Chapter 5: Women as Subaltern Insiders

5.1 Introduction

The chapter strives to inflect the debates on concepts of the ‘body’ and ‘citizenship’ as enmeshed within the legal rights and cultural duties of women in the khap areas. The chapter strives to flesh out the new and subtler forms and language of patriarchy. There is also an attempt to reach out to the less obvious and the invisible by locating subversions and its ways in the field of research, as well as tracing the links regarding the dominant notions of caste and patriarchy through the texts and scriptures of various time periods.

Halford John Mackinder described society as a structure of interlocking habits of many men that constituted it (1919, p. 13). These habits get internalised by the society over time. Any attempt to change these social habits become extremely difficult and are met by fierce resistance. This analysis of Mackinder just fits the case to explain the social dynamics of western Uttar Pradesh in India where the principle social arrangement is khap panchayat sof various khaps (region inhabited by clan groups). The point to be noted is that the resistance to counter the changing habits of women is also adopting a new language and tone of patriarchy. This facet of patriarchy camouflages the potency of violence against women, which it is capable of causing. We could call it veiled patriarchy. This new and subtle language of violence of thoughts or manipulation further problematises gender issue and the concept of rights and citizenship. It gives dignity to women as insiders and yet keeps them as subaltern at all levels -- family, culture, as well as state. The subtle patriarchal practices, which are highlighted later in the chapter through field narratives, keep the violence and injuries caused to women out of sight. It makes the reality fuzzy, which in turn causes further damage as it blunts the fight against patriarchal mindset, inflicting violence on women and also misguides the agencies in making the correct choice of demands against violence.
Misguided demands only remain focused on the manifest forms of violence and the latent ones go unseen. This could be very well understood by looking into the subtle forms and rules of patriarchy in the khap regions of western Uttar Pradesh.

These khap panchayats, institutionalised through social mandate and acceptance by the people, cast a mix of reverence and fear. The social formulations coming out of khap panchayats are like Mackinder’s explanation of society as the structure of habits. Any change in these habits going against the khap mores is met with fierce resistance.

Cultural system is like an arrangement where there is a continuance of habits through internalisation. This internalisation of cultural mores is so strong that it almost becomes a given, and the people are habituated to them unconsciously. This we shall analyse in later part of the chapter through John Searle’s concept of “Background”. There is an element of naturalisation of culture involved, which accords a sense of comfort to the existence and practice of cultural practices. The unperturbed assimilation of these cultural practices receives a sudden jolt with the realisation that these practices are customs; and customs are never given, rather they are transitory. With greater awareness it is also realised that such customs are thrust perforce. Once the established belief system receives a jolt and is shaken, there is a renewed attempt by the self-acclaimed keepers of culture to preserve the old belief systems, so that the values and reverence attached with the cultural guards don’t get dissipated with the new belief systems.

The reason why people internalise social practices and cultures so deeply and keep performing accordingly can be understood in a better way if we look at John Searle’s concepts of ‘Background’ (1983) and ‘Network’ (1994, pp. 175-177), which explain the theoretical framework behind how the socio-cultural mores of a particular society/community function in the minds of the people of that society as a ‘network’ of ‘unconscious’ desires. There are many possibilities that may not occur to people until they actually happen. The unconscious ‘background’ is realised only when the given set-up disintegrates or, as in the case of khaps, faces threats of disintegration. The counter-measure in these circumstances comes from the old guard of these societies to prevent the dissipation of erstwhile beliefs. The
ferocious defence of the ban against jeans and severe punishments and control on
the choice of life partner in these societies by khap panchayats can be understood
in this context.

