Chapter 6: Narratives of Women: Negotiating Materiality

6.1 Introduction

The chapter tries to put in context the social condition of the females of khap areas of western Uttar Pradesh. In the process, it looks at the entrapment of female body by patriarchal institutions of the region. In doing so this chapter explores the nature of the reality that is portrayed through the dominant narrative and how it stands in difference with the other reality -- that is to say, the reality of the unexplored desires -- that comes to the fore when subversive ways to deal with the existing norms are adopted. In this regard the subtle resistance of women to social diktats comprises one way of subversion, among many others.

Through a mix of field reports, personal anecdotes, analyses and theories, this chapter tries to portray in a threadbare manner the dynamics between patriarchy as represented by khaps and the negotiations by women, enclasped in these institutions and thoughts. The chapter also looks at multiple narratives by females that remain obscure due to the assertion of the dominant culture of the male gender. These narratives and gender realities of this region are pitted against textual parallels to understand the social behavior, biases against women and social tools of subversions with historical contexts in a better way.

Every region and culture poses a peculiar picture of its reality, which has to be understood in its own materiality. Understanding and analysing the multi-layered realities through the established universals of theories and concepts involve a risk of making the picture either too fuzzy or too simplistic. The texture of the region, society or culture needs to be felt entirely in its own material complex and imaginings. This understanding becomes indispensable, especially while documenting the complexity women’s issues within the specific cultural imaginings. It is believed that “male-dominated cultural concepts contribute to violence against women” (Blake 2008, 6) The male-dominated cultural concepts
and androcentric cultural imaginings seem to give the impression of one single homogenous reality, making all other visions and aspirations insignificant and invisible. That is why documenting subversions by women, taking place within the cultural-regional specificities, become significant, as it not only exposes the way in which they have been devalued and misrepresented but also brings to light how the women characterise themselves in their own vision (Blake 2008).

Similarly, khap region of western Uttar Pradesh, economically better than most other northern parts of the country, paints a peculiar picture of its historicity, cultural presence and existence. The question to be asked is: whose picture is it really? The role of females in this area is worth observing and researching, in the context of suppression of their thoughts under the veneer of the superficial contentedness. The condition of females residing in this area involves a complex duality; there is much beyond the content faces of the females. Within their own families, women are given proxy emancipation, which in turn serves as the bait for larger mental captivity.

Women in khap societies are made to believe that they have been offered a say in most of the things, but there are deep suppressed desires and fantasies in these women, which in most cases remain buried, never to come out. There is a constant dual struggle among the females of these communities for survival and identity. In the process of these struggles for existence and finding who they are, women’s identities get shaped by the culture and influences that surround them. A well-argued explanation apropos female’s position is brought out through the statement, “Who we are, how we behave, what we are willing to know, what we are able to feel. We are born into a sex role, which is determined by visible sex, or gender.” (Dworkin 1974, 34).

The visible gender being talked about is the male gender, the bearer of patriarchy. Males in khap communities portray a reality, which is always refracted through the prism of the dominant or visible culture. People belonging to these communities have to accord to the dominant shibboleths put forward by cultural institutions of patriarchy. These communities have layered thoughts and psyches, with the most dominant culture at the top and suppressed ones below it. It is only
when the cozy picture of the dominant reality is questioned that the other pictures start coming out. This happens through subversions. The subversive ways bring out other views about reality: this other reality is different from the societal norms. These are the “subversions of verisimilitude” (Schehr 2009), which allusively bring out a starkly different picture of a ‘reality’ that has dominated social understanding for a long time.

As explained earlier, the Jat communities’ social and panchayati arrangement is based on institutional set-ups depending on blood relations like gotra1 (clan), thok (group), kutumb (family); it’s these units from where the

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The concept of gotra as explained by P. V. Kane, quoted in Patrick Olivelle’s Dharmasutras - Gotra is referred as:

“A family line that is connected to a single ancient teacher as a common ancestor. The definition of this relationship is quite vague and often confused in the literature.”

“Gotra is connected to another ancient Indian kinship category called pravara based on having the same ancestral seer. Each gotra may have several pravaras. ‘Connection of gotra and pravara may be stated thus: gotra is the latest ancestor or one of the latest ancestors of a person by whose name his family has been known for generations; while pravara is constituted by the sages or in some cases the remote ancestor alone. Two persons related through one or the other are not permitted to marry each other.”

In the case of Jats the latter explanation of gotra appears to be more close to their system of gotra. Jats do not see any seer as their ancestor. They believe in an ancestor from whom they could trace their lineage, but especially belonging to warrior classes and not from Brahmanical sages. Here is an example of the gotra system of Baliyan khap, one of the dominant and influential khaps of western Uttar Pradesh.

Baliyan khap’s cultural profiling tells us that in the gotra set up they belong to the Raghuvanshi gotra. They trace their Raghuvanshi gotra to a king, Ramchandra’s son, Lav. They say their gotra system is different from the Brahmanical gotra system. They do not follow the rishi gotra system. For marriages they do not look for the rishi gotra, they instead enquire about the khap’s name or Vansha (dynasty) name, which is considered as their gotra. For instance the Baliyan khap’s rishi gotra is traced to the ancient sage Kashyap but that is insignificant to them. The rishi gotra holds no importance in their culture. The dynasty or vansa that they follow is from King Raghu of Ikshvaku. In the dynasty system also they follow a system of upper gotra and lower gotra - upper and lower are not hierarchically arranged rather they stand for the first ancestor and the last ancestor in order. The closest in order becomes their immediate ancestor and they tread the closest ancestor’s line.

For the young men in the villages gotra simply meant a sense of belongingness. When the author asked the young people whether they were clear on the concept of gotra in
community gains power. The Jats are a caste mainly comprising of farmers organised around *pirtapradhan gotra* (patrilineal clans). The dominant notion attached to the concept of *pitrapradhan gotras* is one of influence and of desire to peddle their authority. The areas that fall under specific khap panchayats also comprise of members from communities other than the Jats. The socio-political unit called khap was originally formed for the purpose of gaining social and juridical control of several villages in an area. A khap consisted of several *gotra*.

