

HARYANA VILLAGE SAYS YES TO LOVE MATCHES AND NO TO CASTE NAMES

Himanshi Dhawan

ABSTRACT

Haryana's infamous khaps are known for condoning honour killings and telling women not to wear jeans or use mobiles. But in Barsola, the winds of change are blowing. The caste names are given up and children are now adding their village name as a marker. Love marriages, inter-caste unions, and interfaith weddings are accepted. Traditional norms are thus changing and social reforms are taking roots in making village couples fear-free of being reprimanded by khaps.

When 18-year old Ritu started work in a thread weaving factory near her village in Haryana's Jind district, little did she know that love would blossom in the dreary confines of Radhika factory. But what really shocked her was how quickly the parents of Parveen, her paramour, accepted their "love marriage," Even though her village Barsola is just 170 km from the national capital, the mindsets are very different. While Delhi's singles can swipe right and left to find dates, here are parents and matchmaker's decide the future of couples.

At least they did, till the winds of change swept tiny Barsola in June this year-2019 when Satbir Pahalwan - pradhan of the Khera Khap - announced that all 24 villages and 2 lakh residents under its jurisdiction would accept love marriages and inter-caste unions and couples would no longer have to live in fear of being reprimanded by the khap.

Khaps in Haryana, which include village elders as its members, are notorious for encouraging, even ordering honour killings in cases of inter-gotra or inter-caste marriages and discouraging what they perceive immodest clothing or behavior. While some have blamed Chinese food for rapes, others have banned mobile phones and jeans for young girls.

It is here that Khera Khap is trying to step away from the beaten path. "Acceptance of inter caste marriage is an important step. The world is changing and we cannot be left behind. *Isme kya burai hai?* (What is wrong in this). Both parents and young children feel less threatened because they know that the khap is supportive," says Satbir Pahalwan, who has earned his name from years in the wrestling ring.

Little wonder that Murti, Parveen's mother gave her blessings to the love match. "Jab dono ke man mil gaya to humme kya karna (When the couple has decided, why should we interfere)," she says as she looks

dotingly at her daughter-in-law kneading uplas (cow dung cakes) on a cold December morning.

In another progressive step, the khap chief also announced that people should drop caste names and instead be identified by their village name. He has taken the lead by changing his own name to Satbir Pahalwan Barsola from Satbir Singh.

The retired army Subedar Major took this step as his village for fractured by castes and sub-castes. “When I retired from the army I found that people in the village would constantly fight over petty issues. This was also encouraged by political parties. We thought if everyone was only known by the village name, there would be more love and brotherhood,” he says. Most villages, both upper and lower caste, have taken the cue and added Barsola to their names. The move though is largely symbolic as they are still known by their caste names on official documents.

Caste divisions were acutely felt during highway accidents. Most people would sticker caste markers like 'Jat' or 'Saini' on their motor bikes and cars. “If the bike had an accident a Jat might not stop to save a 'Saini' thinking why should I bother? It is an awful thing. We wanted people to think of each other as brothers,” says Surinder Barsola, a villager who is pursuing a Masters in education.

One of the challenges that Satbir Pahalwan and others face is that the 24 villages include over 17 castes. Though the initiative is only a few months old, many feel that it is a step in the right direction. Rahul Barsola, who belongs to lower caste and runs a juice corner, says that there is greater interaction within the village. “We always sat together in school and played sports in the stadium together but now the upper caste come to our chaupal for functions and we are invited to theirs,”

Taking a cue, Sabharwal khap that has members spread over Haryana has also announced a similar initiative. “We have asked all our members to follow this. So that just like Barsola, we can make other villagers free of caste,” Sachin Sabharwal, from Rohtak says.

Suraj Yengde, Harvard scholar and Dalit activist welcomed the step, “I would hope this is not a cosmetic celebration. If khaps can demasculinise their attitude, this can be a genuine effort to address caste issues. It could even be a new model for India and regressive societies across the world.”

