Caste, Patriarchy and Power: An Ethnographic Study of Khap Panchayat

ABSTRACT
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Supervised by Dr. Badri Narayan
Professor in Social History/Cultural Anthropology G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad

Submitted by Tarushikha Sarvesh
Doctoral Student

Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad Constituent Institute of the University of Allahabad
Abstract

This thesis is a study of the khaps of western Uttar Pradesh. The attempt has been to scrutinise the khap panchayats as a ‘phenomenon’ carrying within themselves the components of caste, power and patriarchy, situated at the interface of tradition and modernity. For this study, my focus is mainly on the Baliyan khap of Muzaffarnagar.

Though caste and honour happen to be the primary components of the life-world and fabric of khap culture, the processes and forms of making of such components usually remain invisible. Given the complexities and multilayered reality of khap panchayats, it was more relevant to study them as a phenomenon rather than as an institution.

The analysis intends to make such processes and forms detectable that keep taking place at the subconscious level -- of not just the individuals, but rather the entire societies. It explores the various invisible layers of realities within the phenomenon of khap. All social phenomenon are marked by multilayered multiple realities, but we often get to see only the more visible or projected dominant reality. The thesis has been successful in problematising the idea of dominant reality by exploring and documenting subversion from the projected dominant reality.

The subtle processes and forms of forces like caste, patriarchy and honour, which interact with each other, become more easily discernible in the face of subversive forces. The subversive forces have been successful in exposing the duality of every reality projected as a single, true entity. Subversion causes a legitimacy crisis by revealing the multiple layers of dominance and power accumulation.
The focus of my work is to trace the various ‘processes’ of certain phenomena -- like the struggle for identity, legitimation, establishing of power dynamics and subtleties involved in the gender question -- that emerge from the interaction of the cultural systems like khap, which are considered anachronistic, with the elements and features of modernity.

The three major questions that emerged from the pilot field study, were: How did the present form and condition of power get shaped in the khap regions of western Uttar Pradesh, and what does it hold for the future? What kinds of experiences are opened up by the interface between historical forces like the state, the khaps and civil society? What are the spaces, forms and processes of subversion by women and other marginal groups in the khap region of western Uttar Pradesh?

Khap panchayats, with their recent upsurge, or rather struggle for ‘visibility’, seemed appropriate to study the frontier between a throwback society and modernity at various levels. It seemed like a perfect example of an anachronism surviving the passing years and ever-changing surroundings, though there are debates over whether it is correct to call such phenomenon anachronism. Therefore, I decided to explore the elements and the validity of such terminology as old-fashioned or anachronistic attached to the cultural set-ups as in the case of khap.

The literature consulted has been categorized as: one, the studies directly related to khap explaining the region and practices; two, indirectly related works explaining the ‘dynamics’ of the region where khaps are located; and, finally, other relevant concepts and categories related to the phenomenon of khap -- i.e. literature on caste, patriarchy, power, etc.

Literature on caste takes into account the diverse aspects of caste in terms of dominance, power, its political economy and its changing protean relationships. Literature on gender takes into account the studies on ‘body’ as well. The idea of ‘body’ is not only traced through academic analysis of female body, but also from the ideas mentioned in certain scriptural texts. I also went through literature on state, citizenship and rights from a gender perspective. Literature on various claims and debates surrounding the concept of power is also consulted for the purpose of contextualising power as an entity.
In my field work, I felt that I was not being able to perforate enough the sheets of reality in order to understand the ‘real’ picture especially when it comes to gender issues and matters of individual choices. Philosophers like Nelson Goodman talk about the relativity of reality and consider that realism is impressed by “the extent to which we perceive the world through conceptual and linguistic lenses of our own making”. The gap between the ‘visible’ and the ‘invisible something’ could not be established ipso facto in this field of research. It required an understanding through inferences and symbolic readings. Therefore the theories that turned out to be helpful in comprehending the gaps between the visible and ‘invisible something’ were rational choice theory, hybridity theory, feminist theory on intersectionality approach, and dramaturgy.

But the literature and theoretical perspectives mentioned are not the strict frameworks on which the thesis is based; rather these are broad frameworks or perspectives to guide along the explorations in the field. The thesis work is emergent and mostly exploratory, grounded in the field set-up and real-life narratives.

This study is carried about with a multiple methodology approach, which includes ethnography, phenomenology and grounded theory, because such an approach keeps the human element visible in research and does not make it a top-down approach. Constructivist-interpretive paradigm, which happens to be part of grounded theory, keeps the collaborative approach alive in research with the belief that human beings are capable of narrating their life experiences and their position in their given social context.