6.2 Attitude towards Women

In the backdrop of the above mentioned cultural pattern and institutional and structural set-up (which is infused with patriarchy) any effort to withstand the repressive, prescriptive and subversive moral codes for women should be seen as welcome efforts by the women folks inhabiting the western part of the state of Uttar Pradesh in India. There is an accusatory narrative against women peddled through the institution of khap. Women in this region are believed to be responsible for spoiling the men. It is believed that so many cases of elopement are taking place because girls are luring boys and encouraging them for such acts. In other words, the blame completely falls on the females of the region. The khap panchayats of the region believe that the matters involving women should be left solely to their jurisdiction and the courts or any other authority should not interfere. There is a social demarcation created in the process between what is defined in this society as public and private: the khaps treat the issues related to women as private. This imposed privacy is also in many ways an encroachment on women’s rights. This rhetoric of privacy is seen as the most important ideological obstacle to change and reform, as the concepts of privacy permit, encourage, and reinforce violence against women (Schneider 2000, 87). The issue of “privacy is selectively invoked as a rationale for immunity in order to protect male domination” (Schneider 2000, 88). The state law enforcement machineries do not intervene in the matter; there is an unstated understanding between the khap panchayat of the village (led by its powerful men) and the law enforcement

their area, most of them said *gotra* meant ‘apnapan’ (belongingness). In true sense the meaning goes much beyond that.
machineries like the police. The tacit understanding seems to be that there are certain issues that these communities treat as ‘private’, and any intervention in this matter would amount to an encroachment of the khap’s socio-moral jurisdiction.

The emphasis by khap is on local interpretations of justice and not through constitutional mandate guaranteed by the penal laws applicable in the region. In such an environment, if women are subverting in their own capacity, it does call for special attention. These subverting voices, murmurs or even silent protests to manipulation have, to an extent, become success stories in themselves for the women residing in this region and under these circumstances. Such subversion in a patriarchic set-up compels us to imagine and hope for structural and institutional changes from within.

6.3 Documenting Subversion

I have documented below a few cases of subversion in the khap regions of Muzaffarnagar.

In the Mansurpur village of Muzaffarnagar in western Uttar Pradesh, unmarried women took the first step towards having their say. The elderlies of the village convened a panchayat and imposed bans on the usage of mobile phones and jeans for unmarried women. The gender-exclusive ban worried the women at the receiving end. A young woman called Vaishali -- Vaishali is the granddaughter of Sohan Biri, the leader of the women’s wing of Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) -- organised a panchayat for women to decide the terms and conditions for negotiating with the elderlies’ diktat. (Vaishali was a student of standard 11 when I met her in 2012.) The women decided on a compromise: they said they would use mobile phones but forgo wearing jeans. They collected many pairs of jeans from village and incinerated them publically. It might seem like a puny step by women towards having their voices heard (when seen alongside the strong, age-old patriarchal authority of khaps), but its significance shouldn’t be missed. For the females of this region, negotiations like this were the starting points of making their voices heard in the din of patriarchy. It is in struggles like this that they could negotiate and bargain for their social status -- vis-à-vis the dominant gender --
within the system. Such subversions do not threaten the authority openly, yet manoeuvre changes in favour of the female gender.

As for the ban on the use of mobile phones by unmarried women, one has to understand that it is not merely a restriction on the use of a gadget. Restricting women’s access to media technologies like phone and Internet means restricting their access to the world around. Restriction on media technologies and especially the restriction on the use of new media technologies (like social media) by women means hampering their power to learn, comprehend and reason.

The tussle for negotiation of space for females goes on at a subliminal level. The struggle of the female voice against the forced assertion of patriarchy happens through the denial of these small-scale subversions and murmurs of dissent. This issue has been dealt with in all its complexity by J. Cheryl Exum: in her work she argues that the ‘denial itself constitutes the acknowledgement’ (Exum 1993, 169) of the threats posed to patriarchy by female voices.

In my conversations with women in the khap areas, I did hear murmurs of dissent: the women said sarcastically the khap panchayat should also try to ban jeans for girls in the cities. Some of the girls asserted that panchayats are only able to show their strength and impose diktats on the village girls. They said that these caste councils or panchayats know their limits and only show their authority on the people who can be controlled and socially tied according to their diktats and whims.

Here is a sample from what some of the girls I talked to said about the panchayat claiming to preserve culture. A 16-year old girl called Priyanka, a resident of Mazara village, told me, “In logon ki aur kisi pe to chalti nahi. Hum hi milte hain bas. Ye pehredaar bane baithi rehte hain yahin par. Shehar ki larkiyan ka toh ye kuch nahi kar paate.” (These people do not have authority on anyone else. Only girls like us suffer at their hands. They keep sitting here to guard our movements. They have no authority on girls in the cities.) Such small notes of dissent might not sound too lethal at the moment, but they do have the element of opposition to the established institutions like khaps and other strands of patriarchal thoughts ensuing from it. This questioning might still be on the levels of
imagination and might be a very private thought for the time being but even such small dissents could play a huge role in turning the circumstances of the girls of the region in their favour.

Marriage is almost a compulsory destination for girls, more so in areas where sex ratio is too low. The data quoted in chapter three showed that the sex ratio in the khap regions of western Uttar Pradesh is very low. The moment one utters the idea of ‘single women’ or the possibility of women to remain single by choice, the elderly, especially elderly women, start treating the issue as something that is anachronistic to their imagination. I met a few women whose marriageable age had passed and it was very much possible that they would never get married. (One among these was the sister of the pradhan of Narottampur Mazra village.) These women themselves confessed that they never wanted to get married, as they were a witness to the ‘plight’ of their sisters and other married women. They added that they were better off at their mother’s place and going to mother-in-law’s place would be akin to torture, something they would never want to go through. One of the unmarried women said, “Humari behnein gayi hain shaadi hokar lekin hamesha bolti rehti hain ki tum kitni sukhi ho ghar pe. Saas ke yaham hoti to khapti rehti.” (My sisters have got married and they keep saying that I am very lucky that I got to stay at my parents’ house. Had I got married, I would be suffering like them.) Another unmarried woman added, “Apna ghar kaun chhorna chahta hai” (Who wants to leave their house?) On this statement a married woman sitting and cooking with her back towards everyone, emphatically said a ‘yes’. Her ‘yes’ came in support of the statement of the unmarried women, explaining the condition of a woman at her in-law’s place as full of sufferings. She was the daughter-in-law of the house i.e. the pradhan’s wife -- someone not even considered worthy of being introduced to me. She was in fact the elected pradhan of the village Narrotampur Mazara, but her husband was playing the role of the pradhan; she was completely invisible not only from the political space but also from the private spaces of a family. In most villages it is the pradhan women’s husbands who handle all the work, and often people are unaware of the woman being the pradhan. The husbands of women pradhan are called ‘pradhan pati’.
During the conversation, the pradhan’s unmarried sister told me with some emphasis that her brother’s family treated her with respect, and, in fact, she was the real decision-maker in her family. She said that her presence makes her brother relaxed and at ease, since he remains engaged with multiple issues concerning household and outside. Here we can see the reluctance of women to be seen as dependents and their willingness to be seen as partners who share responsibility and live as equal family members. This thought comes to women because they are seen as dependents and are denied certain basic human rights in the process. Iris Marion Young explains this by saying, “Today the exclusion of dependent person’s is barely hidden beneath the surface.” (Young 1990, 54). Dependency causes invisibility. The desire to be counted and get equal visibility as that of men came out quite evidently in many conversations I had in the field.

