

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF RUNAWAY COUPLES IN SAFE HOMES: A CASE OF HARYANA

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ABSTRACT

Choice marriage is still a dream for youngsters in India after 75 years of independence. Constitutionally we are a democratic country with equal rights for males and females of all colours, races and communities, but socially we are far backward than this. We are adopting modern ways of living with the advancement of technology but are culturally rigid to our traditions without rationalising our thoughts. The consequences of which youth are facing, especially in matrimonial matters. Young males and females who breach the idea of parent's command over the choice of marriage partners runaway for the sake of their relationship and life after all. The state government has provided protection centres for such couples in all 22 districts in Haryana for their security. The present paper attempts to get an insight into the socio-economic status of such couples who seek protection from the state authorities. Various factors like age, educational qualification, caste, occupation, income and residential area are considered for the study.

Key Words: *Runaway, Protection, Occupation, Democratic.*

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Introduction:

In Brahminical Indian texts, marriage is considered a *samskara* "a ritual and sacramental union" (Rao and Rao, 1982)¹ which is crucial in the sense that it binds two people together for the future. It changes the way people used to live before marriage. But in practice, it is not just binding two people but two families (Ahlawat, 2008)² and other two kinship groups (Grover, 2011)³. This makes it a more sensitive matter and crucial for people. That is why in India, even today, almost all marriages are fixed and arranged by the parents only (Chaudhry, 2007)⁴. Serena Nanda found this system of arranged marriage oppressive (Nanda, 2000)⁵. When finding a match for a girl or boy, relatives play an essential part as the mediator in fixing the game is very significant. But the final decision is of the parents and often of older males in the family. Couples who take their marriage into their hands invite trouble for themselves (Nanda, 2000)⁶. The parents and community members do not accept any breach in the normative structure of matrimonial matters as there are a few norms taken into account by the family while fixing a marriage. These are village and territorial exogamy, gotra exogamy and caste endogamy (Ahlawat, 2015)⁷. While many other aspects are also to be considered, these are the most crucial ones. In April 2010, a *Sarvkhap* panchayat (a council of hundreds of people with different clans) of Haryana held in the Kurukshetra district demanded the government amend the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 and ban same-gotra marriage (bbc.com, 13 April 2010)⁸.

Ignoring the parents and finding a match for themselves divert youngsters to not comply with all these norms and hence lead them to commit the mistake of breaking the cultural codes of the society (Chowdhry, 1997)⁹. The collective conscience of our community is still preserved with some value/amount of cohesion which forces the family to take action against such couples. Not that all families themselves take action but sometimes the village councils and caste councils (*khaps*) as well. The kind of action taken

against such couples varies in nature, which too often depends on the socio-economic background of the male and female who are found engaged with each other without the family will. The community seeks punitive measures against such couples to make others learn a lesson that such moves cannot be tolerated in any case. Sometimes such teams are fined, beaten up and rounded in the village with black faces, excommunicated, socially boycotted, and forced to tie Rakhi (a holy thread tied by sister on brother's wrist for her protection) if they are found from the same gotra and sometimes they are killed in the name of honour. By doing such things, parents have a notion of honour in their minds thinking that they will restore their lost honour. Nowadays, it has not been seen that any *khap* has come into such family matters. But village councils and families are still found involved in such acts of atrocities upon the couples who choose the life partner of their own will.

We have a lot of examples of recent incidents reported in newspapers when such couples are punished by their kins. This is also true that in almost all matters, a strong resentment comes from girl's families. From the very infamous heinous dishonour killing of Manoj and Babli of Kaithal district in 2007 and brutal murder of a couple in Garnauthi village in 2013 to the recent incident of shooting a couple in Rohtak district in 2020 and a witness in wife's murder in Sonapat court premises in 2022, there are many instances when a girl's family with their kins support poured their wrath on the couples or individuals who got married without their will. Looking at the grave issue of atrocities and incidents of 'dishonour killing, of the couples by family and community members Punjab and Haryana High court passed an order in the case of Pardeep Kumar Singh versus the State of Haryana in 2008 to protect the couples who eloped and get married against the will of their parents. In 2012 as well High court ordered the establishment of safe homes in every district centre to provide temporary shelters for runaway couples for a period until they feel unsafe outside. In Haryana, 22 safe homes

are functioning under the direct supervision of the District Judge, District Commissioner, and superintendent of police.

