

TALKING MARRIAGE, CASTE AND COMMUNITY: VOICES FROM WITHIN

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A SAHELI STUDY

On 21 February 2008, the newspapers in Delhi featured a news item of members of the BJP Mahila Morcha at a rally in the capital demanding 33% reservation for women in Parliament. Nothing new about that until you saw the photograph accompanying it – of the women leading the rally wearing masks of Narendra Modi. A scathing irony that the instigator of terrible crimes against Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular, should become an icon for Hindu majority mobilisation. A crude reminder of the true challenge that the communalisation of women towards the right-wing poses in India today.

Then again, this is not the first time we have had to face this reality. We came face to face with such contradictions during our anti-Sati struggles in 1987 when we were confronted by women who supported the murder of Roop Kanwar in the name of Sati. With the rise of right-wing Hindu fundamentalism in the last two decades, such communalisation of women has been on the rise: as a fallout of the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984, through the rhetoric of Hindu manhood to save the Hindu mother-nation by demolishing the Babri Masjid, a call led by women like Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambhara: or the carnage of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 where we witnessed with horror as Hindu women actively supported and encouraged countless crimes against the Muslim minority, including sexual crimes on Muslim women. Each such instance challenged our earlier view of women only being victims.

Today, communal and caste-based politics are fragmenting the polity, and leading to strong assertions of identity by majority groups as well as marginalised and minority communities. On one hand, women's bodies are sites of violence during communal conflict, and on the other, within all communities there is a strengthening of fundamentalism and practices that deeply affect women, leading to greater violence and control – be it in the form of dress codes, increased honour killings, Sati, and even the parading of woman naked, or the rigidity with which caste and cultural 'purity' is being asserted through forced endogamous marriages and control over women's sexuality and reproduction. With rising communalism matched by rising casteism, the need to look deeper at the impact of such politics on women's lives is more vital than ever.

Drawing from our work in crisis intervention, our campaigns against communalism, unequal personal laws, and our own life experiences of caste and community identity, we embarked on a study to see how these issues currently manifest themselves in women's lives, to explore conflicting notions of faith and belonging, as well as the complexities between identity, gender and sexuality, especially within the institution of marriage.

This study was carried out among women from different religions, castes and communities to gain some insights into how these define women's experience of marriage and family and to get a glimpse of their daily lives (See box: Profile of the Women at the end of the document). It attempted to understand their choices of partnership and marriage or to remain single, the nature of their relationship with the family and the spouse, the loss or transformation of identity through marriage, the impact of their beliefs on their children and their vision for the future as influenced by religion, caste and community. From faith to rituals, from conforming to rebelling, as individuals and as 'carriers of tradition and culture', day-to-day life was the subject of our enquiry.

We wanted to gain insights which could help to evolve campaign strategies and interventions to tackle growing casteism and communalism. We hope it will contribute to bringing together anti-caste and anti-communal struggles with feminist critiques of religion, marriage, caste and community, and pave the way for a more radical, transformative politics. '

The Enquiry begins within

Even as we addressed the larger impact and challenges of these communalised times, we began to question what it means to each of us to belong or identify as a member of a community, or be identified as such by others.

Through a series of discussions with friends and comrades exploring similar questions, we looked at ourselves to understand how our own religious-socio-cultural locations are defined — is it by the god we pray to, the festivals we celebrate, the clothes we wear, the language we speak, the food we eat, the cultural symbols that comfort or alienate us. Even for non-believers among us (and there are a fair number in Saheli), we discovered the many ways in which the religion, caste and community we come from/grew up within has defined our lives, identities, preferences, tastes, and prejudices. At the same time, we also introspected on the privileges/oppressions of the institutions of marriage— what it means to be single, married, divorced, separated or in same sex relationships, and how powerfully these issues conflate with questions of family, society and community identity. Through this process we became the first subjects of our own study and our voices are included in the report, though not in the formal, quantitative sense.

Women Speak of Discovering ‘us’ and ‘them’

Since social conditioning and upbringing play a critical role in determining our beliefs and practices as well as framing our identities, we began by trying to understand the social, religious and cultural environment the women in the study grew up in. We wanted to understand notions of caste and community identity, stereotypes and prejudice as acquired in their natal homes and the limitations these cast upon them and the ways in which these were and are negotiated among friends and family, in school and in neighborhoods.

