

**OUR LAND OF HONOUR:
A CONVERSATION ON INCIDENTS OF
HONOUR KILLINGS IN HARYANA**

JAGMATI SANGWAN



Women in Resistance
The Research Collective
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The Research Collective, of the Programme for Social Action (PSA), facilitates research around the theoretical framework and practical aspects of development, sustainable alternatives, equitable growth, natural resources, community and people's rights. Cutting across subjects of economics, law, politics, environment and social sciences, the work bases itself on people's experiences and community perspectives. Our work aims to reflect ground realities, challenge conventional growth paradigms and generate informed discussions on social, economic, political, environmental and cultural problems.

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Stories, Reflections and Dreams of Women in Resistance

Women have always been part of movements and resistance struggles, and historically have been instrumental in shaping and strengthening them. In spite of this, often they are seen as mass cadre or witnesses in the struggles, and not as leaders, in most cases. Understanding the why and the how of this scenario is crucial in today's socio-political context, with the rise of conservative forces across India, trying to assert their power over women who stand up against authority.

Within struggles, often a systematic practice can be observed, in which separate women's groups/wings have been formed with women leading them, be it within trade unions or political parties. However, the fact of the matter is that this makes the participation and leadership of women confined or restricted to a separate wing of the group, rather than the head of its core movements, thereby diluting the role of women in strategising and decision making.

This can be a convenient arrangement for the men in leadership positions, as several important issues of gender discrimination such as domestic labour, sexual exploitation, and unequal wages can thus be easily avoided in the core leadership discussions and spaces, mostly benefitting the larger capitalist and patriarchal forces. However women have always resisted these practices, exposing these hypocrisies and shredding them into pieces.

Every woman who has stepped out of her traditional confines to join the struggle in the 'public sphere' had to first struggle in the private domain to manage housework, convince or defy the husband or father and speak up on many such issues. It is quite common to see that, for women, the struggle of the private domain travels through to the public domain as well; once the struggle in the public domain is over, the woman is expected to revert to her roles of mother, wife and daughter. Hence, there is a three-phased struggle that almost every woman in public life goes through – the struggle alongside men against the oppressive and exploitative system, the struggle within their organisation or union against male domination, and the struggle in the private domain: of the family, of domestic labour, of reproduction and sexuality.

Over the past several years, we have witnessed an overwhelming and reassuring uprising of the marginalised and suppressed communities, be it women, Dalits, Adivasis or people in conflict zones. One of the key strengths of these movements and struggles has been that they are led by collectives of people instead of having individual leaders, and women have played significant roles, promoting strong collective leadership models.

'Women Leadership in Resistance' was the theme of Jashn-e-Sangharsh, a celebration of resistance, of Programme for Social Action held at Chaibasa, Jharkhand in April 2017. The event deliberated on the role of women as witness, participants and leaders of struggles across India, and reiterated the need to acknowledge, celebrate and strengthen the importance of women in leadership positions.

The Research Collective (TRC) brought out a pre-publication copy of *Women in Resistance* in 2017 for the gathering in Chaibasa. The publication was a collection of conversations on the journey of nine inspiring women who have been part of struggles and movements. It highlighted the way in which these women resisted the patriarchal forces and maintained and developed the question of women's leadership through their action. This series, 'Women in Resistance', aims to continue to nourish and draw out those conversations, to understand the subtle and blatant ways through which patriarchy operates in the minds of the women, and of those around them, and how they have learned to unlearn those patterns of thought. We hope that these stories can also reach readers in vernacular languages and would be open to any collaboration in translation. We hope that these lives inspire, educate and reassure readers to rethink and rekindle our own life struggles and to support and encourage the women leaders we know in our own lives.