It is seen that the invisibility of a gender renders the issue of its rights insignificant. If we analyse the statements by unmarried women as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, we realise that the desire is not so much as to get importance, rather this is a basic desire to simply get ‘counted’. There is a self-imposed desire to be ‘included’ within the family on the part of the females, yet this is undercut by their own realisation that they are not ‘full’ members of the family. However, there is an attempt to cover/hide this realisation of being the ‘other’ in their family. Women create this sense of inclusion for themselves with claims on central position in the family to counter the position of unmarried female as peripheral in the society.

In a society which virtually makes women invisible, the above-mentioned is the sign of an urge to at least be ‘visible’; not as the appointed messengers of a culture governed by male-centric thought, but rather as important individuals. Women’s issues in these societies are still very basic and intersect with the issues of other similar marginal communities that face this understated threat of invisibility. The threat of invisibility seems to get more lethal when women’s success or freedom to choose their occupation is seen as interchangeable with their desire to be counted as central in everyday life. The men from these khap communities very proudly flaunted how their womenfolk had ended up taking various respectable occupations, but the conversations with these women about
everyday life made me aware of the desire of women not only to be counted as family members capable of sharing responsibilities, but as citizens who are also responsible thinking beings. The problem in such societies is that women are expected to be satisfied with the kind of love and respect they get and are understood to feel happy and content about it. In fact, men -- and sometimes even women -- feel satisfied with what they have. This idea of satisfaction is seen as replaceable with the idea of freedom of a particular gender: women seem to inadvertently swap their freedom with a false sense of satisfaction.

More often than not, it leads to the denial of basic human rights of women. Women, both as members of cultural community and as citizens of the state, are denied certain fundamental human rights not because of grudges or enmity towards them, but because of the notion that women are not capable enough to take tough decisions or make rational judgments. This closes the doors for making women responsible citizens or community members, and hence, in the same vein, making them incapable of performing duties around decision-making, inescapably depriving them of their fundamental rights. This again problematizes the idea of citizenship of women in khap societies. This is how women’s duties and rights of decision-making as members of particular families, cultures as well as individuals are rendered insignificant.

When women show reluctance to marriage it is seen they have to bear the consequences of being negatively labelled. In the reluctance of unmarried women of these cultural groups, there is a subtle confrontation: on the one hand there is an attempt to subvert by remaining unmarried, while on the other there is a tussle to remain counted in her own family (as her socially supposed position is some other house where she would have gone, had she married). In her opposition to marriage there is a resistance (to her family’s wishes) and, at the same time, there is also the desire to gain equality with other members of the family.

The experiences that women go through are both complex and nuanced in these circumstances. These experiences show that there is resistance for gaining equality on the part of the women of these social set-ups. While these steps may be hailed as progressive and lead to positive role of gender construction in such
societies, those within such societies see such resistance by women through the crude characterisation of “abuse excuse” (Schneider 2000, 147) and in return pose resistance to equality by the construction of sexist stereotypes as explained by Elizabeth Schneider. In other words, women showing resilience in the face of patriarchy carry the risk of being labeled “bad or mad” (Schneider 2000, 147). The region under my study also threw such examples of resistance for equality in a patriarchal set-up. One of the men from the region said, “Inse shadi karega kaun. Aisa nahi ki inhone ki hi nahi shadi balki inki hui hi nahi.” The argument made by men about the unmarried women was that they are not worth marrying. The men said that it is better to stay unmarried than to marry such ugly and mad women. Such are the labels the unmarried women in khap areas get in resisting the patriarchally-driven cultural norms.

6.3.1 Women’s Voices

Saloni, a middle-aged woman from Purbaliyan village in Muzaffarnagar shows the courage and strength against the odds faced by the women of that region. She is addressed as ‘Saloni pradhan’, though she is not the officially elected head of the village. She belongs to Kashyap (a backward caste) community. She fights for the rights of the downtrodden and stands up for people who do not have either the means or the awareness of how to go about things. Saloni says, official gram panchayats or khap panchayats are for the ‘others’ and not for the needy. By ‘others’ she meant those who are already in a better position -- the dominant and the wealthy. She further added that in the official panchayats the matters are called for hearing only for the affluent of the society, not the deprived.

According to Saloni, poor people, especially women, of the Kashyap community and women of other low-caste groups did not know their rights, that is why somebody was needed at the helm to take up the cause. This was the reason why she had to come to the public fore in the face of patriarchal resistance. She confessed that it was a big step even for her. As a woman of that region, she had to think a lot about purdah and honour of the family and was not expected to go out in public and fight with the officials for someone’s rights. Saloni is now highly respected in the region. Over time, her husband has made peace with her leadership
qualities. Contrary to the region’s cultural psyche, Saloni has a very liberal and open mindset. She has a very liberal stand on the idea of choosing a partner for marriage, something that can hardly be expected from a woman of that society. Her only concern is that young girls should not get fooled by males or get co-opted and spoil their lives. Her idea is that when a girl is educated and mature enough then she should rationally and wisely make her choices. Saloni’s liberal attitude comes across even in casual conversations: “No tension no jhanjhat. Kabhi andhi kabhi toofan to ata hi rehta hai. Abhi to bahut kuch hai karne ko aur batane ko.”

