

Behind the bans on girls' mobile phone use in North India

Friday 9 March 2018, by [KOVACS Dr. Anja](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2017).

Since 2010, a number of khap panchayats across north India have pronounced bans on mobile phone use for young women. What drives such orders? Are they really effective? And how do young women themselves respond to the bans and the underlying anxieties? We went to Haryana and western UP to find out.

Setting the Scene

The Pradhan and the Order

In mid-November 2014, the Baliyan khap panchayat of Sisouli village and surroundings, near Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh, issued an order: henceforth all those under 18 years of age in the villages covered by the khap panchayat should no longer be allowed to access chat applications like WhatsApp or social media sites like Facebook. In fact, mobile phone use by such young people should be banned altogether.

The Baliyan khap panchayat brings together traditional leaders of one of the gotras (clans) of the Jat community in the area. It is headed by its pradhan (chief), Naresh Tikait, son of illustrious farmers' leader Mahendra Singh Tikait who passed away a few years ago, and covers 46 villages according to newspapers, 84 in Tikait's own estimation.

Though Tikait, generally addressed as Choudhary locally, claimed that the order was meant for both boys and girls, others, such as Bhartiya Kisan Union district president Rahul Ahlawat, were clear that it is especially girls who should refrain from using new technologies.

That addendum did not really come as a surprise. From Bihar to Gujarat, since 2010 there have been countless reports from across north India about khap panchayats and other conservative groupings banning or severely restricting mobile phone use for girls and unmarried women in their communities - and, in a rare case, such as in Sunderbari, Bihar, in 2012, even for married women (Tewary 2012). Though the details of the orders vary, [\[1\]](#) all seem to agree: unrestricted, unsupervised mobile phone use by unmarried women spells disaster.

How serious the threat is considered to be, is illustrated by the punishments that some village councils have announced for violations of their orders. For example, a khap panchayat in Basauli village, around 80 kms from Agra in Uttar Pradesh, announced in February 2016 that the families of girls who violate its complete ban on the use of mobiles by girls younger than 18 will be punished by having to sweep 500 meters of village roads for five days or pay a fine of Rs. 1000. That same month a khap panchayat in Suraj village in Mehsana, Gujarat, went even a step further: in addition to imposing a hefty fine of Rs. 2100 on violators of the ban, the village council decided to reward informers with a payment of Rs. 200 for every tip-off (Khan 2016a). The ban reportedly spread to other villages in the area within weeks (Khan 2016b). The Sunderbari khap panchayat had announced in its 2012 order fines of Rs. 2000 for married women who are found to use their phone

outside of their homes and a whopping Rs. 10 000 for any unmarried woman found to use a phone at all (Tewary 2012). Although elsewhere the bans are framed as advice, even then social censure can be strict in the case of violations (Talukdar 2015 and our fieldwork in Haryana and UP, November and December 2016, also Chowdhry 2004).

The Stakes

At a time when India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is personally pushing his vision for a Digital India, where every person will be connected and every person can be online, how could mobile phones have become so vilified by large swathes of its rural population?

At the Internet Democracy Project, we - that is my colleague Nayantara Ranganathan and myself - went to look for answers, through desk research and through fieldwork in Haryana and western UP, and here is what we found: a fear for a breakdown of social surveillance is at the heart of mobile phone bans for young women.

Tikait had given an indication of the stakes already when he commented to the media following the pronouncement of the ban in 2014. At that time he had said,

[technology] is a good thing but it should not be misused. Making friends on Facebook, falling in love and then breaking up. This all is not good. They should limit it to studies and not use it in the wrong way (PTI 2014).

Others have been more explicit. When one of the first bans was pronounced by an all caste and community panchayat in Lank village, also near Muzaffarnagar, in 2010, panchayat spokesman Rajender Malick told the media: 'The panchayat has imposed a ban on the usage of mobile phones by unmarried girls to prevent them from eloping with young boys against the wishes of their parents' (PTI 2010).

Similar concerns have been raised in Jhajjar in Haryana; Jarwar and Rataur in UP; Bhandarej in Rajasthan; Suraj in Gujarat. In Sunderbari, where at least six women were believed to have eloped in the months before the ban, Manuwar Alam, the head of a committee that had been set up to enforce the ban, was quoted as saying:

It always gives us a lot of embarrassment when someone asks who has eloped this time [...]. Even married women were deserting their husbands to elope with lovers. That was shameful for us [...]. So, we decided to tackle it firmly. Mobile phones are debasing the social atmosphere (Reuters 2012).

Village sarpanch Devshi Vankar of Suraj compared mobile phone use by unmarried women to alcohol consumption of men, describing both as a 'nuisance to society' (Khan 2016a). Following a phone ban issued by the Birohad Barah khap in Jhajjar in 2013, the head of the khap, Jagdev, was quoted as saying, '[t]here will be no honour killing if a strict dress code is imposed in colleges and mobile phones banned' (Sehgal 2013).

