MARRIAGE AS A SITE OF SUBALTERITY: CASE OF HARYANVI WOMEN

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ABSTRACT The research paper delves deep into the notion of marriage and its various manifestations in the folk narrative tradition of Haryanvi folktales. This has been seen and analysed in terms of marginalized position of women in a subaltern context. There are multiple layers of meanings that comeout of even simple folknarration. The fact remains that the condition of Haryanvi women remains complex and problem ridden in the contemporary context inspite of few efforts on part of social establishment and political establishment.

KEYWORDS Haryanvi, Folknarratives, marriage, tradition, subaltern, marginalized.

Marriage has been described as a sacrament whereby a man and a woman is bound in wedlock during their entire lifetime. It not only allows physical intimacy between a husband and a wife but also endows responsibility upon the husband to rear his wife and children, in strict traditional sense. The relationship between a husband and a wife in marital relationship is considered to be quite pious and dedicated. Husband and wife become like two pillars of the married life. Both of them share the marital responsibilities. In Valmiki’s Ramayana, a very beautiful description is given, *the way there cannot be a Veena without string, a chariot without wheel similarly, the life of a husband without wife cannot be joyous.*

It has also been described as a practice which suggests a control over female sexuality. A controversial code attributed to Manu states; ‘A woman should never be independent. Her father has authority over her in childhood, her husband in youth, and her son of old age.* Women’s identity, access to resources, opportunities etc, are also determined by their social and economic standing in terms of their caste and class.

Marital status and the fertility provide an important social identity to women. Married women achieve status and respect in the family and society after attaining motherhood, especially after giving birth to sons.

Let me give an overview of how women is represented in customs and traditions related to marriage in folknarrative tradition.

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1 Valmiki Ramayana (Gorakhpur: Geeta Press)

2 Swami Darshanand Saraswati Manusmriti,(Mathura: Pustak Mandir)
Engagement

There are various ceremonies to enter into the marital relationship. The first of its kind is engagement. The songs are sung at the bridegroom’s house and sugar/jiggery is distributed among the visitors. The ceremony is accomplished in the presence of a brahmin and a barber.

In a folktale *The Story of an Old Lady*, she engages her daughter to a dog which turns out to be god himself. The story goes as:

*There is an old lady. She wants to get her daughter engaged but finds no good match for her. In a very tense mood, she meets a barbar and a brahmir, she tells them her cause of concern. Brahmin suggests, Whosoever, you meet today, get your daughter engaged to him Your all problems will be solved migh be poorest of the poor or ugliest of the ugly. The old lady promises herself to do exactly like he tense her. She meets a dog on her way. Hence, she engages her daughter to a dog only. But, it is not actually a dog but Almighty in dog’s form. Both the women are, blessed.*

The ceremony is vividly described in the folktale *‘God’s daughter’*, in which the king engages her daughter to a woodcutter:

*There is a king. He looks out for good matrimonial offers for his daughter. Finally, he finds a good match for her, surprisingly, a woodcutter. The ceremony of engagement is fixed. A barbar and a Brahmin are invited for its accomplishment. People gather to celebrate, to sing songs and also dance. Sweets are distributed. Everybody is happy. Brahmin and barbar are given lots of gifts and sweets.*

Brahmin and Barber from low caste are indispensible for the culmination of marriage. Women have no say in choosing their life partners, either the father chooses for her as in *‘the God’s Daughter’* or the mother chooses for her as in *‘the story of an old lady’*.

Barat

After the ceremony of engagement, a yellow letter is sent to the groom’s side by the bride’s side in which the dates of ceremony and marriage are written. On the marriage eve, the barat goes from the groom’s place to the bride’s place. The ceremony of Toran is performed as soon as the barat arrives as the bride’s place. In the story *‘Bhaiya Dhooj’*, the sister-in-law does not allowed brother-in-law i.e. groom to perform the ceremony of toran

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3 Recorded in cassettes

4 ibid
due to the fear of falling of the door. She gets a paper door constructed. All the baratis said that she had saved the boy.