Another woman who showed similar strength and courage as that of Saloni is from the village called Shoron. Dr. Anju is the daughter of Rajpal Singh of Shoron. She is a working woman. She was married but her marriage did not work out, and now she lives with her daughter Mansi. Dr. Anju is a doctor and has encouraged her daughter also to take up studies seriously. Mansi, her daughter who is in standard 10, says, “main science padhungi aur doctor banungi.” (I will take up Science and become a doctor). Dr. Anju says, “akele sabkuch sambhalna mushkil to bahut hai lekin phri bhi kharab shadi se to yahi acha.” (Handling everything alone is indeed a tough job, but it’s still better than ending up into a bad marriage.)

6.3.2 Subversion in Scriptural Histories

In spite of being a male-dominated society, India has had historical and textual parallels of subversion by its women. ‘Kamasutra’, a famous text, which deals with the issue of sexuality has also in many ways depicted how women from the position of subaltern go on to subvert the male impositions. The ‘Kamasutra’ could be seen as a subverting text of its time and even today it is not considered a taboo and indecent to openly talk about such texts, as it deals with one of the most hushed up things in accordance with Hindu law: sensual pleasures. Though this text also portrays women as objects for extracting maximum sensual pleasures, it also gives some scope for women to subvert in whatever limited way possible. For example, in the referred text women are shown as retaliating if a man, despite being warded off, wounds her body to the extent, which she cannot bear. She mocks and rebukes the man even in daytime, secretly though (Vatsayana 2011,
There are other private spaces where women can have role reversals vis-à-vis men, which comes across through the text (Vatsayana 2011, 63-66).

These parallels extend to historical Buddhist texts. In the analysis of Buddhist texts, we see two different versions related to the attainment of enlightenment by women (Tsomo 1999). One version of the story of the sea dragon’s daughter, as mentioned in Saddharmapundarika Sutra, gives the account about how women cannot attain enlightenment in a female body and need sexual transformation into a male body for the same. Another version of story, as mentioned in Sagaranagaraja Sutra, shows that the sea dragon’s daughter Ratnadatta claims that a woman in a female body without sexual transformation can attain enlightenment. In this historic-textual parallel, we see how within an overall mega textual account there are two takes on female body. The version that dismisses the possibility of the attainment of enlightenment in a female body is believed to have come from the sect of Devadatta in confluence with the Mahayana sects. The idea of sexual transformation as necessary for enlightenment that is found in the Saddharmapundarika Sutra is seen as “coming not from authentic Buddhist tradition, but from the tradition of Devadatta's sect, which was under the influence of traditional, discriminatory Indian views of women” (Tsomo 1999, 128).

Talking of historical biases against women and their continuous presence in Indian societies, we see that the sects that came about and glorified female energy also did not stand for women. The images of women in sects like Nāthpanth, which came about as the sect practising Shakti Puja (worship of the female principle of divine energy as the supreme deity), also do not seem to be supporting women, rather warn against them and portray them as dangerous temptresses who have the potential of sucking life out of males (Barathwal 2004, 157-164).

6.3.3 Successful Examples of Subversion

A number of young boys and girls have started subverting the patriarchal ‘mores’ of the khap region. A girl called Komal belonging to Gathwala gotra, from Jagaheri village in Muzaffarnagar, had eloped with a boy from a neighbouring village Pinna. Her family went to the police and found out where she was. Her
family tried to convince her to come back and put the blame on the boy of kidnapping her by concocting false stories. This is a regular feature and tactic of the families of the girls who go against the family to choose a partner in marriage for themselves. There have also been cases in which the girls’ family, after murdering the girl, puts the blame of murder on the boy she had eloped with. Such incidents are then used to create a fear psychosis and hence a deterrence against elopement. Girls are made to believe that they are safe only so long as they have the support of their family. Whenever they go against the will of the family, their lives come under threat both socially and personally.

When I went to meet the girls’ family in Jagaheri village, I saw that girl’s brother Monu was still furious about her marriage by elopement five years down the line. Initially, he was quite hostile to even so much as mention his sister’s name. Sometime later, though, he decided to talk about his ‘grief and embarrassment’ that his family had to face because of his sister’s ‘deeds.’ Overwhelmed by grief, he linked the defamation caused to him and his family due to his sister’s elopement to some existential questions. Monu said, “Marte bhi nahi hota, kaam karte bhi nahi hota. Ab mar ke bhi kuch nahi hona, kalank to lag hi gaya” (neither can I die nor do anything else. Family reputation and honour is maligned, now there is no point in even dying). He said the village or the community could not ostracise his family because he himself threw his sister out of the family and disowned her for knowingly making ‘wrong’ choices in life. The brother also feigned ignorance, and said he did not know where his sister was, and that wherever she was she must be having a miserable life and would be bearing all the consequences of going against her family in choosing her life ahead.

Later, when I went to meet Komal in her husband’s village, which was nearby, I saw that the atmosphere there was surprisingly pleasant. The couple had two kids by that time and was living quite happily. They had no idea that someone would be coming to meet them to talk about their marriage. Komal seemed quite satisfied by the choice that she had made against her family. She said she was very happy there and it did not bother her if her family ever came to visit her or whether they accepted her. She said she was content and proud to have made the right choice in her life. She said that she was aware of the tactics some families of young
girls employ to manipulate them and weaken them psychologically. She admitted that she was almost on the verge of falling prey to her family’s manipulation against her own husband. Eventually she thanked her wisdom and discretion that saved her as well as her husband’s life.

Evident in this episode are some of the subtle tactics used to instill suspicion and fear in the minds of the women of the region. The khap area is replete with such narratives and records. It should be credited to these women who, despite such socially and personally testing environment where it becomes extremely difficult to invest emotions and faith in someone, have held their ground to fight for what they believed in.

The above mentioned example shows how the women are expected to be complete dependents on their family and not take the liberty of choosing their own path of life ahead. The subliminal fantasies and desires of patriarchy get fulfilled in exercising social control over the female gender. Tactics of suffusing the minds of women with fear is the first step towards the kind of mental harassment the families and the socio-cultural co-habitants compel women to go through. If they are unable to succeed in their first tactic, the alternative step is to send the girls away from the village to some relative’s village to keep her away from the person she likes. This further restricts her mobility and interaction as she is displaced from her familiar surroundings. When none of these tactics seem to work, the last resort is killing in the name of ‘honour’. It must be noted here that the higher the prestige of the family in the village, the more likely it is that the families will resort to violence -- in some cases amounting to murders. They say that they are required to set examples in front of potential deviators in order to preserve the moral codes of conduct in the cultural set up of the region.