Society could be seen as a ‘going concern’ (Mackinder, 1919, p. 12), which
seems to be made to function in a way that guarantees profit in return in terms of,
say, smooth functioning, cooperation and growth. Who gets the dividends from
this sort of a societal order or arrangement? History tells that the powerful reap the
benefits. Powerful would be those who are in commanding position in society.
People in commanding position could mean those who have any of the three forms
of power: influence, authority, or coercive control (Mitchell, 1979, p. 12). In any
particular society, people get to call the shots are the ones who become dominant
in terms of the above mentioned forms of power. This is how we can say the
dominant cultures, dominant castes, or dominant gender gets created. Since the
society is a ‘going concern’ for the controllers of this social set up, there is an
attempt at controlling the rest through various ways of society’s behavioural
manifestations. These imposed manifestations over time and under social thrust
have become accepted socio-moral complexes of the societies falling within the
khap regions. These realities reflect in this chapter vis-à-vis the social dynamics
that are played out in the khap regions through the interplay of gender specific as
well as community specific negotiations between the controller and the controlled.

5.1.2 Focus of the Chapter
The new spaces of communitarian civil society and its tussle with the modern
spaces of individualisation in India today have become evident in the cultural
clusters defining specific territorial identities like khaps. Why and how the
communitarian civil society lobbies for the established cultural codes, could be
understood by the following explanation, as quite lucidly put forth by Isabel
Apawo Phiri:

“In patriarchal societies, culture is formulated by men; women
are on the receiving end. Culture is dynamic, it changes as a
result of contacts as well as circumstances that people encounter.
However those aspects of culture that ensure male control of
power and authority are upheld by society at the expense of the personhood of women.” (2007, p. 13)

The chapter in this above-mentioned context also looks into the subversive ways that are adopted by the women and other marginal communities within the particular geographical area in their respective positionings to re-imagine their personhood. It is important to look into these negotiations that are going on in the region, as they tell us how and why the demands like banning of khap panchayats are not at all congruous with the actual situation of marginal groups like women and other depressed sections inhabiting the region. Banning would not change the everyday life and struggles posed by the dominant culture and dominant gender in the region.

The chapter also attempts to bring out the new, reconditioned version of patriarchy, which gives an illusion of subdued patriarchy. These new forms and ways of domination need to be studied and understood for making the right kind of demands and efforts towards emancipation of the concerned groups. It was challenging because the area, supposedly high and strict on patriarchal meter, started looking very conducive to the women and other marginal communities. It didn’t not seem outright patriarchal; everything looked ‘normal’ and ‘usual’. (The words normal and usual are stressed upon to warn against deception.) The layers began to reveal themselves -- directly and indirectly -- when conversations and narratives started pouring in.

When I developed an affinity with the people and the atmosphere got a bit relaxed, many of the deep-seated claims and notions got revealed -- often through indirect conversations. The struggle to reach out to the less obvious and the invisible yields results only when direct questions are avoided and the researcher just remains a part of the conversation happening around. Some of the subverting voices and claims I heard could only be heard in an atmosphere of jokes and light conversations. Building rapport through informal conversations and by developing intimacy was also part of to methodology adopted.

The nature of the problem and the issues being focused were such that they needed to be studied ethnographically to understand the ‘realities’ as confronted,
created, posed, narrated and ‘subverted’ by the groups falling within the region of focus i.e. the khap areas. Along with ethnography, I also used textual and scriptural analysis to trace how the mindset has changed from ancient to the so-called modern times. The chapter also documents how the women and other marginal groups are negotiating their imaginings.

5.2 Changing Patriarchal Patterns

Narratives I heard in the field bring out the new language of patriarchy and the subtle ways of manipulating women’s visions and desires.

In the khap areas, people boasted about having strong and educated women who are all well placed in various occupations. One could call it conditional empowerment, which could be seen as a sort of bargain for some exposure and free will -- free will being limited to the choice of education and occupation. In the matter of occupation too, the choice is limited to the conventional professions considered ‘appropriate’ for the womenfolk. Other choices -- like that of choosing a partner for marriage, or behaving in a manner not expected of a lady -- are out of question. The term ‘lady’ was used to emphasise the burdensome characterising and stereotyping of the female gender. Here we see a paradox similar to the one present in matrilineal traditional cultures (though the society being discussed is not matrilineal, of course): the khap culture also, as seen among the matrilineal traditional cultures, includes the elements in which the dignity of women is affirmed but other elements are oppressed (Phiri, 2007, p. 14).