It was evident that most of the women we talked to were brought up with a strong sense of belonging to a certain community as defined by a whole ‘way of living’ — customs, cultural code, rituals, food habits and so on. Consequently, the sense of ‘self’ came hand in hand with a strong sense of the ‘other’ — complete with characteristics and stereotypes. This showed itself everywhere, from neighborhoods to school and work, from matters of faith to personal choices made as adults, as well as interactions with people from other communities.

“My family lived in Shakarpur. During the 1984 riots, my father hid in a loft for three-four days and was severely beaten up. He cut his hair at that time, and so did my brothers. I feel so bad that we were forced to conceal our Sikh identity,” shares Rajinder Kaur, a Sikh woman originally from Gurdaspur.

“All our close interactions are within our community. We do interact with people from other communities in the neighborhood but won’t go to their houses to eat or anything else,” says Roopwanti, a Jatav woman from Uttar Pradesh.

“I was told not to talk to Muslims or eat in their houses,” says Sushma, a Hindu Punjabi, echoing a prejudice which was oft repeated during the study.

In most cases, the women’s emotional engagement with faith was intertwined with culture, custom and family. It was quite ‘natural’ for the women in the study to speak of their families, and more specifically, their parents as being the most significant influences in determining their religious identities. Prayers, fasts, festivals and rituals performed at home remained important initiators into religion and culture.

Our study revealed that irrespective of whether the women we spoke to described their families as believers or ritualistic practitioners or neither of the two, almost every woman in this study — 44 out of 45 as well as the Sahelis — had grown up in homes that had some center of prayer or marker of religion — a puja room, a sacred corner, a shelf with deities, statues or pictures. Naturally then, most religious practices were inculcated in the home. The reasons varied. Some

women said they simply followed or were expected to follow what the parents and elders in the family practiced, while others said they joined in the spirit of fun and celebration, and many others did not seem to be very clear as to why they participated in prayers, havans or pilgrimages. But across the board, the prayers, rituals and customs followed by the women in their natal homes underwent a change if they married... telling stories of 'adjustment and assimilation' in marital homes. As did changes in clothing, attire, food habits, rituals, fasts and a host of other 'habits' and 'norms', likes and dislikes that every woman spoke about.

We also spoke at length to the women about places outside the home where they experienced/ were made aware of the benefits or blots of their religious/caste identities. The earliest lessons learnt were in school – especially among women from the lower castes and from minority communities who shared vivid memories of discrimination and humiliation.

Beena, a Jatav woman from Uttar Pradesh, said "In school, teachers used to differentiate... kids also... used to tease us as 'harijan'. Many times upper caste kids would stop talking to us. Even those who continued (to talk to us), if there was a fight, would call us names..." and "we were not let near other's food because we would 'pollute' it".

Madhu Bala, a Jatav woman from Uttar Pradesh who works as a domestic worker said that she had to finally drop out of school because higher caste boys, "The Thakur, Chauhan, Rathores used to harass us."

"Our teacher used to call us chamar in class. We did not know the benefits we were entitled to. Generally, the students who looked neat and belonged to higher class were given preferences and opportunities, (even) in extra-curricular activities...I felt very demoralised," recalls Sunita, a Jatav woman from Delhi who is now a school teacher.

Contrarily others like Sanjana, a Brahmin woman who holds a clerical job said openly, "In fact, I felt privileged – being an upper caste Hindu in India." Similarly, Rachel, a Keralite Catholic who describes herself as a non-believer said, "In fact, I was at an advantage being Christian in a Christian school..."

As a member of Saheli, a Brahmin, added, "I do not think there were girls belonging to Scheduled Castes or Tribes in my class, and my interactions were mostly with Brahmins or Kayasthas throughout my school. I did not know any Muslims, Christians or Parsis. When I came across them during interschool competitions I looked at them as 'not amongst us' but 'strangers'. In retrospect I realise how limited my world view was."

Similarly we found that the workplace was not free of caste and religious community dynamics either.

Sandhya is a young Buddhist who used to be a domestic worker in Mumbai. When we met her, she was living in a women's shelter in Delhi. "I don't have any problems these days," she said, "but in Mumbai and Bihar I would lie about my caste to get work, else they wouldn't allow me inside the house..."

