In *How the Light Gets In*, Ashok Alexander explores the adventure of self-discovery in his memoir about a groundbreaking public health initiative. He shares his journey of creating an organisation aimed at reducing needless deaths among India's poorest mothers and children. Through honest storytelling, he takes readers from the streets of Mumbai to the lush landscapes of Madhya Pradesh, revealing the beauty and struggles of marginalised communities. Ashok's transition from a corporate career to this mission showcases the power of everyday heroism, evoking a range of emotions and inspiring hope.



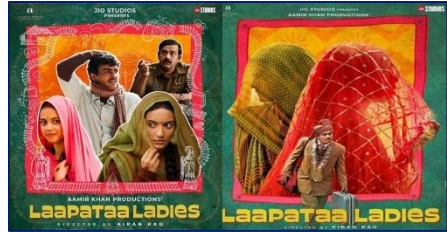
FILM AWARDS

BEST FEATURE FILM

LAAPATAA LADIES

HINDI | KIRAN RAO

Kiran Rao's *Laapataa Ladies* uses its narrative premise - of two brides who, in 2001, are unintentionally switched while travelling by train - to explore women's empowerment and gender equality in rural India.

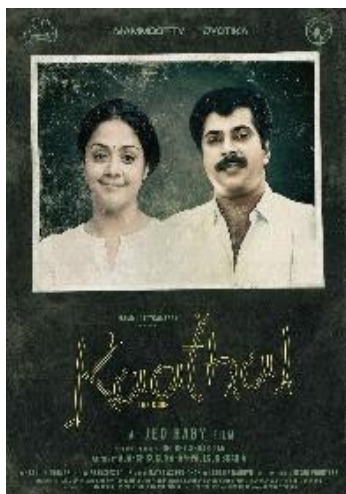


THE MOST SIGNIFICANT FILM OF THE YEAR

PAYAL KAPADIA | ALL WE IMAGINE AS LIGHT



Payal Kapadia's Malayalam-Hindi Indo-French production *All We Imagine As Light*, which became the 1st Indian film ever to win the prestigious Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival stars Kani Kusruti, Divya Prabha, and Chhaya Kadam. Its gender-sensitive narrative focuses on women navigating their lives in Mumbai and the challenges that come along. It follows Prabha, a Mumbai nurse whose life goes into a tailspin when she receives a rice cooker from her estranged husband. While Anu, her roommate and colleague, struggles for privacy to spend time with her boyfriend, Prabha's best friend Parvati, a widow, is forced out of her home by property developers.



BEST OTT FILM

KAATHAL - THE CORE

AMAZON PRIME VIDEO | MALAYALAM | JEO BABY

Kaathal - The Core breaks down the exteriors of a loveless marriage to hold a mirror to society's denial of diverse sexual orientations. Without getting hateful/angry this Jeo Baby film non-judgementally tells the audience it's never too late to let more colours enter their lives. It masterfully tackles a topic still largely taboo in both the film industry and society by employing a traditional family drama scenario highlighting how homophobia affects wives of men forced into marriage.

RAVI JADHAV

TAALI

WEB SERIES | JIO CINEMA

Taali's mesmerising journey immerses us in the world of transgender activist Shree Gauri Sawant. The biographical series directed by Ravi Jadhav where Sushmita Sen plays the protagonist unfolds like a tapestry of courage tracing Sawant's estrangement from her policeman-father, her psycho-emotional struggle given her conservative milieu which compounds her challenge and her eventual transformation into someone who resolutely stands up to the system with dignity.



SPECIAL AWARD WINNERS

LAADLI OF THE CENTURY AWARD

DR. ARMAITY DESAI



This trailblazer social work educator and 1992 Katherine Kendall Awardee's efforts promoting gender equality in higher education stand out. Dr Desai established the standard for incorporating gender justice and equality in social work education long before they became buzzwords. As the head of Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences and the University Grants Commission, she has advocated gender equality. Her capacity building of women faculty and administrators for managerial roles in higher education as UGC Chairperson which led to a nationwide impact particularly stands out.

LAADLI LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

BACHI KARKARIA



This columnist, chronicler of Urbania, author and media trainer was the first Indian on the board of the World Editors' Forum. Ms. Bachi Karkaria's decade-long stint at The Statesman when she put gender sharply on the agenda, with her exposes on the plight of women in custodial protection is still the go-to template in journalism on this subject. Her intersectionalising of gender, urbanisation and public health has seen her emerge as an advisor to the Bill and Melinda Gates AIDS India Initiative and Global Health Strategies. While Ms Karkaria's satirical column since 1994 Erratica enjoys a cult following, her books include In Hot Blood: The Nanavati Case That Shook India; Dare to Dream - a best-selling biography of MS Oberoi; and the most recent biography - Capture The Dream, The Many Lives of Capt. CP Krishnan Nair.