During the fieldwork, I saw how men glorify the clothes that ‘their’ women wear. Women are encouraged to wear -- whatever be the occasion -- a certain variety of clothes, in accordance with the dress code of the region. I was told that it made them look decent and different from others -- others being people who prefer western style of clothing. It was believed that women who follow their cultural norm of dressing would leave a mark of their identity wherever they go. Subhash Baliyan of Burhana village in Muzaffarnagar distric, who holds a prominent position in the Baliyan khap region, said that if their girls went out to study in colleges in different parts of country and followed their own dress code, they would be more confident as they would look different from the aping crowd. This
kind of glorification of difference and uniqueness gives a subtle hint of the politics of identity to keep the cultural coding intact through the women of the community. I realised that these were the new ways of maintaining authority -- authority with the revamped image of a benevolent guardian -- by manipulating women’s visions and desires.

The aversion to western clothes -- and especially the hatred towards women wearing jeans -- in traditional societies traces itself to the conservative thought and conception that holds the female body contour as culpable under the male gaze. There is a strong collective male emphasis on how the female body should appear and in which cloths, lest females appear temptress. Pain and trauma gets inflicted on the body through an act of sexual aggression and hatred (Exum, 1993, p. 170). This sort of hatred towards female body has shades of violence, but of the kind which keep the injuries invisible. This is the violence that remains invisible and undetectable. It not only speaks about the injuries caused to the individual bodies, but also narrates the story about the health of the society and generally the nature of the entire social fabric (Das, 2006, p. 12).

5.3 Text and Mind continuum – Viewing the Female Body

Khap panchayats and the regions within their jurisdiction in India, in many ways, carry the highly orthodox legacy of the thought which sees women as the yardstick of purity. Restrictions on the dress and other modes of lifestyle are the most glaring examples that reflect the collective patriarchal mindset, an avoidable legacy in conservative Indian society since the time of Manu. According to P.H. Prabhu, Manu claims to know the nature of women and says, “it is the nature of women to seduce the men in this world” (1963, p. 272). Manu also calls woman the temptress, pramada, a noun derived from the verb pra-mad, which means, to intoxicate or inflame with passion (Prabhu, 1963, p. 272).

One can find various streaks of this Manuvadi (Manu-like) thought in the thoughts and practices of the khap panchayats. In their assertion that women are responsible for spoiling boys and they should not wear western clothes (since western clothes bring out their body shape), the khap panchayats’ thinking is the same body-centric argument about females that patriarchy often latches on. It
seems that the concept of purity has been indispensably tied to women since time immemorial, which, in turn, has increased the vulnerability of women in present times. Prabhu refers to *Mitakshara* (legal commentary) in which the concept of purity of women is mentioned where *Yajnavalkya* says that a woman gets her purity from God Soma and should always be considered as pure (Prabhu, 1963, p. 272).

The concept of purity of women also works as a form of social control by the men by projecting women as vulnerable. In khap panchayats too, the females are seen as easily corruptible, be it through their wearing of jeans or using mobile phones. The undermining of the female body is done through a superior, historically and socio-religiously determined depiction of the male body. An exemplary parallel can be drawn from the societal attitude towards women in the Buddhist texts to understand and trace the lineage of thought and conception vis-a-vis women in India: for instance, shunning of female traits was considered to be the gateway to purity through a rebirth of the females into males (Paul, 2014, pp. 64-66). Spiritual attainment as a possibility was also inextricably linked to the denial of the female body and thought (Paul, 2014, pp. 64-66). These thoughts found resonance in my research, primarily through the role of khap panchayats vis-a-vis women in that society. The framing of thought which in the Buddhist era happened at three levels -- spiritual, textual and societal -- seems to have taken a consolidated form in the cultural and social moulding of females through a male-centric perception and requirement for females.

5. 4 Reading Women’s Fantasies

When I talked to the people from Dalit communities of the khap area, I could sense hidden desires of breaking away from the traditional norms. A girl from the Dalit community told me something that I would never hear from a Jat woman.

