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Here and Now

Forbidden love

With families turning hostile and no one to turn to, these girls find their hopes dwindling



Nineteen-year-old Poonam was forced inside a jeep and thrown into the Rajasthan canal by her father and some of the male members of her family. Her crime: She fell in love with Mukhram, a dalit boy. The punishment for falling in love with a boy of a lower caste was swift and brutal. But, the girl not merely lived to tell the tale, but, fought back and charged her relatives for trying to kill. The story goes:

On September 18, last year, Poonam left her home and married Mukhram. Her father immediately filed a complaint. The couple were tracked down and arrested by the police. The trauma did not end there, Poonam was shifted to a relative's house at village Dhotad and was subjected to regular beatings. Around 10 pm on January 2, Poonam was thrown into the canal, where waters ran deep, to die. Defying death, Poonam swam to her own rescue.

The car stopped in front of the Nari Niketan at Karnal. The TSI team was in the process of tracking down the hapless girl. Poonam has been given shelter in the Nari Niketan and her husband Mukhram was out on bail. Though a case has been registered against her father, Prabhu Ram, and seven others, under sections 307 (attempt to murder), 364 (abduction with intention to kill) and 120-B (criminal conspiracy) of the IPC, no arrests have been so far been made.

At Nari Niketan, Poonam was not the only one. Locked inside a huge room, were several girls, suffering silently. "Yeh sab love marriage waali hai" (these all are love marriage cases)," a man pointed at them.

Majority of the inmates at Nari Niketan are those who fell in love or married men of different caste. Of the 40 girls, 37 were victims of their parents' wrath. On failing to dissuade the girls to give up their partners, their kins used fake birth certificates to prove that they were minors. The law huddled them inside the women's home.

Neeru (name changed) did not appear to be 12-years old. She has been put in Nari Niketan on court orders, after she refused to let go of her boyfriend. Neeru had eloped with her lover, when she was 18. But the birth certificates produced in the court claimed that she was only 12-years old.

Sitting in a corner was Karamjeet Kaur. She had married a boy from a different caste (Rothe), Ashok Kumar, against her family's wishes. The Sirsa village panchayat, playing the role of moral police, ordered the couple to separate. They eloped and got married on October 22 last year. However, the girl's family filed an abduction case against Ashok, who later surrendered and the girl was brought back to Sirsa. Karamjeet told the court that she was not a minor and maintained that she married Ashok of her own will. Yet, she was sent to Nari Niketan.

Reena, is a 21-year old Jat girl, who fell in love with Ashok Yadav of Mewat District, Nihalgarh

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village. She had eloped with her beloved on June 2. But like other inmates, Reena's parents tracked her down, brought her back to the village and forced her to marry 50-year old Prakash of Jajjar district. And then began her nightmare. For the next six months, Reena was repeatedly "raped" by her husband and three more relatives. There was no one to turn to. Not even her parents, who turned a deaf ear to her cries of help. It was then with the help of a journalist Reena managed to come out of her in-laws' place. She was sent back to her parents who, however, pressurised her to return to her husband. Finally, Reena lodged a complaint with the police claiming that she was "not safe" in her parents' house. The girl was then sent to Nari Niketan. Her beloved and husband, Ashok Yadav, arrested on charges of kidnapping a minor, is now out on bail.

Reena said that though her father was willing to accept Ashok, it was her uncle and aunt (chacha and bua) who wanted her to suffer, since she had disgraced the family. Her uncle's threats rant in her head even now—"I will teach you a lesson." As the TSI team was about to leave, Poonam was seen entering the women's home with three policemen. It was then the girl narrated the horrific experience she went through.

Such cases are not merely confined to rural India. Caste discrimination also exists among urban Indians. Education and exposure have not been able to wash away the prejudice. "Honour killings" have cut across the society. Subhash Chander, living in Chicago, killed his daughter Monika, son-in-law Rajesh Jhamb and grandchild Vansh in their Oak Forest apartment merely because his daughter had married a man of supposedly a lower caste.

In 2002, an FCI official, stabbed his daughter to death at Mohali for a similar reason. Four years back, the relatives of a Rajput girl, Geeta Rani of Janhan Khelan village in Hoshiarpur, allegedly hacked her husband, Jasbir Singh, to death since it was an inter-caste marriage. They cut off his hands and legs and then killed him for "showing the courage" to marry one of their women. Though Geeta's parents had reportedly accepted the alliance, her brothers were against it and thought that she and her husband had tarnished the family's honour among their community.

In another shocking incident, a woman in Uttar Pradesh, who belonged to barber caste, was repeatedly raped and then killed by a gang of Yadav men. Her fault was that her son had married a girl from the socially and economically more prosperous Yadav caste.

Regardless of the hype and screams over India moving ahead, the spectre of caste divide continues to haunt the nation. Women continue to be harassed and killed for the sake of family "honour." Some killings often go unreported, the perpetrators unpunished. Ask a policeman at Sirsa, he whispers: "Many of the unsolved murders could possibly relate to honour killings."

Priyanka Rai

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