



Research Paper

Gender Inequality and Masculine Structure: An Analysis of Khap Panchayats in Haryana

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Abstract

Gender inequality is a major concern of all societies in the world. For equal status and participation of women in various social and political institutions, societies should provide equal opportunity to them and allow them to play an active role in decision-making bodies. During and after the mid-20th century feminist movement and various other movements promoted their key roles in multiple social and political spheres. Within the patriarchal structure of Indian society there existed a socio-political institution called Khap panchayat– a traditional institution meant for and led by males. There was a sheer domination of men as all the decisions were taken by them only. These socio-political institutions were claimed to be the protectors of social norms and rituals and were very influential in a large part of Haryana. It is claimed that issues like marriages, property and family disputes were resolved by these institutions. The present paper focuses on the structure and formation of these Khap panchayats where women are devoid of any participation. Even today, this masculine attitude and practice prevails all over the Khap influential area of northern India and particularly in the Jat community of Haryana. Although it is believed that these Khaps exist in all communities, yet the major chunk is experienced by the Jat community of Haryana. The paper explores the prevalent patriarchal structure of the relative society and analyzes the masculine dominion therein.

Keywords: Masculinity, Gender, Inequality, Khap Panchayats, Patriarchy.

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I. Introduction:

Debates in the academic field on gender equality and the ways and manners of achieving it, question the changing roles, attitudes, and status of women in various institutions and organizations. Khap Panchayat is one of such institutions where women are not given equal chances and opportunities. They are totally deprived of any types of involvements in its formation as well as functioning. Not surprisingly Women themselves have taken the lead role in the struggle, as a result of which women's lives have begun to change.... (but) women are subordinated by the patriarchal structure. (Bhasin 2004, 2) This patriarchal structure hampers their political participation and demeans and lowers their status by denying them a role in social and political decision making. Khap Panchayats have been playing the leading role in the North Indian society and politics from very old time period. There are many oral and written facts about the historical genesis of *Khap Panchayats*. It is said that the first meeting of the *Sarva Khap Panchayat* was held at Baraut in 1195 AD and took the decision to raise an army (Bhardwaj 2012, 45). During the Mughal rule, the Khap and the *Sarva Khap Panchayats* became the champions of protecting religious faith. (M. C. Pradhan 1966, 98) In these areas, *Khap* became famous, and some Hindu communities came under the umbrella of these councils. (M. C. Pradhan 1966, 98) As per M. C. Pradhan during Mughal period *Khap* councils were the main protectors of Hindu' rights as they opposed the jazia tax, and protected religious rights.

II. Methodology:

The research population of my study is consisted of three districts of the state of Haryana. The districts are Jind, Hisar and Sonapat. The data collection was decided to be done through random interviews of various office bearers of the Khap Panchayats existed in these districts. I randomly selected total Nine panchayat out of approximately total, Twenty-nine Panchayat, found in these districts. Beside it, the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out, recorded and transcribed. Each Focused Group comprised approximately of 7 to 15

participants. The collected data was meticulously analyzed and interpreted to drive meaningful insights. Secondary data was also examined and analyzed.

Khap Panchayat:

There are four kinds of traditional panchayats in rural north India, viz, caste panchayat, village multi-caste panchayat, the farmer-retainer panchayat and any single-purpose panchayat. Khap Panchayat is a clan based traditional Panchayat. Ch. Ranbir Singh says that “the word "khap" has Sanskrit roots. It is a deformed derivative of "kashtrap" meaning "domain". (C. R. Singh 2010, 17-19) Some experts opine that the word *khap* drives from the *saka* language word *khatrap*, (A. Anand 2021, 1) which means an area inhabited by a particular clan. Suraj Bhan Bhardwaj writes that since Khap Panchayats generally comprises the different Gotra¹ of Jats, and Jats are divided into numbers of Gotra (clan) which means Gaushetra/cowherds and the people of single Gaushetra considered belonging to one Gotra. (Bhardwaj 2012, 54) It means that all the members of the same Gotra are siblings and classified as brother and sister. (Ratika Thakur 2015, 9)

On the other hand, a territorial Khap Panchayat is one in which all individuals inhabited within the denoted area are brothers and sisters irrespective of their Gotras. There can be more than one Gotra within the territory of Khap Panchayats. Notion of Bhaichara²/ brotherhood is behind the unity and formation of Khap Panchayat. These Khap Panchayats are active in most parts of Haryana. They provide justice to the appellant, actively participate in various social and political movements and mobilize the public to participate in the movements. Khap Panchayats are clan based social organizations.