In an informal group conversation with the people about choice of partner for marriage, suddenly -- and unexpectedly -- a voice from behind came, “Yes, why not, if we feel like, we can go for love marriage”. To be sure, that girl didn’t say it with confidence, nor was she very open about it. She said it only because she believed she is not going to be identified and the anonymity could be maintained. But still, in this conversation, I could sense a flight through fantasy reminiscent of
Brian Attebery’s concept of fantasy in which she talked about the desire to exchange one’s identity for a more interesting and important version of the self (2013, p. 82). But when I asked her to come in front and show her face, she chose not to. Others showed anger and shock for what she had said, and, later, when she came to me, she said she meant to say something else. This could be seen as subtle subversion at least on the level of imagination, and is a potential threat to collective imagination, which forms the basis of a cultural group.

Here the point to be noted is that even the Dalit communities living within the khap region have modelled their cultural pattern and belief systems on that of the dominant group i.e. the Jats. They might be following similar cultural and belief patterns for peaceful coexistence, or they might be guided by the thinking that by following the norms and values considered honourable by the dominant cultural groups in that area, they also might earn some respect. Even though it was far from being completely clear, the conversations with the members of the Dalit communities indicated the above-mentioned line of thought: they categorically kept emphasising that they are also total vegetarians; that they also despised the families in their community that earned livelihood through the occupations considered dirty and impure, such as breeding of pigs.

The reason why a few low-caste women could voice their thoughts directly or indirectly could be that even though the Dalit community is silent on its choices and beliefs vis-à-vis the dominant group, there is possibility that it might not be having problems with the breach of certain given norms of the region. This might be one of the reason why Dalit women sometimes ended up voicing their desires.

In other cases, the fact that protection and respect are not the only things that women want for themselves, came out in the conversations. It’s easy to read people’s minds when they show appreciation or desire for the kind of things others are getting to do. For example, in the initial conversations with the daughter-in-law of an influential person of the khap area, she gave the idea that she liked her lifestyle: living indoors gave her protection and consent of elders, which is good for a healthy married life. She said, “Aise theek se rehne se khud ko bhi aur mayeke walon ko bhi pyar aur izzat milti hai” (staying this way, I, as well as my
parents, get respected by my in-laws). Later, after a few meetings, she said she had admiration for the kind of work a researcher gets to do. In reply to her I said that sometimes running around becomes tiring and difficult. To that she immediately said, “haan lekin kum se kum bahar jane ko, logon se milne ko, aur ghumne ko bhi to milta hai. Main to kehne ko to desh ki rajdhani dilli ke itne paas rehti hu lekin phir bhi kabhi ja nahi payi dilli” (yes, but at least you get a chance to visit places and meet new people. I stay so close to Delhi, capital of the country, still I have never been there). This kind of conversation finds a parallel context in Brian Attebery’s classification of desires, with regards to understanding fantasies, especially the desire to perform great deeds in exotic places (2013, p. 82). These are the fantasies of women that go unnoticed in the name of protection and care. These are the fantasies which, in the long run, have the potential of questioning and challenging from within the accepted norms often considered as ‘given’.

Women are not able to comprehend and describe aspects of their experiences, not because they are reluctant to, but because they lack the ability to describe. They are not able to share their experiences and voice their concerns because the language is often incongruent to the realities of women’s experiences (DeVault, 1990). Self-doubt in women sustains the linguistic void and when find it difficult to share their experiences and desires even with other women (Wichroski, 1997). The problem of self-doubt in women is believed to be due to the gap in social knowledge called as “line of fault” in women’s experience in which they are forced to see their activities through male eyes instead of viewing their activites through their own interpretation (Smith, 1987).

5.5 Position of Women in Public/Private Spheres

Nivedita Menon, in her book Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics beyond the Law, talks about “how to make the private, public” (2004, p. 13). She draws attention to the fact that seeing state with the idea that it can be the route to fight against the social customs is highly problematic as, “it is the law that constructs the private by refusing to intervene, by closing off that arena as inappropriate for its own intervention” (Menon, 2004, p. 13). Menon also argues that such circumscription ensures the exclusion of lower castes, women and other
stigmatised groups from socially valued cultural and economic resources (2004, p. 32).

