



# TIED IN A KNOT

Cross-region Marriages in Haryana and Rajasthan:  
Implications for Gender Rights and Gender Relations

Reena Kukreja  
Paritosh Kumar



NORWEGIAN EMBASSY

A study supported by  
The Royal Norwegian Embassy

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ISBN: 978-0-9918952-0-5

*All names of people and villages have been withheld to protect the identity of the respondents*

The views presented in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Royal Norwegian Embassy.

The research study has been supported by The Royal Norwegian Embassy.

Published 2013

Published by:

Tamarind Tree Films  
377 Malabar Dr  
Kingston ON K7M 8X1  
Canada

Tamarind Tree Films  
C8/8177, Vasant Kunj  
New Delhi-110070, India

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Cover photograph: Reena Kukreja  
Jacket design: Partha Sarkar  
Printed & Typeset at: Graphica Tradelinks, Delhi

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to begin by thanking Ms Renu Wadehra, Senior Advisor, Development, The Royal Norwegian Embassy for grasping the necessity to do in-depth research on this subject and to Ms Bodil Maal, Senior Advisor, Department of Economic Development, Gender and Governance, Norad for understanding the complexities of the study. Without their unqualified support and belief in our quest, this report wouldn't have seen the light of the day.

We would like to thank Suresh Rahad and his entire family who accepted us into their family with love and trust and took great risks in helping us undertake clandestine observation with traffickers. Thanks also to Sunder Lal ji and SCRIA, Khori for facilitating initial forays into this subject in the Rewari region; Kuntala and R.K. Ray for being gracious hosts to us in Balasore, Odisha; Partha Sarkar for coming up with answers to our oddest of requests; Rajiv Pratap Singh 'Rudy' and Ranjanesh Sahai for helping out with travel and accommodation while we did research; and Ujjwal Singh and Anupama Rao for always being there when we needed support. All participating NGOs, activists, academics and officials who took time out of their busy schedules for interviews too have to be thanked for sharing their insights or analysis of the situation.

We are grateful to Reena's parents, Krishan Mohan and Urmila who bore our nomadic existence in their house with patience and affection. Their lavish doses of love and attention on our daughter allowed us do this research with less guilt about deserting her in their care.

Above all, we would like to express our gratitude to all the cross region brides who took time out of their busy daily routines to sit down and talk at length with us. They did so in the hope that this report would enable their voices reach out to those who care about such issues and help prevent other cross-region brides experiencing the same problems as them.

Reena Kukreja  
Paritosh Kumar

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last decade and a half, the male marriage squeeze in economically prosperous North Indian provinces such as Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Western Uttar Pradesh has led to men from these states to pay money to marry women, usually from underdeveloped or economically marginalized regions in Eastern India.

This study, focussed on Haryana and Rajasthan as receiving regions, sought to examine the everyday existence of such cross-region brides within the intimacy of the conjugal household and community. Some questions for the study included looking at intra-gender relations within the family, kin network and community; the subject of integration and assimilation of these women; whether their caste status impacted their lives; and what forms, if any, did gender subordination and gender based violence take vis-à-vis such brides.

The research was conducted in three phases in the districts of Rohtak, Rewari and Mewat in Haryana and Alwar and Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan. 226 villages were surveyed with 1247 cross-region brides participating in the survey. Detailed qualitative research followed in 30 select villages with 54 brides participating in it. In the source region of Odisha, research was conducted on a cluster of 10 villages from Bhograi and Jaleswar blocks from Balasore district with 47 families participating in it.

## KEY FINDINGS

Shortage of women is not common across all caste groups in the conjugal regions, but is endemic in dominant caste groups of *Jats* and *Yadavs*. While the well-off from these caste groups are able to marry within locally, men who are underemployed; poor; have little land; suffer from some deformity; are less educated or are old are the ones most often seeking cross-region brides. This practice, however, is slowly spreading to some lower caste groups and among Muslim communities. It is primarily a rural phenomenon where caste hierarchies and regulations governing marriage are more strictly enforced.

Such marriages are non-customary as the women come from different ethnicity, region and sometimes, even religion. Families of these brides are extremely poor, often falling in the category of BPL (Below Poverty Line); have little or no land assets; and rely on seasonal low-paying agricultural wage work. Inability to meet the exorbitant dowry demands made by local grooms that compels them to long-distance alliances is the main reason why they opt for 'dowry-free, no wedding expenses' offers made by Haryanvi or Rajasthani men.

These marriages are arranged in four ways with grave consequences for the brides depending on which route they get married through. These are: (a.) Trafficking (b) Alliances through marriage brokers or Dalals; (c) Husbands of brides; and (d) Brides as marriage mediators. Though there is trafficking of women for forced marriages, it isn't as extensive and rampant as media makes it to be. The largest number of marriages are conducted by the cross-region brides themselves, usually of their female relatives in the immediate family or kin networks. Their motivations aren't solely monetary as they also seek companionship in a culturally alien environment through such alliances. However, most marriages through all routes involve some degree of deception about the man's economic ability, social status or health.

The men seek alliances only when other female family members, such as mothers, are unable to support them. The brides are 'needed' solely for their ability to perform free reproductive and productive labour. They are also preferred over local women as loosening of natal family connections render them vulnerable to domination and abuse. New forms of gender subordination have emerged within conjugal families as extreme demands are made on the labour time of cross-region brides.

The most disturbing finding of our study has been the widespread intolerance exhibited by conjugal communities in Haryana and Rajasthan towards the cross-region brides. These take a number of different forms, the worst being caste discrimination. Caste councils or *Khap Panchayats*, though taking a tough stance on inter-caste marriages within Haryana, show a studied silence and tacit acceptance of inter-caste nature of these cross-region marriages.

Oppression and discrimination experienced by the low caste groups and the Dalits from the dominant caste groups gets similarly reproduced within the family bringing in wives from other parts of India. They are segregated, isolated and shunned primarily because of their 'unknown' caste status though the families, overtly, insist otherwise. Furthermore, the caste-based exclusion and humiliation is experienced both in public arena and the private space of the family.

Caste discrimination is further amplified by exhibition of deep racism against the women and their natal communities. They are pejoratively called 'Biharan': a term implying poverty, desperation, filth and savagery. Their parents and natal communities are branded as 'thieves', 'sellers of daughters' and 'primitive savages'. The continual denigration is internalized by the brides leading to lowering of their self-esteem and self-worth. As a survival strategy, they minimize social contact with others with negative impact on their mental health.

Most cross-region brides are victims of colourism (darker pigmentation of their skin). Dark skin leads to their rejection in the local marriage market making them more likely to be offered for long-distance alliance, resulting in dislocation from their culture, community and family. Apart from casteist and racist slurs, these brides are considered and often taunted as ugly and dull in intelligence because of their dark skin tone.

Children of such unions face similar racial taunts from their peers and are not accepted as one of their own. These range from sidelining them in games or bullying them with name-calling. Such incidents were high in Rohtak district of Haryana and in Alwar region of Rajasthan respectively. Some older male children have faced difficulty

in finding local girls because of their mother's 'questionable' caste identity. More research needs to be done on this aspect to assess its long-term impact.

The brides are subject to heightened surveillance, which varies from total confinement to restriction of their movement within the village. The degree to which this is enforced depends on the a) mode through which the bride has been sourced, i.e., whether she is trafficked, coerced or married with her parent's approval; b) duration of the marriage; c) amount invested by the family in the marriage; and d) whether she has children or not from this marriage.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Registration of all marriages, notwithstanding any community or religion, should be made compulsory with the proposed bill on it passed as quickly as possible by the Indian Parliament. It will offer protection of gender rights of cross region brides, in case of trafficking; abuse during marriage; desertion by husband; or claiming maintenance or inheritance rights. The benefits of the marriage registration will extend to their children too. An intensive and sustained awareness campaign outlining the correct process of registering marriages should be undertaken in both natal and conjugal regions. The benefits of the registration should be spelt out differently to each target group.

Panchayati Raj Institutions in both conjugal and natal regions should be used to discuss cross-region marriages; gendered nature of violence that the brides face; and the need to desist traffickers. At least a minimum of one Gram Sabha, especially in conjugal areas, should be devoted to cross-region marriages and its linkage to girl dis-preference and male marriage squeeze.

Government scheme to encourage inter-caste marriages with a monetary incentive of Rs 50,000 should be extended to cross-region marriages with a clause that the wife has to be a non-resident and of low-caste status. Presently, both spouses have to be residents of the same state to claim the benefit. It will ensure that such marriages are registered by a Marriage Registration Officer; lead to reduction in incidences of trafficking; and offer legal protection of human rights of the brides and their children.

The Centre and State governments should prioritize implementation of targeted and tailored prevention initiatives that address core contributing factors to cross region marriages. These should emphasize poverty alleviation schemes; anti-dowry campaigns; education; access to resources; and job opportunities for vulnerable women. Even though all such schemes do exist, tardy implementation prevents these from reaching those it is intended for.

Partnership between the Civil Society Organisations and the Government in conjugal regions on the issue of cross-region marriages and the treatment of brides should be established to allow tabling and discussion of region-specific strategies to protect human rights of the brides. Workshops specifically on the complexity of such alliances and the gendered nature of violence and



discrimination should be held for CSOs in conjugal districts to increase awareness levels and to devise grassroots-based intervention strategies.

Further research should be undertaken to ascertain whether cross region wives are able to access and obtain the same sets of rights and privileges available to local brides. It will determine whether they face barriers in access to resources, be it property rights or government schemes. Similarly, further detailed and phased research on their children should be conducted to find out whether they face differential treatment in choosing marriage partners, access to resources, education, inheritance rights, amongst others.

Research also needs to be conducted to study the mental health status of cross-region brides and, on the basis of the findings, devise targeted interventions aimed at this group. Since a majority experience loneliness, isolation, psychological abuse and emotional violence, it has led to depression and suicidal thoughts apart from elevated levels of stress.

Business cards with helpline information of local feminist advocacy organisations / AHTUs in conjugal regions should be undertaken in some key source-region languages. These can be distributed by Anganwadi and / or ASHA workers to cross region brides in conjugal communities.

## INTRODUCTION

The decennial Census of India 2011 results revealed that the male-female sex ratio had further deteriorated in India since the last Census in 2001 with the deficit of women tagged at a staggering 38 million! The sex ratio between the ages 0-6 years showed a decline from 927 females per 1000 males in the 2001 Census to 914 in the 2011 one.<sup>1</sup> Alarm bells were especially raised about the skewed sex ratio and the attitude of girl dis-preference and selective negligence of the girl child that appeared to have spread to regions other than North India. The previous censuses of 1991 and 2001 had revealed that female deficit was serious in economically prosperous North Indian provinces such as Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Western Uttar Pradesh. A number of demographic and sociological studies in the recent past have extensively examined the intersection of family planning policies of the Government of India to limit family size and the use of medical technology to detect and abort female fetuses with the overarching patriarchal preference for a male child that has led to a female shortage (Jha et al. 2011; John et al, 2009; Bandyopadhyay: 2003). It has led to certain parts of India confronting a comparable crisis facing China and other South-east Asian countries: male marriage squeeze brought on by a shortage of women of marriageable age.

In India, a trend has emerged since the past few years: that of men from female deficit states of North India seeking marriage partners from outside their customary marriage pools. Many media reports and a few academic studies too have documented this trend. Today, this new phenomenon, interchangeably called long-distance (Chaudhry and Mohan. 2011) or cross-region marriages (Kaur. 2010) involves the marriage of women from underdeveloped or economically marginalized regions of India with such men. The trend which began in Haryana and Punjab has now appears to have spread to other parts of India such as Rajasthan, Western Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. A study projects that by 2020, there will be 31 million more men living in India<sup>2</sup>. It can then be safely conjectured that the practice of sourcing brides will only increase and that the women's shortage might lead to increased trafficking as men become desperate to obtain a wife at any cost.

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<sup>1</sup> Census of India, 2011

<sup>2</sup> Hudson, Valerie M and Boer, Andrea M. den. (2002) "A Surplus of Men, A Deficit of Peace: Security and Sex Ratios in Asia's Largest States" in *International Security* - Volume 26, Number 4, Spring 2002, pp. 5-38

In India, such marriages, at present, are confined within its national boundaries with the grooms travelling hundreds of kilometres away to distant provinces such as West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Tripura and Jharkhand to obtain brides. This is unlike China or Taiwan where significant cross-border marriage migration of women from poorer South-east Asian countries has taken place in response to the male marriage squeeze there (Wang. 2010; Lu. 2005; Hugo and Nguyen. 2007; Duong et al. 2007). Only one study so far lists the localized trend of marriage of Bangladeshi women to men from eastern Uttar Pradesh in North India (Blanchett. 2004). Interestingly, there is historical evidence that, in Haryana, women were bought by specific caste groups. Mention is also made of open auctions or Mandis, particularly in Ambala<sup>3</sup> or Jind<sup>4</sup> being held where women were sold as wives. However, this seemed to have died down by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

## FRAMING SOME QUESTIONS

Within India, there is an emerging concern amongst human rights and feminist groups about such alliances as it appears many of the women are trafficked for forced marriage. A number of media articles and few reports produced by human rights and aid organizations have tended to primarily focus on the trafficking of women for forced marriage into these female deficit regions. A handful of scholarly works, pioneering in many ways, too have been limited to small sample groups. There has been no large scale in-depth study done about the impact of such marriages on the women who are brought in as brides and on gender relations and intra-gender dynamics in the receiving communities. Nor has any study examined the regions and communities from where the women are being 'sourced' as brides.

Who are the people obtaining brides? Does the sourcing cut across class and caste or is it limited to a few caste groups? Is it only limited to rural parts of Haryana? Has the reduced availability led to women being treated better in society there, the lessening of sex selective abortions or the reduction in demands for dowry? Or is the shortage leading to their marriage at an earlier age or increased gender based violence within the region? If yes, what are the implications for gender rights there?

Traditionally, families desirous of marrying their son or daughter would contact a person with extensive social network in their caste group or *Got* to find a suitable match. The role of the matchmaker *Bichola* was crucial as s/he checked the antecedents of each family including the *got*, the socio-economic status of the family and the character of the groom/bride before arranging for the two families to meet (Sharma, 1980: 147 and Puri, 1998:16-17). In the context of cross-region marriages occurring in rural Haryana and Rajasthan, the role of traditional *Bicholas* or marriage mediators has taken a backseat and instead, a new breed of go-betweens has emerged to fill the demand for obtaining brides from outside the customary pool of marriageable women. Since these matchmakers are non-

<sup>3</sup> "Bride-buying an old practise in North India". The Tribune 18, August, 2003, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030818/main8.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Ms. Jagmati Sangwan, 28 December, 2011. Rohtak, Haryana.

traditional, it is worth discussing the implications of such matchmaking on both gender rights and gender-based violence that brides experience within such marriages and their status within conjugal homes and communities.

This research project wants to go beyond the mere reporting about the exploitative nature of obtaining brides from non-customary marriage pools; trafficking of women for forced marriage; or the framing of the women solely as 'victims' who have no agency of their own. It seeks to explore everyday lives of the brides who, either trafficked or married with consent, have decided to stay with the men they are married to and make either Haryana or Rajasthan their 'home'. A large part of the study would centre on the brides as they cope with living in the conjugal family, the community and the village they are brought into.

Prima facie evidence based on customary marriage rules emphasizing the importance of endogamy that is territorially bound demonstrates that these marriages are non-customary in many ways: the women belong to a different caste, ethnicity, region, and sometimes, even religion than that of their husbands. In Haryana, as many recent media reports have documented, amongst the Hindus, a rigid caste system prevails with inter-caste marriages frowned upon and often punished by the entire village either by social ostracism of the offending family or in extreme cases, death to the couple sanctioned by it and carried out by the family members! The study would begin by examining how a marriage with a woman who belongs to a lower caste or is considered out-caste is legitimized. What arguments are employed to sanction and approve such unions and how are these women treated within the rigid caste hierarchy? Is tradition re-interpreted or are customary laws diluted? Significantly, if there is a new interpretation of tradition; has it enfeebled customary laws in ways that the breakdown or the dilution of caste hierarchies might appear imminent?

Based on literature on the intersection of caste and gender and Dalit Studies, it appears that there is a substantial degree of difference in the inequalities based on caste and class between local village women. How then are intra-gender relations framed within the confines of the family when the caste status of one female member is significantly lower than that of the others? How then are these brides treated vis-a-vis other women in the same family who belong to the same caste/ community as that of the man's? Is the work-load within and outside the home fair and equitable? And if there is any difference in the treatment, the study aims to uncover the reasons for it.

Since these women are clearly marked as the 'internal other' with their language, attire and food habits different from the norm in Haryana, the question that begets an answer is what forms does the 'othering' take? How do the villagers relate to such women? What measures do the women have to undertake to be 'assimilated' or 'integrated' into their husband's community and what does such a process imply for their own identity? How do the women themselves perceive such a marriage in terms of its stability or companionship? What does integration and assimilation into the husband's community imply for their identity? Are they viewed as a commodity with a price tag or are they treated differently after a period of time has lapsed, say for instance, the birth of children that makes them more tied to the husband's family? What freedoms do they have and lack, for instance, freedom of association with other village women or mobility within

the village or the freedom to call up family and speak to them via the cheap and readily available cell phones? Do they have any choice or agency in negotiating day to day existence? What forms, if any, does resistance to their circumstance acquire?

Another part of the study seeks to examine the future of the children born of such unions? How are they treated by the family, their peers and other villagers? Are they treated at par with other children in the same family vis-à-vis inheritance and other rights or is there any differential treatment? As they grow older, would they, as children of such brides face discrimination in accessing livelihood options.

Are there any measures that can be undertaken either by the family, grassroots organizations, women's and civil society groups to alleviate some of the problems that these women encounter? What policies can the State initiate that can address their concerns and prevent the violence perpetrated against them? What are some ways in which NGOs, activist organisations or women's groups can engage with the communities there to increase consciousness and evolve targeted programs for the women or family members? And last but not the least, how can the families of the women themselves become empowered to prevent trafficking or marriage through deception of their daughters or wards?

## RESEARCH METHODS

The study has been informed by Feminist Methodology as it is reflexive and recognizes the implicit hierarchies and the privileges and dis-privileges contained in respective positions of a researcher and the researched. Ethical in nature; it seeks to make women's experiences visible and expose gender inequality and oppression in all forms. It also allows knowledge production about women whose voices and experiences need to be heard unmediated. It also forces the researcher to examine whether the research is going to be empowering or oppressive for the participants.

### 3.1 RESEARCH TIMELINE

The research was undertaken in three phases. In the first phase, lasting from March 2011 – July 2011 in Rohtak and Mewat districts of Haryana, surveys were used to obtain information about cross-region marriages. The second phase lasted from mid-September to end-December, 2011. Here, the research was extended to other conjugal communities in Rewari in Haryana and Alwar and Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan on one hand and to natal communities in Balasore, Odisha on the other. The second phase involved employing both surveys and qualitative research methods. The third phase, conducted in July – August 2012, a follow up to the second phase covered select conjugal areas in Rajasthan and Haryana.

### 3.2. RESEARCH LOCATIONS

The locations for the study were the receiving or the conjugal communities and natal or source regions from where the women were being brought as wives.

#### 3.2.1 RECEIVING OR CONJUGAL COMMUNITIES

A comparative analysis of Haryana and Rajasthan, it was felt, could be revealing in terms of commonalities and differences in marriage strategies, experiences of the brides and circulation of knowledge regarding such marriages within caste groups in general. Haryana was chosen because the largest body of literature about 'bought' brides has emerged from there. Rajasthan, on the other hand, started figuring in these types of reports fairly recently and it appears that, there, the practice is not as endemic as in other regions. Within these two states,

select blocks were chosen for the study from five districts, i.e., Rohtak, Rewari and Mewat from Haryana and from Jhunjhunu and from Alwar in Rajasthan (see Figs. 1 & 2). The reasons for their selection are listed below.