LAADLI WOMAN BEHIND THE SCREEN

HETALL DEDDHIA



Hetall Deddhia, the Indian film industry's first and only female gaffer, started her career in 2005, carrying on the legacy of her father, Mr Mulchand Dedhia, the most renowned gaffer in India. Among the numerous films she has worked on are the well-known Bollywood hits: Bluffmaster, Karthik Calling Karthik and Road, Movie often commanding an all-male team to ensure film sets or event stages are perfectly lit. She has also assisted her father on multiple international productions shot in India and

is particularly proud of her work on Mission Impossible: The Ghost Protocol and Un Plus Une.

LAADLI GENDER CHAMPION AWARD

ADV. VRINDA GROVER



One of India's feistiest human rights lawyers, Ms Vrinda Grover has defended victims of extrajudicial executions, sexual and domestic abuse, mass murders, and torture in detention. She has also supported political activists, trade unions, and sexual minorities who are the targets of state-sponsored human rights abuses.

Enquiries into the role of law in women's subjugation, the criminal justice system's breakdown during collective and targeted violence, the impact of "security" laws on human rights, the rights of undocumented workers, the difficulties faced by internally displaced people and the impunity for torture and enforced disappearances in conflict situations are the focus of Ms Grover's research and writing.

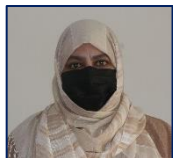
LAADLI THEATRE AWARD

ULKA MAYUR | CAST OFF ALL SHAME



Written, directed, and performed by Dr Ulka Mayur, *Cast Off All Shame* is a solo theatre piece. Stories of modern women and Bhakti poetry are combined in a playful and thought-provoking way in this show, highlighting gender with intersectionalities of caste and class. Poems and anecdotes are interspersed with vignettes of Indian women from various social levels and backgrounds.

SOUTH ASIA WINNERS



ZARGHOONA SALEHI

ENGLISH | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | AFGHANISTAN

Zarghoona Salehi, an Afghan journalist with nearly two decades of experience, has bravely reported on women's issues and human rights under Taliban rule. As head of the women's section at *Pajhwok News Agency*, she highlights the struggles faced by Afghan women, from school closures to gender-based violence. Despite the risks, she remains committed to raising awareness.



WASLAT ZUHA KHAN

URDU | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | AFGHANISTAN

Now based in Islamabad, Waslat Zuha Khan is an Afghan journalist dedicated to advocating for women and marginalised communities from her home country. Despite being displaced, she continues to amplify the voices of Afghan women, particularly those facing violence and discrimination. With over five years of experience, she has held various roles in Afghan media, including news manager, reporter, and producer. Her work spans multiple outlets, including *11 Network TV* and *Afghan Youth Television*. A committed advocate for women's rights, Waslat's resilience and dedication, even in exile, make her set apart.



TAPASHI RABEYA AKHI

BENGALI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | BANGLADESH

Tapashi Rabeya Akhi, a journalist in Bangladesh, is committed to gender-sensitive reporting. As a Special Correspondent at *The Daily South Asian Times*, she focuses on women's and marginalised communities' issues. With 14 years of experience, Tapashi has received recognition, including an award for Best TV Reporting on Safe Environment by the SAARC Environment Journalists' Forum. Her leadership and media training highlights her dedication to amplifying underrepresented voices in Bangladesh.



SHUMANA SHARMIN

**BENGALI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER
ISSUES | BANGLADESH**

Shumana Sharmin, Associate Editor at *Prothom Alo*, has been a trailblazer in gender-sensitive journalism in Bangladesh. Starting her career in 1991, she has focused on issues affecting women and children, amplifying their voices through her editorial work. She edited *Anya Paksha* and *Narimanacha*, platforms that highlighted women's empowerment. Shumana's contributions extend beyond journalism, collaborating with organisations like UNICEF to promote gender sensitivity.



DAMCHOE PEM

**ENGLISH | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER
ISSUES | BHUTAN**

Damchoe Pem, an award-winning journalist with over a decade of experience, focuses on crime-related stories, particularly those involving female victims. In Bhutan, where women often remain silent about their experiences, Damchoe's unique storytelling gives them a powerful voice. Her sensitive coverage of these issues sets her apart, as she highlights the voices of women rather than letting male suspects dominate the narrative.