In the region that comes under my research, women’s role in the society is understood to be more private than public. Being limited to household work or decisions related to domestic affair gives them a false sense of being involved in decision making with the males. Rarely do women realise that the process of internalisation of the reality has so deeply rooted itself in the female psyche that it has replaced their natural rights, thereby impairing many of the social, constitutional and individual rights that come concomitantly with state’s idea of citizenship. An inadvertent divide gets created between what is private and public, which in turn sabotages the nature of citizenship of females in such societies. What Iris Marion Young says about the traditional public realm of universal citizenship stands quite true in the case of Indian society as well. She says, “The traditional public realm of universal citizenship has operated to exclude persons associated with the body and feeling—especially women, Blacks, American Indians, and Jews.” (1990, p. 97).

As per John Rawls’ arguments, social justice in a society is determined by the way the society is structured or the way in which the rights and duties of its citizens are distributed by the major social institutions and principle social and economic arrangements of the society (1971, p. 7). If we see western Uttar Pradesh, the principle social arrangements are the khap panchayats, and social formulations result from the principles peddled out by these patriarchal institutions. To that extent, the rights of women in these societies remain undermined by male prejudice. Duties and rights are redefined for women under patriarchal bias. This results in subtle yet deep inequality in terms of gender, caste etc.

5.5.1 Women as extensions of men

The ways of looking at women as extensions of men became clear to me through narratives and anecdotes in the field. The way a community talked about its female members and the manner in which it portrayed the women of other communities, brought out the hidden sense of women being merely the extensions of men. The
language used and the stories weaved around women’s identities revealed the existence of women as extensions of men.

The point regarding the control of women’s sexuality (mentioned earlier in the chapter) can also be seen when low-caste groups try to challenge the authority of upper castes in the region. Women are used as an object to mock another community: For example Valmikis\(^1\) mock the Jats by using the narrative from Sanskrit epics like Ramayana, saying the Jat men who claim to be warriors and superior could not even control their women. They accuse Sita of having one of the two sons with Saint Valmiki while she had taken refuge in his *ashram* (hermitage). In the Ramayana, Sita is the wife of King Rama and she is considered as the Hindu model of the ideal chaste/holy woman. Here, through mockery of an upper-caste woman, the lower-caste men get the satisfaction of having abused the upper-caste men and their symbols, but in doing so it is the women who actually end up bearing the brunt from both sides. This kind of mindset of using women for mockery of another group, or violent attacks on the women of another community, could be understood through the well known Hutu-Tutsi tribes’ antagonism that had led to large scale ethnic violence in Rwanda, Africa. In the Rwandan Genocide, the treatment meted out to females resembles a thought which tells that there too women were seen as extensions of men. There too the “gender hate propaganda was perhaps the most virulent component of the propaganda campaign” (Green, 2012). Tutsi women’s ethnicity and gender made them particularly vulnerable to attack (Green, 2012). This mindset of using women to settle scores by men seems to have been prevalent all over the world and at all times.

In another example, I again got to witness a similar mindset among the inhabitants of khap area, where Jat men mocked the women of Muslim community. Jats forbid marriage even within the same *gotra* (same lineage clan),

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\(^1\) Valmiki is a scheduled caste. It is considered to be an impure caste and is placed very low in the hierarchy of castes. This community claims to be the descendant of saint Valmiki, even though Hindu epics refer to him as a Brahmin saint. Brahmins are members of the highest caste in Hinduism.
whereas Muslims can get married to close relatives also. This is abhorred by Hindu Jats. Jat men jokingly say that in Muslim communities sisters are not born, only wives are born.\(^2\)

This kind of differentiation and stereotyping is done by one group to claim superiority by proving the other group as inferior (Ron Scollon, 2012, p. 273). What remains out of sight, in all these claims of superior culture-inferior culture and stereotyping, is the issue of the othering of the female gender as it gets victimised and mocked from both the sides in their claims of superiority and probity.