In grounded theory, patterns are observed and connected that develops into a theory or concept. In my research also, with time certain patterns started emerging from the chapters. Chapters started moving from the narrative of realism to the narrative of romance, finally culminating into the narrative of tragedy. From the unfolding of the thesis chapters in this manner and through the decoding of the themes running through the thesis, the idea of “tragedy of power” emerged.

Narrative style of inquiry and writing is used in the thesis in order to bring out the complex patterns of social processes, forms and responses to situations surrounding the phenomenon of khap. It is believed that denying the potential of
narration or ignoring the capacity of the people to narrate is like treating them as if they are not humans. The purpose of the thesis was to explore the voices and the emergent realities of the phenomenon of khap through narratives, imbedded in their time, space and context. Paul Ricoeur says that narratives work by ‘grasping things together’ and making a configuration visible from a sequence. It is said that we must be ready to forego the needs, experiences and other such realities that we cannot explain. That is why it becomes imperative to look into the processes and things that make certain conditions and situations invisible, as they happen to be out of the realm of narration. My thesis has been an effort to understand the processes that obstruct the imagination of the ‘self’ and make narration inconceivable.

Since my research is focused on khap, I saw the existing studies on the subject by scholars like Prem Chowdhry and M C Pradhan, which seem to point towards a resurgence of the phenomenon through intricate ethnographic analyses. The inflection of themes -- like panchayats vs courts, clan exogamy vs Hindu Marriage Act, and even subordinate gotras vs dominant gotras -- do posit interesting questions about the ‘invention’ of traditions in the wake of modernization. But, while these accounts bring to light the fuzziness of power structures amongst the Jats and other inhabitants of the khap region in northern India, they do not portray how this present form and condition of power got shaped and what it holds for the future. They fail to give us insights into the institution of khap, which in recent years has emerged as a strong and visible cultural force in the ‘territorial spaces’ of Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. The phenomenon has not been detailed out to throw light on the new trends of ‘culture steadying’ within the democratic configuration of India. The struggles of women as subaltern insiders, both as members of a culture and that of the state, remain invisible. The forms in which the struggles or subversions are taking place on the ground are generally bypassed in most of the studies.

My thesis is structured in such a manner that it captures the motion of the field and the khap phenomenon with each successive chapter. Chapter one introduces the research and its approach. It also brings out the detail of some academic debates over the concepts of universal rights in the light of individual and cultural rights, idea of nation-state, territoriality, media, etc.
Chapter two discusses the literature that was reviewed for comprehending the phenomenon of khap in its entirety. As mentioned earlier, some of these studies are directly related to khap, some are indirectly related, others still are related to the features and components that make up the phenomenon of khap. The theories taken into consideration to comprehend the language of experiences and desires surrounding the phenomenon of khap are also explained in this chapter.

Chapter three, “Introducing the Field and Methodology”, introduces the ‘field’ in the research. It tries to bring out the various notions attached to the field as well as the subjective socio-cultural traits of the field are captured. This chapter also explores the extent to which the location of the field influences the internal and external dynamics of the field. It also brings out the on-field methodology.

Chapter four, “Khap, State and Law”, narrates the positioning of the khap panchayat in terms of its interface with the modern forces of state and law. It delves into debates about the modern state as well. The chapter also explores the lived experiences of women from the field and the idea of law in action.

Chapter five, “Women as Subaltern Insiders”, takes chapter four further into understanding the subaltern complexity of the women’s positions -- both as the members of a community as well as that of the state. The chapter also brings in the concept of body as well as the field narratives to explain the complexity of women’s situation in the region. This chapter also shows some level of subversion and negotiation rather than outright opposition to the dominant cultural patterns.

Chapter six, “Narratives of Women: Negotiating Materiality”, deals entirely with the narratives of subversion that expose the duality of reality. This chapter brings out how women negotiate their materiality. Subversions and negotiations challenge the single dominant notion of reality and bring to light the multiple realities co-existing in the region.

Chapter seven, “Tragedy of Power and Territoriality”, brings us to the point where negotiations, subversions and claims start showing the internal reshaping of the phenomenon of khap in terms of its juridical as well as cultural claims. Patterns of the emergent theory also emerge in this chapter. Power as a concept has earlier
been looked into mostly as ‘power in things’, ‘power through mobilisation’, or ‘power as an immanent affair’ as referred to earlier in the thesis. In this research, though, power is seen as an entity in itself, and that is how I arrived at the idea of “tragedy of power”.

