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Bride Trafficking or Marriage of Inconvenience turning women into 'silent slaves'

Haryana's skewed sex ratio which is 879. for each 1000 male, lower than the national average of 940 as per 2011 census. In 2001, the sex ratio of female was 861 per 1000 males, has given rise to an intense demand for brides from organised trafficking agencies. A report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2013) has blamed the skewed sex ratio in Haryana and Punjab for the trafficking of girls from Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Kerala, Odisha, West Bengal, Maharashtra and even Nepal in great numbers for forced marriages and agricultural labour. According to the UN study, these states are also the "supply states" from which women are trafficked for marriage. The majority of the girls and women are trafficked from low-income homes. Either fictitious marriage fantasies or well-paying jobs in rapidly expanding Indian cities entice them.

However, Bride Trafficking is a persistent social evil that falls under the category of crimes against humanity due to the fact that the victims' rights, dignity, and freedom are violated. As Bride Trafficking is so pervasive in society, it is very challenging to provide precise statistics because it is frequently impossible to locate and identify individual cases of Bride Trafficking. Among the many horrors experienced by trafficked women are rapes during transportation, followed by rapes by spouses and other male family members. Aside from that, they frequently become victims of multiple trafficking, endure spousal abuse, and receive harsher treatment than slaves. Trafficking can be facilitated by a number of conditions, including poverty, dowry, female infanticide, female foeticide, and illiteracy.¹

In Haryana and Punjab, decades of unchecked sex-selective abortions have led to a significant shortage of women of "marriageable age", a concept that is widespread there. This shortage has given rise to human trafficking as a lucrative trade, with even local villagers acting as brokers. Many articles have been written about the ill-treatment these women endure, primarily due to the fact that they are despised for using trades to break into society, being

¹ Bride Trafficking in India: Aspects, Causes and Potential Solutions https://www.bricslawjournal.com/jour/article/view/537?locale=en_US#:~:text=Poverty%2C%20female%20foeticide%2C%20female%20infanticide,solutions%20to%20this%20illicit%20trade. (Accessed on 25th April 2024)

dependent on their new families, lacking parental support, being poor and illiterate, and just being women in a society that is incredibly patriarchal.

Approximately 90% of the 200,000 people who are trafficked into India each year are sold within the nation after becoming victims of interstate trafficking, according to Global Voices. Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan are major destinations of trafficked 'brides'. It is hardly surprising that these states also account for the most skewed sex ratios in the country. In undivided India, the buying and selling of brides was a well-documented historical practice. However, the lives of today's trafficked girls and women are shrouded in secrecy since they lack the finances and social mobility to acquire and raise a voice.²

According to long analysis conducted by Empower People, 23% of girls from West Bengal are trafficked. Bihar is next at 17% followed by Assam (13%), Andhra Pradesh (11%), Odisha (8%) and Kerala (6%).³

Brides who have been trafficked are referred as Paro (outsider), Molki (one who has been bought) and Jugaad (adjustment Majority of brides that are trafficked are either drawn from Adivasi, Dalit or minority communities, especially from lower socio-economic categories. Some of them are kidnapped, some tricked and some sold into flesh trade by their own parents or other trusted family members/neighbours.

Women relying on their husbands experience domestic abuse

Most of these marriages emerge out of mutual necessity. The men in Haryana need a wife to continue their lineage, look after household chores and act as a helping hand in the fields. The families of these brides, meanwhile, are impoverished and incapable of paying dowry to marry their daughters, as told by Dr Suneeta Tyagi, a former academic & Convener of Gohana-based Samtamulak Mahila Manch. She and her organisations had been intervening to ameliorate the conditions and fight against domestic abuses of those trafficked for marriages.

These women after marriage struggle financially and confront language barriers. Few among them, who had their schooling enabled them to speak the language and successfully face the challenges.

Narrating about the violence perpetrated on these women which proved as much a revelation about this ghastly trend, which often draws on trafficked women, as the intricate societal and familial relations in Haryana, Dr Suneeta Tyagi said, "Anushikha, who was bought from West Bengal and married in Jind could break the language barrier as she had her schooling, prior to her marriage.