In this issue, we bring to you, Jagmati Sangwan and the issue of killings of couples termed as 'honour killings' that are done by their families with the support of the Khap Panchayats in North India. Hailing from a village from Haryana, a vibrant sports champion during her school and college days, Jagmati has always questioned and worked for mechanisms against the hypermasculine norms that exist in society. In this conversation, she opens up about her childhood, college days and work with Himmat Mahila Samooh organisation and All India Democratic Women's Association and what it means to work as a woman in the land of Khaps.

Aashima Subberwal
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On 15th June 2007, a newly married couple - Manoj and Babli appeared in Karnal court, Haryana against an FIR lodged by Babli's family alleging Manoj of kidnapping Babli. They were given police protection from the Karnal court. A police car accompanying the couple made way for Chandigarh, but the car dropped them halfway through the route. The couple scared, decided to catch a bus to Delhi. The bus had crossed hardly 20 metres when Babli's family stopped the bus and kidnapped the couple. The couple were beaten, Babli was forced to drink pesticide, Manoj was strangled and both of them were killed and thrown in the Barwala Link canal in Hisar district.

This story of honour killing made headlines in print and electronic media and Haryana came in the limelight as a gruesome state where crimes against women were increasing rapidly. This horrifying incident of killing shows how certain departments of state work along with people with power who are not afraid of committing crimes to keep themselves in power. Through such incidents of honour crimes there begins an understanding of a larger debate: the political economy of honour crimes.

Jagmati Sangwan is a former volleyball champion who represented India at the Asian games. In an interview with her, she talks about her love of the game and how it carved her for social activism later. On talking about communities stuck at a crossroads of traditions and 'development', she poses integral questions about women and society. Beginning with matters such as livelihood issues of women, she gives us a glimpse of how the society in Haryana ruled by age old traditions emboldened by the Khap Panchayats¹ is fighting to adopt modern ideas of freedom and love.

Himmat Mahila Samooh is an organisation opened in 2005 which works towards development by keeping women and issues connected to women as their focal point. The organisation has been at the forefront of fighting against incidences of rapes/gang rapes, eve-teasing, molestation, abduction, rampant foeticide, child marriages, honour killings, *diktats* (directives) by Khaps, violence against girls in natal families on the choice of their marriage partners and property issues, etc. The organisation is part of AIDWA (All India Democratic Women's Association) with Jagmati Sangwan as the President.

This challenge however, does not come easy. The extra-judicial powers of the Khaps still have a hold over the society. If not challenged, it is not far way that the Khaps would issues *diktats* to the state for forwarding their causes. When we see young people marrying with their own choice and taking risk of their own lives, this is a challenge to tradition. These young people bring forward the new ideas of freedom and love. The women of Himmat have been and will be helping young people in their fights and creating new norms of understanding. Their actions political or social are acts of love that takes consideration of people- from young people fraught with love to farmers growing our food.

¹ A Khap is an organization of a clan or a group of related clans. A Khap panchayat is an assembly of the Khap elders.

How was your childhood? How did your journey of becoming a national level volleyball player begin?

I was born in a village called Janta Butana in Sonipat district, Haryana in the 1960s. My family came from a farming community and we were five brothers and three sisters. I am the youngest in the family. In our village, which was one of the biggest villages had a school established by an educational institute. Children from nearby areas came to study in the school. However, the prevailing patriarchal norms of our society meant that only boys got an education and went to school. But my family were followers of the Arya Samaj² school of thoughts which also insisted on prioritising education for girls. So, while my sisters and I went to school, we were still not allowed to play outside like the boys did.

In our village and in nearby areas there was an enthusiasm for the sport of volleyball. Groups of boys would be playing volleyball in the nearby fields and often there would be competitions including in schools. But girls were never allowed to play. Rather, my sisters and I would do house chores, like picking up *gobar* (cow dung), bringing water from the well, etc. as our brothers would be playing volleyball!