Understanding the Background

What's in a Khap?

That khap panchayats do indeed have an abiding interest in control over marriage practices and related issues in this area is not new. In particular, they have become closely associated in the public eye with controversies around so-called 'honour killings' in UP and Haryana in recent years.

In existence since at least the sixteenth century (Singh 2010), khap panchayats are extra-constitutional bodies that are generally made up of mostly elderly, powerful men of the dominant caste who 'wish to be considered as upholders of village norms, custodians of rural culture and guardians of public morality' (Yadav 2009: 16). As such, they often wield considerable influence among the gotras that they belong to or the geographical area that their decisions cover (Gurtoo 2016). Though there have been a few exceptions in recent times (Khatry 2014), women are generally not allowed to participate in their meetings.

Traditionally, khap panchayats took it upon themselves to settle disputes on a wide range of issues, with the aim of maintaining unity, solidarity and goodwill within the group (Pradhan 1965). Examples of such matters include 'property rights, inheritance and disputes which threaten the peace of the village or the immediate region' (Chowdhry 2004: 6). With the introduction of mechanisms such as the statutory, elected panchayat and equality before the law for all in post-colonial India, the traditional panchayats' fields of influence, and thus, power has, however, been waning. This power has further been eroded as more and more people are taking to the courts to settle disagreements regarding material interests.

If khap panchayats have managed to remain socially relevant after Independence, this is precisely because of their engagement with social problems. This was possible because statutory panchayats have largely left this area untouched (Singh 2010). In addition, many villagers continue to see social issues as 'personal', and believe these are best addressed by insiders from the caste and clan (Chowdhry 2004).

Love and Honour (Killings)

Nowadays, therefore, the focus of khaps' deliberations is overwhelmingly on contentious marriages and related problems (Sawhney 2012). And their interventions in these areas have often been far-reaching. Where transgressions of the community's strict rules of kinship and territorial exogamy is believed to occur, khap panchayats frequently come in and mobilise, in the name of 'justice', concerns about the entire village's izzat to impose their own preferences - or rules. Most notoriously, this has taken the form of forcing married couples to divorce so that their fictional brother-sister relationship could be reinstated, and of murdering one or both of the couple involved in what is known as 'honour killings'. [2]

Khap panchayats are said to take action especially where a union between two people entails a risk of loss of status, property or power for dominant groups, and where relatively little cost is associated with reasserting dominance. When an incident involves a dalit from an upwardly mobile family, the response is said to often be particularly vicious and brutal. Dissidence with regard to the khaps' interventions is quelled through threats of social ostracism - or worse. In this way, the institution of the khap panchayat allows older upper caste men to reassert their power over upcoming contenders: younger men and women in general, as well as people from lower castes and socio-economic classes (Chowdhry 2004; Sangwan 2010).

For long, local police and politicians at best stayed out of these disputes, at worst explicitly supported and facilitated the khap panchayats' diktats (Chowdhry 2004; Yadav 2009). Yet as the contradictions between the panchayats' pronouncements and the law of the land has become increasingly stark, the panchayats' activities also have become increasingly infamous. In 2010, history was made when a khap panchayat leader was, for the first time, found guilty by a court for his involvement in the honour killing of one such young couple, Manoj and Babli, in 2007.

By the time we met Naresh Tikait, in November 2016, the institution he was heading was, thus, not unquestioned, and that is something he was painfully aware of. When we met Tikait, a tall man who

listens attentively and speaks thoughtfully, after an hours-long wait in his home, he plunged right in as soon as we had introduced ourselves:

The village environment and city life are different. Khap panchayats and village culture have been shown in a bad light in the newspapers, as if khaps are terrorist organisations. It's a tradition that is thousands of years old that parents choose who is right for the girls to marry. We educate our girls until whatever age they like - to inter level, BA - spending twenty, thirty, forty lakhs with the wish that they find someone worthy of them to marry. But then they run away with anybody. Wouldn't the parents feel bad? [...] There will be opposition in society. Because of the sin that the girl has committed, the parents have to bend in society. [...] We don't want to kill girls like it is portrayed in the papers. We love our girls. But arranged marriages run longer. Otherwise you have to go to the DM [District Magistrate], jilli mukhya [District Head] - the girls' family gets upset, the boys' family gets upset. We don't feel good.

Mobiles and Other Bans

The khaps' concern about illicit relationships has not only found expression in the events around contentious marriages, though; it is also reflected in a whole range of other decisions by traditional panchayats from across north India - including bans on jeans, tops and short skirts, on girls dancing at social events, even on eating chowmein, burgers and pizza (Sarin 2013; PTI 2013a). All of these have been said to contribute to violence against women, and to illicit affairs between young boys and girls.