The baratis and barat is attended in a very regal manner. Earlier, the party would stay at bride’s home for three days. The baraties too enjoy a lot. The scene of the story ‘Magic Boots’ is worth appreciating:

The barat comes in the afternoon. They are well attended. The baratis had bathed in sweet smelling oil and soap. They wear new clothes. Various delicious meals are cooked. They eat to their full. The barat stays for three days. They are given coins and glasses and they are send off

During the ceremony of marriage ‘Saptpadi’ is of great importance. After the Toran ceremony is done, the groom is called for another ceremony in Haryanvi folktales. The custom of taking ‘seven pheras’ around the Pipal tree is considered to be marriage itself. This is called as the ritual of saptpadi. In the story of potter and his son, this custom is depicted:

Seventy eight girls become the wives of the potter’s son after taking seven pheras around the papal tree. The potter’s son told the girls before offering them water, ‘First eat this medicine and then take rounds with me around this Pipal tree. This way they became pregnant because of eating tablets made out of wine.

This is the time now for the bride to leave her parent’s home. It is called Bidai. Feeling of sadness prevails everywhere. The bride’s family give ample dowry to the girl. In the story ‘The Saturday Story’ King Vikramaditya, marries the daughter of Seth, named Kambri. She is given sufficient dowry at the time of her send off

The Seth has a beautiful daughter named Kambri. King Vikramaaditya asks for her hand. The seth marries her daughter to him. He gives ample dowry. The King stays there for few days and then leaves after few days Taking his wife, money, dowry and servants to Ujjain.

After the wedding, taking into consideration the age of the bride and the groom, the Muklava is done. Sometimes it is done immediately after the wedding. But other times, keeping in view the age of the bride and the groom, it is done after years. The ceremony denotes the arrival of bride to the groom’s place after marriage.

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5 ibid
6 ibid
7 ibid
In the story, ‘The story of Friday’ the sons of a Brahmin, the Vaish and the Kaiysths are friends. As they get married, the Brahmin and the Kaisth complete their muklava ceremony and bring back their wife from her parent’s place. But the other one did not. ‘The house looks dull without a wife.’ The Seth’s son liked this and decided to bring his wife.8

In the story ‘The story of a Merchant’, the bride asks the merchant’s son to hit himself with shoes five times. Only after this she will come back to his place.

This tradition of _Bhaat_ has been important part of marriage since ancient times. In this, the sister invites the brother for bhat, before wedding. The maternal uncle offers money, clothes, sweets etc. to his nephew and niece according to his economic status. The sister worships her brother. He is made to stand on a platform and is measured by the rope. Everybody is offered ladoos afterwards. The panchayat is called to celebrate bhaat.

In the story ‘The Magical Boots’, the tradition of bhaat is depicted very vividly:

_Bhopal’s sister Jamuna comes to invite him for bhaat. He treats and pampers her well. Songs are sung. The day of wedding arrives. Bhopal does all the arrangements very well. He carries lots of new clothes, gold ornaments and plenty of money and reaches his sister’s house. The sister performs puja very affectionately. She invites the panchayat and shows everything before them. Her joy knows no bounds._9

It is considered very auspicious and pious to accept the bhaat. Even if there is no money for food, still he borrows money and his wife offers her own dresses.

**Types of Marriages**

According to Manusmriti eight types of weddings are performed i.e. Braham, Dev, Arsh, Prajapatya, Asur, Gandharva, Ratsshchya, and eighth one is Peshach. In the Haryanvi folk tales, there is description of Braham, Prajapatya and Gandharva marriages only.

**Braham Marriage**

A reader of Vedas and a man of high character and esteem is called to chant marriage hymns. He is worshipped by giving clothed and ornaments Both the bride and the groom are married.

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8 ibid

9 ibid
In the story King Vikrajit’, the Brahmin Vikram sought out for a Brahmin boy Markandya, who was handsome and scholar for his daughter Mohini. ‘The king called the Diwan and asked to seek a Brahmin match. The Diwan sought a Brahmin match and the bridegroom was given rich dowry’.10

Prajapatyā Marriage

It is quite similar to the Brahm marriage. In this too, the bride and the groom are worshipped and are given teachings of religious life. In Haryana, this type of wedding is performed in folk tales also. In the story ‘The daughter of brickmaker’ the poor brickmaker begs King Vikramaditya for money to marry his daughter. He then marries his daughter with great pomp and show by borrowing ten lakhs of rupees and jewels. He spends all the money in marriage.11

Other than that, such type of marriages are also performed in the stories like ‘The story of Saturday12’, and ‘King Vikramaditya story’13. In certain stories it is only mentioned that such marriage is performed. They also can be taken into this category.