YANGYEL LHADEN

**ENGLISH | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER
ISSUES | BHUTAN**

Yangyel Lhaden, an award-winning journalist at Kuensel, is renowned for her dedication to addressing critical social issues. In her impactful story, "Domestic Violence is No Longer Gender-Biased," she challenges the perception that domestic violence only affects women in Bhutan. By shedding light on male victims, she broadens the conversation around domestic violence, raising awareness of its often-overlooked impact on men. Her commitment to highlighting such nuanced issues makes her a rising star in journalism.



AISHATH MOHAMED

**DHIVEHI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES |
MALDIVES**

Aishath Mohamed's selection for the South Asian Laadli Award highlights her significant contributions to Maldivian journalism. Her trailblazing journey, marked by resilience and dedication, has transformed the media landscape. Aishath's commitment to accurate, gender-sensitive reporting, and her role as a pioneering woman in the field, embodies the spirit of the Laadli Award. Her ability to break barriers and set new standards in journalism. Aishath's work not only informs but also inspires, making her a beacon in the world of media.



ZAMATH AHMED WAHEED

**DHIVEHI | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER
ISSUES | MALDIVES**

Zamath Ahmed Waheed's journalism is defined by her unwavering commitment to truth, education, and women's empowerment. Her reports and stories have consistently highlighted critical social issues, advancing gender-sensitive discourse in the Maldives. With her diverse experience and leadership roles, Zamath has made a significant impact on the media landscape.



BINITA DAHAL

**ENGLISH | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER
ISSUES | NEPAL**

Binita Dahal, a senior journalist with the *BBC Nepali Service*, is renowned for her in-depth reporting on gender issues in Nepal. Her investigative journalism, widely respected both within the country and among the diaspora, covers the social exclusion of women and marginalised communities, including the Rautes and Chepangs. Binita's work submitted for the Laadli Awards reflects her commitment to shedding light on these critical issues.



KALPANA BHATTARAI

ENGLISH | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | NEPAL

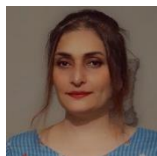
Kalpana Bhattarai is a rising young journalist known for her investigative reporting. Her recent work, on Nepali children being trafficked into India, has garnered significant attention across the country. Kalpana's commitment to exposing critical issues through her impactful journalism makes her a notable voice in Nepal's media landscape.



JAMAIMA AFRIDI

ENGLISH | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | PAKISTAN

Jamaima Afridi has made remarkable strides in journalism, overcoming challenges in a region where women in the field face significant barriers. Her reporting focuses on marginalised communities, particularly women, using compelling storytelling techniques like human interest and thematic interlinking. In a country where young journalists often lack mentorship, Jamaima's dedication and potential are inspiring. She continues to rise, making a meaningful impact in gender-sensitive journalism.



RABBIA ARSHAD

URDU | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER ISSUES | PAKISTAN

Rabbia Arshad has excelled in adapting to the evolving digital media landscape, transitioning from print and electronic journalism to mobile journalism. Her impactful stories focus on critical issues like gender equality and climate change. Known for her balanced perspective and commitment to social justice, Rabbia's work amplifies marginalised voices.



SONALI WANIGABADUGE

**ENGLISH | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER
ISSUES | SRI LANKA**

Sonali Wanigabaduge, a media personality and lawyer from Sri Lanka, is a staunch advocate for women's rights in the media industry. At a time when space for women's issues in mainstream media is shrinking, Sonali hosts *The Peoples' Platform*, a leading bespoke policy talk show that provides a vital space for women experts to engage in policy dialogues on gender-blind policies, food insecurity and education reform. Telecast on *News1st*, Sri Lanka's largest news network, Sonali's work is a beacon for amplifying women's voices in public policy and governance debates.



AANYA WIPULASENA

**ENGLISH | CONSISTENT REPORTING ON GENDER
ISSUES | SRI LANKA**

Aanya Wipulasena, the Sri Lankan freelance journalist focuses on the stories of the island nation's most marginalised communities, particularly women. With deep empathy, she sheds light on the lives of the voiceless, from sex workers to migrant women, and highlights issues like vaccine inequity. Her gender-sensitive reporting brings visibility to society's most invisible sections. This Chevening Fellow's work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, *The New York Times*, and *Agencia EFE*.