The people with lower stakes also willy-nilly have to show that they have severed their family ties with their daughters. The mothers also act in concert, to support such practices for the sake of their other daughters. The larger thought behind this is aimed at creating fear and making elopement appear as a dangerous act. The girls are made to believe that because of the deeds of one disobedient daughter, all the other girls in the family are going to suffer and that nobody would
want to marry their sons to such defiled families. An elderly woman from Sisauli village said, “ek larki kharab hone se sab behene baithing reh jayengi.” (Due to one girl’s misdeed, all her sisters risk becoming unmarriageable.) Women are made to feel as complete dependents, and if they cross the prescribed limits set by their families they are threatened that their support system would be withdrawn. In such circumstances, even if the females are able to survive they always lead a life ridden with the burden of an identity crisis and dependence. The females who show potential streaks of disobedience are threatened of losing their familial affiliations, their name and the protective cover that the family apparently provides for them. Women live under constant threat of losing their sense of belongingness to their family and life for them is always on the social edge, as it were. State machineries with their biases also eschew their job of providing any kind of solace to the women making independent choices.

As far as the issue of citizenship is concerned, which involves every citizen’s right to live with dignity, is also ignored by the state machineries’ inefficiencies and prejudices.

Often it is seen that the local administration and the police, technically obliged by law to give protection to women who make an effort to break away from the clutches of coercive cultural norms, contribute to their agony by colluding with the khaps. Instead of offering help to the grieving families, police in fact demeans and tortures the families for the conduct of their daughter and, sometimes, even in case of a son. Despite such threats of deprivation of belongingness and identity both in terms of culture and citizenship, there are women who pave path for the generations to come by setting examples or taking the cause up for others. In doing so, they risk their lives for a desire to lead life on their terms. These risks are tantamount to subversive measures. Incidents like these are still to get traction on a mass scale in these societies. They still occur only sporadically and are not organised on large scale. That is why, these subversions by women do not appear as posing impending threats to the cultural authorities in the region; but they do have great potential of bringing about long-term structural and institutional changes from within.
In another incident involving the two villages of Muzaffarnagar -- Pinna and Kazikhera -- I got to see subverting efforts by a girl and her family who belong to the Malik gotra. Malik is a Jat community’s clan. Among the Jats, marrying within the gotra is absolutely unacceptable. They follow strict gotra exogamy. Marrying within the gotra could lead to dire social consequences for whoever attempts such a thing. The girl referred to was from Pinna village, and she married a boy from Kazikhera village. Both belonged to the same gotra. The girl’s family, after initial reluctance, brought itself to terms with this unacceptable idea, but the boy’s family was completely furious about the inter-gotra marriage and tried to sever all ties with the boy. Later, they even tried to hide the fact that the boy and the girl were from the same gotra. The effort of the family to brush the issue under the carpet could be seen as the first step towards the acknowledgement of the marriage.

When I planned to approach the boy’s family mentioned above, people I interacted with earlier said that the young couple that they would be reluctant to talk about their marriage. Adesh Tyagi, a man who was accompanying me, said, “yahan kuch bol mat dijiyega. Zyada kuch poochiyega bhi nahi.” (Remember not to say any unpleasant thing. Don’t ask many questions either.) He especially warned me against mentioning that the married couple belonged to the same gotra. To everyone’s surprise, the family had by then accepted the boy, though they were not very appreciative of the girl. But the family members said that since the girl’s family was supporting her so much, why should they leave their son? The girl’s family was giving all the facilities to the couple and keeping their lives content and secure. Seeing this acceptance, boy’s family felt that this way they were letting down their son and sullying their prestige further. The boy’s family told me that if the girl’s family was not cutting off all the ties with her then why should they leave their son alone!

This subversive effort from the girl as well her family was at variance with the given prescribed norms of the cultural community. Since both the families accepted their son and daughter respectively and the couple was financially secure, they did not have to face ostracism from the community. In order to protect themselves from any chance of ostracism, they generally do not publically accept
that both the families are from the same gotra; in situations where this lie does not work, they feign anger saying they have not accepted the couple whole-heartedly. They try to keep up with the indicators of respectability and honour by mostly keeping silent or showing anger about the same-gotra marriage in their family. In their efforts to salvage respectability, there is a subtle acknowledgment of retreat in the imposition of khap directives on females.

I came across a case from 2003 from Purbaliyan and Bhanera villages of Muzaffarnagar, where Ajay Saroha and Poonam Baliyan’s marriage was annulled by the chaudhary of the Baliyan khap on the ground that their marriage was a same-gotra marriage. Later, the couple had given the proof that their marriage was not a same-gotra marriage, simply because they belonged to different gotras. But this was also not accepted as evidence and the argument against the marriage was that the girl and the boy were from the villages falling under the jurisdiction of same gotra khap: the logic was that within a khap, a girl cannot be accepted both as daughter as well as daughter-in-law. The couple was ordered to leave that area and settle somewhere else for the rest of their lives. When I went to locate their house in 2013, to my surprise I found out they were living in the village itself. In response to the diktats of the khap heads, the couple had decided on the contrary to courageously stay in the same village. Though they could easily have migrated -- they said that they had their business elsewhere, and that it would have been convenient for them to leave the village -- due to the threats the couple received from the clan’s headmen, they deliberately wanted to flout the order and decided to answer them back by winding up their business elsewhere and settle down in the village from where they had been expelled. Ajay Saroha says, “Agle pachchas saal yahan kuch nahi badalne wala. Yahan rehne ke liye to aise hi himmat karni parti hai. Yahan pyar nahi chalta, takarar hoti hai bas.” (Nothing is going to change here in the next 50 years. One has to be courageous like us to survive here. Here people believe in fighting and not loving).

The more the younger generation is pushed on the edge of their lives, the more defiant they grow. It is through this defiance that subversion also takes place. The people have now accepted the girl and her marriage. This is another success story against the tough diktats of the khap panchayat.
6.4 Negotiation of Space and Ostracism

It is important to catalogue how people are negotiating for their space in the most unfavourable social circumstances. These are the ways which, if met with success, pave the way for changes in the future without resorting to mutinous tactics. The resistance and fights put forth by people who resist khap diktats keep denting the false pride and legitimacy of forced authority of khap societies. When such small efforts in the long run get the desired support from the neutral or liberal parties, their morale is boosted. These efforts if counted could very well be seen as the vanguard of institutional changes in the times to come. These are the people whose struggles need a fillip, both institutional and social, and this can be achieved if timely changes are induced.