Let alone, playing the game, we were not even allowed to watch them play. But sometimes my sisters and I used to take a peek at the boys playing in the field. When we would be working in the fields after school or during holidays, we could hear people shouting “GOAL! GOAL!”, from the nearby school. I would get very curious and excited to know who scored the goal. Such incidents made the girls in the village, including me feel that we were left out. We wished we could also play because who doesn't like playing?

However, things started changing slowly for the girls in the village when a teacher from Rohtak came to the village to teach. She was a volleyball player herself and encouraged the girls to participate in sports. She is one of the first inspiring figures for me. She always dressed smart and I would want to be like her when I grew up. Her presence had turned the village into a productive space for sports. She created a kho-kho³ team for girls and slowly, we also started playing volleyball also. Our wishes were coming true after all! Apart from her, there was one more figure for me who made our dream to play volleyball as a team real. This was our Hindi teacher who decided to make a girls' team for volleyball. She was also a volleyball player and gave us the last push to play the game.

So, when we finally started as a team, our girls' team became very competitive. Once, in a volleyball competition we came second in all of Haryana. This was a big victory for all of us. We played all throughout eight, ninth and tenth standard. But, after tenth standard, it became difficult for some girls to continue. Students from the village had to travel to the town every day since our village did not have any institutions for higher secondary education. For some families, the fear of sending their girls outside of the village and their

² A monotheistic Indian Hindu reform movement that believes in the authority of the Vedas and reject the worship of idols. The founder of Arya Samaj, Dayanand Saraswati, came to Haryana in the 1880s and received support from the Jat community in rejecting the caste system.

³ A game invented in Maharashtra, India. It is a popular tag game where a team of nine members play in the field and three extra players who try to avoid being touched by members of the opposite team.

financial situation meant that only some girls could afford to study further. In my family, the intervention of one of my school teachers convinced my parents to send me outside the village. I was happy, but I also wanted my friends to come along with me. I tried to convince the parents of the other girls, but they did not agree.

Going to study outside was not easy. The boys in my village eve-teased me a lot. Also, the travel from the village to the town was not easy. Every day I returned from the school very tired and I did not have any energy to help in any of the household chores. This made me fear that my parents would force me to discontinue my studies. Thankfully that did not happen and I finally completed my higher secondary education. I was happy that I was able to complete it, but I also wanted to continue my studies further and not sit at home or get married. I knew that my family could not afford to pay for my expenses even if they allowed me to study outside. I thought this was the end of my education. But, during this time in 1970, an agricultural university was established in Hisar namely Hissar Agricultural University (HAU) where hostel and education fees was free for sportspeople. I knew this was my only chance for a higher education. I worked hard and with the help of some teachers and support of my brothers, I was able to apply to the university. When I got admission there, I was the only girl. I was hesitant and so was my family, but when I thought about the kind of life my sisters had after getting married, I knew I did not want that hard life where I was caged inside a house, doing only household chores. I thought if I get an education, I would be able to get a government job and have a better life. I decided to work hard and take this opportunity to have the kind of life I wanted.

When I started studying in the university, I felt free. I was in a campus which was big and open. I was in a space where I was not held back. The atmosphere in the university helped me put all my energy in volleyball. After just one year, I was already selected for the Indian team to play at the Asian games in Seoul, Korea. Even though I was happy, I wished my friends from the village who were in the volleyball team along with me could also have played along with me. In many ways, they were better in the sport than I was. I felt that my friends missed out on a life opportunity because their parents did not let them leave the village. Nevertheless, I wanted them to share this experience with me. So, the day I was leaving for Seoul by flight, I asked all the girls and their family to come see me off at the airport. I arranged for a bus to pick them from the village and take them to the Delhi International airport. I wanted to show them what they have taken away from their daughters because they were afraid of letting them go out. I wanted to let them know that if you let your daughter go out, she can do wonders. I think this is where I began thinking in terms of social realities where so many women are not able to fulfil their wishes.

