

# Perspective Paper: Crimes in the Name of Honour in South Asia

Friday 5 May 2017, by [BERRY Varsha Rajan](#) (Date first published: 13 December 2016).

## Contents

- [Context: Globalisation and](#)
- [Concept of Honour](#)
- [Intersectionalities](#)
- [Interconnectedness and Network](#)

*"Idea of equality as a badge of honour for a nation and a society... unfettered equality...(implies that) if all men are equal, then all men are of the same essence, and the common essence entitles them of the same fundamental rights and equal liberty... In short, justice is another name of liberty, equality and fraternity". B.R. Ambedkar*

## Context: Globalisation and Fractured Modernity

Our societies in South Asia are undergoing transition influenced by post modern globalisation processes and we are witnessing the huge impact of the imbalance which is a fallout of this transition.

Modernisation is supposed to inculcate rational behaviour, scientific temper, respect for plural beliefs, tolerance towards multicultural lifestyles, ethos of liberal humanism, equality, liberty, democratic governance, non-discriminatory behaviour, challenge hierarchies based on class, caste, race, ethnicity, religion and gender.

Instead we have a situation in India and across South Asia, where the imbalance has led to upheavals in society. This has created dilemmas which manifest in many forms and significantly in the rise of crimes in the name of honour, which are primarily meted out on the bodies of women, religious and ethnic minorities and on lower caste communities/groups. This is especially so when they challenge the system or show aspirations to rise above. For example, in India we pride ourselves in having a strong legal redressal system yet we see a reassertion of 'Khap Panchayats' who assume authority to punish the so called 'guilty'. Guilt is established not by modern principles of jurisprudence but by caste, class, ethnic and religious identity.

Hence caste, class, ethnicity and religion are the basis on which our societies are organised and they impose a social order. When this social order is confronted with new challenges, they not only reject/fail to adapt but react with intimidating and violent backlash.

A major issue concerning this region is that of majoritarian violence. The identity of the majority religion claims the national identity. Persons belonging to minority religions and smaller sub sects within a majority become victims of violence. The recent attacks on churches in India, silencing of voices of dissent or of people not agreeing to the dominant position, the most recent being the ban on the IIT Chennai youth group are examples of this. Bangladesh in 2015 has seen the hacking down

of some young bloggers the most recent being the murder of Washiqur Rahman, a progressive activist that followed a similar killing of an American atheist blogger critiquing Islamic fundamentalism in February this year. Pakistan has also witnessed killing of several activists, journalists, the most recent one being the attack and killing of 40 year old Sabeen Mahmud who was conducting a discussion on Balochistan in her cafe which she had been running for the past 8 years.

Another dimension of this imbalance is seen with the arrival of women in the public sphere representing the assertion of women's rights and aspirations in the modern world but which has also given rise to patriarchal anxieties. Crimes take the form of unwelcome behaviour that is intended to offend, humiliate and intimidate persons in lower/weaker positions in the hierarchy. The idea of chivalry is replaced by rude hostility arising from jealousy and insecurity. Time and again we hear, read or witness instances related to this.

Instead of instilling the feeling of liberal humanism globalisation has led to further inequality thus increasing the scope of violence. In India while the national income may have increased 16 fold in the past 20 years budgetary allocations for key social welfare and security has been very low. There is a lack of concern for social issues, the new middle class has lost touch with the toiling masses. In Nepal, where women participated in the war to overthrow the feudal regime they have now been sidelined in the country's governance. There is low representation in the Constituent Assembly and participation in decision making. These are examples of a scenario that reflects fractured modernity and it has come to a level where we are experiencing it in our daily lives. Thus violence has become embedded in our societal structures and is not limited to geopolitics.

The Right Wing ideology cuts across our societies and is not only limited to this region but pans in all of Asia, Europe, Australia and the Americas. This ideology is embedded in the static view of history and society. Any form of challenge by any group or society is unacceptable. This ideology rests on preserving so called chauvinistic 'honour' and deals with challenge through discrimination, rejection, intolerance and would even stretch to ostracisation and elimination. On the other hand, these very sections have all the makings of the new capitalist class interested in only their definition of 'development' thus tragically in control of social, economic and political power which will in the long run destroy the egalitarian, humane, democratic, liberal social fabric.

An interesting observation that we place here is the role of youth in this transitional phase. We see youth across all sections either challenging or being pulled into this politics.

## **Concept of Honour**

The dominant position on defining the term honour is proclamation and self glorification of superiority which derived from a perceived historical past, geographical location, caste and class structure, economic supremacy and power, hegemony of knowledge, masculinity etc which gives the right to inflict violence on the so called 'other, weaker sections of society'.