Masculinity

Gender issues are not solely women's issues. Masculinity can be better understood in relation to Femininity. It does not exist in isolation. Therefore, one has to understand masculinity as men, tied in their stereotypical roles, of strong, muscular, hard-working, protector and breadwinner. Masculinity is associated also with the traditional appearances of men. Masculinity has to do with particular traits and qualities rather than with biology. (Bhasin 2004, 6) The origin of the word 'Masculinity' is a Latin word "masculus" that means 'male'. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, masculinity means "having characteristic of a male", "the quality or nature of a male" (R. Singh, Political Masculinity 2023, 165-66), Masculinity is a social construct, nature makes us male or female, it gives us our biological definition but it is society which makes us masculine and feminine. (Bhasin 2004, 6) the notion of Masculinity is not static. It changes with the changes in social, economic and political circumstances.

Khap Panchayats: A Masculine Space:

To understand the prevalence of masculinity in social institutions of rural Haryana, we must comprehend the structure and formation of various social units that exist within its territory and exercise their influence and authority in their respective territory. The smallest social lineage is known as *Kunbha*, while *Sarva Khap* is the largest lineage of social organizations. Between *Kunbha* and *Sarva Khap*, there are *Thok*, *Tapa* and *Khap*. M.C. Pradhan has described the formation and structure of Khap, particularly focusing on the Balyan Khap of Uttar Pradesh. His analysis suggests that (for political purposes) Khap councils were divided into various *thambas*.³ A *thamba* is further divided into two or more *Ganwand*. A *Ganwand* is a group of four or five villages, and each *Ganwand* has its own council. Although the councils are informal and no records are maintained, there is no hereditary Chaudhry/ headman of the *ganwand*. (M. Pradhan, The Political System of The Jats of Northern India 1966) Though Pradhan also notes that there is no historical evidence of *Ganwand* in the history of Khap Panchayats, but there is oral history and a system in place. When any dispute arises and cannot be settled at village level, then the *Ganwand* council is called, and it continues to reach up to the higher council until the matter is resolved. *Om Prakash* provides a description of the formation of Sarv Khap Panchayats in a magazine named: '*Jat Lahar*'. He explains that initially, a group of families forms a *kunbha*, which further expands to form *Thola*, *Panna*, *village*, *Tapa*, *Khap* and ultimately *Sarva Khap*. (Omprakash 2017, 1-16)

M.C.Pradhan describes the structure and organization of the khap panchayat in his famous work "*The Political System of Jats of The Northern India*."(1966). He says that the Headman or *Chaudhary* or *Pradhan* is elected or selected for the whole life. In Haryana, it is a general practice also that once a Headman is always a Headman which is true in the case of almost always in the case of all the Khap Panchayats except a few cases where the Headman was decided differently e.g. in *Kandela Khap*, the old Headman was once replaced and *the*

¹ Gotra is a clan. It is considered to be equivalent to lineage. Gotra tells us about our lineage.

² Bhaichara is a notion of brotherhood-ness within the community.

³ A group of 12 to 14 villages is called Thamba in Uttar Pradesh and it is called Tapa in Haryana

Khap Panchayat elected the new Headman in 2022. Berwal Khap has been constituted in district Jind in December 2022. Thus new Khaps have also been constituted.

Similar instances were found during the field study. The president or Head of the *Benwala khap* of *Singhwal* village, District Jind, a convict in an honour killing case, and had been in jail for 9 years in this case, spoke about the practice of the election of the headman of their *Khap*. In this interview, he said:

Box 1: Head of Benwala Khap, Jind, Haryana

"When the people of our clan elected the head, they put a condition that we would choose someone from a village where the clan was originally formed. We would select someone from a family not having blemish of any kind. There should not be any dispute regarding the marital relationships of his daughter and daughter-in-law, their land property should be intact and there shouldn't be any blemish. So my father was chosen first, and after his death, I was chosen. This tradition has been continued further. I was considered the head even when I was in the jail. It is not a position of power. This is a symbol of pride, respect and honor for our community."