As I finally reached Seoul, these thoughts also came along with me. In Seoul, India came third in the volleyball competition. I learnt a lot of new things in the competition. Different techniques that I saw there made me realise that the girls back in my village were better in these techniques. I wished again and again that they were there with me. It was here that I realised that '*ladkiyon ke pratibha*' (a woman's talent) should not be suppressed.

How did the transition from a sportsperson to a social activist begin in your life? What difficulties did you have to endure?

When I came back to India, I started taking part in activities inside the university other than sports. The Students Federation of India (SFI) in HAU was very active at that time and hence I joined some of their events. I first spoke on one of their events when they conducted a debate on March 8th, Women's day. It was here that I first started putting down my opinions on women and society. It was refreshing for me. From here on, I started taking part in their protests. Along with sports, I was building my conscience of the problems in my university. The first issue in our university where I took part in was the problem of student's welfare fund for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. There were many students who did not get support from the government to continue studying. But when these same people won a medal in a sport, the government felicitated them. I was uncomfortable with this hypocrisy.

During this time I also met my partner in the university and in 1982, we decided to get married. Indrajeet, to whom I got married, was a student leader of SFI in HAU. I married out of my own will and my own choice. I knew that this decision will not be received positively in my family. But, I wanted to keep working on social issues and I thought that it was only possible if I married someone who understands me. My family was not happy and the people in my village saw me as a woman who has defied her parents. No matter how tough the backlash from the society was for me, I was determined to continue with my resolution. Indrajeet and I came back to our university after our marriage and from here my new life begun.

After I did my MSc from HAU, I wanted to work in a women's organisation. At that time All Indian Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) was very active and I started working with them. In Haryana, we began by working on women's livelihood. We decided to start with livelihood issues and not gender rights were because we felt that the former would be a softer issue to address than the latter. Through livelihood questions, we thought we could get more women inspired to join the union. Women are not their own masters, often! If we would have picked up gender issues, in the beginning we would have received opposition from the community. The women would not be able to comprehend it. It was with this approach that we started visiting the *bastis* (small group of hutments around the villages) and villages. When we went to talk to the women, we took up issues of electricity, water, sewerage and what are their linkages to policy making. Slowly, we also brought out matters of gender inequality.

Along with the work in AIDWA, I was also working as the Assistant Director of sports in HAU. When my daughter was born, I was still working in the university. But, I was not very happy with my work, it felt as if it was only need-based and there was no actual engagement in sports. But, when my daughter went to Delhi to study in the University of Delhi, my need-based work could now be shifted to something I really wanted to do. I was still working with AIDWA along with my other job. There were plans of opening a women's centre in HAU and the Vice-chancellor asked me to take the first steps towards it. When I started working full time as the founding director of Women Studies in HAU, I was also given the opportunity to become the General Secretary of AIDWA at all India level.

After finally beginning to work as a full-time social activist, I felt that my training as a sportsperson has also helped me in becoming a better social activist. I guess the training that you get as a sportsperson prepares you to not getting defeated. Whenever I have my mind on a goal, I put in all my efforts to reach it.

When was Himmat Mahila Samooh opened and why did you think of opening it?

In 2004-05, we planned to open a new organisation named Himmat. A lot of our donation came our way after the Satyamev Jayate⁴ show which also helped us open our office in Rohtak. After working in AIDWA, we understood that women's problems are not limited to honour crimes. Women needed assistance on a daily basis. There are many women workers who work for daily wage. So, we started working for them. In Haryana, many women die during childbirth and there was no attempt from the government in administering a law that allowed safe choice-willed abortions. Girls are married off at a very young age and are forced to bear children. In schools and colleges, girls are not encouraged to continue. There are many girls in Haryana who are very enthusiastic about sports, but due to lack of infrastructure they cannot go on to play for the country. But when they win Olympic medals, the government honours them. They hide under the pretence that they are doing everything for the girl-child or the women in Haryana, but the truth is they don't do anything.