JURY PROFILES

DR. AARTHI P M - Director of the School of Gender Studies at Mahatma Gandhi University, specialising in public health law, gender justice, and feminist research methodology.

ANAND MADHAB - Development professional and media marketing expert with expertise in CSR, gender empowerment, and development campaigns.

ANUJA GULATI - Program Management Specialist, UNFPA.

ANJUM RAJABALI - A Veteran Indian screenwriter, actor, teacher, and activist for screenwriters' rights

ADV. AUDREY DMELLO - Director at Majlis, heading the Gender and Law programme, offers legal aid to victims of domestic and sexual violence.

BEVERLY WHITE - Senior Anchor with 20 years' experience, covering business and features at NDTV, Times Now, and Your Story.

DR. DAYA KRISHNA MANGAL - MD with 40+ years in public health, now an Adjunct Professor at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health, USA.

DEEPA GAHLOT - National Award-winning critic, columnist, editor and author with works featured in numerous publications and anthologies.

DIVYA GUPTA - A seasoned development practitioner and journalist with over 20 years of experience, has worked with UN agencies, WHO & World Bank.

DOLLY THAKORE - Television news anchor, veteran commentator, columnist, communication and public relations consultant, author, associate publisher, editor, casting director, and actor.

DR. MINAXI SHUKLA - Co-founder of the Centre for Health, Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA) has consulted on child rights and education since 2016, recently with UNICEF and Bihar's ECCE programme.

DR. MALTI MEHTA - Media Educator, Documentary Filmmaker, and former Director of Educational Multimedia Research Centre (EMMRC), Ahmedabad.

GITALI VINAYAK - Chief Editor, Miloon Saryajani, a Marathi magazine and a social activist.

GITA CHADHA - Visiting Professor at Azim Premji University and Obaid Siddiqui Chair at NCBS, with notable work in science studies, feminist theories, and postcolonial studies.

GOKUL KRISHNAMOORTHY - Co-founder and Group Consulting Editor, Uplift MediaNews4u & Editor, The Free Press Journal BrandSutra.

GOVIND CHATURVEDI - A veteran journalist, Associated with Dainik Navjyoti, UNI, Rajasthan Patrika.

GOWHAR GEELANI- Senior Journalist-author with over 15 years of international media experience, Ex-Editor at Deutsche Welle.

JYOTSNA KAUR HABIBULLAH - CEO of Lucknow Farmers Market, leads a sustainable online community connecting over 5000 agripreneurs, farmers, and artisans, offering 10,000 products and recently launched her product line.

K PRAVEISH VISHWANATH AIYAR - A cinephile, Taught Film Communications at Guru Nanak Khalsa College for twenty-four years.

KALA RAMANATHAN - The management graduate has been an air hostess with Indian Airlines. A home chef specialising in millet-based cooking she is deeply interested in performing arts, culture and gender issues.

KANCHAN MATHUR - Ex-officiating director at IDSJ, Jaipur until 2018 and Professor (Honorary) until 2023.

KANCHAN SRIVASTAVA - Senior Editor at Exchange4media Group with 16 years of experience at Times Group, Zee Group, and Free Press Journal.

KANKSHI NETRI - Founder of NETRI Foundation and policy researcher. Recognized for championing women's rights and driving technology-based political opportunities in India.

PROF. KULDEEP KAUR - Retired vice principal of G.N. Khalsa College of Arts, Science, and Commerce, Mumbai, a visiting faculty at Tata Institute of Social Sciences and dialect coach.

KUSUM TRIPATHI - Professor at Dr. B.R. University of Social Science Mhow and an author.

KV SRIDHAR aka “Pops,” – A celebrated Indian advertising creative director and founder of Hyper Collective. With nearly 40 years in the industry, he has won 23 Cannes Lions and over 400 awards globally

DR. LEENA PUJARI - A feminist sociologist and Head of Sociology at K C College, specialises in Gender Studies, feminist pedagogy, and jurisprudence.

MEENA KARNIK - Ex-editor of *Aapla Mahanagar*, current jury member at FIPRESCI

MIRA K DESAI -Researcher with over three decades in gender, development, and media studies, contributing to Indian television studies, media education, and development communication.

MITALI PAREKH - An editorial fixture since 2000, has written for the Guardian, Time Out, and more, was Gender and Sexuality Editor at DNA, and now contributes to Sunday mid-day on gender, mental health, and beyond.