Fig. 1: Map of Haryana showing the research locations of Rohtak, Rewari & Mewat. Source: Govt. of Haryana website



Fig. 2: Map of Rajasthan showing the research locations of Alwar & Jhunjhunu. Source: Govt. of Rajasthan website

The district of Rohtak has many villages with a Child Sex Ratio of below 800. *Jats* are the predominant caste sub-group in the Blocks of Sampla, Lakhn Majra and Rohtak. They also own most of the agricultural land there. Mewat was selected as *Meo* Muslims form the majority there and this district has been projected in print media as a hub for trafficking of women/ brides to other parts of Haryana. Considered the most 'underdeveloped' region of Haryana, it boasts the best Child Sex Ratio (CSR) in Haryana in the census of 2011. Rewari has the *Yadavs* as the major caste sub-group. They are also the dominant landowners there. The district is one of the first places in Haryana where ultrasound clinics for prenatal sex determination emerged in the early 80s. The population in Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan consists of *Jats*, *Rajputs* and *Muslims* (non *Meos*). A comparative study of *Muslims* and *Jats* here with their counterparts in other research locations was responsible for its selection. Some parts of Alwar such as Umrain have *Meo* *Muslims* as the majority whereas the Blocks of Rajgarh, Thanagazi and Kishangarh consist of *Haryana Brahmins*, a *got* specific to this region alone.

All selected districts with the exception of Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan, surround the National Capital Region of Delhi (commonly referred to as NCR) and are a part of the greater National Capital Region of Delhi (see Fig 3).<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Mewat, all other regions, in the last couple of decades, have witnessed increased urbanization, industrialization, soaring property prices and acquisition of agricultural land. The unleashing of these multiple processes has resulted in complex inter-caste and gender dynamics, both of which have impacted marriage practices there.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NCR of Delhi – Under the *Delhi Master Plan 2021*, regions surrounding it are to be developed in a planned manner through efficient transport systems and economic opportunities to reduce infrastructure overload on the NCR of Delhi.

<sup>2</sup> For more, read Prem Chowdhry's *Contentious Marriages Eloping Couples: Gender, Caste and Marriage in North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007)



Fig. 3: National Region of Delhi spread over surrounding districts of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Source: Govt. of India website

### 3.2.2 NATAL COMMUNITIES OR SOURCE STATES

A cluster of 10 villages from Bhograi and Jaleswar blocks of Balasore district from the eastern province of Odisha was chosen for both phases of fieldwork based on a pattern of repetition of certain data from primary survey of conjugal areas to identify regions from where brides were coming (see Figs. 4 & 5).



Fig. 4: Map of India showing Odisha in the east. Source: Govt. of Odisha website



Fig. 5: Detailed map of Balasore district indicating Bhograi and Jaleswar blocks. Source: Govt. of Odisha website

### 3.3 PARTICIPATING NGOS

The presence of grassroots NGOs working on issues of gender justice and caste oppression was a major determining factor in the selection of the blocks for research. The sensitivity of the subject necessitated collaboration to allay fears of villagers about the research motives and to be able to interpret local nuances lost to outsiders conducting research. Moreover, the NGOs’ fieldworkers, who were locals and could speak the language of the region, were necessary to conduct the primary survey and work as translators and transcribers during the qualitative phase of data collection.



### 3.4 RESEARCH METHODS

A triangulation of quantitative and qualitative research methods was adopted including surveys, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, note taking, participant and clandestine observation and documentary filming. In the conjugal states of Haryana and Rajasthan, a total of 226 villages across five districts were surveyed for quantitative data collection whilst 33 villages went on to be studied for qualitative data. 1247 cross-region brides participated in the survey and 54 in the detailed phase.

### 3.5 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The primary participants were brides who self-identified themselves as non-locals and were marked as 'outsiders' because of their different ethnicity, language, culture or region. Their husbands, in-laws (father-in-law and/or mother-in-law) and other family members sharing the same roof such as the husband's sister, husband's brother or his wife comprised another category. Neighbours or friends of the brides and village elders, both men and women, formed the third category. The fourth consisted of villagers, either men or women clearly identified as either 'marriage agents' or 'marriage brokers'. Brides acting as go-betweens or brokers to facilitate marriages within their natal region or conjugal families too came under this category. The fifth group comprised families facing difficulties in getting their sons married locally and were either contemplating contacting a broker to arrange a bride or had done so already.

In natal communities, the participants included those who had married their daughter (s) or female wards outside of their customary marriage region into another that was distinctly different in language, ethnicity and cultural practises. (See Appendix 3 & 4 for a detailed listing of interviews).

# 4

## FINDINGS

### 4.1 BACKGROUND CONJUGAL REGIONS : Reasons for marriage

The regions of Haryana and Rajasthan, where this research was conducted are among the relatively prosperous provinces of India. This has especially been the case from 1970s onward. With the Land Reform acts and the Community Development Programmes of 1950s, the agrarian economy of these regions changed quickly; the control of agricultural land moving from upper caste Brahman or Kshatriya to dominant agricultural castes of *Jats* and *Yadavs*. Following the introduction of green revolution strategy (High-Yielding variety of seeds, modern agricultural inputs, etc.) in the mid-1960s, a section from these dominant castes became economically powerful rich peasants. As more profits accrued to them from agricultural sector, they began to invest their profits outside not only in agricultural sector, but also in small industrial and commercial sectors, like small factories, mills, transport companies, hotels, cinema theatres, etc.<sup>1</sup> By 1970s, the dominant caste peasants had become an economically very powerful social group, whom K. Balagopal aptly called the 'provincial propertied class'.<sup>2</sup>

However, the rapid agricultural development did not embrace the whole population. Some benefits did percolate down to non-elite members of the dominant caste groups and to other lower castes, but this was only marginal at best. As far as overall poverty ratio is concerned, it is much lower in these regions. Compared to the national figure of 33.8% of rural population who are below the poverty line, the figures for Haryana and Rajasthan are 18.6% and 26.4% respectively.<sup>3</sup>

Paradoxically, as these regions fared well economically, the sex ratio showed an opposite trend. Economic prosperity and rise in literacy made abortion through ultra-sound technology affordable to the dominant caste groups. Despite amniocentesis being made illegal, there was a gap between crime and

<sup>1</sup> Jairus Banaji. (1994). 'The Farmer's Movements: A Critique of Conservative Rural Coalitions,' *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 21, Nos. 3 &4, April/July.

<sup>2</sup> K. Balagopal. (1987). 'An Ideology for the Provincial Propertied Class,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXII, Nos. 362 and 363, 5 – 12 September.

<sup>3</sup> *Press Note on Poverty*. March 2012. Government of India, Planning Commission.

punishment. Disposable income made it possible for families to pay doctors who were willing to break the law and abort a female foetus for a price.

The result of this has been a precipitous deterioration in this region's sex-ratio. According to 2011 census data, it stood at 847. In the districts where we conducted research, the figures are as follows: 868 in Rohtak, 898 in Rewari, 894 in Alwar and 950 in Jhunjunu. While these figures have improved slightly in the latest census, the *longue duree* trend has been of a secular decline. The fall is particularly steep in Haryana.

The male bias is also reflected in the literacy rate here. The proportion of females with no education is significantly high compared to males. The female literacy rate in rural areas of Rohtak is 66.32% compared to 88.18% for rural men; in Rewari it is 67.19% for women compared to 92.88% for men. The difference is even more acute in Rajasthan: 52.69% for rural women in Alwar compared to 83.46 for men and 59.86% to 87.71% in Jhunjunu.

It appears that despite the skewed sex ratio and male marriage squeeze facing these communities, the culturally engrained attitude of girl dis-preference has not been shed by the communities here. The logic of 'supply and demand' has not increased the value of the girl child, particularly amongst the *Jats* and *Yadavs*. Girl dis-preference is strongly linked to inheritance rights of property as these dominant landowning caste groups want to keep it patrilineal and not have their daughters, after marriage, demand their fair share of property inheritance. They rather prefer facing a female shortage in their communities and then source brides from outside by spending money. This then allows property, usually land, to remain within the family whereas giving girls a share implies that their share of land is controlled by their husbands' family. Ironically, the very act that had sought to provide gender parity has worked against women in these regions through increase in girl dis-preference.

*"The main reason for the shortage of girls here (in Haryana) is because the Government decided to give inheritance rights to women in the 1950s. That is not correct. The law should be repealed. No one wants a daughter as later on, after marriage, her husband can lay claims to the property."*

Village men discussing reasons for female deficit. Rohtak District, Haryana.

Findings from this research reveal that the shortage of women is not common across all caste groups but is more endemic in some intermediate caste groups such as the *Jats* and *Yadavs* even though the practise of obtaining brides from outside customary marriage pools has extended to other caste groups too. However, as can be seen from Appendix. 5, their number is small.

The issue of further fragmentation of land seems to be another reason why some men are unable to get married locally. Here, the birth order of the male seems to matter as the ones higher up in the scale, it appears, try to deter or dissuade their younger male siblings from getting married. All this is done in

order to have the share of the unmarried male pass on to their children. With reference to the division of property, the Khap Panchayats lament the loss of “traditional bonding between brothers as now even the younger ones want to get married”.<sup>4</sup> It is alluded that the younger male siblings seeking wives are selfish and self-centred instead of being satisfied of being looked after other members of the family. The finding also reveals that those men who do manage to raise the necessary capital and get a wife from elsewhere face opposition from other family members. Efforts are also made to make life uncomfortable for their wives by making them work more than necessary or taunting them so that they leave the man ‘voluntarily’.

*“The jethani (wife of husband’s elder brother) made life difficult for me. They were all upset because I had been married here. They wanted their children to get the property of my husband. Now it would, obviously, pass on to our children. They tried to make me leave him but I wasn’t going to fall into their trap.”*

A cross-region bride discussing property and marriage. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

As the pool of eligible women has shrunk, it is men, especially those who are either underemployed; poor; have little land; suffer from some deformity or handicap; less educated; widowers; or are considered past the marriageable age that have been rendered ineligible in the local marriage market. Moreover, the shortage of women has meant that there are lesser women available for the custom of ‘adla-badla’ loosely translated as exchange in certain caste groups wherein marriage alliance between two families is done by exchanging a girl from one in return for a boy from the other. It is these men, largely from the dominant caste groups of *Jats* and *Yadavs*, that are seeking brides from far-off regions. Of course, the ones most prized as grooms locally are those who hold government or secure private jobs.

*“I’d no means of employment that could enable a woman to survive. Here, whilst arranging a match, the girl’s family looks at the employment of the man and the land and other assets to ensure that their daughter and her kids will be well looked after. That’s what each parent aspires. I’d very little land.”*

A 40 year old man married to a woman from Maharashtra. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*“I am physically handicapped. My hand is useless. I couldn’t get married here and I had become quite old. That’s why I decided to bring a wife from Odisha. There was no way I could get married here.”*

A 74 year old man with a cross-region bride. Rewari District, Haryana.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Dahiya Khap Panchayat. 22 July, 2012, Sonapat District, Haryana.

This practice has also spread amongst the Muslim population in Rajasthan and Haryana. Amongst the Meo Muslims in the Alwar region, for instance, men wishing to go in for a second marriage have to go in for cross-region alliances. Such marriages, term ‘*Duuj bar*’, loosely translated as second time doesn’t fetch them a local bride.

*“I had been married earlier but my wife left me on her own. I tried getting married here but people don’t want to give their unmarried daughters to men who are going in for a ‘Duuj bar’ (second marriage). I had no choice but go outside for getting married.”*

A Meo Muslim man describing the hurdles in marrying locally. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

Our research reveals that these marriages are primarily rural in nature as it is here that caste hierarchies and regulations governing marriage are more strictly enforced than within urban centres. These marriages are non-customary in many ways as the women belong to a different caste, ethnicity, region and sometimes, even religion.

What makes such men transgress caste boundaries, spend considerable amounts of money on the marriage and invite social ostracism or ‘out-casting’ by going in for such cross-region marriages? Why do they wait for so long before taking the decision to out-marry? Detailed interviews with husbands and conjugal family members reveal that the men choose to wait till it becomes almost impossible to fend for themselves, i.e., their mothers become too aged or infirm to look after their basic needs or when wives of other brothers refuse to cook for them. Their sexual needs can be met locally with cash transactions but it is the necessity to have someone to do household chores; someone who ensures that the family’s day to day needs are looked after; someone who works in the fields and tends the cattle and someone who bears them children that proves to be the biggest factors spurring them to eke out money and get a wife. The term most often used when describing their decision is ‘*majboori*’ or helplessness.

*“My hair had turned grey! For how long could I go on begging food from other people to feed myself? I did that for 2-3 years. I couldn’t take it anymore. Sometimes, I would manage to find food to fill my belly. Other times, I would go hungry. That’s when I decided to find a bride from elsewhere.”*

A husband narrating the reason why he decided to go for cross-region marriage. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*“Family circumstances forced me to marry. My mother had fallen ill at the time and my father too didn’t keep good health. There was no one to cook for us. For many days, we had to get food from other villagers. That’s when I made up my mind to marry a woman from anywhere. ... My parents also said, ‘suppose we die tomorrow, who’ll look after you?’”*

A husband talking about compelling reasons to marry elsewhere. Rohtak District, Haryana.

The cost for a cross-region bride ranges anywhere from Rs 35,000 to Rs 260,000; this is dependent on her caste status, looks, age and ability to perform labour, both productive and reproductive. A common assumption is that such men are

rich with 'deep pockets' to be able to spend so much money. On the contrary, our research discloses that the majority of men work as agricultural labourers or do other petty jobs (see Fig. 7). They or their families take loans from the informal village moneylender at an exorbitant rate of interest or have other family members pooling in with savings of their own to make the total amount demanded by the marriage agent for arranging their marriage. In a few instances (8 out of the 22 men), families had mortgaged their land to raise the capital required for arranging a cross-region marriage.

Fig. 7

Occupation breakdown of men who have gone for cross-region marriages.

Occupation	Alwar	Jhunjhunu	Mewat	Rewari	Rohtak
Labourer	65	34	405	47	160
Agriculture	8	2	59	38	53
Driver	0	0	25	2	16
Shopkeeper	1	3	17	3	3
Other (Menial Work)	4	14	42	3	9
Not disclosed	0	0	268	0	0

*"I had to sell the one bigha of land that I had. How could I have raised so much money for the marriage just by doing agricultural labour? Even after doing labour for a whole day, I could hope to earn only Rs 30! I don't also indulge in 'drinks' nor do I have any other vices on which I throw away my hard-earned money."*

A husband recounting how he raised the capital to go and marry in Odisha. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*"I drive a tempo. My salary is Rs 8,000. The marriage will cost Rs 50 - 60,000. It means that my entire salary for 6 to 7 months will have to be saved if I want to get married there. I will also have to take a loan from the owner of the tempo which, of course, I will return."*

A man thinking of going to Assam to get married. Rohtak District, Haryana.

## 4.2 SOURCE REGION : Reasons for cross-region marriages

To gain an understanding of the natal families, Balasore district of Orissa was chosen as the site for in-depth interviews. This was done for number of reasons. The primary being the pattern of repetition of certain data from primary survey of conjugal areas to identify source regions revealed Balasore district as a big source of brides.

The choice was also ideal since, due to its underdevelopment, Orissa represents, at once, the ideal-type and extreme case to contrast with the conjugal states. Economic growth in Orissa has been much slower than rest of the India. State-level poverty figures put Orissa as one of the poorest states, with agricultural

wages being the lowest in the country.<sup>5</sup> Although there is a regional variation, with coastal districts like Balasore better off than non-coastal regions, the level of rural poverty in Balasore district is very high. Orissa also has a highly stratified society with the highest proportion of Scheduled Tribe and Schedule Caste population. 18.8% of Balasore’s population belongs to SC and whilst 11.28% constitute ST.<sup>6</sup>

The other factors that played into the selection of Balasore as a research site were: (a) existence of good and willing NGOs to partner with; (b) reliable contacts into the community that were provided by the cross-region brides during the course of our interview; and (c) language and other differences provided a better context to understand the issue of cultural isolation that cross-region brides talked about in their interviews.

Most of the cross-region brides belonged to either the OBC or SC caste and came primarily from families with no landholdings. Out of the 47 families surveyed, 45 owned no land and the rest two owned .4 decimals and 3 acres respectively. This is a very high percentage of families that have no assets to call their own. Agriculture income being insufficient, they supplement their income with livestock rearing, fishery and horticulture (see Fig. 8 for breakdown of occupation). Almost all families fall in the category of ‘BPL’, i.e., Below Poverty Level or just above it. With either little or no land assets, almost all families either take land on sharecropping to grow paddy or do seasonal low-paying agricultural wage work, the rate of which is one of the lowest in India.<sup>7</sup> According to official sources, three-fourths of the population in Balasore is below the official poverty line.<sup>8</sup> There is also a lag in female education, with 23% disparity between men and women.<sup>9</sup> As De Haan and Dubey aptly sum up about Orissa: “Adivasis suffer from the culmination of disadvantages related to location and social group, and dalits face the kinds of discrimination that has been well-documented for other parts of India. Gender disparities equally are significant with education gaps not being reduced, and women continuing to suffer from health disadvantages.”<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 8: Breakdown of occupation of parents.

<sup>5</sup> Haan, De Arjan and Amaresh Dube. (2005). ‘Poverty, Disparities, or the Development of Underdevelopment in Orissa,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 24 – June 4, 2008, p.2322.

<sup>6</sup> Comprehensive District Annual Plan, 2011 – 12: Balasore District. <http://baleswar.nic.in/Comprehensive%20District%20Annual%20Plan%20%202011-12%20Balasore%20District.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Deaton, A and Dreze, J. (2002). ‘Poverty and Inequality in India: A Re-examination’. *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 7, 2002, pp. 3729-48.

<sup>8</sup> Comprehensive District Plan, *ibid*, p.x

<sup>9</sup> Rural literacy rate in Balasore district is 57.40% for female, compared to 81% for males. The literacy rate for both men and women, however, is higher than the state average. For details, see *Comprehenasive District Plan, op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Haan and Dube. (2005), *op. cit*

Not surprisingly, these villages also report out-migration of a large percentage of its young men to work in Kerala or the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh. The region where the study was conducted reveals that the largest percentage of cross-region marriages are localised to Raju caste. Belonging to the middle caste, they have developed “extensive marital relationship with Khandayats”,<sup>11</sup> a cultivating peasant. Although an elite group has emerged from this caste cluster with substantial influence in state politics,<sup>12</sup> bulk of them live in distressing conditions.

Like other studies on cross-region marriages<sup>13</sup>, similarly here, families cite poverty as the most compelling factor that prevents them from meeting the high dowry demands made by local grooms. With all other factors as fixed (skin tone, appearance, level of literacy), it appears that birth order too plays a major role in determining whether a daughter will be married locally or cross-region. The families appear to exhaust themselves of their small patch of land, either by selling it or mortgaging it, to meet the wedding expenses of the eldest daughter(s). Consequently, those down the birth order are disadvantaged as their parents are unable to marry them locally. For such families with more daughters to marry off, the proposal of an ‘all expenses paid, no dowry demand’ appears to be biggest incentive to agree. Another category consists of widows of marginal farmers or landless agricultural labourers. They are the most marginalised and have no assets to rely on. For their day to day subsistence, they either have to do petty jobs or rely on relatives to feed them.

*“I had a small piece of land – less than a Qila (an acre) which I had to sell off to marry my oldest daughter. I am too old now to work on other people’s fields to earn a living. So when the proposal came from Rajasthan for my other daughter, I had no choice but agree. I couldn’t have been able to marry her here.”*

A father of a cross-region bride. Balasore District, Odisha.

*“I am very poor. At the time my daughter got married there (Haryana), we had nothing! We would eat once at 12 noon and then be forced to go hungry till the next day. You cannot imagine our plight at that time. Do you know what hunger really means? I work as a cook here (a small roadside eatery). My back hurts constantly but what can I do? The offer was good. I couldn’t have been able to marry my daughter here. I relied on God.”*

A widow and mother of a cross-region bride narrating her difficult circumstances. Balasore District, Odisha.

*“If we were not poor, would we go that far? If we were well to do, we would be here only. (Married) in the nearby areas. Why would we be that far? We would have taken care of our parents as much and would have shared their sorrows.”*

A cross-region bride visiting her mother discussing why she was married in Rajasthan. Balasore District, Odisha.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen, S. Jeyaseela. (2006). *Literature, Caste and Society: The Masks and Veils*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publishers, p. 357.