Mobile phone bans for unmarried women do not simply fall in the same category, however: unlike the above, they are not merely lifestyle choices, but facilitate further choice, and autonomy. Jagwati Sangwan from the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) explained in a conversation with us at AIDWA's office in Rohtak:

The phone is a space for connectivity. It makes the women using it independent in some respects. That is why they do not like it when girls have it. As individuals, if they become independent, it leaves room for love and affection on their own terms - it allows in a big way for freedom as a human being. It allows women to make transactions on their own behalf. Even within the house, relations are hierarchical, and the ones lowest in the hierarchy benefit the most from exercising individual choice.

What mobile phones make possible in India, in other words, is to develop new ideas of the 'self', of who one is and how one wants to relate with and represent oneself to others - even to experiment 'with ideas and practices of courtship, "love", and intimacy' (Jeffrey and Doron 2013, p. 181).

And it is precisely that which many khap panchayats want to prevent. By creating all these new possibilities, and especially by creating spaces for privacy that were previously not available to young women in these communities, mobiles have disrupted the existing patriarchal regimes of control and surveillance. As a consequence, they have also emerged as a major threat to a girl's - and by extension her family's - reputation and izzat (honour).

Thus, Dhara Singh, Secretary of the Kadyan khap, identified mobile phones as one of three big threats 'corrupting' young people today - the other two threats he mentioned are television and co-education (Swahney 2012). 'Girls using mobile phones are easily connected and approachable and this freedom may create unnecessary problems for her family', said Durga Lal, Sarpanch of Bhandarej (PTI 2012). While discussing the local khap panchayat's phone ban order with us, a male teacher in his late thirties, early forties at the local school in Sisouli, who was fully in agreement

with the pradhan's views, commented:

There is a contradiction between the Constitution and social norms in our villages. [...] The implementation of the Constitution cannot go at the expense of rural life. Whatever we get from our older generation, we have to hand it down to the next generation'

Girls themselves were painfully aware of how such views affected their phone use. An 11th standard student who we chatted with in Shahpur said scornfully: 'when boys use it [i.e. a mobile phone], parents say, "do whatever you want, just leave us out of it". For girls, the house's whole izzat depends on it'.

The ultimate object of protection is not the young woman herself, but her family's honour.

Resistance, Support, Adaptation

Resistance and Failure

The orders did not go uncontested. English-language media coverage was often critical, and activists, members of the National Commission for Women, representatives of the Union Ministry for Minority Affairs and even the Supreme Court of India have all explicitly criticised the mobile phone bans at various points in time (PTI 2013b, PTI 2014).

Locally, the situation is more complex. Although there are exceptions, few residents have come on record to protest the bans when they were initially pronounced. 'These people are vindictive,' said a man from Kedhar village in Hissar, Haryana, following the announcement of a ban there in 2013. 'If we question their decision they will ban us from the village' (Mukherjee 2013).

Even so, when we travelled to UP and Haryana to find out what had happened after the bans, there seemed to be widespread agreement that they had failed. 'Less educated people make these bans, but they don't affect educated people', a young woman in a computer coaching centre in Shahpur told us. Karanvir, the pradhan of the statutory panchayat of Shoram, who believed the ban had been a complete failure, commented:

Mobile phones were new back then [when the order for the ban was first given] and people were scared that their daughters would get spoiled. But now it has become a necessity. You can go hungry but you cannot be without a phone.

Similarly, the Muzaffarnagar-based Bina Sharma, who has been closely associated with the establishment and functioning of UP's 1090 helpline for women (about which more later), said, in a conversation with us: 'Women are using phones a lot - it has become a need. Even maids are using it - phone in one hand, and sweeping. Housewives, vegetable vendors, everyone has phones'.

While we were chatting with her at their home about the khap panchayat's order, Tikait's sister-in-law, who lavished us with warm hospitality and good-humoured conversation, admitted wistfully: 'people wouldn't listen'.

A New Take

Whether or not as a consequence of this widespread resistance, when we met Choudhary Tikait, he told us that the khap panchayat's 2014 order had, in fact, been misunderstood. Rather than completely banning mobile phone use, as was reported in the media, it was meant to discourage young women from using mobile phones in public spaces. The pradhan explained:

When the college is close by, the girl has to walk 1 km to get there. After college, she comes back home. What good will she do with a phone? If she is walking on the road laughing, society laughs at her [...].

Don't use it in the open. There are opportunities to use it - use it at home, before college, after college, on Sundays. Why do you need it on the road? If you have an urgent call to make, use a PCO booth, or make it but then keep your phone in your bag or in a book [...].

Some girls stop studying after 5th, 6th. Some go on to become pilots, BSF, IBP - that is also there. Girls can go to great heights. But what will happen if someone says, 'your girl was standing at the bus stop, just standing around'?

With this reframing, the pradhan's views were much more closely aligned with another refrain that was pervasive throughout our interactions: that use of mobile phones is ok and misuse is not - and that the misuse far outnumbers the use. Social workers, school teachers, even young women themselves, everyone repeated this point to us - so much so that we had to wonder aloud how it was possible that none of the people we had spoken to had ever misused their mobile.