This sort of mockery, that counters the ‘other’ and the mockery that strengthens ‘otherness’, done via women as medium, occasions a multilayered ‘othering’. Here one group tries to put the other group down and claims its superiority. As seen above in the example quoting Sita, Valmikis, a low-caste group, made a mockery of the upper castes by accusing the most admired woman of that caste of being licentious.

All these mockeries and counter-attacks, on the outside, give the appearance simply of an inter-group conflict. But this oversimplified reading of the issue actually comouflages the fact that it is one particular gender that gets humiliated and mocked from both sides -- in attacks and counter-attacks alike: women. The gender issue involved in this gets overshadowed by the issue of cultural antagonism. The narratives of cultural antagonism take away the focus from the one-dimensional depiction of the female gender fixed around libidinal impulse and gratification.

\(^2\) In the khap areas, Jat community is divided into two groups: one is the Hindu Jat group, the other is the Muslim Jat group. Apart from Muslim Jats, there are also Muslims who are not Jats. Hindu Jats are not too appreciative of the Muslim culture and its systems regarding marriages. Hindu Jats forbid marriage even within the same gotra, whereas Muslims do get married to close relatives also. This is abhorred by Hindu Jats. Muslim community’s presence is substantial in the region and they share the space with Hindu Jats who consider themselves as a superior race. Hindu Jats try to show that Muslims can never compete with them though they are living in the same region where Hindu Jats’ rules are mostly adhered to. Since Muslims’ have different rules and whoever has different rules regarding marriages, Hindu Jats have a tendency to mock them. Hindu Jats also mock a form of South Indian Marriage that prefers marriage between the girl and her mother’s brother.
5.5.2 Exhibiting Culture through Women

Among some people belonging to the Jat community I talked to, I saw a tendency of showing off the austerity of their lifestyle; they claimed austerity came to them as a matter of culture. The problem was that it is the womenfolk whose desires and possessions have always been sacrificed in order to show off austerity as a cultural trait. Jats boasted of their simple living by saying, for example, that the engagement ring of the daughters-in-law of the family is passed on from mother-in-law to daughters-in-law -- generation after generation. They boasted of leading a simple life in terms of wealth and possessions. They said that even when they are very wealthy, they do not like being ostentatious. When I talked to the elderly women of some influential Jat families (like that of the families of chaudharies), I realised that the women felt the pain of parting with their jewellery, which they felt belonged to them. On being asked about this system of passing on the jewellery, an elderly woman called it the tragedy of women’s life: they neither get anything from their own family nor from their husband’s family. Women in this way felt a sense of being dispossessed both emotionally and materially.

The above-mentioned point got highlighted in the words of the wife of one of the khaps’ chaudharies, when she said, “Ladkiyan kahin ki nahi hoti. Humein na yahan se kuch milta hai na wahan se” (Girls belong to nowhere. We neither get anything from the parents’ side nor from the husband’s family). She showed her gold and told how she will be dispossessed of her ring, which she got on her wedding from the husband’s family, as she was supposed to pass on that ring to her daughter-in-law.

The framework of the norms and value systems assigns particular sexual roles and desires to each gendered body (Couldry, 2010). The desires of the ‘self’ remain inhumed under the the desires ‘assigned’ to the body. The unnarratable language of desires becomes faintly visible when the longue duree is taken into consideration but the longue duree and the continuua get visible through the account of the narrative dimensions of the self, which is always intersubjectively grounded yet individually experienced (Couldry, 2010). It is understood that the account of voice starts “from a notion of embodied experience that emerges
through an intersubjective process of perception and action, speech and reflection but is no less real, substantial, and important for that.” (Couldry, 2010, p. 96) . Understanding and highlighting voice is an important process to make sense of the world around the subjectivity of the self.