We thought that having a local office will help us deal with these day-to-day issues. Also, our office has become a space where many couples who are abandoned or threatened by their families for marrying against their choices get married.

When you were studying in school or in college did you hear any cases of honour killing? If yes, then how did you feel about them? How did you approach them later in life?

When I was young, we used to hear cases of girls being harassed or beaten; we noticed how everyone sympathised with the woman and demanded justice for her. But, when girls were being killed by their own family, there was only silence. This was an issue where girls and boys were dying in their young age. When I started working with AIDWA, we knew we could not have turned a blind eye to it. We had many debates amongst us and some of us were not agreeing to provoke the people by discussing this problem. On top of that, we also had to face the harsh opposition of the Khap Panchayats which does the work of keeping the status quo intact in the village. We were agents of change, while they were the protectors of the status quo who would altogether dismissing the horrors of honour killing. From here, there began an obvious conflict between us and the Khap Panchayats.

We had to invest a lot of our time in working on honour killing, almost six to seven years. It was very difficult for us, to be able to talk about honour killing in these villages. Whenever we hear about any case of honour killing, we went to talk to the victim's families. The first time we did it, we hid our identities from the villagers. It is a difficult task to talk to the family and encourage them to talk about it. We plead them to file a case in the authorities

⁴ Satyamev Jayate was a talk show in Indian television which discussed several socially and politically relevant issues in India. In the words of the host, Aamir Khan, the show is about "the common man of India, connecting with India and its people."

because we believed the state could take actions on it. We tried to make the police file an FIR by taking our statements even when there were no complainants from a family. We also devised different ways of forming support for the victim families: talking to the previous village Sarpanch, various farmers' groups, employee's union and also the people of the village. Our first years went in making the government see honour killing as an act of violence and a human rights violation.

How did you begin to understand and see honour killings? Why do you think societies experience it??

In one incident, a couple married for more than a year were declared siblings and banished from their village. The village Sarpanch had also issued a *fatwa* (religious order by a leader) against them and demanded that they pay Rs 10 to each other and become brother and sister. On being banished, the couple had nowhere to go. The woman was pregnant and in need of medical support. We also tried to get into a dialogue with the Sarpanch and ask to take back the *fatwa*. A delegation of advocates, head of the Sociology department and other people who worked for human rights also came along with us. When we reached their house, it seemed as if they were not away from any modern technology. They had a big lavish house with all amenities.

When the conversation came to asking the Sarpanch to take back the fatwa, he made a statement that made us understand how deep seated the seed of honour killing is. He said all this is happening because of the doings of Jawaharlal Nehru. It is because of him that women were given the rights to parental property.⁵ He said that he did what he did to save his property. We were stunned at this comment, but it was here that I began to understand how local politics of land and power have a role to play in this.

Local politics have a big role to play in such incidents where the Sarpanch takes such steps to win popular support to be in power. In the case of this young couple, their choice-based marriage was not accepted by the community because the girl's father lived in the boy's village for some time. But these are not actual norms; rather they are created because if a girl marries by her own choice and free will, then tomorrow she will also choose to keep her property.

We understood that honour killing or any kind of honour crime has its own political economy. If the daughters of landed upper caste families marry a Dalit or to someone from a caste different from her, or even scarier for them, to someone below them in the caste hierarchy, then there would be shift of power along with the property. This fear of losing control leads to taking extreme measures of killing girls, from their own family as well so that it sends a message to all young women of the consequences of marrying by choice.

When we analysed it further, we found that when it came to choice-based marriage, if the boy is of the same caste, there is a little disagreement. If he is of a different caste, but belong to the upper caste, there would be more disappointment. But if the boy is a Dalit,

⁵ The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 is an Act of the Parliament of India enacted to amend and codify the law relating to intestate or unwilled succession, among Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs. This law gave women the right to own a share in their husband's and father's property.

then it is more probable that they both would be murdered. The traditional marriage system keeps divisions of gender roles, caste and class intact. But if a girl marries out of her choice, then the seeds of an egalitarian society is sown. As Dr. B.R Ambedkar said, if we have to eradicate caste then we need to make relationships of '*roti aur beti*' (of bread and daughters, where roti signifies eating with people of all castes and breaking the notions of purity and letting our daughters marry as they wish).