Should the pradhan's reframing or the alternative discourse on use and misuse be seen as a victory? Certainly, it leaves new spaces for empowerment if women at least have some access. But the overarching problem remains: whether or not a partial ban was indeed intended, the desire to control women's conversations, actions, choices and movements remains at its heart. The predominant concern about misuse remained intimately tied to the possibility of illegitimate relationships and of a blot on a girl's reputation. As the pradhan himself told us: 'Fear, shame - girls have to carry it. It is a question of izzat and maan-sammaan (respect)'.

Support

While support for a complete ban might have been limited, such partial restrictions, generally translating into a ban on unsupervised use, therefore find much wider approval - and sometimes from somewhat unexpected quarters.

Take Bina Sharma, for example, who in many ways has been a strong advocate for women's rights. 'There is no such ban on phones as such anywhere,' she told us squarely. 'You can't stop it and you should not stop it'.

But 'secret' uses of mobile phones do deeply trouble her also, as well as other school teachers we spoke to. The principle of a college in Shahpur could not hide her disapproval when she said, 'they shut the door and then use it!'. Sharma explained how boys would often gift girls they were interested in both a phone and a sim, so they can talk to each other. 'Girls use it secretly by going into the toilet', she added. A local media owner, lawyer and activist who was visiting Sharma at the same time we were, proposed that an app should be developed so one would be able to detect how many phones there are in an area. Sharma seemed in complete agreement.

In Sharma's case, as she is intimately familiar with a larger number of cases of violence against women, the worry was perhaps driven as much by a concern for girls' well-being as for their family's honour. But the parallel she drew was instructive. In the school around the corner, there are about 4000 girls', she told us by way of illustration.

As soon as school is over, they cover their face with a dupatta and go and ride on the back of a boy's bike! And because they all wear the same uniform, it becomes impossible

to identify them! Whatever is done chupke chupke (secretly) is always wrong.

A number of khap panchayats as well as the Hindu Mahasabha (Joychen 2012; Outlook 2014), too, have called for bans on the use of dupattas by girls to cover their faces.

Sharma saw mobile phones as responsible for other family problems as well, moreover, in particular for divorces. She said:

Earlier, when one's daughter got married, you sent her off in the doli [palanquin] to another house, with the advice to adjust. Now, you give a phone in her hand and say, 'whenever there is trouble, you give us a call, we are here for you'. This causes a lot of interference during the time that the girl has to adjust in her new house. If her in-laws scold her, then immediately the girl calls her parents, and they will come right away to take her back.

Sharma is not the only one to think like that. In some communities in relative conservative areas such as Banaras, the distrust of cell phones and the havoc they can wreak can in fact be so big that daughters-in-law are asked to leave their cell phones behind in their natal home. 'With the arrival of a young bride, the family ensured that her previous social network was dismantled' (Jeffrey and Doron 2013: 175).

A woman's space for privacy, it seems, *always* spells trouble.

What Happens with Girls IRL

Ownership and control

As a consequence of what seems to be a fairly broad consensus on this issue, even the fairly privileged school and college girls that we met in Haryana and UP find themselves in an impossible bind. On the one hand, it became evident from our conversations with them that questions of women's empowerment and equal rights for all were regularly discussed in their schools, after they themselves brought up the issue of equality time and again, and with vehemence. But at the same time, they could also see quite clearly that this wasn't the way the world around them was working.

At thirty six percent, India has one of the largest gaps in mobile phone ownership in the world (GSMA 2015). To what extent mobile phone ownership or control differed exactly between young women and young men in the areas we visited was difficult to ascertain, but there was wide agreement among all those we spoke with, young and old, that boys had more and easier access than girls.

Only a small minority of the school girls who we spoke to had a phone of their own - many said that they used their mother's phone. Among college students, the number of students owning, or at least controlling, a phone seemed to be higher - in one of the colleges we visited in Haryana, the principal estimated that around eighty percent of the students had phones, with about half having smartphones. In poorer communities, we were told that there was frequently only one phone per house, which was controlled by the male head of the household or by a son, but which others in the household were allowed to use as well. In such cases, boys and husbands were identified as the main users, though girls did have access. Older woman frequently noted that they asked their children for help when they want to use the phone.

Time and Space

Gender role expectations further contributed to different patterns in use. An 11th standard student

from Shahpur told us:

At home, boys are holding a book and they have a mobile phone in between [the pages]. We have to slice vegetables, study, etc. Boys are told: 'don't worry about the work, your sister will do it'!

One of the girls in the Shahpur coaching centre said that in her house, 'there was no need for [a ban]. We use it whenever it is necessary and we also do the housework - we are responsible' (emphasis mine).