Gandharvā Marriage

The boy and the girl in love, who marry on their own, without the permission from the parents, is called Gandharva marriage. According to Manusmriti, the mutual relationship, be it physical or otherwise is called ‘Gandharva Marriage’.14 It can be considered a sort of love marriage. In the ancient times, in the ashrams of rishis, around the streams etc. the lovers would meet. They would vow to live together forever. The marriage of King Dushayant and Shakuntala is the ideal example of this

The Gandharva marriages are of two types. In The Rakshas Marriage mixed with Gandharva Marriage, the girl would like the boy secretly. If she faces opposition from her parents, she would request the boy to kidnap her. The boy would kidnap her killing her family members. This fills the condition of a Rakshas marriage. In the story of a prince, such type of wedding is described. The prince loves his classmate but as she tells him that she is engaged, they decide to elope.15

10 ibid
11 ibid
12 ibid
13 Swami Darshanand Saraswati Manusmriti, (Mathura: Pustak Mandir)
14 Recorded in cassettes
15 ibid
In *Mixed Gandharva Marriage* there is no kidnapping but the bride and the groom marry without the consent of their parents. In the story, ‘*Dhan Teras*’, King Hema sent his son to live a life of celibacy in the caves of Jamuns, but by chance the daughter of King Hans comes there. They then marry in the Gandharva way.\(^{16}\)

In this way, in the Haryanvi folktales Braham marriage, Prajapatya and Gandharva marriage are described lucidly.

*Various modes of Marriages*

*Swayamvar Marriage*

In this type of wedding, the girl has the complete liberty to choose her own husband. There is some condition kept for wedding the girl. If anyone fills that condition, he is chosen by the girl. The ‘Sita and Draupadi Swayamvar’ are quite popular.

In the Haryanvi folktales this is quite prevalent. In the story of ‘*Samaya Mata*’ the King’s daughter, inspite of so many impediments, puts the garland around the neck of the gardner’s son and marries him.\(^{17}\) In the story, ‘*Til Kutni Chauth*’ the girl chooses the old lady’s son as her husband. In the story of ‘*The Fast For Sixteen Mondays*’ the king claims that he would marry his daughter with only that man around whose neck the she elephant would throw garland. The she elephant throws the garland around a brahmin’s son. The king’s daughter is married to him with great pomp and it shows an example of. inter-varna marriages.\(^{19}\) In the same way in the *Story of Lord Ganesha* similar instances are found.

A very strange story is found in the ‘*Sant and the Grihasthi*’. In this story King Karan Singh puts a condition that whosoever will bathe in hot oil will be married to his daughter. No one could do so. Then a saint is able to do that out of his religious fervor. But as the girl proceeds to put garland around his neck, the saint lets her marry his own student.\(^{20}\)

*Monogamy*

According to this system a man can only marry once. It is the most prevalent system in society. Vedas too profess monogamy. A Hindu husband vows, at the time of marriage ‘*I accept your hand for good luck so that you might reach old age with your husband*,’

\(^{16}\)ibid

\(^{17}\)ibid

\(^{18}\)ibid

\(^{19}\)ibid

\(^{20}\)ibid
In the Haryanvi folktales monogamy is given extreme importance. Even if the husband is characterless, uneducated, impotent and immoral, the wife always considers him as God and worships him throughout her life. In the famous story ‘Pipal’, a brahmin and his wife are childless. But still he don’t remarry. They pray papal tree with great devotion and get a son. In the ‘Story of Thursday’ a poor businessman and his wife keep on praying to Lord Jupiter and get rich ultimately.

In the same way ‘Til Kutni Chauth’ and the ‘Story of Wednesday’, and old lady doesn’t remarry after becoming a widow. In the story, ‘Frog and she frog’, both live together remembering Lord Rama.21

Polygamy

In this system a man marries one or more than one women. Such type of wedding were considered of great social importance. That’s why only kings or the leaders of prestigious class/community could marry more than once.