The murder of Manoj and Babli called attention to the feudal character of the Khap Panchayats. Could you explain your experience of fighting the Khap and bringing justice to Manoj's family?

The marriage of Manoj-Babli was a big violation in the eyes of the Khap. They belonged to the same gotra (A system in Hindu culture where people are traced according to their male ancestry or lineage) and were considered siblings. In 2007, the killing of Manoj- Babli was making national news. When we heard about them, it shook all of us. Their murder was inhuman and ruthless. We knew we had to take this issue.

Since the Manoj-Babli incident became so well-known, when we began working on the issue, everyone in Haryana was against us. They blamed us for going against our own traditions. We were refrained from entering villages, nobody would talk to us. We were isolated by the society and everyone was standing in our opposition. During this time, we also saw how the police department stood with the murderers. All political parties, fearing the loss of votes were also helping the Khap Panchayat. Nobody was concerned about the people, rather they were playing anti-people politics. These were very hard times for our organisation. We got several threat calls. Fighting against all of them was very hard for all of us.

In this struggle, we had tried to make many people stand and empower them, but there was no real success. Manoj's family: his widow mother, sister and a younger brother stood courageously against the Khap Panchayat. His mother and sister are very bold women. They were terrorised, harassed threatened to be murdered if they don't take back the case from the court. On March 30, 2010, Karnal district court passed a ruling which became landmark judgement. The ruling stated that the state found all the accused guilty of murder, kidnapping, conspiracy and destroying evidence. What was also notable for me that this judgement was passed by a lady judge.

After the judgement was passed, the state ministry, the Khap Panchayat, the police department and all socio-political forces were boiling with agony. Even though this was a big win for us, we had to bear the brunt of political parties speaking against us. Three former ministers from different political parties spoke against our work in various news channels. These people also shamed the Vice Chancellor of HAU for allowing me to work for the university. In just a short period of time, the whole society was turned against Himmat. But, during this time, teacher's association of Delhi University extended a hand of solidarity towards us by encouraging us to go forward. On the other hand, Manoj and Babli's murderers were being honoured by a Khap association in Kurukshetra!

These were harsh times, but we thought after having come this far in the struggle, we now need to fight for a law that criminalised honour crimes. We gave the draft for the law in 2010. We named it: 'Prevention of Violence in the Name of Honour'. During the UPA II government, they made a group of ministers to take this issue forward, but this group never had a sitting, no meeting and no drafts. We were very disappointed. The Chief Minister of Haryana also asked whether the centre should allow the passing of the law that we drafted. This issue was swept under the rug both by the Chief Minister of Haryana and those at the centre. But that didn't make us pursue this further. We started doing signature campaigns in universities and various other areas. We also met the then law minister Deve Gowda to talk about the possibilities in turning this law into a reality. But this meeting was also unsuccessful. He said a law on honour crimes will be gravely misused like all the previous women protection laws. This was a very shocking statement coming from the former Prime Minister of India who made the previous women empowerment laws controversial. Our draft for the law could not get approval from the state. We felt as if we lost.

Does the state have a role in honour crimes? If yes, how?

When the BJP government came to power in 2014, honour killings in our area started increasing again. When PM Modi came to Haryana for the campaigning for the first time in Jind district, he greeted the state by saying, "*Main khapo ki bhumi Haryana ka naman karta hun*" (I greet the land of Khap Panchayats, Haryana). It was clear that for him that the land was not of the labourers, the farmers or the women, but only of the Khaps. After this, we saw a rise in honour crimes. Even couples who were married for years started getting attacked. Many cases of such killings started coming out. A girl from a Jaat (a tribe in northern part of India) community who married a Dalit was the victim of such a crime where she, her husband, her husband's parents were also killed. In another case, a Jaat girl who was engaged with a boy from a caste below her in the hierarchy and was staying in one of the protection homes was shot in broad daylight in front of her college. A police officer who was in charge of her protection was also shot dead.