In addition to restrictions in terms of when they can use a phone, restrictions about where they can use it were also common. In particular, ideas about the impropriety of young women using mobile phones in public space, first highlighted by the pradhan, were found to be widespread. For example, in a group discussion with a group of about forty women of all ages who we met in a village in Muzaffarnagar district, facilitated by officers of Mahila Samakya in UP, they identified college, meetings, trains, the jungle, shops, the road, wells, the field, the mosque, while eating and outside of college all as spaces or times where mobile phone use would not be appropriate. The village is squeezed between two areas in eastern UP where bans have been pronounced, but has not seen a ban itself. The women of the village argued that these norms applied to both men and women, and identified rational arguments for their roots, such as that it is not safe to use a phone while walking on the road. Yet when we asked them whether that meant men didn't use their phones in those spaces either, they readily admitted that men do, 'because they don't care about anything' (laughter). Moreover, after the session, one teenager came up to my colleague Nayantara and whispered in her ear: 'I do have many more restrictions than my brother, they are worried about what I will do!'.

In the pradhan's village, too, girls noted that they would use phones mostly at home. When they would go out of the village, or when there was a special occasion in the school, like the freshers' party on the day we visited, they could bring a phone with them. But otherwise, mobile phones were, ironically, not to be carried around.

As we walked into the school, a student who was walking some twenty five meters ahead of us checked her phone one last time before putting it in her bag. 'Look', said the pradhan, 'she put her phone away. That is out of respect for me'.

Use

When the women members of Mahila Samakya we spoke with discussed places where it was ok to use a mobile phone, apart from the home, interestingly, all the spaces that they listed indicated instrumental use: hospital, the oil and ration shop, at the pradhan's.

Moreover, although we are sure that girls do use phones for other purposes as well, in their conversations with us, they all emphasised what they themselves called 'responsible' uses: to study, to look for valuable information on the Internet, to check their exam results, to look for jobs, at best also to WhatsApp with family and friends or make online purchases - the latter being especially popular among college students. Clearly, even if their uses went beyond these into more controversial areas, they were acutely aware of the particular ways in which their communities looked at use/misuse and reproduced those distinctions closely in their own accounts, always making clear that they were to be seen on the right side of the divide. We really had to prod to get the students we spoke with to share less instrumental uses, no matter how innocent, such as watching TV serials or listening to music, also. (Among those who did, it was striking how often they mentioned that they did so on Reliance Communications' Jio sim. At the time of our fieldwork,

Reliance offered a Jio plan with high-speed 4G data, HD voice calls, HD video calls, SMM and Jio apps all free. Without the cost barrier to their Internet use, it seemed to be easier for these girls to explore the Internet on their own terms.)

What stood out in particular is how controversial and surrounded by taboos social media, and especially Facebook use, seemed to be, even more so in more rural areas. The enormous gender gap in Facebook use in India has been commented on widely. While in most countries, women make up half of all Facebook users, in India that figure stands at barely a quarter (We Are Social Singapore 2017). Some of the gap might be due to differences in Internet access (Palit 2016). But as we found, that is only part of the story.

Although they agreed boys commonly did (and all the boys we met did indeed have Facebook accounts), few girls acknowledged using Facebook, in contrast to WhatsApp. When we asked who used Facebook of a mixed-gender group in a coaching centre, one girl blushed while shaking her head. When we jokingly pushed the question with her, she blushed even more heavily, hid her face behind her sister's back and gazed around with a slightly panicked look in her eyes. We never pursued the question in this way again. On other occasions, however, we could literally see girls make an internal calculation as to how that answer that question. Some in the end bravely raised their hands, others decided it is better to stay quiet.

An 11th standard school girl in Shahpur explained why Facebook use was such a sensitive issue: 'WhatsApp is ok because it only has the contacts of people whose number is already in the phone. On Facebook, you can add anybody in the world, so it is different'.

The central concern here, in other words, was once again the development of relationships considered illicit by the community and the sully of girls' reputation. The pradhan commented: 'Facebook is not related to work, is it? It is related to love, marriage'. And then, after a pause, 'we cannot control what happens in the city. We would like to preserve our culture here, in the village'.

More broadly, students in a girls college in Kharkhoda that had seen a mobile phone ban for four years which now stood cancelled, closely echoed the concerns of their elders when they told us what 'misuse' would entail, and what kind of mishaps can happen as a consequence:

Boys sometimes do eve teasing [sexual harassment]: put their number in the pockets of girls and run away. Girls come out of their homes to go to college, but bunk classes and go off to the canteen. Even when there was a ban, they would still use phones - whoever were the type not to follow the bans and who would talk to boys. They even now put earphones in and cover their head with their dupatta and speak on the phone [...].

Those who are using it to talk to their parents do it confidently on the grounds without any fear. Those who are not using it for good reasons hide and do it secretly.

In other words: although mobile phone use of young women may not be banned in practice, it remains heavily curtailed, circumscribed and supervised. Across generations, nobody we spoke with said it is ok for girls to use a mobile phone everywhere or for whatever they want. It is in this way that the social surveillance of young women can be reproduced even in the mobile phone age.