² Paloma Sharma, A Marriage of Inconvenience, Justice for Women (Jul. 5, 2021), available at <https://justiceforwomenindia.wordpress.com/tag/trafficking-statistics-in-india/>

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Even then, she faced physical assault by her husband's maternal uncle so she reported and got him detained by the police and beaten at the lock-up. She got him released as there was pressure from the family. She came to us for her tubectomy opened, which was not our job."

However, majority of these women are not properly accepted into the families they enter. Dr Suneeta Tyagi said, "A woman brought from Siliguri, West Bengal and married to a man living at Vishnu Nagar in Gohana. She was injured after being beaten at home. We got her admitted at Khanpur Kalan's BPS Government Medical College for Women. Her brother-in-law was in police. She was separated from her extended family, and was left without any food or any basic necessities, even though she had a house of her own and everything. There was the medical consultant, who helped us to address her problems. Her brother-in-law, who was policeman harassed her a lot."

Domestic violence is rampant upon these women, and they find themselves completely alone. There is no way for them to go to police, even she returns to her parental homes, again she is married. As it happened with another victim of bride trafficking from Guwahati, Assam, who had to leave her husband's home due to marital problems. After that, she sought safety in her parents' house. Her children needed to be fed, and her parents were quite impoverished. Thus, she was bought and married to Naresh, who had a stepmother. He possessed 1.5 kila of land. She had a great deal of problems after her marriage. She was asked to leave the child behind when she was made to leave the house. She believed that the child deserved to be returned to her husband, Naresh. She returned, but the suffering persisted.

She came to see Dr. Suneeta Tyagi 8 to 10 ten times in order to get her issues fixed. As she said, "We conversed with the Sarpanch. Her husband used to physically abuse her and was an alcoholic. She was self-sufficient in her finances. She used to work as a farmer, extracting and selling buffalo milk. At last, she moved to Rohtak and quit her husband's home. She went to work in the factory and never returned to her alcoholic husband's house, where he would beat her every day. She kept her son, earned between Rs. 6000 - Rs. 7000 in the factory, and lived in a rented Rohtak home with two to three other women."

The middlemen

These marriages are facilitated by a number of middlemen, often married to such women themselves, who receive a considerable commission for their services.

As it happened with Meena, who was bought from Mumbai after her parents were paid. She now works on a contractual basis at Civil Hospital at Gohana. She has two children and was married into a Jat family. She was frequently harassed by her unmarried brother-in-law, who had a lecherous streak, which

her husband greatly encouraged. Her husband was an alcoholic who frequently beat his wife. Her mother-in-law was supportive until she gave birth to her children; after that, she watched helplessly seeing her alcoholic son beat her. Dr. Suneeta Tyagi and her team visited her home numerous times, but each time they went, her brother-in-law and husband disappeared. She spoke to her mother-in-law and asked her to stop harassing her daughter-in-law, as she carried her lineage, and asked her to kindly take better care of her. Now her husband has stopped hitting her once she got a job in the Civil Hospital.

Raped by husband's relative, can't report, suffers in silence

Delving on one of the cases where a woman was married and raped. Then she was pressurized by her husband's relatives to withdraw the complaint, as Dr Tyagi said, "A woman bought from Bihar was married in Gohana and she worked day and night at home. She was instructed to get some medicines from Gohana city by her mother-in-law. A young man who happened to be her neighbour and distant brother-in-law was riding past on a motorcycle as she waited for a bus. He informed her that she may ride along on his motorcycle as he was heading to Gohana. While traveling, he sexually assaulted her. She withdrew after family pressure, despite a police case was filed."

Humiliation and teasing by neighbour and domestic abuse continue

A woman bought from Odisha and married on the outskirts of Gohana. Her neighbouring young men, used to tease her. Samtamulak Mahila Manch was requested to step in and help her mother-in-law with the situation. Women who get married through trafficking aim to exploit them. She is likewise treated like an animal by the family members. They beat her anytime they want, force her to toil all the day, and give her less food. In Jat households, a woman is asked to quit from the home upon giving birth. The husband and family want the wife to leave the child and disappear, which is how the conspiracy gets started."