When we took the body of the girl to her husband's village, the people in the village refused to cremate her. So, we took her body and decided to cremate her. Only the state women commission helped us, apart from them no one lend us a hand to deal with this. The boy who was put in jail wished to see her one last time but he did not get the permission to.. Even the justice system kept delaying the case in court.

In 2019, legislation was passed by the Rajasthan government which gave us a ray of hope. This law was named Prohibition of interference with the Freedom of Matrimonial Alliances in the Name of Honour and Tradition bill 2019⁶. But in our state, BJP's rule has made these things very hard to achieve. In legal procedure and also in curbing honour crimes, the state has not done anything. The democratic right of a choice marriage was neglected and, in some cases, even denied. They made a rule where a marriage would be allowed only if the

⁶Prohibition of Unlawful Assembly (Interference with the Freedom of Matrimonial Alliances) Bill, 2011 is a law that aims to criminalise locally ascertained justice courts that pass judgements on inter-caste, inter-faith, same-gotra, inter-community marriages that lead to honour crimes.

parents of both the girl and the boy would be present! If both the parents were willing why would they elope?

How does an honour killing occur? Is it mostly the girl's family who kill the couple?

When a woman is killed by her own family her mother is also involved in it. We have talked to many women whose daughters are killed. We have found that they never wanted their daughters to be killed. Even their fathers didn't want this to happen, often. They only want their daughters to go away and never show their face again. It is actually their relatives who are under social pressure to kill them. We have also found that these relatives also rape the girl before killing her.

Has the Khap Panchayat done anything to stop any of AIDWA's or Himmat's efforts against honour killing?

While we were making efforts in passing a law for honour killing. The Khap Panchayats have been asking for an amendment in the Hindu Marriage Act 1955⁷. They demanded that marriage between same gotras and same village be made illegal since they are all blood relations. We asked: How they can be considered blood relation when a girl never takes on her maiden name and uses her father's surname?

They have even influenced changes in the implementation of the Special Marriage Act. It is not couple friendly. There are provisions in the act where they make the marriage between two individuals public through a notification. We asked that this provision be removed. Even letters are sent to the parents. And all this happens within the time period of a month. We demanded for this to be also removed because this puts the couple in grave danger. One month is a long time for such couples to stay safe from such violent vengeful people! A simple registration should be done and they should be allowed to marry. The failure of implementing these provisions have led to many young couples getting married right here in our office. I can't even remember to how many couples I am named the parent of!

There are many cases where a couple is killed for having an inter-faith marriage and it is justified by the killers by using the term 'love-jihad'.⁸ What are your opinions on this?

When it comes to inter-religious marriages, they have now termed it as 'love jihad.' Just like the political economy of honour killing, inter-religious marriage also has its own political economy. This is a politics that is being played by the BJP government. Women marrying outside their caste or religion is a strategic point from wherein an egalitarian society emerges. These create inter-linkages between different caste and religion and they want to close any ways that could happen. We have taken this as our battlefield. If a woman marries

⁷ The main purpose of the act was to amend and codify the law relating to marriage among Hindus and others. Besides amending and codifying Sastrik Law, it introduced separation and divorce, which did not exist in Sastrik Law.

⁸ 'Love jihad' is a term concocted by the right wing alleging that Muslim young men pretend to be in love with women from non-Muslim communities to lure them to convert to Islam and become jihadis. Media and the right wing have used this term to target interfaith couples extensively in the country and the most recent was the one known widely as the 'Hadiya case' in which the Supreme Court eventually upheld her right to marry the person of her choice.

by choice, there is a big turning point in her life. Marrying outside the social structure also dismisses the prospect for demanding dowry. This is a big challenge to the economy of patriarchy. The base for equality also increases.

