

INDIA'S GRUESOME REALITY OF 'HONOUR KILLINGS'

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Sairat (Marathi)

Directed by Nagraj Popatrao Manjule

Sairat as it is...

The blockbuster Marathi film *Sairat* (Wild), directed by Nagraj Manjule, rated as the most important film of 2016, made history as it grossed the magic figure of 100 crores. While there is no doubt that it is a well-made film and tugs at the heart strings of young viewers, its theme of honour killing is the main reason for its popularity. The film helps to break the misconception that these gruesome murders of young girls and / or their lovers / husbands committed to save the family honour, are confined to the North Indian States of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh Utter Pradesh and Bihar and helps to strike home the reality that it is a pan Indian reality, as prevalent in the Southern states which are generally considered to be less violent towards women than the North India States.

The highest grossing Marathi film of all times, follows the formula of fatal love often seen in Hindi movies, is set in rural Maharashtra. The romantic involvement of a Dalit youth and the daughter of a rich and influential zamindar meet its inevitable end. Hailed as an epic film, it is all set to be reproduced in the four South Indian languages.

The film poignantly depicts the violence; a father is capable of inflicting upon his daughter, even to the extent of making his own two-year-old grandchild an orphan, if she breaks the rigid caste boundaries. The most heart rending scene which stays with the viewer for a long time after the movie is that of a crying toddler on the street outside her home, her tiny foot impressions leaving behind a trail of blood, after she suddenly finds both her parents lying dead in a pool of blood in the kitchen.

While the film has brought to the fore the unpalatable reality of honour killing in a state considered to be progressive, several Maratha outfits, irked by the

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negative manner in which their caste has been projected in the movie, have opposed it on the ground that it unnecessarily targets the Maratha community while in reality caste biases are prevalent among all upper castes in Maharashtra.

Re-checking Maharashtra in recent times

One tends to agree that caste biases are prevalent among most upper and middle castes, and not just in Maharashtra but also across all states. The caste lines are rigidly drawn and any girl who crosses the boundaries of caste hierarchy must pay a price with her life.

Nitish Nawsagare, a law professor at the reputed ILS Law College in Pune and an activist, of the Dalit Adivasi Adhikar Andholan (DAAA) affirms that brutal violence against a Dalit youth who dares to fall in love with an upper caste girl is a routine occurrence. Most cases are not even registered as honour killings and conviction is rare as investigations get botched up due to the police-political-upper caste nexus.

Among the many cases that are being followed up by his organisation is the gruesome murder of a 17-year-old schoolboy, Nitin Agge, whose father is a daily wage labourer in Kharda village, Jamkhed taluka, Ahmednagar, in April 2014. He was dragged out from school and killed brutally by the girl's brother along with his friend and uncle, for speaking to an upper caste girl in his school.

On October 21, 2014, a young boy along with his parents was brutally hacked to death in Javkhede Khalsa-Kasarwadi, in Ahmednagar, on the suspicion that the young boy Sunil Jadhav (19) was in an illicit relationship with a married woman in his neighbourhood.

In January 2013, in Sonai, Ahmednagar, Dalits from the Mehtar community working in educational institution owned by the relatives of the accused were killed because a sweeper, Sachin Gharu, was in love with an upper caste Maratha girl studying in the same college.

The caste lines are so rigidly drawn among Marathas that even when a Maratha girl marries a Brahmin she is not spared as revealed in the Kolhapur murder case, that occurred in December 2015. Megha Patil, who married Indrajit Kulkarni against the wishes of her family, was killed by her brothers. When the landlady hearing shrieks from their apartment rushed to help, she was pushed aside by the assailants, who were fleeing the spot. She found the couple lying in a pool of blood with their throats slit, a scene similar to the one portrayed in Sairat.

The harped bougie of inter-caste marriages

According to Dalit activists, usually in cases involving caste atrocities, there is a counter-case in an attempt to weaken the case of Dalits. They add that for every hate crime that is reported, there are several others that find little or no place in the mainstream media.

In 2014, for the first time, the National Crime Records Bureau report “Crimes in India” listed murders under the category of “honour killings” and reported 28 such cases. While Madhya Pradesh tops the list with seven cases, Maharashtra comes a close second along with Punjab with five cases each. The neighbouring Karnataka recorded 13 honour killings since 2011, an indication of hardening social identities.

In June 2016, the Karnataka High Court denied bail to Madhu Kumari’s the parents who were accused of killing their daughter in a case of honour killing. Madhu Kumari, was in love with Jayaram, a boy from a lower caste. Her parents, who did not approve of her choice, had fixed her wedding with a relative. Madhu resisted the alliance and insisted on marrying Jayaram against her family’s wishes. On April 12 2016, her parents and brother made her drink juice laced with pesticide. Based on a tip off, local police picked up the three. During the interrogation, the accused confessed to the crime.