MOHAMMED KHAN - Indian advertising legend who set up some of the country's best agencies, including Contract, Rediffusion and Enterprise Nexus.

MUSTAFA PLUMBER - Karnataka State Correspondent for LiveLaw, has over 18 years of legal reporting experience and a Law degree, specialising in court decisions and legislative developments.

DR PAM RAJPUT - Indian academic and feminist-activist, Padma Shri honouree, renowned for advancing gender equity, and former Chair of India's High-Level Committee on Women's Status.

PAMELA PHILIPOSE - Current ombudsperson for The Wire.in, ex-editor-in-chief of Women's Feature Service, Ex-senior associate editor at The Indian Express, ex-advisor at the Indian government's Media Task Force.

ADV. PERSIS SIDHVA - An Advocate for over a decade. Head, Legal Services Programme at RATI Foundation.

PRACHI PINGLAY - Consulting Editor at Citizen Matters Mumbai and Bengaluru-based journalist, covers political and social issues for Outlook, BBC News, and The Hindu, and teaches radio journalism and podcasting.

PREETA MATHUR - Worked on the Hindi Theatre Stage for the last almost 37 years. With about 5000 shows of more than 50 plays behind her, Preeta has a large and varied experience to draw from.

RAJAN MAHAN - Veteran journalist and expert on Rajasthan politics. Besides serving as a Resident Editor at NDTV, he has been a Professor of Journalism at the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur.

RANJONA BANERJI - Worked for four decades in media, has transitioned from a copywriter to editor across Indian journals and newspapers, covering diverse topics including food, art, politics, and cricket.

RATNA BHARALI TALUKDAR - An acclaimed journalist and writer who brings Northeastern India to life through extensive fieldwork. The Ram Nath Goenka Awardee.

REVATHI SIVAKUMARA - Writer and Journalist with 13 years of experience at The Times of India and Deccan Herald, transitioned to digital media.

RICHA ANIRUDH - Producer & Anchor of the YouTube show “Zindagi With Richa”, award-winner for the talk show 'Zindagi Live’

RICHA S. MUKHERJEE - A TEDx speaker, award-winning author of eight books, ex-journalist, and advertising professional, is a blogger and travel writer.

PROF. RITU DEWAN - President of the 64th Indian Society of Labour Economics Conference, Visiting Professor at the Institute of Human Development, Co-Founder of the Feminist Policy Collective, Trustee at the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability and The India Forum, and former President of the Indian Association for Women’s Studies.

REVATI LAUL – An independent journalist, filmmaker, and author of The Anatomy of Hate, reported for NDTV, Tehelka, and Hindustan Times, and the Director of Sarfaroshi Foundation.

SAMEERA R - Actor And Voice-Over Artist from Andhra Pradesh, Worked in Hindi and Telugu films, TV, and ads, trained in Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi.

SAMPAD MAHAPATRA - Former Editor of 'The Sambad' and Founder Editor of 'The Nitidin', former Odisha Bureau Chief of NDTV.

SANDEEP SAHU - Multilingual journalist associated with the BBC World Service from Odisha, OTV, Outlook magazine, thequint.com, news18.com, and others.

SATHYA SARAN - Consulting Editor at Penguin Random House India, former Femina Editor, author, fashion journalism lecturer at NIFT, stage actor, and curator of "The Spaces Between Words."

SAUMYA BAIJAL- Feminist, bilingual writer, ad woman, storyteller, poet, guest lecturer, radio presenter, theatre person, activist.

SHAHINA KK - Winner of International Press Freedom Award 2023. Senior Editor with Outlook Magazine. 27 years of experience in journalism- Television, Print and digital media. Reporting experience across human rights, public health, Gender, Caste and politics.

SHEFALI CHATURVEDI - An award-winning audio professional and communication consultant with 20 years' experience in media and humanitarian work, led initiatives with WHO, BBC Media Action.

DR. SHOMA A. CHATTERJI - Highly esteemed freelance journalist, film scholar, and author, two National Awardees, multiple Lifetime Achievement Awardees and ex-jury members at both national and international film festivals.

SUDIPTA BASU - A seasoned journalist from India, currently Senior Editor at Hindustan Times, she has held key editorial roles at The Telegraph, Middy, and Mumbai Mirror.

SUDHIR MISHRA - Currently serves as Resident Editor at Navbharat Times, Delhi, with over 25 years of journalism experience at renowned publications like Dainik Jagran and Dainik Bhaskar.

