

Violence Against Women as an Expression of Assertion of Male Dominance on Her Sexuality: The Indian Story

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Abstract

Societies all over the world have firm ideas as to what a man and a woman “should do” and “should not do”. Societies in general have been more benevolent to the “misdeeds” of men than women. The violence against women emanates from this simple fact. Indian society is keen to establish itself as a society which subscribes to global agenda in matters of economic policies and political beliefs. At the same time the country is keen to retain its cultural and social uniqueness in today’s porous world. The hierarchal settings of the society have a bearing on all types of social relationships and social interactions and gender relations are no exception.

Women hold a dichotomous position in the Indian social imagination – on the one hand she is considered inferior to man but her role as a Creator elevates her to the level of Goddess. Again she is revered as a creator only if she subsumes her identity to the male identity. Her sexuality is celebrated if it operates within the parameters of male assertion and any independent assertion of it is seen as a threat to the social fabric and invites violent reaction from the society.

The paper brings forth data from the Indian scene and discusses in detail the recent spurt in cases of honor killings. The data collected for the paper is through secondary sources. The paper tries to analyse the reasons, the impact of legislations and the future ramifications on the issue.

Keywords: honour killing, patriarchal structures, women empowerment

Introduction

The forces of globalisation and the policies of economic liberalization have positioned India at an enviable level as an aspiring super power. The nation is keen to establish itself as a society which subscribes to the universal principles of equality and inclusiveness in governance and justice. People of the country take great pride in its rich heritage and want to retain their cultural and social uniqueness in today’s porous world. The dynamics of the current development models of governance works on identifying the weaknesses in the social system and developing strategies to deal with them. Empowerment of women has been high on agenda of the State agencies for quite some time now. Several affirmative strategies have been devised and are being implemented to restore the

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Dr. Gunjeet Kaur

balance in gender relations. Such initiatives have been triggered as a response to global pressures as well as a response to indigenous thought processes.

In such a scenario, it becomes difficult to locate the cases of “honour killing”. The honour killings as a term is referred to any such killings which are carried out by the families either by their own convictions or under pressure of the community or is the handiwork of the people who claim to be the guardian of the traditions. Honour killing as a trend is totally in contravention to the principles of equality and modern democratic set up, by which we profess to propel the system. The prime argument the paper proposes to make is that the inequality as faced by women and expressed in its extreme form through “honour killings” is the result of historical biases against women as carried over the generations and can precisely be located in the right to control her sexuality by the patriarchal structures.

Women in the Indian Imagination

The imbalanced sex ratio and the social evils of female infanticide and female foeticide in the modern Indian society reflect the attitude of society towards women. The birth of a female child is rarely celebrated as it is believed that she cannot perpetuate the family name, is physically vulnerable, and that the requirement of dowry for marriage makes her a financial burden as well.

Such an attitude is not of recent origin but we find references even in the Atharva Veda (c. 900 B.C.E.), wherein charms and rituals were offered to guarantee the birth of a son. It is claimed that the Indus Valley culture which was seemingly male-oriented, was also dominated by the cult of the Great Mother, and seen her as Sakti (female cosmic energy), the embodiments of divine dynamic power as distinguished from its passive male aspect. But the Female deities in Vedic society were important only in terms of the male, not as identities unto themselves and most of the female divinities did not enjoy a positive reputation: from a man's perspective, they were frequently considered destructive, seductive forces "who wilfully make the good man bad". A husband alluded at times to his wife as "dangerous woman". There are several examples in these texts where women at their own or at the behest of someone lured the men away from the vow of chastity. The polygamous society permitted the husband to own wives and children, to sell them, and/or to cast them out as he saw fit.

Ramayana and Mahabharata are the two great epics which reveal the values and the inner tensions of society as the protagonists thread their uneasy passage through this world. The female protagonists in both the epics are presented merely as accompaniments to the male identity and their only role that has received description is that of a wife or as a mother.

“Historically, India has always revered her mothers. The Female, as per the Hindu mythology, is the origin of all creation; she is the primeval force, *prakriti*, *shakti*; all that is divine and abundant. Tracing her development from the Indus Valley terracottas which fashioned women of full-breasts and eager, wide hips, to the depiction of goddesses who transcended mythology and graced the carvings of temple walls, many-armed goddesses who were mothers of a hundred sons, right up to

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Dr. Gunjeet Kaur

present day portrayals, we see that this role of "abundance" has not abated. The mother has been venerated precisely because of her capability of giving life, her war-like fertility."

The Analysis

The world inhabited by Man has two realities – one gifted by nature and the other created by Man himself. Man has progressed immensely in creating knowledge reservoirs and making use of it to improve his life conditions. The 21st century is an era in the history of human civilization which presents the highest claims to be guided by the spirit of scientific temper. The everyday experiences of daily life, for each one of us, are all wrapped up in gifts of science. The survival of the modern man is greatly assisted by the fruits of scientific principles. Anomalously, the same spirit of scientific temper has not been allowed to prevail, to that extent, in social interactions. Emotions, values and sentiments based on historical understanding and biases play an important part in conducting social interactions, more so when it comes to gender relations.

All the talk about liberalisation and globalisation and the claims to be a world power notwithstanding, the reality of the Indian society is that social interactions tag high premium on ascriptive status. Caste and gender are the main considerations which slice the Indian society into different strata, with definite ideas about their ranking in the system. Men are considered ritually superior to women and the various castes have a defined relationship towards one another. The provisions of the Indian Constitution and the laws of the land provide for equality of all irrespective of caste, religion, region or sex considerations but there are abundant instances where the ritually impure is forced to submit to the whims and fancies of the superiors, whether the claims to superiority are derived from sex or caste. And any challenge to the superiority of the ritually pure is violently punished by the society.

Societies all over the world have firm ideas as to what a man and a woman "should do" and "should not do". The hierarchal settings of the Indian society had a bearing on all types of social interactions and gender relations are no exception. Societies in general and patriarchal ones in particular have been more benevolent towards the "misdeeds" of men than women.

Societies have always celebrated the power of women to create and have devised ways and means to harness that power in the desired way. Any transgression of the norms related to this is violently attacked by society and at times results in such extreme reactions, where the woman has to pay with her life. All the violence in the society against women emanates from the fact that a woman is endowed with the capacity to procreate and the society believes that the sexual power of the woman must be conducted as per the norms laid by the society. No other crime invites such violence from the society as does the sexual "misconduct" of a woman.

"The body of the female is seen to carry the honour of the family and the shame can only be expunged by the punishment of the body," The society has a fixation with the fertile woman and keeps close tabs on her movements. Any violation of the norms related to the female body - by consent or force, whether it is the rape victim or women suspected of engaging in wedlock by choice, premarital sex,

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Dr. Gunjeet Kaur

accused of adultery, is taken as an affront on the honour of the family, caste, clan and community and is rectified primarily by killing the female and on certain occasions alongwith the consort or the perpetrator.

The Conclusion

Women hold a dichotomous position in the Indian social imagination – on the one hand she is considered inferior to man but her role as a Creator elevates her to the level of Goddess. Again she is revered as a creator only if she subsumes her identity to the male identity. Her sexuality is celebrated if it operates within the parameters of male assertion and any independent assertion of it is seen as a threat to the social fabric and invites violent reaction from the society.

It is this mind set, which despite all the talk about women - empowerment, - education, - participation in public sphere and so on, makes a violent public show of the most personal needs of a woman.

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Endnote

- (i) This is taken from the write up of John Shaju: Myth of the mother, Sunday, Nov 23, 2003, The Hindu
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