Sunita is a Jatav, a school teacher who is very articulate about how uncomfortable she was about her caste in the initial days at every one of her workplaces. "The questions at the time of the interview were harrowing... and all the time, comments!...my caste certificate was kept open for three hours on the staff room table so that everyone knows my caste."

Rachel, a Keralite Catholic who describes herself as a non-believer says, "When my mother started teaching in a Hindu college in Cochin, the nuns criticised her."

Mayuri, an Adivasi (Tudu) woman from Bhagalpur who works as a domestic help in Delhi said, "In films, Adivasis are projected as 'uncivil'. Neither are we bad, nor backward as many people think!"

It is evident that countless aspects of socialisation come together to impact women's lives deeply: to create a sense of belonging, to ensure that they become a seamless part of the culturally acceptable codes, and learn to carry this on to future generations. This of course, raises a moot question: If women are so deeply embedded in the concept of community, can they be expected not to replicate 'such practices and customs and prejudices about 'us' and 'them'.

Marriages – of Convenience and Inconvenience

The expression of female sexuality in India continues to be restricted by and strictly enforced through the institution of heterosexual, endogamous monogamy. The institution of marriage has been seen as 'universal', and non-conformity considered 'deviant' – be it voluntary singlehood, same sex relations, bisexuality or transgender identities and relationships. The only acceptable form of voluntarily remaining outside of the institution of marriage has been singlehood based on religion i.e. sadhus and sadhvis, brahmakumaris, priests and nuns.

Seema Devi, a Dhobi woman from Uttar Pradesh married within the community says, "I had not completed 18, but my body looked physically more 'mature', so I was married..."

There is considerable social and family pressure on women to be (and stay) married, and to have children within that marriage. Hence in looking at why women got married, why they stayed within or distanced themselves from marriage, we tried to understand the nature of partnerships, starting from initial negotiations to the wedding ceremony itself, 'adjustments' within the marriage to changes in the woman's name, food, religion, rituals, and lifestyle, and of course, the crucial question of acceptance.

For the most part, lack of approval and support is one of the first challenges faced by most relationships that defy the norm – whether in terms of caste or class, economic status or reputation, religion or sexual orientation. And this was borne out in the narrations of women who had chosen to marry outside the community. We also looked at how practices like dowry manifested themselves across these marriages.

Shenaaz is a Muslim woman from Uttar Pradesh married to a Brahmin. When they decided to get married, she says, "My brother was supportive... but my father did not know I was married. My mother knew, but she told me not to tell my father..."

Shared Elizabeth, a Keralite Catholic, "Of course my parents, friends and relatives tried to dissuade me. They tried sending me to a Christian retreat and all other kinds of pressure that were even humiliating at times".

For example, the story of Beena, a Jatav who is now divorced, speaks volumes of age-old caste prejudices to do with occupation. "It was an inter-caste marriage, and he was a Balmiki... though we too are Dalits, my father was very upset. He thought they would make me sweep and swab for a living!"

Opposition to inter-religious marriages sometimes comes even from officers of the State who are meant to facilitate them. Veena is a Punjabi Hindu woman from Gurgaon - one of the few in our study who chose not to identify with any caste category. But as she recalls, when she chose to marry a Muslim man, resistance came from "the District Magistrate who screened our application for the civil marriage and was very hostile."

Almost all the women displayed a seeming 'acceptance', if not preparedness for problems in case they broke the norms. Their acceptance and status was tenuous and most women did not even perceive this insecurity as a problem. But the pain of disapproval and of pressures to conform was there for all to see. As a consequence, they cherished all small victories they had achieved along the way – such as a dowryless marriage or not having changed their names even when they had compromised on food habits, wardrobe, mobility and so on.

Another key factor that emerged was how deeply women have internalised their so-called 'natural' roles as daughters, mothers, sisters, wives, daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. Regardless of who they were with, the role of women and their partners followed dominant stereotypes - polarised as boyfriend-girlfriend, man-woman, husband-wife, son-daughter-in-law, daughter-son-in-law and of course later, as father-mother... sometimes even outside the ambit of formal marriage.