The Reproduction of Inequality

The Harm of Losing Out

More than the restrictions as such, however, it was the differential treatment for boys and girls that

many girls felt deeply frustrated about. As school students in Sisouli noted:

Boys have more facilities and we have less permission, so we end up falling behind. We can use phones for things like job search. But we have to go to a cybercafe if we are not allowed to use our phones. We hesitate and our confidence is low because we are not allowed to use phones much. Due to these restrictions, we are getting less response'

Their words were echoed by Dr. Ramesh Saini, who heads the computer lab at Kanya Mahavidyalaya.

Earlier people who studied from these parts would feel inferior when they join jobs where everyone else knows how to use technology. They had to start to learn afresh. They fall behind. That is why we are recognising that understanding and knowing how to use technology is very important for our self-confidence and competence.

School students in Shahpur insisted: 'There has to be equality. We are not given the same freedoms. Boys are always on their phones and constantly doing something on it!'. When we asked their counterparts in Sisouli what would need to change, their answer was: 'Soch [mindset]! We have to ask our elders why are boys allowed to go out when we are not allowed to it'. And then added, dejected: 'But traditions won't change. We don't think anything can change'.

Sexual Harassment

In a region known for its deep inequalities - the sex ratio in Muzaffarnagar district in 2012-2013 was 888, for example (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner 2013), and in parts of Haryana it drops even below 500 - the preferential treatment meted out to boys is readily acknowledged.

Tikait's sister-in-law, for example, commented: 'boys are given more importance, girls are not. Maybe in cities they are equal'. Santosh Dahiya, first woman president of the Sarv Jatiya Sarv Khap Mahapanchayat (SJSKMP, with one representative of every khap in Haryana, argued, when we asked her about the gender gap:

There is a lot of harassment and blackmail that goes on. But emotional bonding happens from the girls only. Just because you are the victim does not mean you are not at fault. Girls are emotionally weak, trusting. They have to be brought back on track. How will you stop boys? You can't stop them.

You can't stop boys - that seemed to be the common refrain, even if some, such as a college teacher in Sisouli or Dahiya herself, do think that there should be restrictions for boys as well.

And sadly, further feeding into the concerns of their elders, mobile phone harassment and blackmailing of young women by these 'unstoppable' men does indeed seem to be widespread. Though few girls we spoke to said they had been victim of it themselves, concerns regarding these issues were raised by almost everyone - young and old. In fact, six out of the fourteen misuses of mobile phones listed by the women members of Mahila Samakya we spoke with referred to harassment; a seventh was that children would get unintended access to porn. Unwanted calls, technology-enabled stalking, and also the creation of fake social media profiles and the morphing of images were the most common complaints.

Though the police is often rapped for not being responsive enough when it comes to technology-enabled abuse, law enforcement in both states has taken action. In April 2015, then Rohtak Superintendent of Police (SP) Shashank Anand set up a service through which women could file

complaints through SMS and WhatsApp, following which a police officer would follow-up with the complainant and register an FIR. The idea was to provide rapid assistance (Mohan 2015). However, due to the large number of irrelevant messages that were received ('hi', 'hello!', 'good morning'), the service was shut down after six months, shared Inspector Garima at the Women Police Station in Rohtak with us. Women can now file their complaints through Haryana's 1091 helpline for women.

Since November 2012, UP, too, has a helpline number, 1090, which focuses overwhelmingly on technology-related harassment and abuse. By 30 September 2016, the helpline had received more than six lakh calls. Almost almost five and a half lakh of these had to do with harassment through phones; less than ten thousand complaints were related to social media sites. All calls are connected to a central call centre where women answer the phones. Men in the call centre will follow up on the complaints by giving the accused several informal warnings. Only if the harassment does not stop following this, a formal complaint is filed, explained Bina Sharma, who has been closely associated with the helpline from the beginning.

While a system of informal warnings might not be sufficient for those who want to see the law applied consistently, it does considerably lower the barrier to actually make a complaint in regions where concerns about a woman's reputation are so pervasive that the preferred response frequently is to simply cover any abuse up. Moreover, we were impressed by how widespread knowledge about the number was among the students we spoke to: all of them seemed to know about the helpline and what it is for, including in the villages.

Whether the helpline is effective remains to be seen. When reporters of UP's rural, all-women news paper Khabar Lahariya filed a complaint with 1090 after having been phone stalked for months, it took so long for the investigation to move that they ended up going to a police station instead (even then, the police in the end only took action after the harassment made national headlines) (Khabar Lahariya 2015a). Others have also complained of simply never being able to get through. According to the police, staff and other resources simply have not been sufficient to keep up with the number of calls (Khabar Lahariya 2015b). Seeing that there reportedly are fifteen women taking calls and fifteen men speaking with harassers at all times, that says something about the scale of this epidemic.

Who Is Invested in Violence?