Another narrative of dispossession of women came from Kanti, an elderly woman of about 80 years of age, living in Shoron village of Muzaffarnagar. Kanti said the men used to keep an eye on the women from all corners when they used to get together to celebrate or go together to the bagh to enjoy the swings. Kanti said that all the men used to stand in a circle and the women used to be sitting in the centre. Kanti recalled these incidents and laughed. She laughed in the presence of Rajpal Singh, her brother. Now she is an elderly woman who can take liberties and laugh at the conduct of men in their presence. In terms of memory, self and bodily experiences it is said that “the level of bodily experience is inseparable from other embodied and cumulative processes of the self, such as memory.” (Couldry, 2010, p. 94)

The idea of honour and the idea of maintaining cultural purity through women was also clear through the conversations and explanations given by the inhabitants of the dominant cultural group of the region. Rakesh Tikait, the son of Mahendra Singh Tikait and the brother of the present Baliyan khap chaudhary, said, “Kaise hum shaadi kar denge apni beti ki us admi se jiska khandan humare pairon pe baitha raha hai.” (How can we marry off our daughters into a family who have been sitting at our feet for generations). He further says, “Ek baar ek judge sahab TV par behas kar rahe the toh maine unhi se keh diya, aap de doge kya apni beti aise admi ko?” (On a TV debate with a judge I threw the same question at him, whether he will give his daughter to such a man?)

The above argument made by Rakesh Tikait throws light on the idea of respect. In this particular argument there are two sets of people i.e., women and members of lower castes, who are getting denied the opportunity of respect. The component of respect and honour in the identity of women and lower-caste members are withdrawn through such claims and statements as above. The notion of ‘choice’ becomes important in analysing the value of voice. Charles Taylor
says, “to make someone less capable of understanding himself, evaluating and choosing, is to deny totally the injunction that we should respect him as a person.” (Taylor, 1986, p. 103)

5.5.3 Reclaiming ‘Honour’ through Women’s Bodies

Exchange of women in marriage to maintain equal respect and honour is referred to as ‘Anta-Shanta’ in the khap areas. In this process, both parties become wife-takers and wife-givers at the same time. In case a boy elopes with a girl, both, the families of the boy and the girl, are called to attend a village meeting, in which, mostly, it is decided that if the boy has a sister then she will be married off to the girl’s brother (if she has a brother). There is a subtle force at play here which has donned the role of a necessary tradition through an imposition of the majoritarian view. The element of compulsion has been concocted into consent through societal unanimity. The village elders say that it is done with the consent of both the parties. But this levelling of the honour of families through the exchange of women is an option only in the case of Muslim communities of the khap region. In the case of Hindu communities, especially among Jats, ‘anta-shanta’ is not the solution and calls for more severe punishments and sanctions, which at times might lead to social boycotts and honour killings.

The aforesaid line of thought comes from the conservative beliefs in khap society: that women are the real culture-bearers, and they cannot tarnish the image and name of the family. The voices that keep resonating the above idea instill the belief that women of the family have to mind their behaviour and understand that they carry the families’ honour. The idea is that women go from one family to another after marriage and represent the family of origin in another family, that is why it is more of their duty than anything else, to carry themselves ‘honourably’ wherever they go. This explains why men get enraged when they sense that they are not able to ‘control’ their women. Controlling women and their sexuality is considered a necessary step to save the honour of the family as well as the community by restricting their choice in marriage and strictly arranging it on family’s terms. The chaudharies of the khap panchayats I talked to often got entangled in their self-contradictory claims: On the one hand they claimed about
mobilising the villages against female foeticide; on the other, they claimed that if the Supreme Court of the country stood in their way of controlling their women, then they might even have to take steps to prevent the births of females altogether. I was told by none other than the chaudhary of Baliyan khap that if girls are born to ruin the name of the family and community, then they will have to be eliminated.

The intensity of the already existing idea of female gender and the defilement of culture due to the female body seems to get further strengthened when the cultural systems come face to face with the idea of individual freedom. Individual liberty and protection and promotion of cultural rights with respect to the idea of relativity, when put together in one space and time period, give rise to the narratives and voices that help the insiders, reflect upon their selfhood and bring out the voices that might be lying silently beneath the level of consciousness.