<sup>12</sup> On this see, Mohanty, Manoranjan. (1990). ‘Class, Caste and Dominance in Backward State: Orissa,’ in Francine Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (eds). *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.351-2.

<sup>13</sup> Chaudhary, S. & Mohan, T.D. (2011) ‘Of Marriage and Migration: Bengali and Bihari Brides in a U.P. Village’, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(3), pp 311-340.



## FINDINGS

Another interesting finding from the research sample in Odisha is that some poor parents are themselves beginning to approach local marriage mediators or cross-region brides either in their extended family network or from their village to arrange 'cashless' weddings for their daughters.

*"We knew a man who arranged such marriages. We had requested him earlier that 'we have two girls to be married. Get some proposals.' So he got the proposals."*

Brother of two cross-region brides married in Uttar Pradesh. Balasore District, Odisha.

*"In my native place, marriage expenses are exorbitant and the dowry demand high. My father got in touch with a 'Bicholia' and requested him to find for me a groom who would not demand any money from us.... My two elder sisters were married within Jharkhand. At that time, my father was unaware of the fact that men from Haryana were willing to marry us for nothing. But once he came to know about this, he got me married here."*

A cross-region bride on being asked who arranged for her wedding. Rewari District, Haryana.

The above interviews run counter to the narrative circulated about trafficking of women for forced marriage in popular discourse. The very fact that parents or other relatives of unmarried women are seeking out mediators reveals that they are willing to take this risk to prevent the 'stigma' of an unmarried adult daughter living home with them. We also found families to be vigilant and wary of unacquainted marriage agents, preferring bride-matchmakers instead. Non-availability of the latter and financial constraints made them also rely on agents or dalals.

On the other hand, to muddle things further, when mediators or agents do bring proposals, most parents mentioned turning these down initially. They didn't want their daughters to be married in places that they didn't know much about. They also worried about keeping in touch with them. However, the initial rejection and fears, the study found, were over-ridden by pragmatic decisions based on an assessment of the family's ability or inability to marry the daughter locally.

Our research also reveals, contrary to popular imagery of cross-region brides as mute victims who have been lured into such marriages, that many brides are pro-active in decisions related to their marriage. Many respondents stated that crippling poverty of their parents implied that they would have had to remain unmarried back home. It is this coupled with hunger and want that made them accept such alliances even though they were apprehensive of what the future might hold for them.

*"My parents were poor. If I had to be married there, then our small piece of land would have to be sold. I have five brothers and we own three acres of land. I was the eldest in the family. My father said he'd sell the land. I told him, 'no, don't do that'. When this proposal came, I accepted it."*

A cross-region bride narrating how she got married. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*“We deliberated for 5-10 days. I had no father. My mother and I consulted amongst ourselves. Mom said, ‘I can’t cater to the dowry demands of men here. It is better to accept this proposal. How can I marry you off?’ That is when we decided. Looking at her poverty, I had no choice but to accept this marriage. My parents had reared me in poverty – thinking of my circumstances, I made this pragmatic decision. It is hard to marry there. When a girl becomes ‘mature’, people make barbed comments about her unmarried status. It’s better to accept this proposal.”*

A cross-region bride with a widowed mother. Rewari District, Haryana.

The above interviews reveal the contradictory position of these women: on the one hand, they appear as active agents in making important decision about their lives; on the other hand, their choice is tempered by internalised patriarchal ideology that ties family honor to a woman’s sexuality. Societal pressure and cultural expectation to marry a daughter off soon after she attains adulthood coupled with the stigma of having an adult daughter remain unmarried emerge as powerful factors compelling both parents and the daughters into accepting such marriage proposals. Moreover, for many women, such marriages are construed as a conscious move up as they state, “here, at least, I won’t die of hunger” or “I don’t have to steal food to feed myself.” In sum, the coupling of poverty and patriarchal ideology creates an absolute reduction of life choices for the women.

What augurs well for the future is that government launched social welfare programmes for the rural poor such as NREGA that offers guaranteed employment; ration cards that allows access to subsidized food items; the Rashtriya Swastha Bima Yojana or the National Health Insurance scheme; subsidized food; and Indira Awas Yojana or low cost housing program has ameliorated the desperation of families there. The lessened sense of desperation brought on by hunger and want has increased, to a degree, parents exercising greater caution in marrying their daughters off to the very first ‘cash free, dowry less’ proposal.

### **4.3 ARRANGING CROSS-REGION MARRIAGES :** **The different routes**

**T**rafficking of women for cross-region marriages by traffickers has been well documented by a number of reports published by anti-trafficking organisations.<sup>14</sup> Instead of reproducing the same information, here, we seek to focus on aspects of marriage negotiations not covered in these reports. There are primarily four ways in which such marriages are being arranged currently with grave consequences for the brides depending on the route they get married through. These are: trafficking; alliances through marriage brokers or *Dalals*; the husbands of the brides as agents; and the cross-region brides themselves who have become *Bicholas* or marriage agents.

A comparative analysis of the motivations and strategies used by these various sets of actors bringing in women for spouseless men in Haryana and Rajasthan

<sup>14</sup> For more, read Shakti Vahini’s report published in 2003 or Empower People’s study done in 2012.

is necessary for several reasons. For instance, what motives compel men and women, including brides, to become marriage mediators? Are there any differences in their dealings and if so, what are these? How do families approach such mediators and make their requests for arranging a 'bride' for their son(s)? Are there any variances in the nature of the negotiations about compensation or the type of bride that the family seeks? Importantly, do the agents or mediator brides adopt any criteria to accept becoming a go-between and if so, are there any differences? How are families with daughters of marriageable age located in source or natal communities? What arguments are provided to the parents to make them agree to marry their daughter outside the customary region? What type of follow-up after marriage is offered to the brides and / or to the families by the mediator brides and the marriage agents? Are marriages conducted by mediator brides considered less deceptive and exploitative than those arranged by others?

Interviews with villagers in Haryana reveal that contemporary cross-region marriages can be pigeonholed in roughly two phases. In the first phase lasting roughly till the early 1990s, inter-region marriages occurred sporadically and were not specifically aimed at filling a female deficit in their communities. Livelihood strategies would take Haryanvi men to distant regions of India and eventually, contact with local communities there would result in marriage with local women. These were one-off weddings and would rarely lead to more marriages between the two communities. However, as the female deficit increased, such men and their wives began getting tapped for obtaining brides from the women's extended natal family or community. Quite often, either the army men who had married 'local' women or those serving in distant provinces, on their return, would be asked for help in obtaining brides from those regions by friends or acquaintances having trouble getting married. This apart, truck drivers hailing from either Punjab or Haryana who worked for the transport industry and had married local women in other parts of India too got roped in, initially, to find wives for their extended kin members. It appears from focus group discussions of men and interviews with families in Haryana that this process of requesting such men arrange marriages was quite informal and did not have the same flavour of commoditization that it has now acquired.

All categories of marriage mediators, including the brides, not only locate families with marriageable daughters in far-off regions within India; they also charge a 'commission' or a 'fee' that includes the cost of travel and all expenses incurred during the search for a bride and during marriage. Unlike the traditional Bicholas who would not negotiate a fee or expect one either, the new group discusses the fee component and the payment mechanism at the very outset before proceeding further. This commission or fee varies depending on whether the family contacts a trafficker or a cross-region bride for arranging a wife. For the brides, an 'all expenses paid' trip back home is sometimes a great incentive as is gifts of *salwar kameez* or some quantities of grain given by the man's family. Other agents demand anything from Rs 35,000 to Rs 200,000 for arranging a bride.

### 4.3.1 Traffickers as marriage agents

Traffickers consist of men and women who are in the business of selling women for the immense profit it brings them. They operate in a clandestine manner and have links with the underworld. Their prime motive is profit and therefore, they bargain hard for commissions. The result is that women are highly commoditized as evident from the language used by them for the women they bring in as brides and the nature of transactions they undertake with the grooms and conjugal family members. They often have no connection with source region but work through a network of similar agents who, either through deception, kidnapping or coercion, bring women for marriage into Haryana and Rajasthan. The women are also lured on promises of employment in the city or marriage into wealthy families and then sold off to brothels or to prospective grooms, depending on whoever is willing to pay a higher price; girl's age, looks, complexion and other attributes being the determining factors. The commodification of women is also evident in the manner in which the agent discusses his commission or 'fee' dependant on the 'unsuitability' of the groom in the local marriage market.

*"Each agent quotes his own price. They size up the family and their capacity to pay and then demand a certain amount from them. Sometimes, they demand 100,000 from one and 50,000 from another. Rs 40,000 from someone else. They then bring the women here."*

A man discussing the demands made by a *Dalal*. Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan.

Clandestine observation of negotiations between a family seeking to obtain a bride with the traffickers aka marriage agents show that a local man in a village acts as their agent for making the primary contact with families. Such local men operate as fronts for organised gangs: they do all the negotiations, including whetting the family about its ability to pay and arranging to show the prospective bride to them. The women and young girls are kept at secret locations that keep on changing frequently to avoid detection by the police. This way, no one is able to connect the dots and see the larger picture.

The language used by traffickers or *Dalals* is shaped by the discourse of the market as the terminology used by a seller of a product is reproduced by the trafficker/agent while describing a bride to a prospective family or groom. Fears of the 'buyers', i.e., the prospective groom and his family, are assuaged by assurances of 'product guarantee'. For instance, a trafficker from Rajasthan, in negotiations with a family, stated, "*I guarantee that the woman is 'good quality'. She is a hard worker and will not run away.*"<sup>14</sup> The use of words like 'guarantee' and 'good quality' to describe a woman clearly echoes the capitalist consumerist model to rope in prospective buyers, only here, the product on sale is a woman. By employing the phrase, 'hard worker' for her labour, she is likened to a merchandise whose ability to perform is assured to the family.

The trafficker/*Dalal* also reassures that in case the bride does run away or if the family is unhappy with her, they have the 'return' option, i.e., 'returning her' back to them and 'replacing' her with another one at no extra cost.<sup>15</sup> In such cases, she is 'returned' back to the very same marriage agent quite unlike traditional

<sup>14</sup> Participant observation of a marriage deal being conducted between a *Dalal* and a family in a village in Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan. 19 November, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Participant observation of a marriage deal between a marriage agent and a family, Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan. 15 December, 2011.

marriages where, usually, both families actively intervene to save a marriage at all costs. In our research sample, 2% of all brides were returned back. It is unclear what happens to them but it can be conjectured they are probably sold off to other families. In our sample group, however, there were no instances of families demanding a replacement, we assume, largely due to social disgrace attached to this practise.

*“He (the agent) said, ‘I will show you at least 10 -20 to choose from. The one that catches your fancy and suits your family, you keep her.’”...Everything revolves around money – if you have money, the ‘agent’ talks to you.”*

A man talking about the negotiations with an agent. Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan.

The fact that a family can pick and choose a bride that “catches their fancy”, “suits” their needs and their paying ability demonstrates a woman’s objectified status. Families seeking brides through traffickers and *Dalals* not only internalise and reproduce market economy ideology and language when describing a ‘transaction’; they also act as consumers in a purely capitalist sense. The offering of instant discounts by traffickers and agents to clinch a deal also engrains the ‘woman as a product’ attitude amongst families bringing home a bride.

*“I haven’t asked him where he gets the girls nor do I know more about it. But the man who does this ‘business’ of bringing the women and selling them here stays close by in another village. ... He has a number of women staying not far from his house. He says that he will take us there, show the women and then we can choose from amongst them.”*

A man in the process of negotiating with an agent on being asked about the background of the women. Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan.

Media’s depiction of traffickers, agents/Dalals and the groom’s family as party to the crime of trafficking is thus quite accurate. The complicity of families who source brides from marriage mediators known for their clandestine operations and ‘cash only with no questions asked’ policy in trafficking cannot be denied. They abet trafficking by creating a ‘demand’ and by wilfully choosing to turn a blind eye to overtly shady operations of such traffickers and agents. They also chose not to ask probing questions such as how women land up in their ‘care’ or details about the women’s families. The bottom-line for such grooms and families is obtaining a ‘guaranteed ‘work horse’ for the best price with no questions asked.

*“There are many agents who bring the girl to your house. They take the money and leave the girl behind. ‘Here is the girl – give me money and you can keep her’. After taking the money from us, the girl is left with us.”*

A woman in process of negotiating a wife for her son. Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan.

A small percentage of young women are also trafficked only for marriage by people known to them such as relatives, usually women, who entreat their families send their daughters back with them to Haryana or Rajasthan. These women are then forcibly married off with their parents learning of the marriage when they demand their daughters be sent back home. This will be dealt in detail in the section 4.3.4 Cross region brides as matchmakers

### 4.3.2 Retired servicemen or ‘armywalas’ and truck drivers as Dalals

The second category of marriage brokers, also called ‘agents’ or Dalals by the local populace, consists of men, usually retired from army service, who have returned back home to live in the village. They rely on their network of contacts in source regions and familiarity with local language and customs to operate as full-time marriage agents. Similarly, men working as truck drivers for long distance hauling companies exploit their familiarity with distant provinces to become agents. These two groups work in tandem with local contacts in source regions/villages who then act as their agents in locating families that are in financial distress and have young unmarried daughters at home. The first contact with such ‘vulnerable’ families is made by the local agents who might be from the same village or from a neighbouring one. The ability to speak the local language and familiarity with the social mores makes it easier for them to wear down the resistance of the family and agree to the match despite their initial reservations.

*“A young man from my village came to my father with the proposal. My father refused the first time as I was studying in 9<sup>th</sup> class at the time. But the man would come each day to my house. My husband’s family stayed in the village for two and a half months. Each day, the village man would come to meet my father and pressurise him. Morning and evening! He finally convinced my father that the proposal was good and that the man belonged to a respectable family. He said that we’d not have to bear any marriage expenses. That’s how we finally agreed. ... He was like a middleman. He must have got money for doing this.”*

A cross-region bride talking about the role of the local middle man.  
Rohtak District, Haryana.

*“My husband contacted an agent here in his village. This agent had a contact in my village: it was a man from my village. This man was working as an agent too. My husband’s agent came with this village man and spoke to my father. He said that the proposal was genuine and that my father would not have to pay any money for my wedding. It was the local man who convinced my father to marry me off.”*

A cross-region bride recounting how her marriage took place.  
Rewari District, Haryana.

*“An agent from here (Haryana) came to my village. He asked around if there were any families that were too poor to marry off their daughters. A man from our village spoke Hindi and he helped him locate us. It is this man who then conducted all the conversations with my father and made him agree to marry me off here. My father was too poor to marry me off there.”*

A cross region bride from Odisha recounting the role of the local man.  
Rohtak District, Haryana.

This group offer families facing financial distress the inducement of a ‘dowry-free, all-expense paid’ marriage for their daughters. Such alliances most often lack transparency as details about men’s earning ability, age, past marriages, physical handicaps and other details are glossed over or not fully disclosed. In such marriages, it appears from our sample group, that no money is paid to the parents nor is any monetary demand made from them. However, this group does make a very clear demand for money from the man or his family seeking

a bride right at the outset. It is only after the family has agreed to the 'price' that the agent from the conjugal region proceeds further and contacts the agent in the natal region. It can be presumed that the local agent in natal region receives a part of the commission or fee for his services.

### 4.3.3 Husbands as agents

Husbands of cross-region brides or other male family members such as father-in-laws, drawn by the temptation of high returns in sourcing wives too have entered the fray to arrange cross-region marriages. This category too arranges weddings for whoever comes to them, be it their relatives, friends or other villagers. They then rely either on their wives or their families for sourcing brides or work in tandem with a local man from the source region who is paid a percentage of the commission. Our research indicates that they do place pressure on their wives to ask their family members locate poor families with daughters. Once a couple of 'suitable' families are found, they then arrange to make a trip to the region with the prospective groom. Oftentimes, it appears that they don't take their wives with them to act as translators. They, however, use their in-laws home as their base and then make day trips to nearby villages to source women. It appears that constant visits by these men have led to a familiarity with the terrain there and a rudimentary grasp of the local language. The presence of the local contact – be it a family member of their wife or a villager too helps in the negotiating process.

Once again, like the *Dalals*, these men too, oftentimes, deceive the women's families about the man's economic stability, his 'handicaps' and his history. The women's families agree to such marriages as he presents himself as a '*jamai*' (son-in-law) of the village and makes claims that he wouldn't mislead them about the prospective groom or that he would try and ensure that their daughter is as happy as his wife is with him.

### 4.3.4 The brides themselves as matchmakers

The matchmaking activities of the brides ranges from doing one-off alliance for their sisters or other close relatives; arranging matches on a regular basis with their natal families acting as their locators for poor families; or adopting deception to bring women from natal villages and forcibly marrying them off in exchange for vast sums of cash.

Our research reveals that the largest number of marriages is arranged by brides themselves with their near relatives or other women from their natal villages.<sup>16</sup> Such marriages are completely different in nature from the others as the women share close ties with each other through kin and linguistic affinity. Interviews with cross-region brides, their husbands and other family members reveal a process of ripple or snowball effect of brides arranging such alliances.

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Kaur found this to be true in her research in Haryana. See Kaur, R. (2008) "Dispensable Daughters and Bachelor Sons: Sex Discrimination in North India" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLIII No. 30, 109-114

*“This is how it happens: suppose I get married here first. I will then go and arrange marriages of a couple of other women from my natal community. Those women will then mediate in a couple of other such marriages. Majority of the weddings here are conducted in this method.”*

A cross region bride who has arranged two marriages from her natal village. Rewari District, Haryana.

*“We are three sisters. Two of us got married here in Rajasthan. Only one was left back in Akola. We felt that once our parents passed away, our brother wouldn’t allow her to come visit us. Nor could we then visit her too. So, we decided to bring her here. At least, all the sisters are in the same region if not the same village. That’s what made us search for a groom here for her.”*

A woman stating her rationale for getting her sister married in Rajasthan. Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan.

On another level, the brides try and arrange marriages of women from their kin network or village into the same conjugal village as theirs primarily because they feel culturally alienated in Haryana or Rajasthan. They are unable to speak in their language and no one there understands their nostalgia for their land, the flora and fauna, the climate or customs and festivals back home. On the contrary, it is assumed by conjugal communities that these women should only be too happy to be married into a region that has ‘abundant *ghee* and milk’! They are laughed at when they comment missing their food or feel sadness about their inability to speak anymore in their mother tongue. For the brides, then, arranging such marriages and having more women from their region in the same village as theirs then allows them to create a bubble into which they can retreat and reminiscence about ‘back home’. Such marriages also act as safety valves for their mental health and happiness by allowing them to emerge out of self-imposed isolation.

*“Why did I get someone else? See, I was all alone when I got here. Earlier, there wasn’t anyone from back home here. I won’t speak to my neighbour but with her, I can speak out what is troubling my heart. That’s why I got her. ... The main benefit is that we can meet and chat with each other. We can share our sorrows. We speak the same language. With others, it is different. We do not feel alone.”*

A woman explains why she got just one woman married into her conjugal village. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

*“Having another Oriya woman in this village feels really good. We drop in on each other often. She visits me when her husband is away and I do the same when my husband is away at work. She puts the child to sleep and visits me. Sometimes, I take ‘our’ food to her and she does the same for me. I ask her, ‘what are you doing?’ She replies, ‘nothing much, just tending to household chores.’ I drop in to spend time with her then. ... We talk to each other and reminiscence about festivals and celebrations back home. Sometimes, we spontaneously decide to cook ‘food from our village’. We make fermented rice (a delicacy in Orissa known as ‘Pakhal Bhaat’) and a couple of vegetables. Then we go and sit in the sun and eat this all just like we would if we were home. We sit on the roof and eat there.”*

A cross region bride from Odisha who has arranged three weddings, one with her husband’s brother. Rewari District, Haryana.



This is very significant as the mediator brides have a vested interest in bringing more women from their villages to settle in Haryana. By doing so, they feel less lonely and can converse comfortably in their native language to each other. Importantly, as they have a shared cultural heritage, they can afford to be nostalgic about things from back home in front of each other without fear of ridicule or being disparaged. This also appears to make their life in Haryana a bit more agreeable than if they were the only bride from Orissa in a village.