SUGITHA SUGI – First Female Editor in Tamil journalism, five-time Laadli Award winner

SUNEETA RAO - The Indipop Icon known for "Paree Hoon Main," boasts a 40-year career in music and theatre, with five Indipop albums, and a prominent "LAADLI" spokesperson in Indian entertainment.

SUNNY SEBASTIAN - Veteran Journalist And Political Commentator, Founder Vice-Chancellor of Haridev Joshi University of Journalism and Mass Communication.

SUNCHIKA PANDEY - Manages HAT Media, an agency responsible for overseeing social media for the city's police department and the BMC

SYED RAZA HUSSAIN ZAIDI - Partnership and DEIA Head at Naz Foundation International. He is currently working with Wikipedia to spotlight underrepresented queer and women's stories.

TK RAJALAKSHMI - Chief of Bureau at Frontline, Delhi, with 25+ years of journalistic experience, specialising in the social sector, including gender, health, education, labour, population policies, and press freedom.

VANAJA C - Award-winning journalist, TV presenter, and filmmaker.

VIKRANT PANDE - translator of 12 Marathi classics into English, an award-winning author, and a former corporate professional with expertise in Indian brand leadership and consumer insights.

VINTA NANDA - Filmmaker and writer. Editor of The Daily Eye, Creative Director at ACEE.

YASIM SAIT - Author, Counsellor, and Life Purpose Coach on a mission to empower women at different stages of their lives.

SAWM JURY

DILRUKSHI HANDUNNETTI (Sri Lanka) - Award-winning investigative journalist, editor, trainer, lawyer, and co-founder of the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) in Colombo, actively involved in regional human rights organizations, with a focus on freedom of expression and gender rights.

KRESHMA FAKHRI (Afghanistan) - Afghan journalist with 14+ years' experience, Fact-check Journalist at Zan Times, known for investigative reporting and contributions to international media like Al Jazeera.

NAMRATA SHARMA (Nepal) - journalist and human rights advocate, first female Editor of The Independent in Nepal, inaugural President of CIJ Nepal, with 25+ years' experience across multiple countries, focusing on cross-border trafficking.

CHENCHO DEMA (Bhutan) – Award-winning journalist Chenchho Dema has over 15 years of experience at Kuensel, covering crime, politics, judiciary, and environmental issues. A fellow of Alfred Friendly and AJF, she has freelanced for BBC Monitoring and contributed to renowned publications, including Nikkei and The New York Times.

ROZINA ISLAM (Bangladesh) - Special Correspondent & Head of Crime Reporting at Prothom Alo, honoured with the 'Anti-Corruption Champions Award' by the US State Department, included in the Coalition for Women in Journalism's list of 20 women journalist heroes for courageous reporting.

SHIMLA AHMED (Maldives) - Educator, award-winning journalist, Founder & CEO of AO NEWS in Maldives, recognized for leadership in media and empowerment initiatives, recipient of prestigious Rehendhi and Presidential awards.

UMA SUDHIR (India) - Executive Editor at NDTV India, honoured with Chameli Devi Jain Award, Ramnath Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism, IPI Award for Excellence in Journalism presented by President Abdul Kalam and multiple UNFPA Laadli Awards.

XARI JALIL (Pakistan) - Journalist with 20+ years' experience at The News International & Dawn, IVLP Fellow, Global Investigative Journalists Network Fellow, Co-founder & Content Editor at Voicepk.net.

ABOUT UNFPA

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is the sexual and reproductive health agency of the United Nations. UNFPAs mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled. In our endeavour to achieve this, UNFPA works towards achieving three transformative results that promise to change the world for every individual by 2030.

These include:.

- Zero Unmet Need for Family Planning
- Zero Preventable Maternal Deaths
- Zero Gender-Based Violence and Harmful Practices

In order to achieve these, UNFPA programmes focus on supporting National and Sub National efforts in achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, promoting gender equality, addressing discriminatory social norms that accord a low status to women and girls, ensuring rights and choices for all, and the imperative that no one is left behind.

Website- <https://india.unfpa.org>

"Dive into the compelling world of 'Alternarratives,' where committed journalists dissect the complexities of gender discrimination, violence, and entrenched societal norms. This collection of articles, at once inspiring and unsettling, initiates crucial conversations around these issues. As you journey through the riveting narratives, you'll discover the power of media to pave the way for a more inclusive world, offering hope for a brighter future for women and the marginalised. 'Alternarratives' is not just a book... It's journalism at its best!"

DR. A. L. SHARADA



Celebrate Her Life
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