Chapter eight, the conclusion of the thesis, talks about the emergent realities of the phenomenon of khap. The chapter revisits the aims and approaches of the thesis and sees how far the gaps have been covered. Conclusion also includes the findings of the research and explains the theory that emerged from the research. The conclusion also gives suggestions for future studies.

One of the original contributions of the thesis has been the emergent theory of “tragedy of power”. Where does tragedy occur? Tragedy occurs at the meeting-point of two or more historical forces. The historical forces happen to be at “irreconcilable odds”, as seen in the analysis of khap phenomenon. These historical forces -- forces of both state and khap as institutions; forces of gender empowerment and patriarchy; forces of dominant as well as marginal castes/cultures -- cause a tragedy of power of institutions, tragedy of power of gender, tragedy of power of caste. These forces ultimately cause predominantly the “tragedy of power”, the foremost finding of this study.

Power can’t have just two possible outcomes -- either the rules, regulations and constraints imposed by the centre are successful in meeting its goals, or, as the second outcome, their organisational impact is minimised or deflected by the degree of resistance met. With the development of chapters, a pattern emerged. Chapters three and four show a realist perspective. Chapters five and six appear to be falling within the narrative framework of romance. Chapter seven emerges within the narrative framework of tragedy. This is one of the theoretical findings. When the historical forces meet, they happen to be at irreconcilable odds. They are irreconcilable because none of these forces give up on their “essential status”. If they give up their essential status, they lose their sense of existence, which they cannot afford to. Historical forces are power, and when they collide or interface with each other, cause a tragedy: tragedy of power.
Another finding of this research was the misleading concept of empowerment, which could be called “proxy empowerment” or “misplaced empowerment”. Change in the nature and language of patriarchy and dominance, could be called “veiled or subtle patriarchy”, as explained in Chapter five of the thesis. The idea of “backstage dominance” appears to be emerging in the khap region and executed through the institution of khap. Backstage dominance gets visible in the action and motive of bringing rest of the communities especially the Dalit communities under its canopy, with an intention of calling the shots on their behalf.

The language and forms of resistance were also explored in the research work. This brought out the fact that many a times the language and form of resistance remain the same, contributing to the concretisation of existing rules of patriarchy and dominance. In chapter six, for example, I explored how the concept of purity is used by Dalit communities to venerate the women saints belonging to their community as Satis; they claim their Satis to be different from the Satis of the upper caste as, according to them, the Dalit Satis stay unmarried and hence are more ‘pure’.

This kind of resistance gets caged in the same language pattern that fuelled patriarchy and dominance towards the marginalisation of certain sections. It cannot be a long-term solution and merely gives a sense of satisfaction through mockery, although ‘mockery’ is also a form of subversion and holds its own, provided it does not further create similar marginalisation. For this reason it calls to study subversion keeping in mind the concept of intersectionality.

My research wasn’t based on case studies, but I did come across certain relevant case studies in the field through which social change could be studied. Future studies can be done, for examples, on the kind of histories, literature and songs that are presently being produced in the region by different communities. An ethnographic study with respect to the ‘ethics of the region’ furthering the research around the framework of ‘moral theories’ is possible. A phenomenological study on the younger generation across castes and religion in the region would give insights into the details of future trends and aspirations of the region. It would be helpful to
understand how the youths of the region visualise their lives vis-à-vis the external world.

Study of the group dynamics of the region with the framework of social change -- and not simply with the idea of political implications -- could contribute both linguistically and sociologically to understanding “prejudice” as a phenomenon in the khap areas. The elements of prejudice and its impact kept popping up during the research. A separate study taking prejudice as a phenomenon would be beneficial to the discipline of sociology as well as political science. A study of the region through idiographic methods -- explaining the phenomenon historically and biographically -- would also contribute to an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural mindset and behaviour of the region and communities.

To sum up, my dissertation has attempted to explore the subtleties of the forms and processes of control and assertions and also brought out the emergent realities hinting an alternate set-up or an alternate future of the phenomenon of khap. The linkages of the phenomenon of khap to its external circumstances have been explored in the wake of ill-conceived interventions by media and civil society. The research tells about the opportunities of alternate participation and the voices that get shaped at the interface of forces like the cultural organisations, the state, and the civil society. Insights gained will be of interest to women and feminists, politicians and civil society and will help in avoiding superficial solutions to social problems. This study will be beneficial in understanding other similar situations and contexts with an understanding of the forms and ways of subversion and negotiation by the disadvantaged.