The second category of mediator brides are those who, when visiting home, are approached by poor parents, either their immediate relatives or folks from the same village to arrange a similar cash-free cross-region marriage for their daughters.<sup>17</sup> They are also asked by close relatives of their conjugal families to bring back a 'bahu' just like them when they go for a visit back home. Usually, such women mediating one or two marriages at the most do not appear to gain any monetary benefits or advance to the next level, i.e., obtaining brides for men in the conjugal village or neighbouring villages on a bigger scale. However, there are some who do move on to becoming matchmakers or go-betweens, i.e., arranging marriages on a regular basis for a fee.

*"How do I search for a woman? For instance, if someone comes to visit my family back home – the visitor asks, 'where is your youngest daughter married?' My mother then tells them everything. They then query whether the family treats her well. My mom says, 'I speak on the cell to my daughter and inquire about her'. People then usually ask my mother to find a similar groom and family for their daughters. They say, 'come and look at our daughter'. It is then that I spend money on travel and visit back home. The entire expense for this trip is borne by the man's family. I return back after I have looked at and 'approved' the woman. It is then that everyone travels for the wedding there. Whoever marries his daughter here does so on my word that I will be responsible for her. It is on my promise that they agree to this wedding."*

A cross region bride who is into arranging marriages. Rewari District, Haryana.

All brides appear to rely on their relatives back home to locate women of marriageable age, a process made easier with the spread of mobile telephony in rural and remote regions. Mediation by brides appear to be distinctly different in nature as there seems to be greater transparency and accountability towards natal families and the women. Matchmaker brides tend to be cautious in deceiving parents about the groom's employment prospects, age, physical disability or his background. This can be attributed to the fact that they conduct marriages on a regular basis in their natal community and if the word goes out about 'cheating' a family or falsifying information, it can hinder their future chances to secure more brides from there. In villages, family and kin ties are closely maintained and any hint of dishonesty and deviousness on their part can travel back to disgrace their entire family within the village and community. This attitude is in sharp contrast to that of the agents or traffickers who have no such fears about social disgrace or accountability concerns simply because they are not rooted to the natal communities.

<sup>17</sup> A similar trend is visible even in cross-border marriages from Vietnam into China or Taiwan where the brides act usually as informal marriage brokers for other women in their natal communities.

Such marriages appear to follow a somewhat different trajectory than that of the traffickers and agents / *Dalals*. It appears that they try not to objectify the potential brides and do not present them as 'wares' easily available for sale to the highest bidder. Instead, they state having the hardest time convincing people that women are not available for sale in natal communities.

*"Over here, close to 20 people have come to me and requested that I help their sons get married. 'Get us a girl from there (Bihar).' I tell them flatly that girls are not available for sale there. Nor is there a glut of unmarried women as you all assume it to be. But they insist, 'bring a girl and get her married to our son'. I have to tell that their parents' views need to be considered about long distance marriage: whether they want this type of a marriage or not."*

A mediator bride discussing attitudes of locals. Rohtak District, Haryana.

Apart from social benefits that may accrue to these women through "expanding social network" (Kaur. 2004:2597), there are other complex and layered reasons propelling brides become regular matchmakers. For instance, desire to gain respect and recognition within their new families and communities makes them adopt this role. As desperate families start seeking their assistance in arranging marriages, it shifts the unequal power dynamics that they face within the family and community in their favour. From being looked down as low caste and 'othered' within the conjugal community and shunned by village women, they start getting treated with deference by the very same people who despised them not so long ago. The earnings too silences their detractors within the family and allows them negotiate more freedoms for themselves.

For the mediator brides, arranging cross-region marriages is also an act of resistance against their conjugal families. An earlier study done on a small sample of 6 villages in Rohtak district of Haryana noted the trend of brides arranged marriages but missed out on the crucial fact that acting as a mediator was, for the brides, an active act of resistance against patriarchal controls imposed in conjugal homes. Nor was any mention made that it allowed them bargaining power to negotiate labour demands within the household (Kaur. 2004 and 2010).

More importantly, matchmaking is one of the tools that women tactically employ to negotiate, resist and cope with violence they encounter in their conjugal home. Arranging alliances too, loosens, to some degree, patriarchal control wielded over them by family members. For instance, they are able to subvert social disciplines that impose restrictions on their movement. Citing necessity to run background checks on families and discuss details allows them freedom to travel between villages. They are able to buy time off chores in the household and in the fields by strategically making extended phone calls during periods when they are expected to work. Matchmaking also allows them the privilege of maintaining contact with their natal families as they now have legitimate reasons to make phone calls back home and converse in their own language, thus giving them privacy from prying relatives.

They are also able to negotiate flexibility over continuous demands made over their productive labour as the family sanctioned trips back home allows them time-off from the drudgery of household and agricultural chores. Moreover, the sojourns back home to arrange marriages are also important in their multiplicity:

it gives these women opportunity for generating small incomes but equally opportunity to enjoy themselves — travel alone, hang around with friends and relatives back home unmitigated by patriarchal control of husbands and fathers.

This category cannot be complete without discussing matchmaker brides whose tactics can be considered quite similar to that of the traffickers and the agents. These cross-region brides resort to deception and coercion in bringing women, sometimes even their near relatives, to conjugal regions and then marry them off to anyone who offers them the highest price. Oftentimes, it is also not clear whether the women are married or just ‘given’ to the men. Many a time, the women are brought as young girls to look after children or help in the household activity. The poverty of the women’s families; girl dis-preference and girl neglect makes the family acquiesce to the matchmaker brides and send their daughters with them without making further inquiries. The parents are then summarily informed much later that their daughters have been married off and that they cannot maintain contact with their daughters.

On the other hand, a number of brides (7 out of 54 interviewed) and their parents mentioned that the brides married in Haryana or Rajasthan pressurized them into cross region marriages. Many details about the prospective groom are either glossed over or falsified to make him appear ‘husband’ material. The worst case scenario happens when the family, trusting of the woman, entrust their daughter to her for the match. Such women are usually married off to much older men; alcoholics; or to those who are either mentally or physically quite challenged.

*“I was approached for my daughter’s hand. I agreed as we were too poor and we had already married a daughter in Haryana. We were not shown the groom. Instead, she was taken there and married off. When I went to visit her couple of years later, I almost fainted with shock on seeing her husband. He was over 70 years in age and suffered from kidney disease. My daughter who was only 20 had been consigned to a life of misery. His family implored me not to take her back with me. We were shown a different photo by the woman (the mediator bride).”*

A mother recounting how the family was deceived. Balasore District, Odisha.

#### 4.4 CROSS REGION MARRIAGES AND “OTHERING”

As a caste-based society slowly crystallised over centuries, Uma Chakravarti, a noted historian of ancient India, points out that one of the key defining features of Indian society becoming a caste based social stratification was one where “women and lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence.”<sup>18</sup> Insistence of caste purity meant controlling women’s sexuality, so that the dominant social order (read brahmanical) could ensure patrilineal succession of property. Through the ages, therefore, according to Chakravarti, purity of caste was assiduously protected through close monitoring of women’s sexuality. Cross-caste alliances became a matter of deep anxiety as these

<sup>18</sup> Uma Chakravarti, “Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State”, in Manoranjan Mohanty (ed.), *Caste, Class and Gender*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), p. 271.

endangered the ritual order and threatened the honour and respectability of men. As a result, mixing of castes meant severe retributions and stern condemnations.

This process of caste, class and gender stratification shaped how marriage institutions evolved in India. Marriages within the Hindus are conducted within the same *Jati*<sup>19</sup> or sub-caste group, usually territorially bound to a geographical space, whilst following the rules of village exogamy and caste endogamy. Normally, caste endogamy is strictly enforced through marriage customary rules to ensure that caste difference and caste hierarchies that otherwise might get eroded are maintained (Chowdhry. 2011:328-332). Inter-caste marriages are prohibited due to the fear of being “out-casted or expelled from the membership of the caste group” (Chowdhry. 2011:327).

The majority of men seeking wives from outside their customary pool in the research areas of Haryana and Rajasthan comprised the *Jats* and *Yadavs* amongst the Hindus with the Rajputs, Jogis and other caste groups comprising a very small minority of those seeking cross-region alliances. This raised a vexing question for this research: is there a tolerance for cross-region marriages when they so clearly violate the entrenched caste rules. If so, why? Recent media reports indicate that this is not a practice that has been diluted. In not so recent past, this region has been witness to numerous instances of caste diktats, heinous violence and even ‘honour killings’ against couples who enter into inter-caste marriages within Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh.

Therefore, this research considered it important to comprehend how the intersection of caste and gender played out for the women who were being brought in as wives from other regions into these caste groups. How did the cross-region wives fare in their conjugal homes and communities, given that such marriages transgressed customary rules and that their castes, given the territorial limits of the *jati*, would be at variance with that of their husbands? Understanding the dynamics of acceptance of such inter-caste marriages was also crucial to understand why such ‘socially sanctioned’ violence or excommunication from the caste group was not extended to the men and families entering cross-region alliances?

While cross-caste alliances are forbidden, our research reveals that there is a silent sanction by the dominant groups for cross-region, cross-caste marriages, as they do not seem to pose any threat to the dominant social order. However, the acceptance of cross-marriage does not translate into tolerance towards the new brides. Our research findings reveal that while on the one hand there is tacit acceptance, there is also institutionalised rejection by defining the cross-region brides as the ‘other’, as lower caste and as inferior. This is experienced at many levels not just by them but also by their children born of such unions.

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<sup>19</sup> The traditional hierarchical kinship-economic system of South Asia called the caste or varna system is characterised by four castes or varnas. Each varna consists of a multitude of social groups called Jatis. Each Jati or sub-caste is a group with a traditional occupation and ranking within a caste; intermarriage and inter-dining is usually limited to subgroups of these, but jati as a whole is the named social unit.

The following sections focus on three areas : (a) caste discrimination; (b) internal racism; and (c) colorism to highlight how the women and their children experience an everyday culture of caste oppression, discrimination and exclusion; and how such 'branded' brides seek out survival strategies to cope with their marriages, conjugal families and communities. These sections also describe how conjugal communities and families try and legitimise such marriages to keep established caste and gender based subordination intact.

#### 4.4.1 Caste discrimination

*A man first tries to get a match from within his caste and community. His honour is not lost then. However, when it's not possible, his helplessness forces him to seek a bride from elsewhere.*

A man with an Odiya wife speaking about the salience of caste in marriage.  
Rohtak District, Haryana.

*It is because of one's helplessness. You need someone to carry on the lineage and to run the family. The conditions are such that if there are five brothers in a family, you need someone to cook for them. The women (brides) who have come in this village have come precisely because of the need for this labour. The elderly parents cannot cook for them – they have to fend for themselves. The families that get such brides are shunned by both the family and the community. Secondly, the relations get broken because of her unknown caste status.*

Jat men in a focus group interview responding to a query about why families were entering into cross-region inter-caste alliances despite reservations within the community about them. Rohtak District, Haryana

The two interviews are quite instructive of the sentiments and attitudes of the majority of families and the communities seeking wives from other parts of India. Families search for a bride from within their *jati* for a number of years, but it is their failure and their 'helplessness' that finally compels them to source them from regions that they wouldn't have ordinarily done so. It is also necessary to realise that this compulsion occurs *only* when the men are unable to fend for themselves, i.e., their mothers cannot perform household chores as they are too old or infirm or that the wives of other brothers refuse to cook for them. The need for a female body to perform free labour, both productive and reproductive appears to be the biggest incentive that makes them transgress caste rules regarding marriage and even invite social sanctions against the family doing so.

Though the families and even the Khap Panchayats here employ the adage, 'a woman married to a Jat becomes a Jatni'<sup>20</sup> when talking about such women, the findings reveal that the women's 'unknown caste status' proves to be the biggest hindrance in their acceptability in conjugal communities. The same Khap Panchayat that states, "the woman who gets married into a Jat family is accepted within it and embraced in its fold" goes on to talk in the next breath that "we are troubled by such marriages. There's no two ways about it."<sup>21</sup> The 'cultural oppression' and the hierarchies of domination and dis-privilege that the low caste

<sup>20</sup> Dahiya Khap Panchayat, Interview, 22 July, 2012. Gadi Sisana village, Sonapat District, Haryana.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

groups and the Dalits experience on an everyday basis from the dominant caste groups gets similarly reproduced within the family bringing in wives from other parts of India. Though the families offer facile arguments that the women's *jati* is the same caste ranking as theirs with the only difference being that it is named differently in natal regions; the findings reveal that neither their own family members or the community buy into this.

*"The villagers comment that the family has brought a bride from outside and her caste identity is not known. They don't allow her to touch anything in the village. If she is from our caste, we have no taboos for her. How can we allow a woman with a dubious caste background to handle things?"*

A village woman commenting about the caste of cross-region brides. Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan.

*"Initially, I couldn't go anywhere. You know I am from Odisha. Here, they are Jats. They'd remark, 'oh, don't drink water from a glass, instead cup your hands to get water from us or use a cup reserved for the 'low castes'. Don't drink from this container but use your hands is what most would say."*

A cross-region bride from Odisha. Rewari District, Haryana.

As mentioned above, caste hierarchies have historically been enforced and maintained through the principle of purity and pollution. The fear of pollution, either by food or by association, is deeply embedded and it carries over to the brides as well. However, what is interesting is that the distancing and shunning is also very subjective: the degree varies according to the dependency and need of the family and the region from where the woman comes from. For instance, caste taboos seem to be rarely invoked for women from Himachal Pradesh yet for women from Odisha, West Bengal or Assam, these create barriers in their integration within the family and the community. Within the family, it is the women, usually the mother-in-law or the sister-in-laws (*jethani* or *devrani*) who enforce caste discrimination by not allowing the brides to enter the kitchen; establishing a separate kitchen or cooking area for either themselves or the brides; not allowing them to perform rituals or *puja* at the family altar or not eating food cooked by them.

*"My mother-in-law didn't allow me to offer water to the Tulsi (Holy Basil) for over a year after my marriage. It used to hurt that I was not allowed to do things just because they weren't sure which caste I belonged to."*

A cross-region bride visiting her family in Odisha recounting her experience in Behrod, Rajasthan.

*"It is considered a dishonour to have a bride from outside. After all, she is not from our caste. Who knows from where they have sourced her? The compulsion to have someone run the house forces them to seek a wife from another caste. She is not from the same caste or economic class as us. We don't associate with them easily."*

Women in a focus group interview. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*“The women would question me, ‘where are you from and which caste do you belong to?’ When I’d reply I was from a particular caste, they’d say I didn’t look like that one but resembled some other low caste group. ... They’d bring it up at all places. Suppose you are sitting outside the house, they might be passing and raise this. Or if we go to the fields for work, they’ll bring it up whilst working.”*

A cross-region bride talking about the questioning she faced about her caste status from women in the community. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

Amongst the Jats of Haryana, it is traditionally the daughter in law or the *bahu* who does the bulk of the agricultural work, tends the cattle and manages the household.<sup>22</sup> What is clearly evident is that whilst women from other regions are *needed* as free labour in the households, in the fields and for continuing the lineage, they are also simultaneously crushed, strangled and degraded. It is only their free labour that renders them attractive to the men and the families that obtain them. In this context, the humiliation that the cross-region brides have to deal with on an everyday basis within the family or from women from the caste groups of their husbands should also be interpreted as a strategic device to minimise their ability to resist overwork or abuse; reduce their self-esteem through constant questioning of their identity; and isolate them socially by denying them entry into the community circle. The women internalise this constant denigration and social isolation and retreat within themselves to ward off the pain of constant taunts and barbs. This will be dealt with separately in the section 408 *Self-regulation and surveillance as a survival strategy*.

*In case of social events, deaths, or marriages, the out-casted family is not invited. They are not invited nor does anyone go to their house. If there is a death in their family, no one from the community (got) goes to offer condolences. They are singled out. The rest of the community will sit and celebrate together. There are many benefits of belonging to a community.*

A man with a cross-region bride. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

Under customary marriage rules, inter-caste marriages are prohibited and the fear of being “out-casted or expelled from the membership of the caste group” (Chowdhry. 2011:327) allows the continuance of gender subordination and divisive and unequal social hierarchies created by the caste system. Yet, it is evident that the families that travel elsewhere and bring wives from there, in any case, invite social sanctions because of the dubious caste status of the women. Oftentimes, the women belong to a lower caste group than that of the men. The question that begs asking is why do the men and their families take so much trouble and spend a significant amount of money on the marriage mediator and travel, etc. to find a wife who has to be taught the language, the customs and the work here? Why then don’t the same families seek to go for inter-caste marriages with women in Haryana and Rajasthan? They would have many commonalities such as food habits, language, dress and work ethos and would be able to fit right in.

<sup>22</sup> Personal interview with Prem Chowdhry, Sociologist, New Delhi. 24 December, 2011

*“Even though there is a shortage of girls here, we will not allow for inter-caste marriages here. If it happens, then the caste council will have a meeting and the family will be excommunicated from the community. We have many villages in Haryana: if we do this, we will create a big social upheaval here.”*

A woman commenting on inter-caste marriages in Haryana to meet the female shortage. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*“Over here, love marriages are taking place between Harijans and Pandits. The Valmikis are marrying Brahmins or the Jats even though the caste difference between Dalits and Pandits is huge. However, such marriages are not occurring through consensus. ... Our societal structures don't allow this to occur.”*

Jat men in a focus group interview. Rohtak District, Haryana.

The fear of breakdown of domination and loss of privileges over resources that certain caste groups enjoy as the younger generation, particularly in Haryana, have begun inter-marrying between caste groups has led to a severe backlash from the *Khap Panchayats*<sup>23</sup> or non-elected caste councils. The *Khap Panchayats* have come down heavily against inter-caste marriages within their region, particularly those with *Dalits*, by decreeing social boycott of families involved and approving punitive action against errant couples, even to the extent of being complicit in their silence about the so-called ‘honor killings’ conducted by families. On home turf, both love and arranged marriages between the intermediate caste groups such as *Jats* or *Yadavs* with *Dalits* defy and dilute caste hierarchies, which is why such punitive action is given by the *Khaps* to deter its dismantling. They are also unwilling to let go of regressive and feudal patriarchal values governing choice of partners.

In this light, it is thus intriguing that cross-region marriages, even though these are evidently inter-caste, are favoured over those conducted locally within the home province. For the families, it is easier to hide or fudge the caste of someone whose family is far away and not invite the wrath of the community on them. These are to be viewed as tactical and well thought out – as ploys to circumvent the community rules regarding maintenance of caste hierarchies. In other words, it allows them an escape route to avoid being socially ostracised.

*“If someone marries a woman from another region, no one is wiser about the caste of the bride. It is an unknown. Here, if such a marriage takes place, it will lead to caste conflict. That's the main reason why inter-caste marriages cannot take place here.”*

Jat men in a focus group interview. Rohtak District, Haryana.

Our study reveals that the caste *Panchayats* are mute on the issue of cross-region marriages that clearly transgress caste lines. In fact, it appears that there is tacit approval of the practice of seeking wives from outside the region. They rather prefer sourcing brides from elsewhere than seeking them from the pool of women from lower castes from within their region as it does not pose a challenge to existing unequal caste hierarchies and discriminatory social practises that accompany them.

<sup>23</sup> Within rural Haryana, the *Khaps*, as these are colloquially known, decide extra-judicially on matters related to “caste and inter-caste matters, transgressions, questions of property rights, inheritance, and disputes which threaten the peace of the village or the immediate region” (Chowdhry. 2011: 332).



*“No way! Caste groups that exist – such as Khati, Chamar, Jats or Brahmins – marriages will take place within the caste group and not intermarry. In Haryana, we will marry within the caste group. ... Nobody really speaks out. I am discussing what we talk generally. ... There are many bachelors in every village who go and bring wives. They bring a woman from some other caste from another region, but within the village, we won’t have marriage with different Jatis. ... People aren’t taken to task for marrying outside the Got. After all, they marry because of their helplessness. They can’t get married here. We’ve never questioned, ‘why did you bring a woman from outside’.”*

Nafe Singh Nain, President, Sarv Jat Khap Maha Panchayat, Jind District, Haryana.