The situation is not very different in Tamil Nadu or Odisha. Tamil Nadu has reported a spate of honour killings in recent years. In Tamil Nadu, since June 2013, 81 young men and women were murdered by the girls’ families. Their crime was they dared to marry or fall in love in violation of strict caste rules. Not a single case ended in conviction. The reason for the lack of convictions is that the girls’ families who generally belong to dominant castes and are influential in the area are able to hush up the matter with the cooperation of the administration and the police.

In March 2016, V Sankar, a 22-year-old Dalit youth, was hacked to death in a crowded market in Tirupur by three bike-borne assailants. The accused were alleged to have been sent by the family of his wife, Kowsalya, who belongs to the powerful Thevar community.

In June 2015, the headless body of 21-year-old Gokulraj, a Dalit youth was found near a railway track in Pallipalayam, Namakkal district, Tamil Nadu. Yuvraj, a local Gounder leader, who had initially absconded, was arrested. He reportedly confessed that he and his accomplices murdered Gokulraj after they saw him talking to a girl from their community.

In November 2014, a Dalit youth Muthu Kumar was killed and his body was found in a well. The police initially claimed that when he was caught for stealing a chicken, while trying to escape he tripped and fell into the well. This was an attempt to make him fit into the stereotypical image of a Dalit. But it was evident that he was murdered for having an affair with the Gounder community girl due to which the girl's relatives killed him.

In October 2014, Vimla Devi, a 21-year-old Thevar girl who had married a Dalit, Dilip Kumar, died in her parents' house under suspicious circumstances, and her body was cremated the same night without informing the police. On her husband's complaint that she was killed, the case was finally handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

In July 2013, a 19-year-old Dalit youth Ilavarasan, was found dead on railway tracks. His marriage to Divya, a Vanniyar, and her father's suicide over the assumed ignominy had triggered caste clashes in which several Dalit houses in Dharmapuri were burnt down. Succumbing to pressure, Divya left her husband and returned to her mother's house.

A recent article published on June 11, 2016 notes, 'Odisha must have progressive law to prevent honour killing' recorded some shocking media reports of honour killing in different parts of Odisha.

The most recent incident is the case of 17-year-old Gita Tanla, from Patnagada, Bolangiri, who was brutally killed by her father in front of her grandmother because she was in love with Naresh Tandi (17), a Dalit boy of Saradhapur, Bongamunda. Gita was four months' pregnant while she was killed. The body of Gita was thrown away to the garbage yard near a railway station without cremation. Street dogs there consumed the body. Later, the benevolent local youth volunteers of a social organisation cremated it with support from local municipality.

The State Human Rights Commission has intervened in the case and issued a show-cause notice to the district Collector, Superintendent of Police (SP), municipality executive officer of the locality to inquire into the matter and report as this is a serious case of human rights violation. Both Naresh and Gita were Dalit migrant workers from the same district but their marriage was unacceptable to Gita's father as Naresh belonged to a slightly lower sub-caste.

Similar cases are being reported from different parts of the State. Swapna, a student of class ten in Dharakot block of Ganjam district, was brutally killed by her brother and father due to her love with a Dalit boy of the same village. The family members killed her to save the family's caste pride. Local police seized her body.

Another girl Sulochana (22) in Bhanjanagar of Ganjam was killed by her family members. Her body was put into a bag and while Sulochana's father was carrying it in public, the local people informed the police. It was also reported from coastal Jajpur where a pregnant teenager of Binjahrapur police station was killed by her parents. The neighbour informed the police and the case was reported in media.

Caste – the pan-Indian reality

A similar situation prevails in most North Indian states as well but since this fact is well known, this essay has not profiled the incidents in these states. When upper caste girls fall in love/ marry lower class boys, the strict code of caste purity is violated. In most of the honour killing cases, the girls are being brutally killed in most inhuman manner following an age-old customary practice systematically followed to maintain purity of religion and caste. These cases bring into focus the extreme brutality which young girls and their lovers/ husbands are subjected to for crossing the caste boundaries by the natal families. The caption of an article by Cynthia Stephen, an activist from Bengaluru (Hindustan Times March 20, 2016) succinctly captures the prevailing situation, '*in Tamil Nadu, caste is above God, 'honour' above life.*' This is true for rest of India as well.

While there are sufficient laws to address the violence inflicted upon married women in their matrimonial home such as dowry death, cruelty to wives and domestic violence, the violence inflicted upon young women by their own parents has gone unrecognised. Since there is limitation in existing laws for prevention and prohibition of honour killing, it was reported that there is a demand for a special legislation to save the lives of many young people in Odisha.

In a landmark ruling of the Supreme Court, delivered by Justice Katju, *Bhagwan Das vs. State of (NCT) Delhi* [(2011) 6 SCC 396] it was held that honour killings are a slur on the nation and these 'barbaric, feudal practices' ought to be stamped out. It directed the courts to view such cases in 'rarest of rare' category for awarding the death penalty.

Within a caste ridden and hierarchical socio-economic political order, there is very slim chance that a special law will have the desired effect or death penalty will act as a deterrent. Convictions in honour killing cases are extremely rare and most accused are able to go scot-free by exerting economic and political influence over the local investigating machinery. What we need, to overcome these caste barriers, is a total social transformation.