This violence is inflicted not only on the other but also when there is challenge to supremacy from within as well. Also it is just not a physical act of violence but it is entrenched in the social, political and economic structures. When people directly facing this injustice (along with their supporters) challenge the power structures are meted out with further ostracisation, stigma, ridicule, threats, warnings and actual violence.

To maintain hegemony, capture and control over resources the so called honourable communities as defined above attack and destroy the foundations of honour of the other leading to their systematic marginalisation which over years eventually leads to their dehumanisation and elimination of their

culture, livelihood, leading to a life of abject impoverishment.

Crimes in the name of honour are not only about gender but include other types of crimes, especially for example the crimes committed by men on men. To illustrate, in caste based violence in the name of protecting caste honour violent acts are committed against men as well. It is not only marrying out of religion that provokes community rage, but also inter-caste marriage especially between a dalit and a non-dalit can lead to antagonism. And sometimes it is not the community but the parents themselves who kill their offspring, not just the daughter but the son or son-in-law as well.

We need to understand that the man 'wields' the honour whereas honour 'rests' in a woman's body. The honour of patriarchy is defined in terms of women's chastity and caste purity. When conflict occurs the revenge is taken by inflicting violence on a woman's body because it is seen as humiliating the man. Therefore gender based violence is intrinsic to our societies.

Violence in the South Asian context is both a human and political predicament. The most apparent form of violence though is physical but as argued above not limited to it. It has psychological, structural, geopolitical dimensions and multiple manifestations. Violence is used to demean a personality and is an attempt to break free will by using one's might to put a person into constant state of tension, humiliation and subjugation and is most prominently done to preserve the so called 'honour'.

### **Intersectionalities**

When honour is defined in this broad sense it gives us a wider horizon to discuss the crimes in relation to domestic violence, caste based violence, ethnic and communal violence and violence inflicted on migrant communities and does not limit us to discussing honour killing and women as victims alone.

Within the family men in the role of care takers turn themselves into power centres, to control the household, control the female sexuality and control the weaker members of the family and this is sanctioned by the society and is considered masculine. Any transgression by other members of the family is considered dishonourable and shameful and is dealt with severity. Domestic violence also has community, caste and religious sanction so the victim is supposed to be guilty of breaking kinship ties or religious code. In this way caste and religion supports patriarchy and reinforces authoritarianism.

The problem becomes more complex when the elder women of the household have internalised the patriarchal hegemonic structure and norms. They work as agents of the patriarchal system willingly or under pressure. Since privacy of the household is supposed to be paramount the problems are under cover. Domestic violence comes in the public sphere when Khap is approached for solutions to the issues. The Khap Panchayats are known for their regressive judgements. Thus domestic violence is not limited to individuals and homes but extends to community at large.

Crimes in the name of honour also pertain to the attacks by so called higher castes on so called lower castes. Caste is based on the religious notion of purity and pollutedness. In the new civil order the Constitution of India treats every human being as a citizen of India. Thereby, bestowing honour on the so called low castes. Caste pride is hurt and is the cause of animosity which springs from the dignity bestowed on Dalits. For example, in Maharashtra, after the death of Dr. Ambedkar the movement of Dalit Panther proclaimed an identity search. They wrote with confidence and discarded the Congress politics. As a reaction there were Dalit atrocities perpetrated. Again any such struggle is meted out on atrocities against women. Women's bodies are always the sites of struggle.

Dr. Ambedkar had written many years ago that “women are gateways to the caste system.” Meaning the control of female sexuality is practiced to achieve caste purity.

Another example is of the Kherlanji massacre of 2006 where the Dalits were murdered by the members of the politically dominant Kunbi caste. On 29<sup>th</sup> September 2006, four members of the Bhotmange family belonging to a Dalit caste were murdered. The women of this family were paraded naked in public and raped before being murdered. The Indian media did not cover this until the Nagpur riots by the Dalits and even then described the incident as having been an act of high castes, thus perpetuating the meme of higher versus lower castes, thus denying the notion of crime committed in the name of honour.

Migration as a phenomenon is linked to economic, socio-cultural and political causes, impacts and dimensions. In South Asia we experience both inter-state and intra-state migration as well as cross-border migration. Issues arising from each of these is unique in nature. Besides the economic push and pull factors of migration, we need to understand honour related violence of migrant communities. This violence stigmatises and racialises the migrant communities whether they are from within the country or across the borders, creating a barrier to accessing the rights to protection which is open to the majority community members. Another dimension of the violence related to the migrant community is that they bring amidst their baggage cruel/patriarchal traditions of their home villages and sufferers of this do not have a place to go to for redressal. For instance, domestic violence is known to be existing among Tibetan migrant families, even though we may see women at the forefront of their marketing activities.