One another interesting finding of the research has been that some families, fearing that they might be out-casted by their communities, have opted for court marriages. It is done tactically to prevent ostracism by their extended family and community. Here, the official document with the surname of the woman’s parents is shown as evidence to those who are suspicious about her caste purity that she isn’t from what they term as the ‘untouchable’ community. At this moment, it can only be conjectured that perhaps the surnames of the women and their family sound alien to the folks in Haryana and Rajasthan and thus the families can put their own ‘caste spin’ on them. More research needs to be done on this to confirm the reasons for families going in for court marriages to avoid out-casting by their community.

*Court marriage benefits us in many ways. It silences those villagers who accuse us of marrying a low caste woman belonging to the scavenger or tanner community (the exact terms used were Chura, Chamar, Bhangi). ... We can be ostracised by the community or threatened with excommunication if her caste status is in doubt.*

A man who opted for court marriage. Alwar District, Haryana.

To sum up, what makes the exclusion and humiliation of the cross region brides rather unique is that unlike local lower caste population who experience caste-based discrimination essentially in public arena, cross-region brides face it both in public and private spaces – from the local community as well as from the members of their conjugal family. While local dalits might get respite in the sanctity of their homes, this too is denied to the brides.

What our findings found more disturbing is that the caste discrimination that the cross-region brides experience is further amplified by the existence of deep racism against them and their natal communities. We are cognisant of the fact that dalit activists see parallels between White racism and caste based oppression. We use the term “internal racism” here specifically to highlight a discourse of ethnic superiority that these brides have to cope with.

#### **4.4.2 Internal Racism**

The most disturbing finding of our study has been the widespread prejudice and hatred exhibited by conjugal communities in Haryana and Punjab towards the cross-region brides. They are pejoratively called ‘Biharani’, i.e., a woman who originally hails from the state of Bihar in East India. The term, when employed against a cross-region bride or her off-springs, is invested with connotations of poverty,

desperation, crime, filth and savagery. Simultaneously, the conjugal sub-caste groups of the *Jats* and *Yadavs* are projected as civilizationally superior to the brides and their natal communities.

Most scholars working on issues of racial and ethnic hatred agree that these forms of hatred are socially constructed and that these have more to do with power than ethnic, racial or cultural differences. It is a mechanism whereby the dominant group is able to maintain its privilege and power over the dominated group through the denigration of their culture, thus legitimising exclusionary practises and unequal treatment. It (re)enforces supremacy of the group that seeks to project itself as innately superior to others. In India, mention of racism usually invokes memories of colonial discrimination of the Indian 'natives' by the 'whites'. Internal racism, drawing from white supremacy racism is loosely defined as discrimination by one group of people against another in the same population group. It is done for similar reasons, i.e., to maintain power and privilege of the dominant sub-group against others by evoking stereotypes that are aimed to hurt and marginalise them.

Internal racism is not uncommon in India as people, particularly *Dalits*, experience caste-based discrimination that is now being increasingly equated by international human rights groups, scholars and activists as racism by another name. Internal racism also takes other forms in India, where people from some regions (like North-eastern states of India), have to deal with prejudice and negative stereotypes from fellow Indians in the rest of India.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in the case of the cross-region brides, research findings reveal that internal racism is clearly exhibited towards specific categories of brides and not all cross-region brides. For instance, brides from Himachal Pradesh or those from Uttar Pradesh are excluded from this labelling as it's argued that they are closer to the Haryanvis in cultural and social practises than the others and that they also share similar physical traits. On the other hand, all other cross-region brides hailing from the eastern provinces of India such as Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal or Assam, are all lumped together as Biharis and represented through few essential characteristics, largely negative, which are then taken to explain their behaviours, values, attitudes, cultural practices and material circumstances.

*"When they call me a Biharan, I feel tremendously angry. I come home and cry. But I cannot do anything about it. I have to just learn to accept the pain that comes when I am called a Biharan."*

A cross-region bride from Tripura sharing her feelings on being called a 'Biharan'. Rohtak District, Haryana.

Problematically, this dominant discourse hegemonises the brides as they internalize the corrosive racist rhetoric and gradually start accepting it as fact. The first step in that direction is evident in the erasure of the self as an Assamese or as a Bengali and perceiving oneself as Bihari. In the recent past, in different parts of India, the people of Bihar or the Biharis have been at the receiving end of xenophobia exhibited towards them. They are accused of hogging jobs and reducing competition due to their sheer numbers. Hatred towards them has taken a virulent form with anti-bihari sentiment stoked by ethnic nationalists resulting in vilification campaigns, social ostracism, denial of jobs and other discriminatory practises and in their being singled

<sup>24</sup> "Let's stop pretending there is racism in India". The Hindu. 29 May, 2012  
<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/lets-stop-pretending-theres-no-racism-in-india/article3466554.ece>

out for attacks. In Haryana as in Punjab, the Bihari male migrant is crucial for meeting the shortage of labour in the agricultural sector. They are, however, excluded by a deliberate process of housing them separately in quarters built in agricultural fields. This distancing through segregation thus allows the perpetuation of the Biharis as uncouth savages and their remote location also prevents the breakdown of dominant stereotypes circulated by the landowning caste groups here.

*“We don’t go near the Biharis. It is so because they eat betel nut and are constantly spitting. They also eat fish and meat. That’s the main reason why we abhor them. Biharis eat everything and the labourers who come from Bihar – they live separately in the fields and cook there as well. A bad smell comes from them. Nobody wants to keep a Bihari in their house. We think its better that they confine their way of living and eating to the fields. Nobody wants to also venture near their quarters.”*

A village woman talking about the ‘Bihari’ male migrant agricultural labourers. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*“We eat with spoons and they eat with hands – eat with all their fingers getting dirtied. We eat observing veil from our male relatives – turn our back to them whilst eating whereas they don’t observe this. We don’t like it. They lack manners or etiquette. They don’t know that if a guest comes to a house, you have to offer food and drinks. They just do nothing.”*

Women in a focus group discussing the ‘Bihari’ brides. Rewari District, Haryana.

*“When she first came here, her body emitted the stink of fish. We simply couldn’t sit next to her. Gradually, as she started eating our food, that smell lessened. ... The women smell because they are Bihari and eat rice and fish.”*

Women neighbours of a cross-region bride on the differences between the local and cross-region brides. Rohtak District, Haryana.

Interestingly, Orientalist discourse used in the colonial / imperial project that represented the colonizing Europeans as ‘self’, i.e., as developed, cultured, refined and intelligent and the colonized natives as the ‘other’ or as primitives and barbarians<sup>25</sup> who had then to be taught the right way by the colonizers is eerily evoked in rural parts of Haryana whilst discussing the locals versus the cross-region brides and by association, their natal families and natal communities. The Biharis are projected as primitive savages who live in thatched roof huts whilst the Haryanvis, more economically prosperous inhabit concrete or pucca dwellings. At the very basic level, the ‘self vs. other’ is evoked towards the brides’ dress, cooking, eating habits and manner of speech, wherein the othered brides lacking social grace have to be taught the ‘right way’ by the more cultured and civilizationally superior local Haryanvi women.

<sup>25</sup> For more, read Said, E.W. 1979. “Orientalism”, Vintage.

*She'd eat the roti by breaking it very crudely and eat using her hands. We advised her to always eat food with a spoon. Earlier, after eating, she'd wipe her hands on her clothes. We had to teach her to use a towel instead.*

Two women neighbours of a cross-region bride discussing her 'primitiveness'. Rohtak District, Haryana.

What is observed is that 'othering' is employed as a discursive practice to reinforce the self, in this case, the Haryanvi Jats and Yadavs, as the norm and as a group that is distinct and superior to other cultural groups derisively lumped together as 'Biharis'. Stereotypes are commonly deployed to project the 'Bihari' othered cross-region brides and by association, their parents and natal communities as savages, barbarians, and deceitful.

*Bihar is a backward and a disreputable area. Trucks are looted there commonly by people there. So anyone from that region or from the adjoining province gets called as Biharis.*

Men in a focus group interview responding to a query about negative associations with the term 'Bihari'. Rohtak District, Haryana.

Stereotypes that are sweeping generalizations of people lumped together as 'Biharis' play on the prejudice that Haryanvis harbor towards them. The natal families are branded as 'thieves', or 'sellers of daughters', who for a paltry sum of money are willing to trade their daughters in order to gratify their addiction to alcohol. They are also considered uncaring and emotionless towards their children with nary a thought of the future life of the 'traded' daughter. This particular stereotype impacts the brides negatively as they are constantly reminded that they are 'less valued' by their natal families and that it is only the conjugal families that offer them shelter and basic needs that their parents couldn't care less of providing for them.

This simultaneous reification of self and denigration of the other ranges the whole gamut from subtle exclusionary behaviours to overt displays of prejudice and discrimination towards the brides. The local women routinely make fun of their manner of speech or their cooking habits. They are sneered at for not understanding local customs. They are mockingly called 'Biharan' behind their backs – a fact that the cross-region brides are painfully aware of. Village women or women from the conjugal family often do not include them in festivities or other activities open to women from their sub-caste group or from the village. The brides speak of intense social isolation that is brought on by exclusionary practises that privilege the Himachali brides over the ones tarred as 'Biharis'.

The continual denigration is internalised by the women who are angry yet helpless in their inability to challenge popular discourse. Their sense of self-worth and self-esteem is ground down by subtle and direct racism that they experience on a daily basis within the family, the kin group and the community they are married into. This lowering of women's self-esteem through racial slurs and exclusion should also be interpreted as a deliberate strategy employed to reduce them to forced passivity and to continue domination over them. It allows the preservation of hierarchies of power and privilege of conjugal families and communities whilst simultaneously subduing resistance strategies of the brides against exploitation or oppression.

On a daily basis, the brides, in order to minimize the pain of such slurs, gradually reduce any social contact with other women and withdraw into a shell as a coping strategy. They report feeling depressed, suicidal or unable to cope meeting others for fear of being ridiculed. Studies elsewhere that focus on the impact of racism note that racism, racial discrimination and exclusionary practices impact the mental health of 'racialized minorities'.<sup>26</sup> While local women, albeit the same caste, have mutual support, shared understanding, reciprocity in relationship, the cross-region brides carry the stigma of Bihari, which leads to feelings of being ignored, hated, feared and unwanted. This is worrying for the mental and physical well-being of a cohort of women who have no community or familial support to rely upon

Lastly, the most disquieting finding on internal racism and xenophobia relates to the dominant caste groups of Jats and Yadavs fearing that their power and privilege might erode over time as more cross-region marriages occur. This fear of their group identity under threat of being 'diluted' or 'erased' by the influx of hordes of Bihari brides in the region is circulated by caste elders and by the Khap Panchayats.

*"If the influx of the Bihari brides continues, our race will gradually get wiped out. And then the Bihari race will take over control. If you marry a Bihari woman, then her race will dominate."*

Village men. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*"The Jat race will get wiped out. Obviously so because of the influx of Biharis. I won't bring a Bihari bride for my son for the fear that my grandchildren will be like her. My child bears my influence as he drinks my milk. Similarly, a child of a Bihari woman will grow in her womb and drink her milk—obviously, he'll have her influence. Haryana's Jat race will get extinguished."*

Focus group of women. Rohtak District, Haryana.

This racial profiling of certain categories of brides has ramifications for their rights as it might limit or prevent their access to resources, be it property or government schemes. Given that local elected village representatives and those in authority such as in the police are drawn from the local populace, the circulation of this racist belief might lead to prejudgement. In specific, it bears gender implications for access to land and property rights. Already Khap Panchayats are trying to roll back women's right to ancestral property. By using the bogey of Biharis overrunning Haryana, it might manifest in denial of property rights not only to cross-region brides but to local women as well. Although this has not been systemically investigated in this research as it was outside its scope, there is strong anecdotal evidence about it, thus requiring further investigation.

*"The household and the land will eventually be controlled by them. Gradually, in this manner, we will get finished and Haryana will be filled with Bengalis and Biharis. Where will the Jats be then? It won't be Haryana anymore."*

Village women discussing their fears about the 'Jat' race. Rohtak District, Haryana.

<sup>26</sup> Karlsen, S. & Nazroo, J.Y. 2002. "Agency and structure: the impact of ethnic identity and racism on the health of ethnic minority people." *Sociology of Health and Illness*, Vol 24. No. 1, pp 1-20.

### 4.4.3 COLORISM

Related to racism is the issue of colorism, which although similar in some senses to racism is also different. While the social construction of race uses multiple categories (heritage, ancestry, national origins, color etc.), colorism specifically deals with discrimination based on pigmentation. In this research, we want to distinguish between the two because the discrimination based on skin color further complicates the story of cross-region brides. It becomes a factor that renders darker-skinned women more vulnerable to cross-region marriages. Post-marriage, their dark hue also appears to impede their acceptance into conjugal communities in Haryana and Rajasthan.

In India, the interconnections between colorism and gender discrimination plays out most prominently in the Indian marriage market and mate selection process wherein darker hue acts as an impediment for women in securing the right marriage partner. This is evident from a cursory glance at the matrimonial ads placed in leading newspapers wherein descriptions of an ideal bride include 'fair-skinned' as a desirable attribute.<sup>27</sup> In India, the cosmetic industry has also tapped into deep rooted societal preference for fair skin by marketing skin whitening products for women. According to a study, in India alone, "(t)he skin-lightening cream market alone was worth US\$432 million in 2010 and growing at 18 percent annually."<sup>28</sup> Moreover, "61% of the dermatological market (in India) consists of skin lightening products."<sup>29</sup>

In the case of cross-region marriages, our research reveals that the skin color bias has far reaching repercussions on women belonging to poor families. Interviews of parents and of cross-region brides reveals the existence of a skin color hierarchy in the local marriage market with lighter skinned women being privileged over those who are darker hued. Deeply internalised notions of fair-skinned women as the feminine ideal thus render dark complexioned women 'ineligible'. Local grooms either reject them or make outrageous dowry demands to 'accept' them as wives. This ties in with what Hunter points out that fair skin is "interpreted as beauty and beauty operates as social capital for women. Women who possess this form of capital (beauty) are able to convert it into economic capital, educational capital, or another form of social capital' (Hunter 2005: 37). Moreover, fair skin tone is also closely tied to moving up the class hierarchy; especially for women as it acts as a 'capital' that provides better marriage and employment prospects (see Rondilla & Spickard, 2007 for more).

For poor parents, already burdened with societal pressure to 'settle' their adult daughters, the inability to pay the higher dowry places further pressure on them to marry them off to whoever is prepared to accept them. The willingness of men from Haryana or Rajasthan to overlook the hue imperfection in their desperate quest to find wives thus makes such dark-hued women and their parents vulnerable to these marriage proposals as an almost 'no-choice' option.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/classifieds/matrimonial/?list1=brides&pageNo=3> web accessed 17 January, 2013

<sup>28</sup> Who's the Fairest of Them All? Asian Scientist, 18 September, 2012.

<http://www.asianscientist.com/features/skin-whitening-products-asia-2012/> web accessed 17 January, 2013

<sup>29</sup> Indians Obsessed with Fairness Creams. The Times of India, 26 June, 2012.

[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-06-26/beauty/32102691\\_1\\_fairness-creams-hydroquinone-mercury](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-06-26/beauty/32102691_1_fairness-creams-hydroquinone-mercury) web accessed 18 January, 2013.

The most damaging impact of their rejection based on skin colour in the local marriage market is that it makes darker-complexioned women prone to enticement by traffickers. As mentioned above, the internalisation of patriarchal norms governing marriage and sexuality of women makes them amenable to marriage proposals from elsewhere. It creates a situation ripe for traffickers and marriage agents to step in and lure them.

*“The daughter was dark skinned and plain featured. Whoever saw her either rejected her or demanded more dowry. I couldn’t have got her married here. About four- five families came to see her. They did not select her and as she was not selected by any, I had to finally give her at a distant place.”*

Mother of a cross-region bride whose two other daughters, both lighter skinned than their sister are married to men from the natal region, Odisha.

*“Don’t dark skinned people have a right to live? Everyone has a right to live but dowry demand is so high for dark skinned women. If it’s fair skin, the dowry is less but for darker skin, it’s more. Why is it like this? If you take dowry, take it without discrimination.”*

Dark-skinned cross region bride, Rohtak, Haryana

*“Yes, the dark-skinned ones can (get married) if you can afford the dowry. Meet the demand and you can! We couldn’t give more cash and goods and so our daughter’s marriage didn’t happen here”*

A mother responding to the question whether dark-skinned girls are able to get married in Odisha.

On the other hand, preference for a fair-skinned bride is even stronger among the men from Haryana and Rajasthan. Apart from the implicit notions of ‘beauty’ as alluded above, the preference for light-skinned bride is also related to the fact that they can claim higher-caste status for these brides, thus gaining a degree of acceptability back home. Unable to pay a higher premium, the only reason the locally-rejected women become acceptable to them is because of their ‘femaleness’ and their ability to perform labour, both productive and reproductive. Twelve out of twenty two men we interviewed, stated explicitly that if they had an option, they would have preferred a fair skinned bride, preferably drawn from the neighbouring region of Himachal Pradesh, and not settled for someone dark-skinned. It was the high ‘fees’ demanded by mediators / agents for fair-skinned Himachali brides that put them out of reach. A few others, having failed to find a wife in Himachal Pradesh after expending money and time, then turn to other parts of India and become amenable to accepting a dark-skinned woman as their wife. Evidently then, dark complexioned women from East India or from Maharashtra are their *least preferred* choice. The internalisation of this colour-based construction of ideal feminine beauty amongst the men has significant implications on the married life for the couple. Their families too, it appears, do not fully accept the wives and create an internal hierarchy that privileges the lighter toned daughters-in-law over the darker one.

*“The fact is that women here are fair skinned whilst I am darker. They don’t like me. When they’d come to Maharashtra for marriage, they didn’t consider the skin tone – whether a dark skinned woman would fit the bill. Now, they think about what their relatives might comment. If there is a festival, wedding or any function within the family, I am not taken anywhere. Not to any wedding. Nowhere! Perhaps they think that I might appear as a misfit in their family. All the women will be fair skinned whilst I’ll be dark. I’ll stand out. Perhaps, that’s what they think. I have never been taken anywhere. For instance, there was a marriage in Rohtak – I wasn’t taken there at all. Or even when a marriage was here in the village, nor there either.”*

A dark-skinned cross-region bride on exclusions faced due to her skin tone. Rohtak District, Haryana.

No less significant is the consequence of colourism on women within natal families. Difference in skin tone creates an internal colour hierarchy with the fair-skinned daughters ranked higher in the scale than their ‘less fortunate’ dark-skinned sisters. The lighter-skinned daughters tend to get married within the region without much problem, thus perpetuating the hegemonic norm of a fair-skinned woman as the feminine ideal. This skin color ranking is problematic for gender solidarity as it “serves the interest of men because it maintains patriarchy as it divides women through competition and reduces their power” (Hunter, 2005: 5).

*“My maternal uncle said, ‘we’ll have to marry her there as she’s dark complexioned. People here will demand huge dowry for her.’ So, I was married here. My younger sister is fairer than me, I am dark skinned. People demand high dowry for dark skinned women. I couldn’t get married in Maharashtra as the dowry demand was huge. My younger sister is married there whilst I am separated from everyone, my family and relatives.*

Cross region bride, Rohtak District, Haryana

The penalisation of women who have dark skin doesn’t end with their rejection in the local marriage market and their consequent separation from their family, community and the region. As mentioned above, it continues into their cross-region marriage as they have to struggle to adjust in culturally alienating environments. They have to, oftentimes, cope with abuse or exploitation without any familial or community support structure to fall back on.