During my field work, I met many such person whose efforts had the potential to change the established notion or at least shake it from within. Omi’s case deserves a special mention: Omi is a 70-years old Dalit widow whose son had eloped with a girl from the same village. Since the elopement her son was nowhere to be seen in the area. People of the village believe that her son could never enter the village because of the orders that the caste panchayat set out for the eloped couple. Omi had to face severe social boycotts. Nobody was allowed to enter her house, nor was she allowed to move out of her house -- there was in fact a fine of Rs. 5,000 declared for anyone who went to visit Omi -- and work in the fields or even fetch water for her house. She met with a complete social ostracisation. When people realised that the woman was too old to bear the pangs of the boycott and feared that she would die, they relaxed the conditions of the boycott. They gave strict orders that she should never see her son again, and that if her son was to be spotted anywhere near her house or in the village he would be shot dead.

When I went to meet Omi, she too narrated a similar story; she further added that the farmer community i.e. the Jats helped her in her fight against survival, and that had it not been for them she would not have survived. To sugarcoat her feigned narrative she went a step further to say that she never faced any problem in the village. On the contrary, Omi was continuously showing her anger towards her son’s deed. I was quite surprised to see this sort of a display of
gratitude towards Jats, a community that is known for ordering severe social boycotts against whoever violated the ‘mores’ of the community. These norms of the region by default are the cultural mores of the dominant group of the region. The dominant group in this region has been the Jat community (also popularly known as the farmers’ community). Earlier the Jats of the region only had their community members under their jurisdiction, but later they tried to get other weaker sections also under their juridical cover. In this process, the Jats gave recognition to the heads of lower castes and other weaker sections and co-opted them as part of the juridical system of the khap panchayat. The problem here is that even when it appears that the decision has been taken by the chaudhary of a particular caste, in reality the decision is always taken at the behest of the dominant groups. Strong decisions like social boycotts for the maintenance of ‘mores’ are mostly taken by the dominant section of the society -- here the Jat community whose clan council is considered to be supreme in the region. The cultural settings in this region are mostly shaped by the narrative coming from dominant groups and institutions. These settings are designed to facilitate advantages for the dominant class. By this they are able to maintain their legitimacy and traditional authority in the region. Any change in the behavioural pattern of any individual or community could prove detrimental to the practice of their authority in the region, where they seem to work like colonisers (Pradhan 1996, 95). They have a colony-like pattern of settlement and try to keep increasing the radius of their jurisdiction.

Omi’s case also revealed to me how people in the region negotiate social ostracism. The praise that Omi had for the Jats in spite of the boycott she had to face puzzled me. But as soon as the conversation ended and I went out of Omi’s house, she sent a little boy to call me back. I was further puzzled by this mysterious behaviour. When I reentered Omi’s house, she asked the kids standing nearby to shut the doors tightly so that nobody could enter while she was having a conversation with me in private. I understood the whole situation very well when Omi started telling me that earlier, when she was talking to me, she could not reveal her feelings because some Jats from the village and other villagers were standing nearby. She did not want to reveal to them what she thought of her son’s conduct. Once she was alone, Omi started pouring her heart out and said this is the
only way she could manage to survive. She said, Who does not like her son? But since she had to show the people, especially the Jats, that she had severed all her relations with her son and did not even know about his whereabouts. The truth was that she was aware of the place where he was living, and her statements gave me an idea that she was also in touch with her son through phone calls.

She now confessed that the Jat farmers had actually made her life hell and supported the girl’s family to get the orders of her social boycott passed. She added further that they did not allow her to work in their fields, which made her survival difficult. Generally in the area, women of low-caste groups work on the fields of the better-off Jat farmers. Omi was deprived of many chances of livelihood because of her son’s conduct. Rules for Omi have now been relaxed and she has started going to the farmers’ fields for work and other villagers also visit her house. All this happened after people came to the conclusion that Omi had severed all her ties with her son This is how Omi negotiated her survival: by feigning obedience to the diktats. The finding of a project on women’s ways of knowing suggests, “women see blind obedience to authorities as being of utmost importance for keeping out of trouble and ensuring their own survival” (Belenky 1986, 28).

Though the Jat community denied its role in Omi’s boycott, it is a known fact in the region. Also, as Omi confessed, Jats themselves supported and encouraged such a boycott. This is how the ramifications of the dominant groups decisions play out. The dominant groups like khaps use social, behavioural and cultural control as tactics to control the marriages and sexuality of the members, especially the womenfolk as well as the weaker sections/marginal groups coming under their social, geographical or influential jurisdiction.

6.5 Issues of Proxy Empowerment

The slow and steady rise of women’s voices against the patriarchy of khp panchayats have also led to a few accommodative steps by the khp panchayats, seen by many as ceding of ground and influence to women. Let me cite an example of an elderly woman called Sohan Biri, who is known for her courage in the region, and is seen as the woman who could teach men a lesson and take up women's cause. Once she burnt nine liquor shops to bring the problem of
alcoholism to a halt (alcoholism is a common problem among males of this area). On seeing her courage and zeal, a leader of the BKU, formed a women's wing of the union and appointed Biri as its head. Biri was also gifted a hookah -- the smoking pipe, gifting of which is a sign of high respect -- by Mahendra Singh Tikait. She takes great pride in flaunting the hookah, as it was in Tikait's prized possession and now it was with her. Hookah in the region is not simply a cultural trait but has a lot of meaning attached to it. When elderly men sit around the hookah in the evenings, it’s not just an idle time they are spending chatting and socializing, but a time of great social respect and relevance. Elderly men sit around hookah while young men sit and listen to the elders. Through these interactions most of the cultural-moral codes are passed on to the young men, and importantly, without officially giving out any patriarchal diktat. Sitting around the hookah becomes the centre-stage where all the moral codes are discussed and the depletion of morality in their society and region is lamented. The hookah is seen as a symbol around which all the patriarchal norms hinge and are passed on to the next generation. In this background of hookah culture, when Sohan Biri gets the hookah from the head of BKU, she takes pride in it as it does mark her presence in the male world. One could possibility see Sohan Biri as the female patriarch, as many of her views are same as that of the male patriarchs. Her takes on the moral code for women is in tandem with the rules prescribed by the men folk of the region. Since she made her presence felt by taking action against the drinking problem of the males of the region and their hooliganism, getting a position as the head of the women's wing of the union, is worth mentioning. Sohan Biri’s episode is symbolic of a complex situation of females. In her case it was her bravery being awarded more than it being a score for feminism against patriarchy in the region.