In the story ‘Fairy and the Prince’, the king had four wives but still remained childless. He was very unhappy22. In the story of ‘Prabav Dacoit’ the businessman gets his son married to eight beautiful daughters in order to prevent him from becoming a saint.23 The story of ‘Dhruv Bhagat’ is very well known in which king Uttanpad marry for the second time with Suruchi, as his first wife Suriti fails to produce a child. 24

In societies, even today, trends of polygamy exist. In ancient societies, the kings used to enjoy harems. The most favourite of rani used to tease others in the harem to have sadistic pleasures. There used to be continuous strained relationships and it goes to the extreme step of even murdering each other’s offsprings. Similar incident can be cited in ‘Bhagat Puranmal’ story: After twelve years Bhagat Puranmal goes to his father’s place. He meets his maternal aunt first before meeting his own mother. But maternal aunt gets attracted to his beauty and expresses her desire. He refuses. Rani orders for his limbs to be cut and he be thrown into a well. Afterwards Guru Gorakhnath rescues him.25

Inter-caste and Inter-creed Marriages

In such marriages, a man marry a girl of another caste or religion or creed. In the Manusmriti there been a mention of inter-creed marriages. According to Manu, generally for marriages, girl of same caste is preferred. But if the marriage is born out of love, it can be made in any other caste also. It means, a Brahmin

21 ibid
22 ibid
23 ibid
24 ibid
25 ibid
can marry in any of the other castes. A kshatriya can marry in the other two varnas such as vaish and shudra. Vaish can marry in Shudra but Shudra can marry among themselves.26

According to above mentioned, the inter-caste marriages can be of two types. In the folktales, both types are mentioned:

(i) **Anulome Marriage**

According to it a man of high caste can marry a girl of low caste. In ‘King Vikramaditya’ the Brahmin king Dharamesh marries girls belonging to other castes.27 In the story of ‘Saturday Fast’, the kshatriya king Vikramaditya marries the daughter of a vaish.28

(ii) **Pratilome Marriages**

In this a person of low caste marries a girl of high caste. In the ‘Monday Fast’ the son of vaish marries a girl of kshtriya.29 In the ‘Saturday Story’, such marriages are mentioned30. In the same way, in the story of ‘Samya Mata’ the son of gardner marries the girl of a king.31

**Inte-Species Marriages**

In such kind of marriages, marriages are shown between human, birds, animals etc. The daughters of the kings are not only asked by the low caste boys but also by birds etc. Such one story is ‘Poddle’s story’ The poddle is killed by getting crushed under the feet of the King. It decides to take revenge with the help of ants, rivers. The king is defeated He takes away the daughter of the king.32 There is another such story, *The Story of Wednesday* where the girl is married to a dog.33

**Inter-Professional Marriages**

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26 ibid
27 ibid
28 ibid
29 ibid
30 ibid
31 ibid
32 ibid
33 ibid
There is no mention of such stories in social sciences. Although it can be included in inter-varna marriages, but in inter-varna marriages, varna is considered the most important. In the inter-professional marriages, problems can arise due to different professions as in the story of the old lady and the girls’

The old lady has two daughters. One daughter is married to a farmer and the other is married to a potter. After some time, the father goes to meet the farmer’s wife. He asks about her welfare. She informs that if it rains well, things will be fine but if it does not things will go bad. Then he visits his another daughter, who is a potter’s wife. She says, ‘father, if it does not rain, things will be good but if it rains, we will be ruined. The old man gets confused and tensed because if it rains the potter’s wife and if it does not rain, the farmer’s wife will be ruined.’

Phenta Marriages

In the story of ‘Story of Pipal Tree’ there is mention of phenta marriage. In such marriages, the groom is not present at the time of wedding. And the wedding is performed with Chatiya phenta

A Brahmin couple is childless. But they worship papal tree which is twelve mile away. They are blessed with a son. Once on their way they stop at a brahmin’s house who has many daughters. As one of the girls starts cleaning the floor, she finds a diamond. The Brahmin feels greedy and proposes his son’s marriage to that girl. He says that their son is not with them. So, they get the girl engaged with phenta and after a few months she was married to a phenta only.