Race theorists working on colorism and internal discrimination point out that deeply embedded prejudice about dark skin is associated with “savagery, irrationality, ugliness and inferiority” (Hunter, 2005: 2). Research findings from Haryana in particular reveal a similar disturbing pattern wherein dark-skinned cross-region brides are looked down upon and mocked for their dark skin and for their supposed savagery and ugliness. Focus group interviews taken separately of groups of village men and women in Haryana (see Appendix 4 for details) reveals disturbing views about skin tone discrimination and the inscription of beauty and cultural refinement in fair skin. Comparisons between the Haryanvis as fair, aesthetically beautiful and civilizationally superior and the dark-skinned cross-region brides as ugly, primitive in behaviour and dull in intelligence are not uncommon. Ironically, within the cross-region brides too, a hierarchy of preference and forced preference is created with the Himachali brides ranked first due to similarity in ‘racial’ attributes to Haryanvis and the women from the eastern



states of Jharkhand, West Bengal or Odisha ranked lowest. Fears of the dark-skinned women diluting the 'racial attributes' of the Haryanvis not only influence the types of interactions between local women and the cross-region brides, these also potentially create a barrier in the creation of gender solidarity between the two disparate groups.

*"The women being brought in from there: they are short in height. Due to harsh summers there, they are also dark-complexioned. People here are light skinned. Obviously, the 'breed' will get impacted as the colour will be different and the height less."*

Focus group of mixed caste men, Rohtak District, Haryana.

#### **4.5 CHILDREN OF CROSS-REGION MARRIAGES : Their future prospects**

As observed above, cross-region brides encounter internal racism and the attendant prejudice, discriminatory and exclusionary practises from conjugal families and / or conjugal communities. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the children born of such marriages face incidents of racism just like their mothers. These children are seen as a 'diluted' race and not 'pure' Haryanvi or pure 'Jat' for the simple fact that their mothers belong to a different caste and region.

When they are young, they face racial taunts of their peers and are not accepted as one of their own. These range from sidelining them in games or bullying them with name-calling. They are branded with epithets such as 'Biharis', 'Biharan ke', i.e., a child of a Bihari woman or as 'Paro ka / ki', i.e., a child of a woman who is an outsider. *Paro*, in this case, is employed as a pejorative term that marks the woman not only as an outsider but also whose socio-economic status is lower than others.

The findings show that, amongst our research areas, such incidents were more evident in the Rohtak District of Haryana and in the Alwar region of Rajasthan respectively. It can only be speculated that the extension of such racial slurs to children in other regions might not have occurred perhaps because such cross-region marriages are a relatively new phenomenon there; the children might be young in age; or their numbers are fewer. These then might pose lesser threat to the established hierarchies of power and caste domination than, say in Rohtak, where, the numbers are more and the children have reached marriageable age. More research on this has to be done.

The boys, in particular, are at the receiving end of the racial slurs, most commonly encountered whilst they play with other village children. What is disturbing is that the children employing these labels are aware that using these as a weapon against a particular sub-set of their playmates can hurt and silence them into submission.

*“Whilst playing, other kids pass comments to my child, ‘you are a Bihari’. They make such comments. ... There may be some fight between the children. It is then that the others pass comments such as ‘you are a Bihari’ or that ‘your mother is a Bihari’. The child comes home crying, ‘mom, that child called me a Bihari’. Obviously then, I get very upset on hearing this. I feel bad but what can we do?”*

A cross-region bride sharing her son’s experience of being called a Bihari. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*“Their children are differentially treated. The boys might be sitting somewhere or just playing. It is then that someone calls out tauntingly to one boy, ‘hey you, son of a bihari’ or ‘Biharan ke’. Nobody can use that as a swear word against my son! He will never be called a ‘biharan ke’.”*

A local woman comparing the treatment meted out to children of cross-region and local marriages. Rohtak District, Haryana.

Despite their tender age, often ranging from 6-7 years onwards, it is evident that the children pick on adult prejudices, internalise them and learn to apply them in specific encounters. Though they may be “too young to intellectually understand the complexities of issues such as racism or prejudice, their behaviors” demonstrate “the influence of societal stereotypes and biases” exhibited towards the cross-region brides.<sup>30</sup> The internalisation of racist assumptions and behaviours has long-term implications for the racialised children as “[w]hat may seem innocent “pretend” play among young children” might well be “a rehearsal for later activities in life.”<sup>31</sup> Despite denials by local conjugal communities of overt and systemic discrimination, the cross-region brides harbour no such delusions about their children’s future. That their fears are not unfounded is corroborated by scholarly works on racism indicating that racist attitudes and behaviours are “perpetuated across generations”.<sup>32</sup>

*“If they are insulting him now, tomorrow when he grows up, they might humiliate him in front of 12 other people by labelling him a Bihari. What do you expect? His head would hang in shame by being ridiculed this way. I feel bad thinking about their future.”*

A cross-region bride discussing the future prospects for her child. Rohtak District, Haryana.

That the stigmatization might continue inter-generationally is evident from dialogues with caste councils and village elders. They firmly believe that cross-region marriages are ‘unnatural’ and that these result in breeding of children that are ‘diseased’ or ‘inferior’ than those born to unions with local women from the desired sub-caste groups. The circulation of mythologies of pathologies of disease that the despised racial group contain is an old bogey used historically to denigrate inter-racial unions. It is, however, unsettling to see the exact discourse reproduced in the rural hinterlands of Haryana and to drum up community outcry against the women and their supposedly ‘mutated’ off-springs.

<sup>30</sup> Tenorio, R. 1994. “Race and Respect Among Young Children” in Rethinking our classrooms: Teaching for equity and justice. Bigelow, et al. Milwaukee.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Van Ausdale, D. & Feagin, J.R. 2002. “The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism”, Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 2.

*“We are troubled by such marriages. There are no two ways about it. Our ancestors said that a child of such a union will be disease ridden – even scientifically, it will be genetically flawed. We aren’t doctors. This is what the doctors have told us and what our elders have passed on to us. We are sharing it with you. The Khap Panchayats are worried about the next generation as the presumption is that it will be afflicted with disease.”*

Dahiya Khap elders commenting on children born of cross-region marriages. Sonipat District, Haryana.

There is also a dichotomy between what the community asserts and what the families wish to believe about such children. As seen above in the interview, they are not considered ‘pure race’ by local communities, instead, they are viewed as ‘half-breeds’ or ‘mutated’ by the majority. On the other hand, the parents and the families insist that, as per patriarchal norms prevalent in these parts, the children are ‘pure’ as they are the ‘seed of the father that are carried in the mother’s womb’ acting merely as the receptacle. Moreover, their caste identity too is not viewed as diluted as their father’s caste defines their identity rather than that of their mother’s.

Despite this, the children, it appears are burdened with the stigma of their mothers being outsiders and of belonging to ‘lower’ caste groups. This ‘blemish’, it is found, has started creating a problem for the children in their adult life as the cohort born of the slightly older wave of cross-region marriages is now of marriageable age and have entered the local marriage market as grooms or brides both amongst the Hindus and Meo Muslims.

Customarily, in the case of the *Jats* and *Yadavs*, rules of caste or gotra endogamy and village or territorial exogamy are followed for entering into marriage relations. Marriages are not arranged in the three sub caste groups or gotras of a family seeking alliance: that of the father’s, mother’s and paternal grandmother. This prevents families marrying out of a particular caste group whilst also ensuring endogamy and caste purity. Since sub-caste groups are usually confined geographically to one location, understandably then, with the brides coming in from other parts of India, this practise of caste verification cannot be adhered to for arranging marriages of their off-springs.

*“They’ll face a big problem when their children grow up. Nobody will want to marry them. Our community will then ask the question, ‘whose children are these’. Where’s the mother from? What caste is she? What sub-caste or Got does she belong to?’ People will ask such questions and it will create a big problem later on.”*

Men in a focus group interview discussing marriage prospects of children of cross-region marriages. Rohtak, Haryana.

*“For instance, if I arrange a match for my son: my gotra and that of my husband and my mother in law will be asked. Only then will a match be arranged. The family might be asked where is the groom’s mother from. If they say she is a Biharan, people will raise objections. They might even say that his family lacked social and economic stature as it had to seek a bride from outside. His entire family background becomes sullied because of that. ‘We won’t marry our daughter here as later on her children too will have to bear the ignominy’.”*

A village woman commenting on marriage norms. Rohtak District, Haryana.

*“My son is 19 years old and still unmarried. I’m trying hard to find a match for him here. No one is willing to marry him as he’s labelled as the son of an outsider. As the son of a Paro.”*

A Meo Muslim father discussing the hurdles faced in getting his son married. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

In the case of the Meo Muslims, inability to get married locally also emerges from the worry that the mothers might not be Muslims; instead, they might be ‘bejat’; ‘kaffir’ or Hindus. Here too, the children of ‘Paro’ are seen as belonging to a lower social category than the others and this stymies their chances of securing a match locally.

*“When my daughter-in-law had a son, village women would come to congratulate us. At the same time, they would then call him an outcaste and say to our face that they wouldn’t offer their daughters to him in marriage.”*

Old woman discussing her infant grand-son’s future. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

Amongst the Hindus and the Meo Muslims in the research areas, it is the male child who is facing the most problems getting a local match. Families and community members state that if the potential groom has a good job, in this case, a coveted ‘government’ job and is financially secure, then reservations about marrying them can be pragmatically put aside. Families with young boys also express hope that their male progenies might have better job prospects and thus be able to overcome such societal barriers.

That this might not play out positively is evident from discussions with members of the Dahiya Khap who unequivocally state that marriages with such children will not be ‘tolerated’ and that as the numbers of cross-region brides and their children increase in Haryana, a new sub-caste group of these people might emerge. Marriages of such ‘mutated’ children, they state, will then occur only between those constituting it. However, at present, this is merely conjecture and the reality that stares the male child of cross-region unions is that they might well be forced to out-marry, thus recreating the cycle of victimization and stigmatization for their wives and children.

*“Their children will also have to be married just the way their fathers were forced to. They’ll have to arrange matches from outside. They won’t get married within the community.”*

Village men commenting on marriage prospects for children of cross-region marriages. Rohtak District, Haryana.

What is interesting is that the girl off-springs do not appear to encounter as much trouble in finding a match as their male counterparts. This may be, once again, ascribed to the shortage of women: marrying them at least ensures that their conjugal family would benefit from ‘len-den’ or customs that ensure a regular supply of gifts and other tokens during festivals, life events and other auspicious occasions. This is something that is denied when marrying a woman whose natal family is located geographically at a distance. However, more work needs to be done to explore whether hypergamy or marrying a man of higher social status, the norm amongst the Jats in Haryana is followed: whether such women are able to find equal or higher status men as their husbands or if they are married to lower status men within the acceptable sub-caste groups.

It is worth exploring whether this racialisation and differential treatment impacts the children's rights such as inheritance rights to land or property. Systematic research needs to be done with this group of children over a period of time to find out what other ways they face discrimination in securing access to livelihood and other opportunities

#### **4.6 CROSS-REGION BRIDES VS. LOCAL BRIDES : Exploring bargaining power and intra-gender relations within the household**

Due to their precarious situation, it is evident that the migrant brides face significant degrees of social control, which act as barriers for their meaningful participation both within the household and outside. To understand the linkage between migration and control mechanism, this research also examined intra-gender relations and dynamics of power between the cross-region brides and other females within and outside of the household. Here, a comparative analysis of bargaining power and treatment of cross-region brides with those who were locals within the same household was examined to tease out whether relations of dominance and subordination varied for the two sets of brides within the household. A related question studied whether differential treatment changed their status within the household; the extended family; and the social group in the village with which the women interact on a daily basis.

Given the context, findings corroborate the hypothesis that the very nature of such marriages and the breakdown of familial policing mechanisms caused by distance of natal families from conjugal homes leads to greater oppression and subordination of these brides. The older female family members, in particular the mother-in-laws, also monitor them far strictly than they do the local brides. They also make more demands on their labour than they would of the local brides. Here, it is necessary to bear in mind that "it is not cultural differences, but social and economic positioning in conjunction with family demographics" (Vera-Sanso, 1999:583) that also shape intra-gender relations within a household.

*"We don't hesitate in quarreling as we have our family's support. They can't do that. They can't blackmail that they are going to their natal homes – their homes are far. We just have to catch a bus in the morning and we are at our parent's by noon. For them, it takes days. Also, no relative of theirs comes to visit them whereas ours do so continually."*

Focus group interview of women on location of natal families as a contributing factor in women's resistance strategies. Rewari District, Haryana

The local women, on the other hand, possessing familial and kin networks in conjugal villages are able to resist more successfully, any excessive demands made of their productive labour for household or agricultural activities. Their courage to refuse largely stems from having a community, kin or family based, around them and their ability to call family at a moment's notice to their aid. Moreover, it also appears they are more pro-active in dealing with gender-based violence faced in conjugal family: they walk out of an abusive marriage and return back home instead of suffering their lot silently. The conjugal family members too are cautious in making unreasonable demands on the local brides. On the other hand, the cross-region brides lack the very same support structure

that local brides rely upon. Agarwal notes that bargaining outcomes within a household can be arrived at through “implicit differences in bargaining power” (1997:7). These are “defined by a range of factors, in particular the strength of the person’s fall-back position (the outside options which determine how well-off she/he would be if cooperation failed), also termed as the “threat point” (Agarwal, 1997:4). The very fact that the brides come from a distant region and lack familial or communal support here creates an immediate difference in bargaining and in the re-arrangement of gender relations within the household.

*“I have my family here. If I face injustice of any sort here, I will immediately report it to my parents. Those women lack such familial support here. If the local brides are asked to perform more work, they tell it to their families who immediately rush in her defence. However, no-one is there to stand up for the outsider bride. That’s why her labour is exploited and she is made to work more. The local brides give a phone call to their mothers whilst the others cannot do that. The families here rule over them.”*

Focus group interview of village women on why the cross-region brides were burdened with more work than others. Rohtak District, Haryana.

As the above interview reveals, the absence of familial network as a regulatory mechanism is a major contributory factor in the abuse of such women’s labour. Paradoxically, despite the very women being denigrated as racially inferior and somewhat rejected within the family, the unquestioning access to their labour renders cross-region brides attractive to people here. The brides are projected as compliant, submissive, docile and hard workers who don’t complain of long hours of labour or the type of work demanded of them. The conjugal family members praise their ‘workhorse’ ethics whilst simultaneously denigrating the local brides of not being respectful or hardworking. Whilst comparing the two sets of brides, the local ones draw flak for their arrogant and rude nature towards elders, laziness, sloppy work ethic, and constant running back to their natal families for protracted periods of time.

*“Our Haryanvi women work a bit in the fields and then say they are tired. They leave the work unfinished for the next day. The women from outside: if they go to work in the fields in the morning, they will continue till dusk. On returning home, they also tend to household chores. They get a full meal and then labour the full day. The local brides simply say, ‘we are tired’ and then go off to sleep.”*

Village woman commenting on the work ethics of the local and cross-region brides. Rewari District, Haryana

*“Suppose I ask the sourced bride to go wash some clothes, she will uncomplainingly go and do it. But if I ask the same of a local bride, she will retort back and say, ‘throw them in a corner. I have been working continuously since morning but your work demands never end.’ The reason is simple: the others are not of these parts but have come from outside. They worry that if we throw them out, where will they go and who will take care of them. Since they are not educated, they fear if we lodge a police complaint against them, who will bail them out. The local brides have no such fears.”*

A father-in-law discussing the reasons why cross region brides are non-resistive to extra demands made of their labour. Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan.

The vulnerability of the cross-region brides is what gives the conjugal family members the bargaining power to make unreasonable work demands of cross region brides. Ironically, though their labour is valued and their contributions to the household recognised, they are not accorded the same respect that others are able to obtain. They are excluded from decision making within the family about major events such as arranging a match for another family member or the naming of a child. On a day to day level, they are even excluded from making decisions about what to cook or what to eat. As a consequence, 70% of brides interviewed reported feeling alienated from the family.

In other instance, this undervaluing of a woman's labor has tremendous implications on her well-being, such as access to food and health care. The non-resistive stance of these 'docile' brides is acknowledged and exploited on their inability of a 'fallback' option of support if the family ill-treats or throws them. They are also denied access to resources including earnings of their husbands.

*"The ones from Akola are much better. They pay attention to provide food and take care of family's needs. They are not desirous of wealth. They do not fret if the husband gives Rs 5000 to his mother; they don't demand that he gives them Rs 2500. Moreover, the women from there don't spend uselessly. Instead, they are happy with whatever money the husband gives to them."*

A Muslim woman discussing the merits of brides from Maharashtra as compared to the ones from Rajasthan. Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan.

*"For instance, I control my household and run it. My husband hands his salary over to me but their husbands never do it as they fear the woman might run away with his money. If she is deprived of something, she doesn't complain. But if it happens to us, we immediately make a phone call to our family. We also tell them, 'if you won't get something that we've asked for, we will get it ourselves'. They lack the courage to say this. That's the main difference. Our families also question them about not providing for us whilst their parents don't."*

Women's focus group interview response to a query about how cross-region brides are controlled by their conjugal family members.

The above interviews reveal that the absence of bargaining chips in the hands of the cross-region brides allows the families to control and regulate their access to familial resources including the husband's earnings. In the conjugal research areas, it is not uncommon to find "households where livelihoods and unpaid work depend[ed] on the labour of family members" with the older family members taking strategic decisions "to ensure someone will undertake both the physical and economic support they and their husbands will need in old age" (Vera-Sanso, 1999:583). Upturning dominant societal norms that have the elderly parents live with the eldest son; a majority of the in-laws chose instead to live with the son who has a cross-region bride. They cite reasons such as greater respect and care accorded to the elders and the non-erosion of the older female's authority within the family as factors influencing their relocation. In other relations, such power gets challenged by the local daughters-in-law as they recognise and exploit the dependency of the older family members on their labour for attending to their day to day needs and comforts.

*“She takes good care of me. She bathes me and respects me. We work in the fields and we get covered in dirt. This one washes the dirt off me with care. The other daughters-in-laws are local and belong to landowning families. They’d rather kick me with their feet instead of washing my feet! That’s how they are.”*

A mother in law talking about her decision to live with her younger son whose wife is a cross-region bride. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

*“There is a difference in my two daughter-in-laws. The elder one doesn’t work. That’s the reason why we got this one (the cross-region bride) to handle the housework. I am now unable to work. That’s why we went so far to fetch a working bride. Now, she has to handle all chores in the house. ... The local or the elder daughter in law is a bad penny. If I ask for anything, she simply refuses to get it for me. If I ask her to do something, the same: refusal. The elder daughter in law doesn’t listen to or respect me at all. That’s why we have separated her (set up another household for them).”*

A mother in law discussing the merits of her cross-region daughter-in-law over the local one. Rewari District, Haryana

The persistence of inequality and exploitation of the cross-region bride’s labour within the household does not diminish till the cross-region bride forces her husband to break away from the joint family and set up a separate household of his own. This move alone allows her an escape from the exhaustive work routine demanded by other female family members. While for the local women, a feeling of well-being stems from mutual support, shared understanding and reciprocity in relationship with other women in the village, the stigma that cross-region brides carry prevents them from being integrated into the village community. Ignored by other women, new brides feel despised, ignored, feared and hated. They become doubly disenfranchised, because of their gender and because of their status as cross-region brides.

## 4.7 REGULATION OF MOVEMENT

Research findings from conjugal communities reveal a disturbing commonality that cuts across trafficked and non-trafficked cross-region brides. The conjugal family members, in particular, the closest female relatives such as the mother-in-law or the sister-in-law (*nanad* or *jethani*) regulate the bride’s movements by restricting her ability to move around the village and interact with other village women. The hawk-like monitoring of her each and every move is largely driven by the family’s fears that she might make an attempt to escape. Having paid a considerable sum of money to the marriage agent / mediator for the alliance, the families candidly admit they do this to prevent a total loss of their monetary investment in a ‘wife’.

*“I fear that we’ve spent so much and then she might run away. That’s what we worry about the most. We don’t let her go anywhere alone. That is the only thing we take care about.”*

Sister-in-law of a cross-region bride. Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan



Although local brides are also subjected to varying degrees of seclusion, the shadowing of each and every move of the new bride is limited to cross-region marriages alone. The severity of surveillance can vary from total confinement to restricted movement within the village. The degree to which this is enforced depends on a) the mode through which the bride has been sourced, i.e., whether she is trafficked, coerced or married with her parent's approval; b) duration of the marriage; c) the amount invested by the family in the marriage; and d) whether she has children or not from this marriage.