All these are actually non-issues, but they make it an issue to control a woman's sexuality. They say that the *pardah* system actually came from Muslims. But is this actually true? Aren't Hindus equally controlling of their women? In our region too, there is practice of *ghunghat* (veil) among women. They politicise the *pardah* system as a tussle between Hindu Muslim, but the reality behind the *pardah* debate is that the women's sexuality is being controlled. Only when she looks, can she begin to see whom she likes. To capture this problem, we gave the slogan- *ghunghat ek andhera hain, bahar niklo sawera hain* (The veil is one of darkness; come out and there is light outside). We see so many cases where we see that if a woman even looks at a man other than her brother, husband and father, she is punished. They want to block every way through which a woman can express her sexuality.

Women are a symbol of honour for them and they want to protect that image. Here in Haryana, girls are not allowed to go to school or go outside to play because of the fear that she will run away. If she exercises her sexuality, she will be out of her *qabila* (family). In her sexuality, resides the ability to give birth; and in that ability, honour was attached. If she begins to bear the child of other communities, the ownership of land will also go away. She is only allowed to express her sexuality where the man allows her to.

Whether be it in the Parliament or within political parties, the percentage of women is always quite low. How do you feel about the unequal opportunities given to women in acquiring positions of legal and political power?

Even though it seems that the political consciousness of women are increasing, equal political representations of women in government positions is lacking. In 2019, in Haryana alone, elections there were only 104 candidates, which is only 9% of the total participants. Political parties use the winning prospect of these women to show that they care about issues of women and are in favour of women being in power, while in reality they are all '*purush andharashtravadee*' (male chauvinists). All political parties have such hypocritical stands on gender equality. Our organisation is working towards fighting for equal representation and this is a fight that we all will have to work hard for.

Apart from this, we also see that most women in political offices pay attention to domestic issues. For example, in a village in Haryana, Lakhna Majra, the female Pradhan (head of the village panchayat) has given her attention to giving nutritious and healthy mid-day meal to students. However without statutory backing, attempts at ensuring equal representation of women in political parties and in offices might not be successful. State needs to recognise the women's right to equal representation. All kinds of inequality based on caste, gender, age, class, age and religion needs to be fought collectively.

How do you and the women you work with see the importance of rights of women?

It is a big process but the women are recognising their rights. Women need various securities from birth: security of food and land. If adequate food is not given to a girl she

might not even live to resist. I remember most of the rural women in my family- my grandmother, aunts- who had early death due to a lack of nutrition compared to the men in the family.

A farmer's land is being grabbed by big companies and the farmer is left without food and income. We feel that this is an issue which is also a part of a woman's movement. Without land there can be no food and without food there can be no strength to fight.

How does Himmat see its future struggles and journeys in women empowerment?

As I mentioned earlier, it was the publicity that we got after our episode on Satyamev Jayate helped us build an office of Himmat. This also became our gender issues centre where we did research and social outreach programmes. Our office has been a big success for us. It is not easy to open an office of a women's organisation and even when they do they are rarely successful. This office has become a great tool for us in take our struggle forward. Many young women have begun to join our organisation. The office space is where we hold programmes, meetings and workshops for women. When we were fighting in court for the Manoj-Babli case, many young women from universities began joining the struggle by becoming a part of Himmat. In the future, we hope that we can continue to broaden our struggle by including more young women.

We are taking up cases in court regarding female foeticide, honour killing and other honour crimes. Even though we operate amidst a patriarchal society that sees women as a symbol of pride, our attempt is to challenge and breaking norms in a highly patriarchal society. Challenging these norms create a break in society, opening the way for an egalitarian society.