Continuing gaps in police responses to these complaints are not the only challenge, however. An additional one is that the moral panics that seem to be at the heart of restrictions on mobile phone use for girls is amplified and further entrenched by a range of actors who have a complex set of interests in doing so. It is not simply that many young men seem to support restrictions on mobile phone use for their female counterparts - Sangwan, for example, pointed out that 'even young men and boys say girls should be under control and there is no need for phones to be given to them'. It is that some have a particularly strong vested personal interest in keeping existing gender inequalities alive and in policing all those who might seem to be transgressing boundaries.

As research by Prem Chowdhry (2005: 5189) in Haryana has shown, the deep crisis in the employment and marriage markets in the state has put tremendous pressure on unmarried, unemployed young men, who remain dependents much longer than traditional ideologies would like them to. This has resulted both in lumpenisation ('ladke haath se nikal gaye' - 'the boys are out of one's control', was a common refrain during Chowdhry's fieldwork) and a crisis of masculinity.

The khap panchayats now gives these unemployed, unmarried young men a chance to gain in 'honour' by policing the 'dishonoured', i.e. men 'who have failed to control their women's behaviour' as well as all women (Chowdhry 2005: 5193). Indeed, often it is precisely unmarried, unemployed

young men who ensure that the diktats of the khap panchayats are adhered to. Through the public spectacle of all-male collectivity, aggression and solidarity, these young men, from dominant castes yet marginal, come into their own.

Moreover, in the Muzaffarnagar area of UP, keeping the moral panics alive is crucial to electoral politics. Groups associated with the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party have been reported to play on fears about communities losing control over the sexuality of 'their' women to create polarisation, and vote banks, along communal lines (Jain 2014). According to Appu Esthose Suresh (2016), 'of the more than 12,000 low-key communal incidents recorded in UP since 2010, nearly 15 percent are spurred by cases involving women: from alleged sexual violence to elopement'. In 2013, rumours of an incident of harassment of a Hindu girl by a Muslim boy were widely believed to be responsible for setting off riots that reportedly killed at least 48 people and displaced 50 000 (HT Correspondent, 2013).

Moving Towards Change

The Distance to the Road

Are the girls in Sisouli right, then, to be pessimistic, to believe that nothing will change?

To the extent that 'distance from the main road' was seen by many as an important indicator of how resistant a community was to change, they might be among one of the later cohorts to actually experience change in a fundamental way.

But change is taking place. A student at Kanya Mahavidyalaya who had replaced her peers' uniform of salwar kameez by dress pants and a top noted:

A few years ago, my mother was also different from how she is now. She used to have a problem with phone use. She has come around now. I also used to wear salwar kameez - now I have also changed [...].

If parents get exposure and see other girls using it [mobile phones], they will be okay with their girls using phones and dressing differently also.

The distance to the road was, according to this student, crucial in how much acceptance she got for her changed behaviour and appearance.

When I go to my village, they look at me as if I am some animal and have come from another planet [...].

People from rural areas and remote areas are a little more hesitant to allow phones. I live on the approach road, and my parents are ok with my using phone.

Similarly, another student in the same college commented, somewhat pained,

I want to use phones openly and nicely. I don't feel good doing it secretly, as if I am doing something I should not be doing. I have studied in Delhi also, and my parents don't think phone use is bad.

Unless students made calls to contact their parents, many of her fellow students considered using a phone to reach others inappropriate. But alternative voices, such as this one, are slowly also being

heard.

The End of the Ban

The college where these girls are studying, Kanya Mahavidyalaya in Kharkoda, is located in a region where several khaps have issued bans on mobile phone use for young girls, and in 2012 a ban on phone use within the college grounds was instated by the college authorities as well, to curb 'misuse'. Khaps have been known to put pressure on schools and colleges to put into place such restrictions in numerous instances. But in 2015, the ban at Kanya Mahavidyalaya was lifted again. 'The ban on phones didn't work', Suresh Boora, the college principal, admitted quite readily, her two phones lying in front of her on her desk.

Before and after the ban, there was not much difference on issues such as outings with boys and boys hanging around the college. [...] The suggestion boxes were always full of requests to allow phones [...].

There are positive uses of phones also, and knowledge about this is increasing. Even we have WhatsApp groups for the teachers [...].

Also it is good to be up to date with the latest technology. Parents and teachers should spread awareness about uses and misuses of phones. Knowledge is good to get.

To educate students, rather than restrict their behaviour - that seems to be the approach that the college has taken now. Saini, the head of the college's computer lab gave an example:

Earlier, the students used to be shy to use computers when we would educate them that sometimes "different" pictures would pop up by mistake. Now they have seen it for themselves and are not running away from using phones and computers for that reason.

Those changes are also driven by the larger political economy of the region, notes Sangwan:

Even if they [the khap panchayats] issue fatwas, young people, dalits, etc, they are asserting their civil rights. Media exposure in a globalised world lets people look at different lifestyles and want some of those things for themselves [...].

The economic crisis in agriculture is very deep right now, and young people are looking outside of agriculture. Internet, phones, communications - they are all 'majboori' [jobs?] now. Circumstances are pulling them in the direction of these technological changes.