Baniyan Khap of district Jind, Haryana also once elected Ch. Raghubir Singh Nain as Khap-Headman in an open meeting with a common consensus on March 17, 2024. After being elected he remains president for whole his life. But sometimes, if there is any dispute, khap panchayat has the authority to change their Headman or *Pradhan* by organizing the general body meeting.

When we look at the organization of Khap Panchayat, we find that traditionally men are made the head of Khap Panchayat. Once a person is elected as *Pradhan*, he remains at the post of *Pradhan* for the rest of his life. Apart from the Jat caste, people of any other caste are often not chosen as Khap *Pradhan*. In a few exceptions, a person from a caste other than Jat is chosen as the headman of the khap, which is a rare occurrence. For example, in *Rakhi Bahra Khap*, a person from the *Khati* caste (a caste among Other Backward Classes) was the head, and in *Thua Bahra*, a Brahman was the head. So far, there has been no appointment of women or individuals from scheduled castes to the prime position. As far as women's role in Khap Panchayats is concerned, almost every participant and group agreed that women have little or no role in the khap panchayats. Neither has any woman ever been elevated to the position of khap headwoman, nor has she ever been included in the decision-making process. Their position is explained with the following examples:

Box 2: Focused Group Discussion, Kharal Village, District Jind, Haryana

Respondent number 2 says, "Political people will not spare even this. (Khap) They will bring women into khap panchayats one way or the other. They have crossed half the way by bringing them into gram panchayats [village councils]. Sooner or later, they will also ensure reservation in LA [Legislative Assembly] seats."

Respondent no. 1 says that until now, there is no role of women in the panchayat.

In Sonipat district in FGD of *Antil Khap* (including the head of four *Tapas*) the participants argued that women don't have any intelligence:

Box 3: Focus Group Discussion, with Antil Khap representative, Sonipat, Haryana

"The government considers women to be intelligent, but they are not. Even if there is a death in the family, instead of performing the last rites, first, they will start fighting."

The above statements reflect the perspective of hegemonic masculinity and its potential implications on women's participation in local bodies, specifically on khap panchayats. These statements clarify that they adhere to patriarchal norms, and may resist and try to exclude women from political spaces. This masculine approach undermines the genuine representation of women, reducing their participation to a token gesture rather than meaningful inclusion.

The respondents believe that women are not intelligent. Even during sorrow or difficult times they start fighting. They do not come to a collective, consensual decision. These statements are not only derogatory towards women but also have gender connotations and biases. In rural Haryana, masculinity is perceived and practiced with regard to women, and women are considered inferior to men. There is a common perception and cultural belief that women are not better than men. As an inferior she is considered unfit to offer advice to a man, and men are instructed not to accept a woman's decision as their own. (P. Chowdhry (2015), 7) In the local popular culture, women are believed to be unintelligent, and incapable of making decisions, as their intelligence is believed to be inferior to that of men. It also indicates that the male viewpoint towards women is prejudiced.

The organization of Khap Panchayats reflects a clear manifestation of Hegemonic masculinity, as traditionally, men are exclusively chosen as the heads of these Panchayats. This practice reinforces the patriarchal power dynamics prevalent in many societies, where men are perceived as the natural leaders and decision-makers. By electing men as *Pradhans* for the whole life, the Khap Panchayats perpetuate the idea that leadership and authority are inherently masculine traits.

There were other respondents who said that the Khap Panchayats not only a male space but they are primarily an outfit of the Jat community. The Headman of Petwad Tapa, which is a sub-section of Satrol Khap, said that although our Khap includes all communities, the majority of active members who participate in Khaps come from the Jat community.

Box 4: Headman of Petwad Tapa, Satrol Khap, Hisar, Haryana

"Most of the leaders in Khap come from the Jat community but people from other communities are also elected. I am from a Brahmin caste and I was elected head of Petwar Tapa. But most of the time Khap is dominated by the Jat community. The reason is that the people of the Jat community have been more active in Khap Panchayat, so they are elected. People from some castes (other than Jat) believe that they are not bound by the rules and rituals of the Khap, that is they are out of the bondage of the Khap system".