Sohan Biri’s so-called ‘empowerment’ by elevating her to the rank of head of the female wing of the BKU and the award of the hookah could be seen as eyewash by the males of the region. This is what I would like to call ‘proxy empowerment’ of the females of the region by the institutions of patriarchy. Males of the region deliberately cede some grounds for females, which the females think are signs of real empowerment, since they have never been given any space in their society. To cite an example in this regard, some elderly women -- like the wife of
the Sisauli nagar panchayat’s chairman Surendra Singh -- are seen as ‘valorous’ figures as they are able to use double barrel guns with ease (only used by males in these societies hitherto). I feel that this ‘empowerment’ in no way should be mistaken as 'subversion' or a genuine empowerment of women as such. In fact, these are the ideas and images the patriarchs very happily with and proudly wish to put forth of 'their' women, perhaps in order to make themselves look liberal and accommodating. This is an outright example of a proxy for real empowerment and freedom of women.

6.6 Regressive Tools of Subversion

I came across another way of resistance and subversion of the dominant groups by the marginal groups like the Jatavs, who come under the category of Dalits. This is a subversion posed by the low-caste category against the upper castes through the portrayal of their women as the purest through the subverted concept of Sati. The word Sati has been used in several contexts for women, which gives it multiple meanings and most of such interpretations of Sati could be seen in the analyses of Puranas like Srimad Bhagwat Mahapurana (Vyas 1940). Sati is a dated practice in India, practiced primarily among the upper castes: the standard practice was that a married woman burnt herself by sitting on the pyre of her dead husband. Sati is also understood to be a very chaste and virtuous woman who performs all the duty, especially in capacity of a wife, with immense honesty and loyalty. Contrary to the popular images of Sati, I came across a completely different definition of Sati among the Dalit communities of the referred region. In my conversations, people from these communities claimed that their women were the real Satis i.e epitome of chastity. They said their Satis were categorically unmarried and virgin, which make them the purest. Raju a young man from village Narottampur Mazara said, “Humari sati asli sati hai. Jo shadi karke pati ke sath mar jaye wo kaise ho gayi sati? Humari sati ganga jal jaisi hoti thi aur samaj ke liye kaam karti thi”

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2 Discussion on Sati with Swami Parmananda of Shri Krishna Pranami Mandir, Ekadil in Uttar Pradesh, India. Sati as per Swami Parmananda’s study and understanding is that woman who has the following seven qualities – Satya (truthful), Dharma (dutiful), Lajja (shame and modesty), Madhur Vani (soft and sweet voice), Dharya (patience), kul ki maryada (maintains dignity of the clan), Pati (husband).
(Our Sati is the real Sati. The woman who marries and dies with her husband, how can you call her Sati? Our Sati was like holy Ganges water who worked for the society). Raju belonged to Karaundhiya gotra. He had recently gone to worship the place of his Sati, which was located in another village named Dhansani. These women did all the good social deeds and healed people by the power of their purity and goodness. They claim to trace their identity from these holy women and accordingly they have named their gotras. I could relate to an attempt by the marginal and lower caste people to assert themselves against the dominant section of the society. The marginal groups, through their conceptual construct of a parallel but different Sati, have not only tried to resist the socio-cultural notions to be passed on to them through the dominant ideology but have negotiated a conceptual-cum-social space for themselves. In this process they have also subverted part of the established view about Sati. The notion of purity attached by the marginal and the dominant groups of this region to their own conceptual ‘Sati’ is also at variance with each other. The subversion by the weaker sections in these societies through their concept of ‘Sati’ is done through this variance. The Dalit Sati is the true symbol of chastity, as she is not married -- unlike the dominant caste’s conception of a married Sati.

The above-mentioned kind of subversion poses a complex problem regarding the tools and forms of subversion. In the above context, it is very essential to point out that the marginal groups, through the formation of their own Sati (as different from that of the dominant castes), have inadvertently indulged in the propagation of stereotypes in so far as the concepts of Sati, chastity and purity are concerned. In other words, the tool used to subvert the dominant castes’ perception is the same that is being used by the latter for years. Here, Patrick Olivelle’s translation of the Dharmasutras needs a special mention. In this radical take on women’s issues by Dharmasutra of Āpastamba is brought to light. Āpastamba presents a divergent take on the tradition of Dharma and contrary to the common assumption that the ancient Indian society was uniform and stifling under orthodoxy imposed by Brahmins (Olivelle 1999, xiii). Āpastamba’s Dharmasutra is considered to be in favour of women to an extent as it talks about property rights of daughters (A 2.14.4) (Olivelle 1999, 57) and joint custody of property after
marriage (A 2.29.3) (Olivelle 1999, 72) but here too the women are described as upholders of traditional lore, and Āpastamba tells his audience that they should learn some customs from women (A 2.15.9; 2.29.11) (Olivelle 1999).

The above-mentioned variety of defences happens to cause more harm to women’s condition. They hinder the mobility of women and affect the psyche of the society at large. Even the subverting texts have used the patriarchal tools and methods to either protect the dignity of women or give them some visibility. Though such subverting texts in themselves, when seen in the background of the context and the time period, could be appreciated, one should be aware that this kind of a defence of women’s rights and visibility has negative effects in the long run. We see this in the context of the khap group in particular, and Indian society in general. In the above-mentioned claims, the subverting definitions of Sati emanate from the fact that women in general and low-caste women in particular have been always seen as polluted and polluting. The women from the lower castes have been the victims of exploitation by the upper castes. Such exploitations have also been analysed and understood through textual narratives and legends (Lorenzen 1991, 49). That is why in the subverting claims portraying the Sati of low castes or ex-untouchables as virgins -- the purest and most holy figures -- challenges the upper castes’ version of reality. Here we get to witness the claims, which do have the potential to undercut the dominant representation of reality.