Amid tales of trying to fit in or feeling left out, of adjustment and compromise, there also ran a visible thread- that the struggle for space, liberty, assertion, freedom of expression in parental as well as marital homes were made within 'limits' that would not rock the relationship. Even within abusive relationships it was a rare woman who decided that she had had enough. Across religion, caste, community and class, the experiences women shared illustrated how much women are expected to (and expect themselves to) conform, even without overt or violent control. Consciously or unconsciously, the onus of holding it together seemed to constantly be borne by the woman. A critical aspect of this upbringing is that women learn to live without a culture of questioning where every enquiry is seen as an act of rebellion.

Speaking of practices like fasts, traditions and customs, the women's voices articulated a range of emotions and experiences. On the one hand, as a sense of culture, identity, belonging and sharing, and on the other, as a force that laid down fairly rigid gender norms and roles. A large number of women we interviewed wore sindoor or mangalsutras, burkhas or ghunghats, and prayed for the 'sake of their husbands and children'. Yet, many of them did not want to attach much 'importance' to their use of cultural and religious symbols of marriage and community. They insisted that many of the things they did were not religious or community-bound practices, rather something they did, just as 'Indians'. But if bangles and bindis, sindoor or mangalsutras, Diwali and Dussehra are what are repeatedly described as 'Indian', is that not a significant pointer to what 'Indianness' is today. We also found among Hindus a widespread acceptance of interpretation of scriptures, myths, rituals and other practices being propagated by the religious establishment, the media and political forces. This is the extent to which the concept of Hindu Rashtra has made inroads to the exclusion of plurality, secularism and unity in diversity.

The disturbing consequences of divisive politics also came up clearly in response to questions on who the women would/would not like their children to be friends with or marry. Across the board there was overwhelming response against Muslims and Scheduled Castes. And most often, these prejudices had formed early in life.

Almost as problematic were responses to the question of reservation where we found sharp divisions among the women along caste lines. Most upper class and caste respondents were in favour of 'merit'. Those at the receiving end of the benefits of reservations had more nuanced responses. They talked how getting these benefits could be matter of life and death, and shared the problems and potentials of such measures. Such polarisation is a pointer to the deep inroads made by the upper caste anti-reservation propaganda.

Other Crucial Interconnections

Our report also places women's experiences of caste, community, religion, marriage, sexuality and autonomy in the context of the changing environment.

It looks at the struggles of the women's movement for equal rights – from demands for an egalitarian civil code that would give all women the same and equal rights to the continuing struggles for change from within religious and caste communities that we have witnessed over the last couple of decades.

The study also addresses the control over women's lives and sexuality asserted by caste panchayats of all communities. From a Jat woman poisoned for bringing 'dishonour' to the family by eloping with a Dalit; to young couple ordered to dissolve their marriage and abort a pregnancy because they belonged to the same gotra; to the case of Gudiya, forced to return to

her first husband, despite her having remarried by the time her husband returned; to Imrana, declared haraam (corrupted or forbidden) for her husband and 'ordered' to marry the rapist, her father-in-law... the violence and control of women by community Panchayats is unending. It is also deeply problematic because the community has unrestrained power to use economic and social sanctions, as well as overt violence with the mute consent of the law enforcing agencies and the society.

We also looked at the significance of secular mechanisms like the Special Marriages Act, and the impact of other government policies in relation to women's health and reproduction. A central aspect of our work in Saheli has also been the struggle for the right to self-determination, control and autonomy over the body, with respect to reproductive and sexual choices. And a disproportionate number of women who become the targets of coercive and dangerous population control including forced sterilisation of Dalit and tribal women. Another critical aspect is son-preference and its religious and cultural roots. This naturally, also includes the question of sex-determination and sex-selective abortions.

Of equal concern in our study was the role of the media at many levels. We examined the media as matchmaker for all kinds of marriages and alliances - where the categorisation of caste and religious communities- in groupings based on religion as well as castes, such as Kayastha, Brahmin, Scheduled Caste, Vaishnav and Sinha, and successive sub-categorisations like gotra and bisa and muthhabs - has increased dramatically over the last 20 years. Is that just a matter of conveniently organising information, or a reflection of how people are identifying themselves more and more as a part of their own community?