One method adopted to discipline new cross-region brides is for the family to strategically relocate the newly married couple from the village home to a remote location, like on the family's agricultural land. The difficult access to transport from that field coupled with the woman being cut-off from interactions with villagers or even other cross-region brides married within the same village influences this shift. The families do this knowing that the new bride, unfamiliar with the local terrain and the language, will be further sequestered in her desire to escape from her situation. Her isolation and the subsequent total dependence on her husband and his close relatives, can be considered a strategy to break down any resistance that she harbours and make her reconcile to her situation. Understandably then, the duration of the stay at the '*kua*' as the quarters in the fields are commonly known, varies from a few weeks to months, depending on the conjugal family's assessment of the bride's 'adjustment' to the marriage and her circumstances. At other times, families routinely lock up, at night, the room where the new couple sleep to prevent her from running away in the night whilst the family sleeps. This normalization of a 'hostage' like situation is, in fact, an act of violence that attacks the bride's freedom of movement.

Our research findings show that regulation takes different forms. For instance, on an everyday basis, the woman is denied privacy even when she wants to relieve herself. It is not uncommon to find women from the family accompanying the new bride as she attends to nature's calls. She is also chaperoned when doing household chores such as collecting water or firewood. Here, the presence of the mother-in-law or the sister-in-law acts as a deterrent for other village women to interact with her. In the case of brides who are trafficked or coerced into marriages, the families regulate them more strictly as they fear being reported to the police or her running away from the coercive situation she is in.

*“Control over the bride is exercised by the mother-in-law and her sister-in-law. They accompany her everywhere so that she cannot attempt running away from home or worse, lodge a police complaint that she was brought her forcibly.”*

A village women commenting on restrictions for cross-region brides.  
Jhunjhunu District, Rajasthan

Another important area of control is by inhibiting any visitations to the natal regions. While local brides routinely visit their natal families during important festivals or during childbirth, this privilege does not extend to long distance brides. However, there is some easing off in the bride's freedom to visit her natal region once the bride bears a child. The families hope that the bride's maternal love for the child might act as a deterrent against her desire to return back home. In some cases, families allow the women visit family only by keeping their children, specifically the boy-child, as ransom to secure her return back to them.

*“I was not allowed to go back home for a visit. They feared that I might not return and that their son would become wifeless. Even after I had my son and daughter, I wasn’t permitted to visit family. It is only after 5-6 years, that my mother-in-law allowed me go home. Even then, they kept my son here with them to ensure my return. I went home for the first time in 6 years after my marriage!”*

A cross-region bride recounting the constraints placed on her movement.  
Rewari District, Haryana.

*“Once the child was born, I took her home for a visit. I felt that then she wouldn’t leave me as she’d love the child.”*

A man tells why he didn’t allow his wife to visit her family for five years after marriage. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

Our research reveals that villagers too play a role in the surveillance of the brides by acting as informal ‘eyes and ears’ for the family. This is not surprising as they share caste and kin alliances with families bringing cross-region brides. This informal community policing not only deters the brides from running away from abusive or difficult family situations, it also makes it doubly harder for them to open up to local woman and share their distress with them. Such fissures in empathetic solidarity for the gendered nature of the brides’ oppression and exploitation enables more extreme forms of patriarchal subordination to occur, thus normalising gender based violence in all forms.

*“Two days after coming here, I said that I wanted to explore the village and go for a walk. The family allowed me to go. I started finding my way out of the maze of lanes and bylanes. Suddenly, I was accosted by two village women who questioned me about my movements. They said they would take me back home. Once here, they ticked off my mother in law and said, ‘you better control your daughter in law’s movements or else she’ll run away.’”*

A cross-region bride who made an unsuccessful attempt to get away.  
Rewari District, Haryana.

*“I was sold off. I tried running away. I saved and also stole till I had Rs 1000. The villagers didn’t allow me to escape. I was caught off the bus. I ran off the second time and caught the Delhi bound bus. The grandson located me at the bus stand and then pointed a gun at me. He threatened to shoot me if I ever made another attempt. That fear prevented me from escaping again. I stayed back.”*

A bride who was sold off to a much older man by her husband. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

#### **4.8 SELF-SURVEILLANCE AND SELF-IMPOSED ISOLATION: A survival strategy**

It must be recognised that marriage and the move to conjugal home is, even in normal circumstances, a stressful time for any new bride. To add on to that strain, the cross-region brides have to cope, at multiple levels, with an alien language; totally different ways of doing household chores such as handling cattle; a cultural milieu that places a lot of emphasis on regulation of women through the practise of veiling; and a physical environment that is starkly opposite

from where they come from. Moreover, the women lack familial support structure or relatives they can rely on customarily to talk to and help them adjust in this difficult time. Oftentimes, to further compound this stress, the women find that they have been deceived either about their husband's earning ability, age; earlier marriage, addiction to alcohol; or physical or mental handicap.

The families into which the women are married into also, it appears, don't try and make adjustments for them as they try getting over the cultural shock. Instead, for the families, what matters the most is that the women learn, as quickly as possible, how to handle household chores, cooking, and working in the fields. Majority of the families (fifteen) during the research spoke of how they tried teaching the women simply to do chores. They did not appear sensitized to the difficult adjustment the women had to do in a very short period of time. The women, in the initial period, the research reveals do try and reach out to other women in the family or in the neighbourhood. But, the gender solidarity that they hope for, it appears doesn't extend to them as they are considered 'inferior' to the local women due to their unknown caste status.

*"I remain inside my room all day. I go out to work in the fields with my husband and come back with him. I don't speak to any village woman. They just make fun of me. So what is the point of talking to them? It's better that I stay indoors and not interact with them."*

A cross region bride commenting on why she doesn't go out and sit with other village women. Rohtak District, Haryana.

As a consequence, cross region brides resort to self-imposed isolation in order to minimise contact with either family members or women in the community. They also regulate their behaviour so that they don't stand out in the village. For instance, they prefer collecting firewood or water separately instead of the usual collective activity it is for most women.

*"First of all, we don't try to argue with people or enter into fights. We retreat. For instance, we go to the forest to collect firewood after all the women have collected theirs just to avoid contact and conflict."*

A cross region bride. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

*"They make fun of me. I come home and cry when they do that. ... The village water tap is a distance from here. ... I go there only after all others have filled water and when no one is there. I don't speak to anyone."*

A cross region bride discussing how she distances herself from others. Rohtak District, Haryana.

This is done as a survival strategy to avert the constant ridicules they face about their 'accent'; their inability to perform household chores; their dress or eating habits; or due to the hawk-like monitoring they encounter in their day to day existence. In part, it is also brought about due to fear about what other women, either in the family or in the village, might report back to their in-laws or their husbands.

*“We don’t share our sorrows or secrets with others here. There are many who are willing to listen to you but they mock us afterwards. It’s better to sit inside our homes and not share our thoughts with anyone else. It is also because we are outsiders. People want to humiliate us. We don’t want that. Whatever our circumstance, we don’t want to be laughed at. We don’t tell them that there is no food in the house or we haven’t eaten all day. None can solve our problems. Instead, they’ll make fun of us.”*

A cross-region bride on being asked if she had local women as friends.  
Alwar District, Rajasthan.

*“I fear that if I share my sorrows or worries with my neighbours, they might report back to my mother in law and to my husband. He might then beat me up in anger. That’s the main reason why I don’t take anyone into confidence here. My mother in law dissuades me from talking to my neighbour too. She doesn’t like it at all.”*

A cross-region bride sharing her fear of opening up to others. Rohtak District, Haryana.

The consequence of this self-imposed isolation and inability to articulate appears to have taken its toll on the brides’ mental and physical health. During the course of the interviews, many mentioned that they felt depressed or that ‘their thoughts would wander all the time’. It is worrying indeed that of the fifty four interviewed; three brides stated they often harboured suicidal thoughts. This should be taken seriously as it appears that the cross-region brides suffer psychological and emotional abuse and that this has an impact on the entire family’s well-being not just the woman’s.

## 4.9 GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

In the recent past, in part spurred by the heinous gang rape of a young woman in Delhi, sociologists and media reports, have touched upon the linkage between a skewed child sex ratio and increase in Gender Based Violence (GBV). Reports point out a causal connection between increase in violence against women in North India and girl dis-preference; patriarchal norms favouring the male child; and the shortage of women caused by decades-long practise of using new reproductive technologies to abort the female fetus. With reference to Haryana, many newspaper reports allude to the social crisis or the chaos caused by the lesser availability of women there that has begun manifesting in the form of increased sexual violence against women such as rapes, sexual assaults and sexual harassment or ‘eve-teasing’.

*“The boys harass the girls, whistle at them and chase them. For instance, if there is one girl, she will have 10 men lusting after her. They need a wife. It has become difficult for girls to step outside their homes. If everyone desires a male child, where then can females be found? That is the main reason why men have started harassing women and mistreating them.”*

Village women discussing increase in violence. Focus group interview.  
Rohtak District, Haryana

This is borne out through our research findings, particularly from Haryana, which indicate a growing unease within rural populations there about a surge in violence against women. Dialogues with villagers reveal that they are confronted with the spectre of potential rape or sexual assault on their female wards and that they recognise that the shortage of women has unleashed a demon in their midst. The presence of a male cohort unable to get married and consequently amenable to indulging in acts of violence against women is one that got articulated by villagers in our research locations. This fear is not unfounded. A comparison of India's National Crime Records Bureau statistics on crimes against women for the past few years<sup>33</sup> reveals that rape is one of the fastest growing crime in India. In part, it might also be due to increased reporting by rape victims too.

*"If the girls travel in a bus, the men trouble them there too. That's the main reason why girls are unable to continue their education. For men abduct them and then sexually assault them. If a girl silently accepts being raped, she survives, otherwise she is killed. Parents, particularly from the Dalit communities, are increasingly pulling their older girl children out of school as they fear their wards might be abducted on way to school by upper caste men. They target low caste women as they know they can get away with it. They don't commit crimes against upper caste women as they fear reprisals."*

Mixed caste focus group interview of women, Rohtak District, Haryana responding to a query about violence against women in their community.

#### **4.10 INTIMACY OF MARRIAGE : Negotiations between the couple**

Within the intimacy of the relationship with their husbands, it appears that some men are more amenable to making accommodations to make the lives of their wives comfortable. These include making small but significant gestures such as buying rice or stealthily bringing in eggs or cooked meat dishes for their wives to taking them out for a day to the nearby small town where the brides can relax from the oppressive social norms and eat what they like without censure or ridicule. Conjugal areas consume a vegetarian diet with wheat as a staple; meat and eggs are taboo and rice is looked down as inferior food. Such actions of husbands not only demonstrate softening of their stance towards their wives but also indicate subtle resistance against constrictive rules regarding eating and behaviour within their own communities.

*"I take her to the city for an outing. We eat samosas and other snacks there and enjoy ourselves. When she first came here, she was disconsolate. I'd take her out to cheer her up."*

Husband of a cross region bride, Rohtak District, Haryana

*"I buy rice for her and bring it home. She cooks and eats it whenever she wants to. Even I have adjusted to eating rice once in a day. I give her money so that she can buy what she feels like. ... So what if rice has to be bought. She has to eat one grain, be it rice or wheat. It doesn't matter to me."*

Husband of a cross region bride, Rewari District, Haryana

<sup>33</sup> Crime in India. National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India <http://ncrb.nic.in/ciiprevious/main.htm>

Perhaps the most significant shift is seen in husbands choosing to break away from the joint family set-up that exploits their wives' labour and live independently with them in the same village. This move, considered radical as men are customarily supposed to live in a joint household, immediately liberates women from continual surveillance, oppression and excessive demands made on their labour by members of conjugal family.

*“My mother-in-law would pick fights with me. So, we decided to move away from joint family. I was also not used to a heavy workload. That’s why I asked my husband to set up house separately. He agreed to do so.”*

Cross region bride from West Bengal, Rohtak District, Haryana

*“I was studying back home and so I wasn’t used to doing this hard manual labour in the fields. That too in fierce sun. I told my husband that if he forced me to continue this way, I would simply run away. He relented and said, ‘just accompany me to the fields. I will do the work. You just chip in what you can.’”*

A cross-region bride sharing the negotiations between her husband and herself. Rohtak District, Haryana.

Surprisingly, such examples of surreptitious transgressions and accommodations were articulated by as many as 9 husbands. Evidently, these indicate not just a softening of the husband’s rigid patriarchal stance towards their wives but also a redefining of masculinity that has traditionally valued domination over spouses. It can only be hoped that as male marriage squeeze intensifies in these regions, patriarchal norms get reconfigured to the benefit of the women in such marriages. Such encouraging examples also challenge stereotypical images of these men as one-dimensional patriarchal monsters and force us to see them, to some extent, as victims of the system too.

## **4.11 TAKING CONTROL :**

### **Checks and balances to counter abuse**

In marriages taking place within kin networks, the presence of some relative, near or distant, provides a natural mechanism of checks and balances to ensure against deception and fluffed up credentials of the groom and his family. These networks also come in handy for the new brides as they can be relied on to monitor and protest against abuse or neglect. Subconsciously, too, their presence acts as a deterrent against their exploitation as erring families can be taken to task and shamed publicly. However, women are less protected against shams and maltreatment if kin ties are absent in conjugal communities. The geographical containment of kin networks renders cross-region brides vulnerable as checks and balances, pre and post marriage, are difficult to undertake. It is only recently that natal families have started coming up with inventive solutions to overcome some drawbacks of long-distance alliances.

#### **4.11.1 Verification Visits**

Customary marriage negotiations usually involve making discreet inquiries through the extensive kin network about the suitability of the marriage proposal.

Such cross-checks are possible as spatial and linguistic boundaries to arranging weddings within a caste sub-group imply the presence of some relative or the other in a village from where the proposal emanates. However, with cross-region marriages, these are inconceivable due to lack of kin networks hundreds of kilometres away. Some parents are becoming pro-active due to stories about deception and trafficking that make their way back home to them. Interviews with the brides and their families reveal a small but a significant trend of lesser reliance on marriage broker's / mediator bride's words. Consequently, women's immediate male kin, usually the father or the brother travel to the prospective groom's village to do a check prior to accepting the proposal. It must also be noted that it is difficult for everyone to do given the high costs of travel and language barriers.

*"I told the mediator that I needed to check out things for myself. I didn't know whether the prospective groom was good or bad. I went there after a few days. I went and spoke to 2-3 villagers there. I asked about this man – about his character, his job, all the details of his life. The villagers confirmed that the man was blemish less and that his family had a good reputation. They said that if I married my sister to him, she would find no grief."*

A man narrating his efforts to cross-check the groom. Balasore District, Odisha.

*"My maternal uncle feared that the family might make false claims to us. If he stayed for a day or two, the family might put up pretence about the man's employment claims or deny his substance or alcohol addiction. They might not be able to do that for 8 days! Such a thing cannot be hidden for long."*

A cross-region bride on verification trips prior to marriage. Rohtak District, Haryana.

The verification visit prior to the marriage is important on several counts. One, it implies agency on part of the woman's relatives to gain control over a situation where the odds are stacked against them. By speaking to neighbours and other villagers, they are able to obtain a clearer picture of the suitability of the proposed match. Second, it places pressure on both the marriage brokers and the prospective grooms to not make false claims as these can be cross-checked. Here, the marriage broker has more at stake as any deceptiveness can ruin their future matchmaking prospects in the village or community. Third, by making a visit to the future conjugal village, it sends a clear message to the conjugal family that in case of abuse or ill-treatment of the bride, her family would be pro-active. There is a greater incidence of male family members accompanying the bride to her new home in Haryana or Rajasthan. This again marks a break from past marriage tradition as earlier, the groom's family members would be the only ones taking her back home.

#### **4.11.2 Court marriages**

Given the immediacy of such weddings, usually taking place within a day or two of consent, these are shorn of the usual prolonged ceremonies and solemnized hastily at home or in temple. However, knowledge about scams and trafficking of women for sale and further re-sale or women or their children being denied property rights after the husband's death has led to a slight shift in attitude towards court marriages in natal communities.

*“Since our daughter was being married far away in Rajasthan, villagers here suggested we conduct a court marriage for our daughter. Everyone agreed on it including the groom.... She won’t face any difficulty in her marriage now. He cannot mistreat her or desert her. The certificate is like a threat – he cannot sell her off to another man nor can he deceive us. After all, it is a legal document.”*

Parents talking about registered marriage. Balasore District, Odisha.

Instances of parents choosing court marriage as a safeguard for their daughters are a rarity as court or civil marriages are still not the norm in India. However, these should not be dismissed for the lack of numbers. One, it marks a recognition that temple marriages hold no water if a woman wants to fight for her marital rights with no legal or community support. Second, it also indicates a growing astuteness on natal families about gender friendly laws and courts as refuge for exploited or abused women. Third, by conducting court marriages, an implicit threat of legal action presumably acts as a pre-emptive against desertion and commodification. It might force wariness on husbands and their family members, thus forestalling their fickleness about such marriages. Registered marriages appear to be more common amongst the Meo Muslims in Alwar region than in any other community.

*“Our marriage was solemnized by a Qazi and then the nikahnama was registered in the court. I got a copy of my marriage registration paper. I kept it for safe-keeping with my mother. I didn’t bring it here with me as there was no secure place to keep it. After all, I would be working all day. If I kept it in my suitcase, they (the conjugal family members) could easily find it and tear it up. Where would I go to get another copy? ... This paper protects me – if he (husband) leaves me, then I can take action.”*

A Meo Muslim cross-region bride on court registered marriage. Alwar District, Rajasthan.

The move towards opting for court marriages augurs well for gender rights. Further research over an extended period of time is required to examine whether court marriages do lead to a lower incidence of abuse or desertion in cross-region marriages as compared to the ones conducted in temples.

It must be mentioned that our research also disturbingly revealed that an overwhelming majority of ‘court marriage’ certificates were notarized ‘Deeds of Declaration of Intention of Marriage’ drawn up on stamp papers instead of marriage certificates issued by Marriage Registration Officer.<sup>34</sup> This was evident amongst the Hindus whereas amongst the Meo Muslims, almost everyone could show us the registered Nikahnama. Only two certificates shown to us by Hindu brides were genuine ‘court marriage’ certificates. Interviews with parents and brides, and even their husbands reveals that they consider these ‘declarations’ to be the actual marriage certificate! For naïve, unsuspecting and illiterate parents and grooms who are usually unaware of the intricacies of legal processes, a

<sup>34</sup> According to the Special Marriage Act (1954) of India under which civil or court marriages are solemnized, such affidavits are necessary to declare that both parties are of legal marriageable age; single; not under compulsion to marry; and that their intention to marry is of their free will. It is only after a 30 day period after this declaration that the two can appear in front of a Marriage Officer and be married for which a marriage certificate is issued there and then. Personal conversation, Supreme Court Lawyer, 23, July 2012. New Delhi.



visit to the court and the drawing up of a legal document by a lawyer is enough proof that legalities are followed and that a marriage has been legalized.

More marriage documents need to be looked at closely to examine whether these are, in actuality, court marriage certificates or just 'declaration of intention to marry'. It would also be interesting to examine whether the 'agents' or 'dalals' and matchmaker brides differ or converge in offering either genuine marriage certificates or declaration of intention to marry. Further research needs also be undertaken to ascertain whether the affidavits are being drawn up intentionally to circumvent the 30 day time criteria and/or to mislead parents and grooms about the actual process of registering a marriage. The repercussions of such oversights, whether deliberate or innocent, on a presumably 'married' woman's fight for her legal rights and those of her children are far-reaching. Evidence from our research about agent-arranged marriages indicates so far that gullibility of villagers is being deliberately exploited to maximize profits.

#### 4.11.3 Wedding albums

During research in the conjugal villages of Haryana and Rajasthan, a vast majority of cross-region brides or their mother-in-laws insisted on showing to us either some photos of the wedding or the entire wedding album itself. Such insistence cannot be dismissed merely as nostalgia for home or family nor can it be assumed that it connotes elitist symbol.

*"When I first came here, village women would taunt me by saying that I was a 'bought' wife. They refused to believe that I had been married and not sold by my parents. A 'wedding album' had been made of our marriage. I started showing it to my detractors here. They, then, came around to accept that I was not a 'bought' bride."*

A cross-region bride telling why she values the album. Rewari District, Haryana.