But not everyone is optimistic about centuries-old divisions disappearing. Satpal Barsola, who identifies himself as Valmiki, says that for years the village has been divided along caste lines. “I have lived for 50 years. I still earn a living as a manual labourer while the upper castes own

the land. There has been no change in my life,” The neighbouring Khatkar khap pradhan Dulail Singh also dismisses the move as mere publicity. “My caste is my identity. Why should I give it up,” he asked.

It is clear that Satbir Pahalwan and his village have taken a risk and only time can tell how effective this will be. But as Jeetender, who is from the Valmiki caste and a teacher at a tuition centre in the nearby town, says it's at least step towards equality. “By giving up our caste names and taking on that of the village we are educating our children to stop looking at caste as a marker. It will not happen in a day but we have to preserve to ensure that they learn to judge people on merit rather than which family they were born in,”

Sunil Jaglan (2019) reported that the only time khaps hit headlines is when they have made a political or socially outrageous statement. Jaglan has been conducting Khap Ki Pathshala (Khap School) for the last 4 years. The school brings together social reformers, lawyers and research scholars to talk about the progressive work done by Khap panchayats such as advocacy for women empowerment and discouraging female foeticide. Jaglan who was a former sarpanch of Bibipur village in Jind district also established Rashtriya Maha Khap Maha Panchayat (RMKMP) in August 2019 to counter the self-styled moral police. All the advice, learnings and even folk songs are centered around telling women to protect the family honour, to accept and adjust, give up their property rights to the brothers and agree with their husbands in every decision. We are going to turn our advocacy to men, to teach them to respect and treat women equally. The RMKMP has about 34 members and it plans to attract more young people to its fold.

Bateshwar Tiwari, an Uttar Pradesh resident, had come to visit his sister Vandana Singh who was living in a Kandivali flat of Mumbai. Vandana had a love marriage with Rohit Singh six months ago. Tiwari was not happy with the match and therefore tried to persuade her to return home. She declined. One day Tiwari reached her flat with liquor bottle. He invited Rohit to have drinks with him but he refused. Tiwari then drank alone and in the fit of liquor effect he fired a shot at his sister and Rohit but missed as they ducked in time. Tiwari panicked and shot himself. This is how honour killing attempt was failed.

REFERENCES :

1. Sunil Jaglan (2019) KHAP SCHOOL: Rashtriya Mahakhap Maha Panchayat. Times of India, dated 22 December 2019.
2. TNN (2019) After Honour Killing Bid Man Shoots Self in Sister's Flat. Times of India, dated 17 December 2019.



Satbir Pahalwan | Head, Khera khap

KHAP ALSO FOR GIRL POWER

Mukhia Ghar Ki

Hold The Flag High

Selfie With Beti

Dalits caution against 'celebrating' Khera khap's move too soon. An activist says, 'Going caste-free demands a change of heart. Are people willing to do that?'



Surnames are identifiers of Caste. Removing them will make way for an equal Society wherein inter-caste marriages will be encouraged, Honor-Killings will be condemned, and discrimination against Dalits will be discarded. This is what exactly the representatives of 24 villages of "KHERA-KHAP" in Jind District of Haryana are deliberating under the Leadership of Satbir Pahalwan, the Head of Khera-Khap. This Khap announced that henceforth the caste-names will be replaced by village names. However, this does not mean 3 Gs of Haryana are finished. GAON [village], GOTRA [ancestry], and GOHAND [neighbouring khap villages] will remain intact. These Three Spheres are non-negotiable when marriages are solemnized by the Jat Community of Haryana heartland. The ripple effect of Progressive Idea is gradually getting off the ground in other Khaps of Haryana like Hisar's Kajala Khap, Bhyan Khap, and Nandal Khap of Rohtak. Going caste-free is a first step in the process of total elimination of Hindu "Varn Vyavastha". Reference: Vjender Kumar, Kumar Mukesh, and Satsingh, TNN (2019). How Jind's first step to go caste-free is working out. TOI dated July 23, 2019.