Widow Remarriage

Widowhood is the deepest trauma of a lady’s life. If unfortunately, the society also isolates her, the life becomes miserable for her. In the Rigveda and Atharvaveda, there is slight reference of widow remarriage. In the Manusmriti complete protection as been provided to the rights of a widow. It also means, in the vedic times, remarriage was of great importance. The main reason was that the birth of children was considered very important. So, after the Death of her husband, the husband’s brother or her near kin had the right to produces her children. This was called Niyog.

Niyog

After the death of a young husband, the lady is allowed to get married to the brother-in-law in the presence of the panchayat. Such ceremony is called’ Putting of Bangles’. But such was possible only when both the parties agreed. Although no direct mention is made in folk tale of such type but there are certain

34 ibid
35 ibid
indications. For e.g. in ‘The Story of Sparrow’ the sparrow starts loving the other sparrow after the death of he-sparrow.36

Sati

After the death of her husband and in non-possibility of re-marriage, the widows have only two alternatives left. The first is to live a life of self control and hard work. Such type of life it is believed, would let a widow, to achieve heavily bliss, even though she could not be a mother. In the story of ‘Sankat Chauth’, the old lady leads a life of discipline.37 The other way is to perform Sati after the death of her husband.

Aumaran is considered when the husband dies at some other place and the wife sacrifices herself with his sign or memoir at their home place. In the Saint and the Grihasti’, the sati custom is also presented. Not only in human world but also in animal world, this custom can be seen. In a story, of a she bird the she bird kills herself by jumping into the fire along with her children when she comes to know that he bird has died.

There is an immense importance of joint family system in Haryanvi society. The onus of preserving their sanctity lies mainly on women. She thus emerges like a big tree in whose grace all family relations grow and prosper. She is also a great teacher right from the childhood till the adulthood. In Kartik Katha’

A woodcutter’s wife keeps kartik fast daily. By doing so, she is able to save one wooden stick everyday. She collects thirty wooden sticks in this manner and then sell all of them. She does this to perform the religious ceremony of langar for the welfare of family. Woodcutter asks his wife if she does charity work. She replies, ‘from where do I do charity? The wooden sticks that you get are sufficient only to cook your food.’. Again, woodcutter asks ‘Why do you lie? I know you have performed langar.38

The concept of anuloma and pratiloma marriage by definition denigrate women. A marriage where a boy of upper caste marries a girl of lower caste is approved is called anuloma, while marriage of women ritually pure groups with men of lower ritual status were considered pratiloma. Most serious punishments like excommunication and even death could be evoked for transgressing the norms. Physical mobility is also restricted through caste norms. The significant symbol of the low status of women in society is that the women of lower castes are accessible to men to higher status, while there is very severe punishment for men of lower castes who dare to approach any women of higher groups.

36 Recorded in cassettes

37 ibid

38 ibid
THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

A number of factors have affected the solidarity of the family, marriage and the quality of relationships within it in modern times in Haryana.

Education, non-traditional occupations, disparities in income, and spatial distance are the most important factors impinging upon relationships and pushing them in the direction of change. The culture of ‘live in’ couples, the single woman phenomenon, and unwed mothers has not yet come to India in a big way, but at least the urban family is undergoing a transformation wherein women is trying to create her own niche.

This ideology of subordination, is pervasive and has invaded the Haryanavi way of thinking and ethos of almost the entire Haryanavi society. There are, of course some exceptions, which permit a greater measure of equality and freedom to women.

Generally in Haryana, a woman’s sense of personal growth is related to her fertility performance and the social standing she achieves as a mother of sons. High fertility in this sex segregated society affects the status of women in several ways. First, the birth of the first child at a very early age and repeated pregnancies combined with malnutrition leads to high maternal mortality and foetal wastage. Second, women are so completely tied down by child care, house work and agricultural labour that few options are open to them for their personal growth apart from their main role of wife-mother as the statistical figures show. Third since such high value is attached to the reproductive function, formal education tends to be seen as irrelevant for girls who are destined for marriage and motherhood at an early age. This pattern of early marriage and the attitude to female education is largely responsible for the high female illiteracy rate.