Migration of women is often confused with trafficking which further hampers their mobility thus in turn affecting their social economic status. Women have the opportunity to be empowered by migrating for better work and pay but are vulnerable to sexual assault and violence. For this reason many a times women are not allowed to move out of their communities which hamper their aspirations and the opportunity for the women as well as family to uplift themselves. In another scenario when women are compelled to migrate they are pushed into sex work and completely dehumanised in the process.

Ethnicity is a cultural term implying a group of people with a shared distinctive culture, common language and a shared identity. Vilification and hostility towards minorities and indigenous people has spread across the region. Hate speech as a crime is unnoticed and overlooked by the government and society who tolerate entrenched patterns of discrimination against particular communities. The governments have failed to provide adequate protection and thus the perpetrators operate with impunity. There are no hate speech laws but there is a greater reliance on the idea of blasphemy which is more to silence dissent rather than protect victims of abuse.

Minority and indigenous communities in South Asia were feeling the effects of political transition from 2013. In India the use of inflammatory language increased ahead of 2014 general elections ( 26 legislators were cleared of charges of hate speech). In January 2014, Bangladesh also held national elections amid violent protests and popular anger over the proceedings of the International Crimes Tribunal, which saw attacks on Hindu minorities in the Muslim-majority country. Pakistan is also witnessing a surge in violence against its Shi'a and Hazara communities, despite undergoing its first-ever transition of power between two democratically elected governments.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhist nationalists are conducting an increasingly vocal hate campaign against the country's Muslim minority, including calling on people to boycott halal food and Muslim-owned businesses. The government has done little to stop them. Similarly even after the war the problems of the Tamil population continue.

In July 2013, a Dalit woman in Nepal who reported her attempted rape by an upper-caste man was covered in soot and garlanded with shoes by a mob of 60 people, with the assault videotaped and uploaded on a social networking site.

Hate crimes send a message not only to the individuals targeted, but also to their communities. This is especially evident in gender-based violence against minority and indigenous women, with rape and sexual assault employed as a weapon of war or an instrument of oppression to fragment and humiliate entire civilian populations.

## **Interconnectedness and Networking**

To conclude, the Centre rejects the common known definition of 'honour' based on religion, caste, class, ethnicity and masculinity and strongly feels that we need to redefine the term 'honour' in the current scenario. Honour should flow not from ones prescribed status but from concepts of humanism, egalitarianism, liberalism, modernity (not fractured), democratic principles and social justice.

It needs to be highlighted that crimes in the name of honour are not a new phenomenon related to fractured modernity alone, though their scale and brutality has become more complex and its insidious acceptance and entrenchment in our society is worrisome and needs to be exposed and confronted.

We need to be continually engaged in political discourse, networking, campaigns, research and writing on this theme at the regional level. The Centre aims to provide this platform and also be a pressure group to evolve actions and a better understanding. There is a strong need for people's voices to be heard and to forge a pan-South Asia identity through advocating for multi-lateral relationships between our countries and engaging with the SAARC platform on common issues.

From this workshop we move towards a zonal workshop on the same theme. It will be held in Rajasthan in October 2015 which will include the sharing of experiences from the grassroots from the states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab. The next level of our engagement will be at a bilateral meeting of India-Pakistan in Lucknow organised by Pakistan India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy on the theme of gender (specifically) and violence. The Centre will contribute towards a panel discussion on 'crimes in the name of honour' in this forum.

The year long process will culminate with a South Asia Workshop in Colombo which will set the stage for the formation of a South Asia Working Group on Crimes in the Name of Honour. This South Asia Working Group will take the activities of the next level forward.

"The future is ours to shape and we earnestly call for forging ahead with renewed energies and remaining focussed in our ideological direction before all voices of humanism are silenced."

**Varsha Rajan Berry**

For the Mrinal Gore Interactive Centre for Social Justice and Peace in South Asia

---

**P.S.**

\*

[http://www.keshavgoretrust.org/mrinalgorecentre/download/Perspective\\_Paper\\_01\\_Crimes\\_in\\_the\\_Name\\_of\\_Honour.pdf](http://www.keshavgoretrust.org/mrinalgorecentre/download/Perspective_Paper_01_Crimes_in_the_Name_of_Honour.pdf)