When a woman gives birth to a son, she is either pressured to quit or subjected to harassment to the point where she feels forced to leave her husband's house. In Haryana, bride trafficking has become a major problem, and political parties run campaigns like '*Bahu Dilao, Vote Pao* (get us a bride, get votes)' in elections to win support. Undoubtedly, there are instances of bride trafficking on any given street. From the Ahirwal belt, which is currently at its height, it has permeated in every district. Women who are bought or trafficked among the Jats its increasing are married off. Very few marriages had taken place in the Jat community before the advent of bride trafficking. Majority of women trafficked for marriage come from minority, Dalit, or adivasi communities

Domestic abuse and mother-in-law's role

On the road, a woman from a Delhi slum was being assaulted by her husband. She gave birth to a daughter and a son. Her parents were paid Rs 2-3 lakh to get her married. When her mother-in-law lived along with her, she worked as a

farmer and provided RO water for earning a livelihood. That woman was forced to perform all home chores from morning till night, she was denied meals. Her mother-in-law occasionally complained about her but the domestic abuse on her continued. Her mother-in-law voiced her displeasure about her daughter-in-law not cleaning the house and washing the clothes. That was unnecessary fuss by her to hide the domestic abuse

Then, when they got together, the mother-in-law would say something different and the daughter-in-law would claim that they had beaten her. Worried by everything, the woman turned back. She left her husband's home, leaving her children. It seems like they threw the mother out after keeping the children.

Dr. Suneeta Tyagi, pointed out succinctly, "The main issue arises only after woman trafficked becomes mother and then the husband's, mother-in-law and other family members rejection begins. Brides who have been trafficked are viewed negatively and handled cruelly. They are disliked by every single member where she is married. These women are targeted for harassment or abuse. For some women, it has become apparent to be a major issue. The *Beti Padhao Beti Bachao* campaign has been a complete failure; the men's perspective and vision have not changed in any noticeable way. Instead, it has just failed and has a negative outcome."

Police playing a dubious role

People who wish to file a police complaint are perceived as offenders instead of victims. The police, who work hand in glove with trafficked women's husband and her in-laws, pressurize her to make a compromise or face the risk being of continuously being humiliated by her husband and his relatives. . In Haryana, police nurses highly negative mindset regarding women. Police consistently mistreat women. When someone files a complaint, they handle her as though she's broken the law. The upset women are being harassed by the panchayat and police. Earlier police used to provide support twenty years ago. The DSP used to say, "Just give us a call and we will send an ambulance whenever you go on a raid." However, the police are now against us. The police are now asking, "Why do you do this, why do you leave now?" In the past, they would tell us that you are doing a great job and that you should let us know. This used to be the case, but things have gone worse since then. The police are now employed to manipulate events, particularly with the BJP in power. The police are a well-organized group of lawbreakers without morality in uniform. 15 to 20 years ago, police played a supportive role," remarked Dr Suneeta Tyagi

While discussing about a case she said, "A woman after being married for seven months in Rohtak, she gave birth to a son and she granted adoption right to her mother-in-law. That woman, a teacher, recently tied the knot for the second time. Her new husband does nothing and causes her a lot of trouble with his mother-in-law. Though the earlier mother-in-law had the child but she did not take care of her. She refused to give her son back to her when she asked because

the adoption rights had already been written down. I asserted that you had the right to claim your son as your own. She went to the police as a result. A mother has rights toward her child, even after seven years. The police said she has no rights as the adoption right has been written. Police got enraged, drove her away from the police station.”

In few of the cases described by Dr Suneeta Tyagi, the victims of Bride Trafficking have been sold many a times as a result of traffickers’ deceptive claims that the victim's next husband and his family will be excellent and that they are sorry for marrying the victim in such a home where domestic abuse is rampant.

Human rights violations and the struggle of victims of human trafficking against these abuses are but one side of the same coin. Though in some of the cases in which Samtamulak Mahila Manch had intervened, brides are content and have better living circumstances now than they had before getting married. For those trafficked brides, the marriage is regarded as one and the same regardless of whether it took place in their home state or somewhere else. Determining if the case under consideration is one of bride trafficking or interregional marriage requires a great deal of work. While human trafficking is classified as a serious offence under the Indian Penal Code, interregional marriages remain lawful. Sometimes, the husband goes to impoverished villages or regions with the trafficker acting as matchmaker claiming that the women who are married in Haryana face no discrimination, no exploitation, domestic abuse or re-trafficking.

Since these marriages resemble traditional arranged marriages, it would be challenging to categorize accusations made against them. The situation outlined above in most of the cases makes it difficult to distinguish between inter-regional brides who are trafficked and those who are not, rendering bride trafficking as a whole all but unstoppable.

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