What are the principal areas in which controls are exercised on women? First, their sexuality is controlled much more strictly than men’s. Women are more easily defiled and given social attitudes this brings disgrace both to the family in which they are born and the one into which they are married. The preservation of their purity is behind the norm of getting females married before the onset of puberty (first menstruation). Implicit in the control of sexuality is the control over reproduction, i.e. giving birth to progeny. Second, there are restraints on women’s movements and contacts. The alleged idea behind this is that women should not yield to temptation and transgress sexual norms because of the opportunity to do so, and also that their resources----property, cash, and labour and skills----are not to be exploited or shared by others. Women at the lower strata have to take up work to meet their family expenses and this necessitates their movement outside the precincts of the domestic group. Thus, these regulations apply mainly to upper and middle level families. Third it was believed that women’s resources need regulation and control. For a majority of women their main resources are their labour and skills. They may be wage-earners engaged in outside work, or participants in family craft, craft, or have special skills that get recognition and can be gainfully used. The questions in this context are: How much of their earnings can they spend at their will, how much can they save, and how much have they to contribute to the pool of the family’s earnings? Women at the upper and middle strata may bring
with them some property that is legally regarded as Stridhan or “women’s property” Can this property be handled by them as they wish? Or are there pressures on them to use it to support common family projects and to tide over family crises?

The manner in which these controls are exercised depend to a great extent on social structure, role allocation, value premises, and the rigidity or flexibility of social control. The interplay of historical, economic, social, and political forces contributes significantly to the shaping and re-shaping of gender equations.

The social system in Haryana folk narratives that speaks volumes about the Haryanvi society too, is characterized by patriarchy, with a few exceptions. Patriarchy recognizes male dominance and female subordination. On marriage the bride breaks loose from her parental home and acquires membership of the family into which she is married. Children born to her belong to her husband’s lineage. He is the principal decision-maker, although he has to consult other elder males also. Women’s presence in the decision-making process is not conspicuously visible, though experienced, strong-willed, and mature women do assert themselves. But they often remain in the background. Even younger women pull the strings from behind. Thus, in the politics of the domestic group the role of women cannot be discounted, but in the final analysis male dominance is not seriously questioned by them. When this is done the breakup of the family becomes imminent. Of course, there are examples of some female-headed households also, but this happens only when children are young and the domestic group has only an elderly female to take charge of its affairs.

In respect of role allocation, distinction is made between ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’. The management of the household is invariably in the women’s sphere. If they cannot hire domestic help—only a few can afford it—women must handle all the domestic chores like drawing water, cooking, cleaning the house, washing the clothes of men and children as well as their own, and looking after the children. Men are usually ridiculed if found undertaking any of these functions. A man may do so only when the wife is away or ill and there is no other woman to take charge. This notion is so deeply ingrained that even women in professions and full-time jobs are expected additionally to continue looking after household affairs. Many women have a sense of inadequacy, if not of guilt, when they cannot attend to their domestic responsibilities. Men, on the other hand, are supposed to look after the affairs of the world outside the home. They are expected to provide for the family and to function as arbiters of its discontents and conflicts.

Men dominate, but women also have ways of getting things done according to their desires and wishes. And in lower Jatis and classes they have a substantial share in the economic pursuits of the domestic group. They may not wield the plough, but they contribute in diverse ways to agriculture. Women in the families of artisans have well-defined roles in carrying out the traditional craft. Their contribution to the household economy, thus, thus, cannot be ignored. In the higher social groups men used to be the providers, but even this is changing fast. Women are entering the public services and professions and earning regular salaries. The trend has to be accepted, partly because of increasing costs and the demands of higher standards of living. But
men do not relish being maintained by their wives, and their ego is hurt when their wives earn more. The emerging ethos does not favour patriarchy, but the hangover of the past is often unrelenting. Society is adapting itself to the altered scenario, even if the pace of adaptation is very slow.