Men and Change

In contrast to Kanya Vidyalaya's Boora, Tikait still only uses a feature phone. But many of the young people in the village are using smart phones as well, and some of them had made Tikait a Facebook page.

Though perhaps more so in small towns than in villages, men's attitudes are also slowly changing. Sangwan noted:

If you look at the aftermath of the Nirbhaya incident [in which a Delhi student was brutally gang raped on a moving bus in Delhi], even young boys are beginning to think about these issues and come forward with them. It's a small portion of men, but it's

there.

Even some of the khap panchayats have started to make a different noise. Though Sangwan believes that their private actions and public messages do not actually cohere, Haryana khaps had expressed their disapproval when a Gujar khap in Jarwar, near Muzaffarnagar, had announced in 2014 that it wanted a total ban on mobile phone use for girls. In response, Haryana's Sarv Khap Panchayat issued a statement saying: 'We understand that the use of mobile phones cannot be allowed in schools and colleges, but it does not mean that all girls cannot use mobile phones' (News18 2014).

Arguing for mobile phone surveillance

Clearly, a churn is happening. And young women, too, add to this, mobilising existing discourses in their favour to the extent possible. When trying to convince their parents to allow them to use a phone, they draw extensively on discourses of upward social mobility and aspirations as well as, as discussed before, illustrating how 'responsible' their use of mobile phones is.

Ironically, to make that point, the argument that mobile phones allow surveillance of their movements even when they are not in sight, is perhaps the most widely used one - and quite successfully so. From Shoram's pradhan to Bina Sharma, everybody agreed that phones were an important tool to ensure girls' safety. In fact, if Kanya Vidyalaya had decided to allow girls to carry their phones into the campus ground, one factor that influenced this decision was that 'parents would also request that their girls be allowed phones for safety', as Boora pointed out. Even the Kanya Vidyalaya student who had exchanged her salwar kameez in favour of more western clothes noted that she needed a phone to update her parents while not at home, as she was living a bit further away.

The arguments we heard were reminiscent of what Reena Patel (2010: 62) found in her research with women call centre workers in India: mobile phones as a technology can help to expand the physical spaces in which women can engage, but frequently they are able to do so precisely because mobiles also allow 'women to remain connected to regimes of surveillance, such as the family unit or the employing organisation' - it is this that allows them to 'stretch the social codes that deem it unacceptable for them to go out', and to go out further afield.

The question that is now before us is how to help these young women expand the new spaces and opportunities this creates for them, while being conscious of the numerous constraints within which they continue to operate.

The Ending

'Can we make one more stop?', asks the Choudhary after we leave Sisouli's degree college. Driving along the narrow winding roads of the village, with sugarcane standing high in the fields all around us, we reach a small open spot, with a building housing a water pump, and an old, frail man sitting on a charpoy (daybed) under a shady tree on the side of a small square. Choudhary introduces us to each other. This man will be able to confirm how things are, the Choudhary explains. They chat.

'Tikaitji is a gentleman,' stresses the old man. 'He is a well-respected man around here'. The men exchange a few more words. Then the old man turns to us and says:

Our khap includes 84 villages. We are a societal arrangement. We take free decisions in the interest of society: don't spend without good reason, don't fight. Then the Supreme Court comes and challenges our existence?

And then, shaking his head, helplessly: 'nobody can do anything'.

Tikaitji sits down on the charpoy next to the old man.

As we drive away, the tall, proud village leader and his frail elder disappear from view. Only the fields are left now.

This article is based on desk research as well as field work, conducted in UP and western Haryana over the course of November and December 2016, by Dr. Anja Kovacs and Nayantara Ranganathan. For our field work, we visited Kharkoda, Rohtak and Kurukshetra in Haryana and Shoram, Shahpur, Sisouli, Jansath and Muzaffarnagar in western Uttar Pradesh. We spoke with a wide range of people in these areas, including the Muzaffarnagar District Magistrate, members of khap panchayats and a statutory panchayat, school and college principals, social workers, activists, school and college girls and members and office bearers of Mahila Samakya. We are very grateful to all of them for opening up their homes, offices and institutions to us and for sharing their insights and opinions so generously.

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P.S.

Gendering Surveillance

https://genderingsurveillance.internetdemocracy.in/phone_ban/

Footnotes

[1] Some khap panchayats qualify their order by noting that supervised use will be allowed, such as in the case of Tikait's grouping or in a meeting of the Jat Mahasabha in Rataur village near Muzaffarnagar in 2016 (Ali 2016). Some make an exception for college girls, highlighting that they rely on their phones for their studies or that they are more mature, such as in Mehsana district of Gujarat in 2016 (Khan 2016b; PTI 2016). Some specifically single out social media use, such as in Kanana village in Barmer district, Rajasthan, 2015, where the order was, ironically, circulated on WhatsApp (Talukdar 2015).

[2] For a range of examples see Yadav 2009; these and other forms of 'punishments' are also covered in Chowdhry 2005.