Motives for keeping photographic records of the wedding vary. For the brides, the photographs, offered "incontrovertible proof" (Sontag, 1978: 5) that their marriage was sanctified in presence of family and relatives. For the man's family, already burdened with the shame of sourcing a bride from outside their caste group, images of the woman's family attending the ceremony and the actual ceremony itself provided evidence that the marriage was performed according to Hindu rites - important to avoid social ostracism within their caste and community, and that the woman was not sold by either her parents or a trafficker. For the bride's family, a few images of the wedding, apart from the keepsake value, also serves as a safety backup against fraudulent marriages.

The very act of hiring photographers to produce documentary proof of weddings, it can be argued, confirms the non-trafficked nature of most cross-region marriages. If it were not so, the groom's family and the agent / mediator would not prefer leaving a photographic evidence trail. The inclusion, quite often, of the mediator or the marriage broker in many wedding snaps too lends credence to this conjecture.

Employing mechanisms such as verification visits, court marriages or marriage albums is indicative of greater agency on part of bride's family against trafficking of their daughters or marriage to 'undesirable' men. The use of such safeguards also sends a powerful message to conjugal families and communities that they are not uncaring brutes willing to 'sell' their daughters. It also helps dismantle pervasive stereotypes about natal families as unconcerned about their daughters' welfare and as brides as 'bought' and hence a 'commodity' that can be exploited for its labour to the fullest.

# 5

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Registration of all marriages, notwithstanding any community or religion, should be made compulsory. The Indian Cabinet, as recent as April 2012, has taken a step in the right direction by taking a decision to make registration of marriages compulsory. The bill has to be passed as quickly as possible by the Indian Parliament. This act in itself will ensure protection of gender rights of cross region brides, in case of trafficking; abuse during marriage; desertion by husband; or claiming maintenance or inheritance rights. The benefits of the marriage registration will also accrue to children born of such cross-region alliances.

At present, our research reveals that both natal and conjugal communities are not aware of the 'proper' process of getting marriages registered. This leads those entering cross-region alliances being duped by marriage agents / *Dalals* / mediators. Notarised documents declaring intention to marry are passed off to 'law-naïve' parents that proper procedure has been followed. An intensive and sustained campaign is needed to be undertaken in both natal and conjugal regions to educate them about the correct procedure. This awareness generation can follow the same trajectory as that undertaken by the Government to sensitise communities about the imperative of birth registration.

Awareness generation about marriage registration should be aimed differently in the regions or areas from where the women are being sourced. The communities should be made aware, once again through local government mechanisms or through the involvement of PRI, that getting a marriage registered is in the benefit of their female children and that it will act as a deterrent against trafficking of women as the prospective grooms will be required to offer identity proof. Moreover, in the worst case scenario of trafficking of a woman, it will allow her family seek help of the police which can then trace the man through the address provided in the marriage documents.

Natal communities need to be sensitized that they too have a responsibility towards ensuring their female wards are not married off or sent with someone for marriage without ensuring the proposal is genuine. Their vigilance against fraud can range from making verification visits or cross checking with other brides or insisting on seeing the groom in person instead of summarily sending their daughters off to be married with neighbours or extended family members. Our research findings show that wherever parents have been vigilant, they have been able to send a strong message that they don't have 'disposable' daughters who can be trafficked or abused. Panchayati Raj Institutions can play a leading role in bringing this up as an issue during Panchayat meetings and in Gram Sabhas.

Various publicity measures can be undertaken in natal and conjugal regions with simple messages for each target group. For instance, in natal communities, it can proceed on the lines such as, “beware of people promising dowry free weddings with your daughters. Verify before proceeding further.” Even though effectiveness of publicity measures like these is hard to measure, yet, it is hoped that people will pause and read it.

Presently, a scheme to encourage inter-caste marriages with a monetary incentive of Rs 50,000 is offered by many states of India. It is a laudable scheme, one that the Khap Panchayats from Haryana want rescinded as they see it enabling the dilution of caste hierarchies. However, the benefits of this scheme, at present, can be availed only if both marriage partners are residents of the same state. It doesn't extend to inter-caste marriages taking place between residents of either Haryana or Rajasthan with women from elsewhere. With the male marriage squeeze increasing with time, such alliances will occur with increasing frequency. It is suggested that the scheme be extended to inter-caste marriages with a clause that the wife has to be a non-resident and of low-caste status. Extending this scheme will also ensure that such marriages are registered, given that one clause requires marriages to be registered by a Marriage Registration Officer. Registration in order to avail the scheme, it is hoped, will also have unintended spin-off benefits such as protection of human rights of such women and their children and reduction in incidences of trafficking.

The Centre and State governments should prioritize implementation of targeted and tailored prevention initiatives that address core contributing factors to cross region marriages. These should emphasize poverty alleviation schemes, anti-dowry campaigns, education, access to resources and job opportunities for vulnerable women. Even though all such schemes do exist, tardy implementation prevents these from reaching those it is intended for.

Partnership between the Civil Society and the Government in conjugal regions is imperative to ensure that the human rights of the cross-region brides are not violated and that, in case these are, then they are able to access services and mechanisms to ensure that the violators are punished. Policy and legislative reforms take a while to trickle down to communities and it is here that Civil Society Organisations can step in to fill in the gap. Workshops on the complexity of cross-region marriages and its gendered impact should be held for CSOs in conjugal districts. It will allow exchange of information and evolving of grassroots strategies to protect the human rights of cross-region brides.

Studies from elsewhere<sup>1</sup> indicate that the repatriated women end up in the same socio-economic situation that initially compels them to migrate or marry as a survival strategy. Anti-trafficking activists and scholars<sup>2</sup> also point out that the rescued trafficked women oftentimes end up being trafficked once again due to their economic vulnerability. Even though the focus of law enforcement agencies

<sup>1</sup> For more, read Hugo, G and Nguyen Thi, H. X. (2007). “Marriage Migration between Vietnam and Taiwan: A View from Vietnam”, *Watering the Neighbour's Garden: The Growing Female Deficit in Asia*, eds. Attane and Guilimoto, Paris: Committee for International Cooperation in National Research in Demography, p 365 – 391

<sup>2</sup> For more, read Sanghera, J. (2005) “Unpacking the Trafficking Discourse”, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work and Human Rights*, Kempado, K.; Sanghera, J.; and Pattanaik, B. (eds). London: Paradigm, pp 3-24

of the Government and of anti-trafficking organisations in India is primarily on the rescue of women from forced marriages and their repatriation, sustained follow up needs to be done with the women who are sent back home in terms of their reintegration and acceptance into home communities. Specific research should be undertaken about women who have been rescued from forced marriages and then repatriated to identify their needs and concerns. It must also be recognised that lack of livelihood opportunities or access to resources under their name renders them dependent on natal male family members, thus opening up more avenues of abuse and neglect.

Further research should be undertaken to ascertain whether cross-region wives are able to access and obtain the same sets of rights and privileges that are available to local brides. Our research findings on cross-region wives reveal they face caste discrimination and racism within conjugal families and communities. This might potentially limit or prevent their access to resources, be it property rights or government schemes. Given that local elected village representatives and that in authority such as in the police are drawn from the local populace, it is feared that the circulation of this racist belief might lead to prejudice and denial of information and / or rights and resources.

Further detailed and phased research that focusses solely on the impact of cross-region / inter-caste marriages on the children born of such unions should be undertaken. Based on our research findings, it is conjectured that these children will face ostracism within paternal communities and kin networks due to the unknown caste status of their mothers, especially when seeking marriage partners. Whether or not this presumption will prove accurate can be determined by time-based research in conjugal regions. Here, the gender of the child too will have to be taken into consideration when researching their rights, be it in claiming inheritance to paternal land or other resources. It will also disclose whether they face gendered discrimination in securing access to livelihood and other opportunities. Moreover, it will also disclose whether the children, whose mothers have been rescued and then repatriated, are able to claim inheritance rights over property of their fathers, given the distance of separation and relocation.

Since a majority of cross-region brides report experiencing loneliness and isolation brought on by their feeling alienated from conjugal family members, research needs to be undertaken to ascertain their mental and physical well-being. Psychological abuse and emotional violence have an adverse impact on a person's overall sense of well-being. It is a well-recognised medical fact that loneliness and alienation causes the person to withdraw into a shell and reduce contact with others. It also leads to depression and suicidal thoughts apart from elevated levels of stress. Since the subject was beyond the scope of this study, more research is required in order to understand the magnitude of this problem and on the basis of the findings, devise targeted interventions aimed at this group.

Printing of business cards with helpline information of local feminist advocacy organisations / AHTUs in conjugal regions should be undertaken in some key source-region languages. These have proven to be of use especially for domestic workers who are tricked or trafficked by placement agencies. These can be

distributed by Anganwadi and / or ASHA workers to cross region brides in conjugal communities. Being small in size, these cards can be tucked away by the brides without arousing suspicion.

Once again, using successful interventions undertaken in the case of female migrant domestic workers, local elected village bodies can be asked to maintain a marriage register with the husband's and the mediator's details including address entered in it. In the case of domestic workers, these have proven not just to deter traffickers or those wanting to deceive women, but also helped parents locate their daughters, particularly in Jharkhand. Vigilance committees set up voluntarily of villagers too can be another measure in this direction.

Some brides and their husbands stated that they faced roadblocks in the women obtaining Voter ID<sup>3</sup> or Aadhar<sup>4</sup> as most or all documents happen to be in the source region language. When presented with such documents, the local officials in conjugal regions, understandably, are unable to translate or comprehend the information contained within. Such families, especially the women, are then put to great trouble in trying to arrange notarised translations from home state. Many give up trying for such identity proofs. This has serious implications for their citizenship rights. Some mechanisms need to be devised by which cross-region brides can obtain their IDs without the attendant hassles.

Creation of AHTUs and having gender sensitive protocols is laudable. However, the research indicates that the majority of lower level functionaries are male, drawn from the same communities and kin networks into which the cross region brides are married into. Anecdotal evidence shows that it is hard for women, whether trafficked or facing gender based violence within the family, to approach such officials, be it in the police or administration as caste and kin loyalty outstrip work ethics. Sensitization programs for lower level staff have to be conducted about the very nature of cross region marriages and the potential types of problems that women might face within it.

<sup>3</sup> See The Election Commission of India's website for document listing <http://eci-citizenservices.nic.in/frmForm6New.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> See the website of India's Unique Identification Project for an exhaustive listing of documents needed for registration for Aadhar. <http://uidnumber.org/aadhaar/628/documents-needed-for-enrollment/>

# 6

## CONCLUSION

The portrayal of all cross-region brides as trafficked and the singular emphasis on anti-trafficking initiatives against cross-region marriages criminalises the entire problem, and conveniently sidesteps critically examining systemic socio-economic factors within India such as the pervasive attitude of girl dis-preference; the heightening of poverty and marginalisation due to neo-liberal economic policies and the lack of livelihood opportunities and access to resources for poor women.

The criminalization attitude also disregards agency of women and their families in viewing cross-region marriage as a strategic voluntary choice. This rhetoric also runs the danger of embedding class bias by equating migration for marriage by poor women with trafficking. There have to be some mechanisms to make clear distinctions between trafficked and non-trafficked nature of cross-region marriages. That the distinction between the two types of marriage is ambiguous is noted by both scholars and activists, “[t]hat the same act of transfer could be interpreted simultaneously as both, marriage and trafficking in a girl appears difficult to reconcile” (Blanchett. 2004:10)

Given that female deficit is a real problem in Haryana and Rajasthan and given that families will most likely seek brides from elsewhere, adopting a ‘law and order’ approach runs the risk of pushing such alliances underground. The fear of prosecutions might potentially force families adopt strategies to make their brides ‘invisible’ by restricting or policing their mobility or confining them at home. This might render the brides more vulnerable to gender based violence and excessive patriarchal control within conjugal homes. It might also prevent them from seeking help in case of abuse or violence, either from the community, other cross-region brides or even the police. Moreover, it is feared that, instead of addressing gender-specific needs and concerns of cross-region brides within conjugal communities, it might direct resources towards policing and other law enforcement deterrent measures as the solution to ‘eradicate’ trafficking.

Both a long-term and a short-term strategy is needed to combat the problem. Long-term strategy requires intervention both at natal and conjugal regions. Renewed, imaginative and coordinated strategies are needed by government, NGOs, activist organizations and INGOs to tackle the continued dis-preference for girls. If the trend is not arrested immediately, the problem of marriage squeeze is quickly going to snowball in the coming years, increasing the desperation among bride seekers. This has the potential for further compounding all the problems that cross-region brides are facing at present in conjugal regions.

Secondly, it must be recognized that poverty coupled with inability to pay high dowry demands of local grooms and the internalization of patriarchal norms about women's sexuality and marriage compel both parents and daughters into accepting such cross-region 'all expenses paid, dowry-free' marriage alliances. Lack of access to resources and livelihood options also make such marriages attractive to people there. A more conscious effort needs to be undertaken for effective implementation of various schemes of the central and state government to address poverty and create livelihood options.

As the findings clearly indicate, brides are finding it very hard to assimilate into conjugal families or communities. Given the current scenario in female-deficit regions, women will continue to be 'needed' for their free labor but at the same time be rejected because of casteism and internal racism. Immediate steps are required to give these women dignity and rights. The report lists a number of recommendations, most of which are short-term interventions and should be taken up without delay.

This report covers a small geographical sample and focusses on gendered implication of such alliances. A number of related themes need to be explored in greater depth. For example, one issue that came up was of marriage scams in which the grooms and their families are duped by agents / mediators into parting with money and then decamp with it. More immediately, what needs to be investigated is the status of the children born of such unions in conjugal families and communities. If the denial of rights and ostracism exists on a much larger scale, then immediate remedial steps might be required to prevent a potentially explosive situation from boiling over. As well, the research community should actively take up research in other areas to capture the nuances and specificities of this issue as it interacts with other variables such as educational levels of bride.



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# APPENDIX 1

## PARTNER NGOs

### HARYANA

Rohtak district: Sahyog

Mewat district: Mewat Social and Educational Development Society

Rewari district: Shakti Parishad

### RAJASTHAN

Jhunjhunu district: Shikshit Rojgar Kendra Prabandhak Samiti

Alwar district: Matsya Mewat Shiksha Evam Vikas Sansthan

### ODISHA

Balasore district: PRAVA

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **FIELDWORKERS**

Amar Singh  
Anita Devi  
Ashfaq  
Baljeet  
Bimla Devi  
Gauri Shankar Hui  
Idris  
Kusum Devi  
Lalita Devi  
Munni Devi  
Mustaq  
Rajbala Devi  
Rekha Devi  
Sandeep Chouhan  
Santosh Devi  
Sarita Devi  
Satpal  
Shahid Hussain  
Sushila Chouhan  
Tushar Kanti Mohanty  
Vijendra Kumar

### **TRANSCRIBERS AND TRANSLATORS**

Deparpita Manjit  
Sandeep Chouhan  
Gauri Shankar  
Tushar Kanti

### **DATA ENTRY**

Indrajeet

# APPENDIX 3

## CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Cross region brides : 54

Husbands of across region brides: 22

Members of the conjugal family(mother in law / father in law / brother or sister in law): 15

Parents / family members of the bride: 25

Procurers/ Agents who source brides: 3

Husbands as agents: 3

Brides who have now become marriage agents: 7

Community members in conjugal villages: 29

Villagers including neighbours: 18

NGOs working on women's issues: 2

Fieldworkers who collected primary data /assisted in translation / detailed research: 9

Government Officials: 4

Academics, activists and religious leaders: 12

# APPENDIX 4

## FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

### Receiving Region

1. Men from the *Jat* caste regarded as village elders
2. Women belonging to the *Jat* caste
3. Brides of Bengali ethnicity who formed the majority of cross-region brides in one village
4. *Brahmin* women from a *Brahmin* majority village where despite female shortage, no bride has been brought in from another region or caste
5. Young men of marriageable age belonging to *Dalit* and *Jat* caste groups;
6. Mixed caste group of village men
7. Mixed caste group of *Jat* and *Dalit* village women
8. Women from the *Yadav* and *Ahir* castes
9. Women from the *Dalit* community in a *Jat* majority village
10. Women from *Dalit* community that had cross-region brides – this village had *Rajput* majority
11. Brides with Oriya ethnicity who came from one specific cluster of villages in Bhograi Block of Balasore in Odisha
12. Village women from dominant and upper caste groups – they were from same village as that of Group 11
13. Members of a Caste Council or *Khap Panchayat*

### Source Region

1. Village women including mothers of women married across region and daughters returning home for reunion
2. Village men including fathers of cross-region brides

## APPENDIX 5

### **CASTE OF MEN ENTERING CROSS-REGION MARRIAGES IN HARYANA & RAJASTHAN**

<b>Caste</b>	<b>Alwar</b>	<b>Jhunjhunu</b>	<b>Mewat</b>	<b>Rewari</b>	<b>Rohtak</b>
Bisht	0	0	5	0	1
Brahmin	16	0	0	4	14
Chamar	0	0	6	1	13
Dhanak	0	0	0	0	3
Dhobi	0	0	3	0	0
Gujjar	2	2	0	0	0
Harijan	0	0	1	2	2
Jats	0	15	0	0	175
Jogi	0	0	1	8	1
Khati	0	2	0	0	3
Kumhar	0	1	2	0	0
Kurmi	0	0	0	0	1
Leelgar	0	5	0	0	0
Lohar	0	0	11	0	5
Mallah	0	0	0	0	2
Meena	0	6	0	0	0
Meghwal	1	1	0	0	0
Muslims (Meos)	53	0	715	0	0
Muslims (Non-Meos)	0	7	0	0	0
Nag	0	0	0	0	2
Nai	0	4	5	2	0
Prajapat	1	0	1	0	1
Rajput	0	5	0	11	3
Sharma	1	1	0	0	0
Sonar	0	0	0	0	5
Soni	1	1	0	0	0
Teli	2	0	4	0	1
Valmiki	0	0	0	0	6
Yadav/Ahir	0	0	0	31	2
Others	0	3	46	4	0
Unknown	0	0	0	0	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>249</b>



## APPENDIX 6

### SOURCE REGIONS OF CROSS-REGION BRIDES

Province	Alwar	Jhunjhunu	Mewat	Rewari	Rohtak
Andaman	0	0	0	0	1
Andhra Pradesh	5	0	131	0	1
Assam	12	6	175	6	17
Bangladesh	0	0	2	0	0
Bihar	9	8	156	10	48
Chattisgarh	0	3	0	0	6
Delhi	0	0	1	0	4
Gujarat	0	1	4	0	0
Himachal Pradesh	0	0	0	2	5
Jharkhand	10	0	67	2	5
Karnataka	0	0	2	0	0
Madhya Pradesh	5	0	7	1	4
Maharashtra	3	24	25	4	15
Odisha	5	1	7	8	27
Pakistan	0	0	0	0	1
Punjab	0	0	0	0	1
Rajasthan	0	0	1	0	2
Tamil Nadu	0	0	0	2	0
Tripura	0	2	0	3	13
Uttar Pradesh	9	2	6	3	30
Uttarakhand	1	0	0	0	11
West Bengal	23	6	173	22	42
Not disclosed	0	0	50	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>249</b>



## **TIED IN A KNOT**

Cross-region Marriages in Haryana and Rajasthan:  
Implications for Gender Rights and Gender Relations

Parts of North India are facing an acute shortage of brides! Years of repressive social mores that promoted girl dis-preference is now forcing men from these regions to breach customary rules and travel to far-off poorer regions of India to find wives.

Who exactly are the men seeking wives from elsewhere? Are the women trafficked for forced marriage or not? Why do the parents agree to such long distance alliances? Why aren't these women able to get married locally? How are they treated by the families and the communities in Haryana and Rajasthan?

Tied in a Knot, an in-depth study based in two 'female-deficit' states of Haryana and Rajasthan and the eastern state of Odisha from where many brides are 'sourced' lays bare the everyday harsh reality of such brides: the stigmatization, racism and abuse they face from conjugal families and communities.

[crossregionmarriages@gmail.com](mailto:crossregionmarriages@gmail.com)



**NORWEGIAN EMBASSY**