When a couple intends to marry against parent's wishes, they seek protection from the court or police under article 21. After the protection orders from authorities, they are escorted to the safe home by the police for a given period till the matter remains hot outside. After which they are asked to go home or anywhere, they feel safe to live. The present study focuses on one of the safe homes in the Panipat district where prior permission was taken from the Superintendent of Police before the fieldwork. Before fieldwork, it was instructed to the researcher by the police not to take any identity proof of address or photos of the couples for security reasons.

Methodology:

For the present study, primary data has been taken from the respondents of the Panipat district safe home with the help of an interview schedule. This is pertinent to mention that the data was collected from only those respondents who agreed to talk to the researcher. Those who refused to speak, citing their reasons, have not been considered. During fieldwork for four months, from December 2021 to March 2022 researcher spent 2-6 hours in the same home on every visit while conducting the interviews. Secondary data has been collected from the record register maintained for the eloped couples. Various newspapers and journal articles are also looked upon.

Results and discussion:

Panipat is a district in Haryana which shares its boundary with Uttar Pradesh and is also a textile industry hub where people from other states come to work in various small-scale industries. The later inhabited urban colonies are occupied by migrant people with different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Heterogeneous people also inhabit the rural areas of the district. The respondents in the safe home also belong to different

socio-economic backgrounds. The natives, as well as migrants both, have a share in the total eloped couples. It is to be noted that migrants also have a kind of same customary practice in marriage matters. They also do not allow their wards to get married to their own choice, especially in the case of girls as in Haryana. There are many aspects of such marriages, and one most crucial aspect is the socio-economic status of the eloped couples, which is studied through the following entities.

Table-1 Educational qualification and gender of the respondents.

| Educational qualifications | Male | Female | Total |
|----------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Post-graduation | 1 (3.13) | 2 (6.25) | 3 (4.69) |
| Under graduation | 6 (18.75) | 9 (28.12) | 15 (23.44) |
| Senior secondary | 10 (31.25) | 10 (31.25) | 20 (31.25) |
| Secondary | 15 (46.87) | 10 (31.25) | 25 (39.06) |
| Illiterate | - | 1 (3.13) | 1 (1.56) |
| Total | 32 (100) | 32 (100) | 64 (100) |

* The data in the brackets are in the percentage.

The above table shows that the male and female respondents who have done their post-graduation are only 3.13 per cent and 6.25 per cent, respectively. About 28 per cent have done or are pursuing their higher studies. About 31 per cent of respondents have passed the senior secondary examination, and 39 per cent are secondary or below. 3.13 per cent of females are uneducated. This data indicates that the maximum number of male and female respondents are those who have not opted for higher education. Among those, the maximum number of male respondents have

left their studies inbetween due to not having an interest in studies or family circumstances likethe demise of the earning family member. Females also have left studies forfamily reasons willingly or unwillingly for household chores. There is anapparent gesture that those who opt for higher studies do not think about sucha move which alienates them from their career, family and the ease of livingwhilemaintaining the status quo.

Table-2 Age and gender of the respondents:

| Age (in years) | Male | Female | Total |
|----------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 18-21 | 6 (18.75) | 23 (71.87) | 29 (45.31) |
| 22-25 | 16 (50.00) | 8 (25) | 24 (37.50) |
| More than 25 | 10 (31.25) | 1 (3.83) | 11 (17.19) |
| Total | 32 (100) | 32 (100) | 64 (100) |

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The table shows the maximum number of eloped males and females from their lower marriageable age group. This means that the maximum number (71.87 per cent) of females are of the age group 18-21 years, and the maximum (about 68 per cent) of male respondents are below 25 years of age. The males and females above 25 years are comparatively less, and there is a big difference in their percentage value as 31.25 per cent of males are above 25 years, but females are only 3.83 per cent. One of the security personnel opined that a girl who crosses the age of 24-25 years, she wouldn't dare to make such a blunder. It is to be noted that the reason for the elopement of girls at their early marriageable age is the parent's pressure to get married to someone other. Some of the female respondents stated that they didn't want to elope this time, but our parents created such circumstances that we had to flee. Some males also made their comments to justify the act- "If I wouldn't take her this time, her parents may arrange her marriage with someone else within a few days". After discovering the relationship of the girl, family members first torture her mentally and physically and then start looking for a match to fix her marriage as soon as possible before she takes any step that causes dishonour to the family.