We also looked at how the media creates a market for increased ritualisation and hinduisation and works as a powerful tool through which caste and community stereotypes of women are propagated and consolidated. There is a dominance of upper caste Hindu homes as the Indian model and 'pure' women like Tulsi and Parvati in TV soap operas. A plethora of stereotypes of women thrives on the celluloid screen, based on their ethnicity, class, caste, morality and above all sexuality. The loud and aggressive Sardarnis, the Christian woman who seems to have transformed from the querulous landlady dressed in over-sized frocks to sexual predator and the sexually accessible lower caste/class and village woman, abet the stereotyping in real life. Stereotyping is rampant in defining the mother, the heroine, the vamp, the widow, the sister, and more recently of course, the lesbian on the screen.

At the same time, the report also looks at the social and emotional challenges that confront single women - women who have either never married as well as the divorced, separated or widowed, and even women in relationships that do not have social and legal sanction- be they live-in relationships with men, or in others outside the ambit of heterosexual, monogamous relationships.

While exploring women's experiences in the context of heterosexual marriages and relationships, it became important to also enquire into the question of how inter-caste, religion and community dynamics come into play for women in same-sex relations. Since the factors impacting the lives of lesbian and bisexual women originate from a different set of complexities, to gauge the wider picture, in addition to discussion within the group, we also spoke to selected queer women activists who shared both, personal narratives and their experiences, while working with other same-sex desiring women.

In exploring all these interconnections, the study underlines the need for all of us to understand how deeply issues of caste and community identity are intertwined with women's lives, autonomy and sexuality. In doing so, the report draws attention to the manner in which right-wing communal ideology is active even in times not marked by conflict, ensuring further division of the polity and creating a fertile ground for the politics of hate to thrive. These trends have to be countered because they impinge directly on women's rights and control over their mobility, sexuality and autonomy, both from within the community and from outside.

The report concludes that while there has been a rise in identity politics even within the women's movement, our collective understanding towards such changes has also transformed over the years. If we were once convinced that these schisms could divide the movement, today we realise that these unique struggles can deepen our understanding of the specificities of oppression. These can then become the basis of working towards a cohesive, vibrant and transformative movement that can shape an alternate vision of society.

Footnote: A few weeks before we go to press, the newspapers reported a meeting of community chiefs of 365 villages around Delhi convened to address increased 'social evils' in their communities. It was reported that the gathering agreed upon several 'progressive' decisions – to reduce opulence and waste at weddings, to ban consumption of alcohol at the events, to stop the practice of dowry and sex-determination. So far so good, we'd all say. And then comes the kicker: Engagements will be attended by only 11 members of the family. Women will not be allowed to attend weddings ("Is the bride allowed?" as someone asked sarcastically!) and marriages within the gotra are prohibited under any circumstances, which of course takes back to community control and the vicious judgments of murder and rape that have been passed against young couples who have chosen partners from within their gotra. Evidently, the struggle ahead remains long and complex.

BOX -

Profile of the women

We primarily interviewed women who live in north India and are residents of the National Capital Territory. However, Delhi being a city of migrants, we ended up interviewing not only women from the Hindi-speaking belt but also others who have been in Delhi for many years. In terms of class and economic strata, the women in the survey came from varied backgrounds. From housewives with no financial autonomy, to women working as peons, domestic helpers or washerwomen, urban middle to higher middle class women who were either self-employed or working as professionals- teachers, editors, lawyers, researchers, NGO employees or corporate executives; as well as a few women in crisis situations who were living in shelter homes when we interviewed them.

Total number of women: 45

Age profile: 18-30 years - 24; 31-40 years - 10; 41-50 years - 10; above 50 - 1

Marriage profile: Married - 37; Single - 8. Married outside the caste/community - 24; married within the caste/community - 14. (One woman is accounted for in both categories since she has been married twice). Four among the married women were separated; two divorced. Among the single women, three were in steady relationships.

Educational profile: Uneducated/illiterate - 5; Schooled - 7; Professionally trained - 3; Graduates or above - 30.

Religious profile: Hindu -25; Christian - 4; Muslim - 3; Sikh - 2; Jain, Buddhist - 1 each; Non-believers - 9.

Caste profile: Upper castes - 20; OBC - 2; Scheduled caste - 8; Scheduled Tribe - 1.

Source link: <https://sites.google.com/site/saheliorgsite/caste/saheli-study-on-marriage-caste-and-community>