Khap panchayat was not a Jat phenomenon earlier, as it has become in present. (A. Anand 2021) "In actual practice, there are hardly any Khap Panchayats in Haryana where the prime position of the head of Khap is held by someone other than the Jat community.

A respondent from Mirchpur village, Hisar who led many sessions of Khap panchayat in Mirchpur arson incident in 2010, also said the same thing:

Box 5: Ex-Head Rakhi Bara Khap, Village Mirchpur, Hisar, Haryana

"Only people belonging to the Jat community are present in the Khap Panchayat. People from other castes are only in name or symbolic. Which Khap panchayat has a non-Jat as the head? Only our Khap panchayat had a person from the Khati community as the head. Otherwise, in the Khap panchayat, only the Chaudhary from the Jat community are becoming the heads. Whenever Rakhi Barha Khap holds a panchayat, only Jats attend the Khap panchayat. People from other castes do not even come to the Khap panchayats."

The common practice is that the Jat community holds a dominating position in the Khap Panchayats due to their economic and social dominance. They form a majority of the population and possess significant land holdings. The majority of the respondents acknowledge the Jat community's dominant position that is why they assume leading roles in social organizations like the Khap Panchayats. This statement was reiterated by a respondent during a focus group discussion in Kharal Village, located in the district of Jind.

Box 6: Respondent of a FGD in Kharal Villages, in district Jind, Haryana

Respondent No. 1 said "I don't consider Jat as a caste, I consider it a culture. Jat caste has more resources, that's why it is in a dominating position

Respondent No. 6 says "Jat is a powerful community in Haryana. A powerful community will always come forward. Can't work without them".

The Khaps representatives and its spokesmen claimed that Khap is a democratic institution of all sections of society and always works for the common good of society.

On the other hand, they have pride that Jat is not just a caste but a culture. As Ratika Thakur and A.K. Shinha debated whether Khap *Panchayat* upholds the unity, honor, and community brotherhood of the rural life of the community. The caste system, in Haryana, has been more consolidated and institutionalized by the Khap Panchayat's structural formation. Rural life is bound by the social norms and values of caste, specifically in Haryana. These social norms are not very essentials and strengthen the caste system in rural life. This particular institution is formed on the basis of *Bhaichara* (brotherhood) by the Jat Community to consolidate their power and position over the entire community. (A. S. Ratika Thakur 2015, 9) But any social organization cannot be called democratic until and unless it includes women, backward classes, and marginalized sections of the society.

So, Khap Panchayats are:

- **Traditional Social-cultural organization** prevalent in Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh, in some parts of Rajasthan and Delhi. These Khap Panchayats hold very strict and significant control over their territorial hold in social and cultural matters of the community.
- **Patrilineal and Hierarchical Organization:** Traditionally, These Khap Panchayats have been dominated by male members typically in a hierarchical structure. The head of the Khap is always a male, often from the Jat community. Women and other castes have a very limited participation in the decision-making process. There is no or limited voice for women and other castes.
- **Conservative in nature:** the structure, ruling and decision making of Khap Panchayats are very conservative in nature. They are known for their decision regarding upholding their social norms, customs, values and, regulating community behaviors and issues related to inter-caste and intra-*gotra* marriages.
- **Masculine Space:** Khap Panchayats are masculine in their structure and it is exclusively a masculine space. Not only The gathering consists of males but women are not allowed to enter and speak also in these spaces.

III. Conclusion

To conclude it can be stated that the Khap Panchayats, finding its genesis in olden times, relish a formidable and influential role in rural Haryana. This institution belongs exclusively to the Jat community and is completely dominated by men. This institution works on the principle of brotherhood as all the members of a Khap feel that they are brothers and sisters and closely associated with one another. Khap, a thorough male bastion belonging to rural Haryana thus carries a position of strength and power and influences the overall social and political dominion. Though Khap Panchayats face criticism for their outdated and discriminatory attitudes and practices, their role and functions have been subject to controversies. They have no legal and statutory recognition, but they can dictate the terms in personal and family matters. After due diligence and criticism, some of the khaps got ready to reform and accept changes. Efforts are still on to include women and marginalized sections in their fold thus addressing issues of discrimination and inequalities. A time is yet to come when one would experience a more democratic and inclusive environment in this institution as is said "It is only the change which is permanent in this world".

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