Table-3 Occupation and gender of the respondents:

| Occupation | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Private job | 20 (62.50) | 3 (9.38) | 23 (35.94) |
| Shopkeeper | 4 (12.50) | 2 (6.25) | 6 (9.37) |
| Agriculture | 1 (3.12) | - | 1 (1.56) |
| Labour | 3 (9.38) | - | 3 (4.69) |
| Student | 1 (3.12) | 13 (40.62) | 14 (21.88) |
| Unemployed | 3 (9.38) | 14 (43.75) | 17 (26.56) |

The above table shows the occupational status of the respondents. Out of total male respondents, 62.5 per cent were in private jobs, which were in unorganised sectors like salesman, truck driver, worker at mechanic shops etcetera. And summer in small factories. Only 3.12 per cent of males were in agriculture, which is significantly less than the other occupations males are engaged in. 12.5 per cent males are shopkeepers running a small grocery and cosmetic shops. 9.38 per cent are labour who work on daily wages, and 3.12 per cent of students and 9.38 per cent are unemployed. If we talk of female respondents, only about 15 per cent are working and earning something. Out of these working females, 9.37 per cent are in private factories, and 6.25 per cent are running cosmetics shops. A total of 40.33 per cent of females are students at the time of elopement who left their studies in between and got eloped due to parent's pressure of marriage as they later discovered their relationship with the male and they didn't want to take the risk of letting her continue her freedom of what they were doing.

Table-4 Income and gender of the respondents:

| Income (in rupees per month) | Male | Female | Total |
|------------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| 8000 or less | - | 5 (15.62) | 5 (7.81) |
| 8001-16000 | 15 (46.88) | - | 15 (23.44) |
| 16001-24000 | 8 (25.00) | - | 8 (12.50) |
| More than 24000 | 5 (15.62) | - | 5 (7.81) |
| No income | 4 (12.50) | 27(84.38) | 31 (48.44) |

In this table, we can see a significant difference in the income status of male and female respondents. First, only 15.62 per cent of female respondents earn themselves, and that is too very low, up to Rs.8000 per month. The rest of the female respondents do not earn as either they are

engaged in studies or they are unemployed and do only household chores in the family. The noticeable thing is that out of these working females, one was below 18 years of age from a migrant Muslim family. Her uncle got her Aadhaar card made with an age showing 18 years so that he could send her to a local factory for earning. But when she got married on that adhar identity proof to a Hindu male changing her religion from Muslim to Hindu, her uncle brought her school certificate from her native state with actual age, which was 16 years and lodged an FIR on the male, which led him to six-month jail. Now he is out on bail, and the girl eloped again willingly from home to live with the male partner. The earning of maximum male respondents is also not too much but a hand-to-mouth earning. 46.88 per cent of male respondents earn only Rs.8,000-Rs.16,000 per month; 25 per cent of male respondents earn Rs.16,000-Rs.24,000 per month, and only 15.62 per cent of males earn more than Rs.24,000 per month. 12.50 per cent of males are unemployed and do not earn a single penny. This shows that for these eloped females, the male partner's income does not highly matter. And for males as well, it does not matter how much they are earning and if that would be substantial for feeding one more member of the family. In Haryana, a culture is developing that in any caste or economic status family, girls' parents expect a government job for their daughter's mate. This is also a reason for not accepting the female's choice of partner by the parents as they later find that the male is not earning enough and that too not in the government job.

Table- 5 Residential area of respondents:

| Residence | Male | Female | Total |
|-----------|------------|------------|------------|
| Rural | 24 (75.00) | 15 (46.88) | 39 (60.94) |
| Urban | 8 (25.00) | 17 (53.12) | 25 (39.06) |
| Total | 32 (100) | 32 (100) | 64 (100) |

*The data in the brackets are in the percentage.