The implementation of norms and values depends to a great extent on the strength or weakness of control mechanisms. Articulation of values and the prescription of norms in socio-religious texts does not imply their automatic observance; even when tradition was strong, mediatory efforts and intervention by elders and social institutions like the Jati Panchayat or village Panchayat were necessary to resolve conflicts and to force recalcitrant members to comply with the normative structure. Notions of honour and shame are strong in the higher Jatis and upper classes. They make a special effort not to let family affairs come out into the open and mediation is done by elders of the concerned household as well as the women’s parents and important members of her kin group. In the lower Jatis and classes generally secrets cannot be kept and intervention becomes necessary. They are also sensitive about shame, but they cannot afford to be very particular about it. Family honour is protected by wifebeating and violence to the offending parties. The extent of intra-family violence cannot be measured. It is all too visible in the lower classes, but it also persists in the upper strata. Even after four decades of Independence one frequently reads of bride-burning and dowry deaths. Other forms of lesser violence are: heaping indignities on the wife and her relations on the paternal side, making the wife do too much work with little rest, failing to provide her adequate nutrition, and mentally torturing her on several scores. Even highly educated and well-placed women are not immune from such maltreatment, although the situation is changing.

Unequal gender relations and injustices perpetrated on women have attracted the attention of social reformers, many of whom have come out in support of their cause.

The abolition of Sati was a positive intervention that spared women much torture, glorification of the self-immolation of a woman on her husband’s pyre still continues. In the twice-born Jatis, widows are still looked down upon, although a small number of them break loose from the shackles of tradition and do remarry. Female infanticide still continues; amniocentesis has made it possible to recognize the sex of an unborn child, and this has facilitated female foeticide.

This facility is now available in almost all cities and many towns. The percentage of inter-community marriages is increasing, but some child marriages also continue to take place, despite legislation. In the original act the minimum age of marriage was fifteen years for girls and eighteen for boys; it was later revised to sixteen years for females and twenty-one years for males. But in some parts of the state even now there are mass marriages in which children (including infants) are married off. After Independence, women got the right to vote and there has been some improvement in their right to own property. But many problems still remain like exploitation of female child labour, dedication of girls as Jogans or Devadasis to temples for sexual
exploitation and prostitution, and sexual abuse of the female child in the family and neighbourhood. Without social consciousness and purposive social action, social legislation remains a hollow and unfulfilled promise.

Educational opportunities for women have been broadened; more of them enter the portals of educational institutions. But enrolment figures for girls are lower than those for boys and the dropout rates are alarmingly high. New economic opportunities have been opened up and women are taking advantages of them. Invisible discrimination is still practiced against them and, in proportion to their size in the population, are still seriously under-represented in the regular employment sector.

Law, education, and now economic and political opportunities, could have altered the situation rapidly, but the State moved cautiously, perhaps because it did not want to tread on the cultural sensitivities of communities in a tradition-bound society. Since the abolition of Sati, legislation has touched several areas impinging on the status of women. Efforts have been made to correct the abuse of polygamy, the age of marriage has been raised, there is legislation against dowry, divorce laws have been liberalized, there have been some changes in the laws pertaining to guardianship, there is new legislation regarding maintenance, and inheritance laws have been made more favourable to women. But there have been difficulties in implementing the changes in law; some loopholes in them have defeated their purpose. The Hindu Code has to make concessions to traditional practices. Women find it difficult to get their lawful share in family property; they do not enjoy full rights ever ‘Stridhan’.

Several forms of gender discrimination emerge from a contradiction in the Indian Constitution. It ensures equality for all before law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, but it also guarantees freedom of religion—the right freely to profess, practice, and propagate religion. This provision of religious freedom takes away much of the freedom and equality extended to women by the Constitution. Because family and personal law is rooted in religious codes, women do not have equal rights within the family, or to property. There has been brave talk about a Common Civil Code, but the opposition from orthodoxy and entrenched vested interests unnerves the country’s political leadership, which defers initiatives for a more propitious time in future. The fear of the possible political fallout and the resultant alienation of the religious communities—and the loss of vote-banks holds progressive legislation in check. In the process, equality eludes women, not only within the configures of Haryana but in general the social and political system appears geared to continue gender inequality.

Keeping in mind the ethos of the state, some honest effort must be made for changing the face of Haryanvi women as is stated: M.N. Srinivas remarks “It (the changing position of India women) has many facets and generalization is well nigh impossible because of the existence of considerable variation among regions,
between rural and urban areas among classes and finally among different religious ethnic and caste groups.”

Unless this is accomplished, the march of the Haryanvi woman, is the march to equality, long and tortuous.

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