The above claim of eliminating women from the socio-cultural stage poses an existential problem for those very cultures that make such claims. The elimination of women who are believed to be carrying the culture on their bodies suggests some sort of circular fallacy in understanding such claims. Despite having logical incoherence and philosophical misunderstandings of existence, such arguments have to be taken into consideration as they point out, even if unconsciously, the common spaces and time periods that simultaneously rear the opposing ideas and desires. The unconscious contestations of ‘space’ come forth through conscious life-stories and narratives.

5.6 Conclusion

Social activists have called for a ban on khap panchayats. But if one takes into account the faith the local people have in this historically-established juridical system, banning of khaps and their panchayats would be a futile solution. Secondly, it’s also in some way against the spirit of a democratic state, which gives all cultural communities the right to preserve their culture. The banning of khap panchayats can only ever be a propitiatory gesture -- more escapist, less genuine -- in terms of finding a solution to this complex issue.
The point that categorically needs to be taken care of is: the state needs to make visible arrangements, which have strong deterrent effect on certain practices of khaps -- like the killings in the name of honour. This situation also suggests that the gender justice and individual rights’ proponents need to be thorough in their understanding of the issue in order to have correct and fruitful vision through their demands. The problem occurs when the demands put forward by civil society bodies themselves are jerry-built. This happens when one does not have a clear vision of what exactly to demand, for exemplary effects. Genuine checks and balances, apropos this complex social problem, need to be figured out and implemented. One of the necessary steps is a provision of robust arrangements for the protection of young men and women in case they report threat to their lives from a particular community or family -- something which is currently very badly handled in the region of my research. Another important step could be the new enactment for protection against crimes of honour.

Excessively harsh, futile and ill-conceived solutions like the banning of khap panchayats might backfire and worsen the condition of the female inhabitants of these areas. Finally, for real and permanent changes, what also needs to be understood is that aiming for revolutionary changes in the position of women would be futile in the given situation. Problems like these will have solutions in the inherent restructuring of the society through negotiations and subversions, which have fortunately started, as seen throughout the chapter in whatever limited ways the women are negotiating and subverting in the region. The best way to support the efforts from within would be to correctly and precisely locate the demands (and avoid random demands like the banning of khap-like cultural systems). For choosing the correct demands for the betterment of the gender issue and for effective solutions, understanding the anatomy of any society becomes indispensable, as it informs about the scope of subversive measures that might be available.

Subversive measures in this region by women have proven fruitful. Women in this region have stood their ground sometimes not only to follow their heart but also to protect the men from becoming the victims of patriarchal mindset and norms. A few women of the villages in khap areas who had eloped with their male
partners and got married, did not change their mind, even under immense pressure from the families, because they knew, if they left their partners at that stage then abduction charges would be filed against their partners by their families. Poonam Baliyan of Purbaliyan village whose marriage was almost annulled by the panchayat said, “Main bahut dari to thi aur kai bar lagta tha ki alag hona par jayega lekin maine socha isse humdono ka hi nuksan hoga. Log galat ilzam laga kar phansa denge sasural walon ko. Yahan yahi hota hai” (I used to be very scared and felt I might have to leave my husband but I thought this step will harm both of us. False charges would be framed against my husband and his family. This is what happens here). Adesh Tyagi, from village Nirmana, who aspires to be a journalist, said, “Ye log khud marwa dete hain apni larkiyon ko aur phansa dete hain larke walon ko. Baat phaila di jati hai ki larke walon ne maar dala,” (These people murder their daughters and file case against the boy’s family. Rumours are spread that boy’s family murdered the girl). This is a known fact in the region and these charges are also used as a deterrence against such free will, to keep the young men and women of the region in check. Women in these regions are realising that men also become the victims of oppressive cultural mores, laws and stereotypes. It is believed that women’s liberation will also lead to the liberation of men and create a new sense of partnership (Phiri, 2007, p. 14).

References