The problem with such claims is that, though they appear to be constructive and favourable to the womenfolk of the community, in reality they trap women further in the same old Brahmanical notions and claims of purity and pollution. Without changing the language and explanations, such subversions could pose further problems for the group which remains at the margins cutting across all the identity groups: women.

6.7 Evidence of Patriarchy in Liberal Texts and Scriptures

The social biases against women by khaps and other social institutions are a part of historical narratives that have been peddled through patriarchal institutions, cultural prejudices and established community shibboleths. These propagations might appear as exclusively social, but many a times they find their moorings in
historical texts. For instance, ‘Tantra’ is seen as a subverting and highly inclusive text, which is believed to ferociously challenge the dominating Brahmanical texts and rituals. “The argument for historical development begins by asserting that Tantra began as a non-Brahmin (sometimes even anti-Brahmin) anti-householder movement.” (Doniger 2009, 396). This text is seen as more liberal towards women and more inclusive, but even in this subverting text the elements of exploitation of women are believed to be present. The strong emphasis on body and bodily fluids is seen as a big challenge to the Vedic texts. Here, we can see the room for the exploitation of women as ingrained. Hence even those narratives coming out of acutely subverting texts also keep women at the margins and show them only as source of liberation for the male practitioners by being their sexual partners. In this regard the Tantric texts are the best examples to illustrate these arguments.

Sexuality as an exclusive domain of the female body has been a thought that has permeated the history of Indian society, and it continues in the current times. This line of thought has emanated from the emphasis of the dominant male psyche on women’s body and bodily fluids. For instance, Many Tantric rituals involve women both as sexual partners and as symbolic of the goddess, therefore objects of ritual worship. “The centrality of women to Tantric ritual may have had a positive influence on more general altitudes to women during this period…But it is by no means clear that Tantra benefited rather than exploited the women involved.” (Doniger 2009, 401). Doniger also brings out that:

“The centrality of semen in this ritual suggests that it was designed for men, though some Indian texts (including medical texts) do assume that women, like men, have semen and can draw it up through the spine to the brain. Some texts go so far as to assume that the male Tantric is able to draw the female’s fluid back into his own sexual organ and up his spine, the so-called fountain pen technique.” (Doniger 2009, 402). “Yet though Tantric ritual performance may construct rigid gender roles, it also allows possibilities for the subversions of those roles. Some women found a kind of autonomy, freedom from their families, in the Tantric community, but for the most part the rituals were designed to benefit people who had lingas, not yonis.” (402)
All these narratives, projecting notions against female body and its subtle subversions, on one level provide the required legitimacy for brazen gender-specific biases and crimes to be carried out against women in areas with rigid cultures mores -- such as those administered by khap panchayats; on the other hand, they also give hope and scope that subversions have been possible in the most ill-disposed situations and times.

6.8 Conclusion

When subversions and negotiations start happening the way they are happening in the khap areas, then “intensely personal and individual experiences radiate outward into common, shared hopes and goals” (Walker 1990, 5) when discussed and shared. The idea that Nancy Walker brings out in her work through Carolyn Gold Heilbrun’s remark about the “Unacceptable Fantasies” (Walker 1990, 4) and how the demands for revision of values and conventions challenge the perceived reality and status-quo in return, stands true in all other contexts (Walker 1990). Such subversions have led to change in the stand of khap panchayats as they have officially announced the acceptance of inter-caste marriages. They have always maintained that their social set up is underlined by a very liberal and broad-minded society in many senses. They have always been saying that inter-caste marriages are not an issue for them, rather they are only against same-gotra marriages, but records and reports have shown that most of the honour killings have happened in the cases of inter-caste marriages -- especially if it is hypogamy for women i.e. if a woman marries a lower-caste man or if their social status do not match. In my conversations, the Jats of khap region have always maintained that they do not believe in the status of castes and in their region they never practice discrimination against any caste, but officially a khap made a statement in favour of inter-caste marriages. What needs to be understood here is that even if such official declarations are only rhetoric and might not really have any affect in reality, still it should be seen as a step towards flexibility, which might ease the pressure of ‘honour’ to some extent -- though such a stand by khaps has many other appendages to it. This should also be seen in two contexts: a statement made for the desire to appear liberal and progressive to the society at large, and a statement to save their authority and neutralise the challenges posed to it to some extent.
As mentioned throughout the chapter, the challenges that are posed to the authority and credibility of khaps -- both from within and outside these regions -- have been the effort at subversions, negotiations, desire for voice manifestations and space creations by the marginal community. I observed that there was a toning down in the severity of the rhetoric by khaps that was earlier characterised by harsh stands on women’s behaviour in the region -- something which according to them is the soul of the region and community i.e. the ‘appropriateness of women’s life-style and behaviour’. In a genuine sign of resentment, I came across people of the region saying that the khaps are nothing but defectors, saying khaps had no say in anything anymore and they gave their decisions in favour of the stronger party. People had started accusing of khaps of biases because of their intimidation by the economically wealthy parties. It was a common belief that economically and socially strong parties could do anything they wanted to, and no sanctions were passed against them, nor could anybody have said anything against them. The khaps rules and authority were only for the weak and dependent. All these, I could sense, were part of the dissenting voice against the khaps. These challenges, social murmurs and dissenting voices have been preparing the ground for the alleviation of such rules in their stand by khaps. Therefore, this kind of official statement, relaxing the rules, was expected in the wake of challenges being posed from within against their authority and functioning.

While subtle tools and ways of subversion may have fitted themselves and may have become compatible in these communities, but the danger of the usage same old tools and categories of patriarchy for subverting it poses another challenge. As previously mentioned in the chapter, some of the methods of subversions and defence were again falling into the same old trap of purity-pollution or glorification of women’s stereotypical characteristics. This is tricky as it does not change the canvas of imaginings of the gendered existence and roles. A more positive picture drawn by these subversions is one that creates more flexibility in the society. These subversions shake established notions and systems and compel them to accommodate the dissent. These flexibilities involve subtle negotiations to achieve what possibly even coercion cannot. However, the flip side of this complex game of subversions to gain equity, voice or influence is that the
tools involved in the process of subversion by women and the marginalized sometimes remain the same as those that established and fueled patriarchy. For subversions to make real difference by challenging the obvious and to give scope to the ‘re-imaginings of female images’ (Blake 2008, 6), the tools, categories and language used to subvert the dominant institutions will have to change.

References