Table 5 shows that 75 per cent of male respondents belong to rural areas. In comparison, female respondents who are from rural areas are 46.88 per cent. This is also pertinent to mention here that all the females who belong to urban settings are from different castes but not the Jat caste, which is dominant in most villages and has a hold on agricultural land. A maximum number of these families have migrated from other parts of Haryana or other states. Twenty-five per cent of males belongs to the city itself. In contrast, the female respondents who belong to the municipality are 53.12 per cent which is quite more than the number of males in the town. One of the most critical findings in the study shows that the distance between 34.37 per cent of couple's residences is less than one kilometre and the maximum of them live just in front or beside each other. This indicates that physical proximity matters a lot in developing such relationships. 18.57 per cent live at a distance of five kilometres, and the distance between the houses of 46.87 per cent of couple's ranges from 10 to 250 kilometres. Of these long-distance relationship couples, few are such who have a kinship relationship with each other, if not directly, then indirectly.

Table-6 Family type of the respondents:

| Family type | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Nuclear | 22 (68.75) | 20 (62.50) | 42 (65.62) |
| Joint | 10 (31.25) | 12 (37.50) | 22 (34.38) |
| Total | 32 (100) | 32 (100) | 64 (100) |

*The data in the brackets are in the percentage.

A family is an institution which socialises its members. It is imperative to know how family type impacts such inclination or attitude of youth to decide for such move of getting married without the consent of family members. The table shows that 65.62 per cent of respondents have

nuclear families, and 34.38 per cent belong to joint families. In common families, it is assumed that the control over the children is more still. There is a good number of runaway couples from such families. This indicates that whether it is a joint family or nuclear proportion of eloped members does not differ much. Besides this, from the field, we learned that 34.37 per cent of male respondents are fatherless while the fatherless female respondents are 12.5 per cent. 9.83 percent of males do not have their mothers alive. This indicates that those males in a relationship who haven't their fathers alive do not have a person to deliberate with on such crucial issues for their validation of whether such a move would be right for them or not. Males often persuade mothers of what they are going to do, and they often let their male ward do what he thinks is better for them.

Table-7 Caste and social categories of the respondents:

| Categories | Male | Female | Total |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| General | 13 (40.63) | 17 (53.13) | 30 (46.87) |
| Other backward castes | 10 (31.25) | 9 (28.12) | 19 (29.69) |
| Schedules castes | 9 (28.12) | 6 (18.75) | 15 (23.44) |
| Total | 32 (100) | 32 (100) | 64 (100) |

*The data in the brackets are in the percentage.

Caste is the most significant aspect that is looked upon by the family members while finding a match for their wards. This is a common notion that parents often refuse their ward's proposal for partner choice due to the different caste of their counterparts. This is not factually true. In the study, it is found that 87.5 per cent of couples are inter-caste married, and only in 12.5 percent of cases, both male and female are of the same castes. While on fieldwork, it was heard

often from the security personnel that such acts are done mainly by those who are of lower socio-cultural background. From this, they indicated that,

in their opinion, lower-caste strata people are found to be engaged. The study shows that a total of 46 per cent of respondents belong to general castes. 29.69 percent belong to Other backward castes, and 23.46 per cent of respondents belong to Scheduled Castes.

Conclusion:

Due to an increase in educational opportunities, spaces for outings and exposure to social media platforms with the easy availability of smartphones and cheap internet data, it has become easy for the youth of all socioeconomic backgrounds to connect with the opposite sex people which

may further develop as a committed bond as they found it suitable for them to be with someone whom they are acquainted with. Most of the males and females who elope are from lower economic backgrounds. The pressure of marriage from the family on the girl persuades her to risk her life for freedom and choice. Not that they don't know the consequences of such a move, but state protection makes them confident to take a step forward. Due to their lower educational status, they do not have more significant career options in their mind for which they can rethink the decision of elopement and be entirely confined to the fact that they have reached the level they could get. This is also, a fact that such people look upon no caste. They connect with whom they find themselves easily connected. Such couples come from both rural as well as urban areas. The difference is that from the villages, couples come from both lower and middle economic status families. Still, in urban areas, most of the teams come from lower financial backgrounds families.

Notes:

1. I am thankful to the Superintendent of Police, Panipat, for granting permission to conduct fieldwork in the safe home.

2. I am also thankful to the security personnel/guards for their cooperation in collecting the data during my visits to the safe home.

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