

The Political Economy of Violence: Gender, Sexuality and SDGs

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1. Introduction

Consider two seemingly disparate quotes:

What is more important is how we view and value the girl child in our society. (Manmohan Singh, Ex-Prime Minister of India, commenting on declining Child Sex-Ratio as a national shame 2011)¹

Premila lived in a rural area of Bihar. Her parents lived in extreme poverty. Desperate to escape their plight she was sold to a man in Punjab. There was no marriage ceremony and her body was used and abused by her 'husband' and his other male relatives. She was then sold to a prostitution ring in New Delhi. (Kapoor 2012)

These two quotes speak to different gendered realities, but drawing on their interconnections is the central thrust of our paper, delineated through two interdependent ideas: first, sex determination policies and the widely prevalent culture of son preference contributes to the skewed sex ratio, particularly in North India. Second, this abysmal gender imbalance results in bride shortages and a crisis in the institution of marriage in itself, which is not confined to North India but affects neighbouring states, creating channels for new forms of practices such as bride trafficking, slavery and prostitution. This paper draws attention to the skewed sex ratio and rampant bride trafficking in India as possible fallouts of uneven development, with specific reference to the state in Haryana in North India.

The right-wing political regime in India represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the Prime Ministership of Narendra Modi, came to power in 2014 with its giant promises of development and a corruption-free India.² Its political

¹ <https://www.oneindia.com/2008/04/28/declining-sex-ratio-national-shame-all-must-work-to-save-girls-1209389687.html> (accessed on 19 February 2020).

² The leading party of right-wing coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) which was formed in 1998.

ideology has been dominated by the idea of an all-inclusive development with its main motto of “*sabka saath sabka vikas*” (together will all, development for all). Women-centred schemes and programmes such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (save the girl child, educate the girl child) attempt to build a level-playing field for women in all spheres of development,³ to correct skewed sex ratios and to promote education for girls⁴ while the *Ujjawala Scheme* aims to eliminate trafficking of girl children in India, a country which has “emerged as a source, destination and transit for both in-country and cross border trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation” (Government of India 2019, p. 2). These positive government-led and funded initiatives appear seemingly consistent with the basic premises of gender equality, the fifth of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by all the United Nations Member States in 2015, and at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁵ Furthermore, the government has set the country on the path of economic development evident through a volley of schemes tailor-made and with overlapping agendas, to boost economic growth through entrepreneurship (Start-up India), micro enterprises (Mudra scheme), manufacturing (Make in India campaign) and industrial skill training (Skill India).⁶ Significantly, women are referred to as “nation builders”⁷ in political articulations and financial benefits have been introduced to encourage parents to not discriminate against girls.

Nonetheless, this neo-liberal vision of development, primarily along economic parameters is inherently conservative, disabling the Indian state from translating economic gains into sustainable human development (Tharamangalam 2016). While it brings women out in the public sites of capitalist production it simultaneously monitors and morally polices them through a discourse of protection (Purewal 2018). As Coleman argues, “the violent imposition of neo-liberal capitalism [. . .] is made possible and legitimised through a production of space that relies upon the mobilisation of gendered discourses” (Coleman 2007, p. 204). The disturbing trends of mob lynching by cow vigilantes; propagation of ideas like “Ghar Wapsi”

³ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/finance/budget-alllocation-to-womens-schemes-hiked-4-to-rs-1-21l-cr/articleshow/62745352.cms> (accessed on 19 February 2020).

⁴ India ranks 108th among 149 countries on the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index 2018 (accessed on 28 February 2020).

⁵ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg> (accessed on 20 February 2020).

⁶ For Start-up India, see <https://www.startupindia.gov.in/>; Make in India; https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/major_initiatives/make-in-india/; Mudra Scheme; <https://www.mudra.org.in/AboutUs/Visioin>; Skill India mission, <https://skillindia.nsdcindia.org/> (accessed on 21 February 2020).

⁷ https://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/need-to-see-women-as-nation-builders-mo-di-114011900300_1.html (accessed on 20 February 2020).

(Katju 2015); “anti- Romeo” squads (Sharma 2017) and “Love Jihad” (Punwani 2014) signals the unholy alliance between cultural ideologies and patriarchal forces, supported through a nexus of control by the family, the state and Hindutva organizations. The steady politicization of Love Jihad by the Hindu Right highlights the failure of the enabling legal provision in the Special Marriage Act 1954, permitting interfaith marriages between consenting individuals in India. In projecting the Muslim “other” as the ultimate threat to unsuspecting and “innocent” Hindu women, who are lured into marriage for the purpose of converting them, the Hindu Right is able to position itself as the patriarchal guardian of Hindu women whose purity (read: purity of the Hindu nation) needs to be protected from defilement by the Muslims (Graff et al. 2019). Furthermore, in evoking the symbolic idea of “mothers of the nation”, the nationalist (read: Hindu) woman stands as an embodiment of the nation: as a nurturer, reproducer and defender of the motherland. The protection of the Hindu nationalist woman together with her valorisation through the symbolism of *Bharat Mata*, accords legitimacy to the divisive rhetoric on religious conversion and the politicisation of intimate/domestic and secular spaces.

These gendered political discourses have been coupled with incidences of gendered violence, often supported by state functionaries that threaten life in all its plurality and diversity. Sunder Rajan (1993, p. 6) argues that state functionaries, such as politicians and police officers, who are meant to be “guarantors of rights to its citizens, have invariably emerged instead as major perpetrators of injustices”. For example, in the Unnao rape case (2017) of Uttar Pradesh, the BJP Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), Kuldeep Sengar, as the main accused was convicted only after three years in 2020, after repeated nationwide public outrage (Sharma 2019a). Another conspicuous example is Asifa’s rape case in Kathua district in Jammu and Kashmir, wherein an eight-year-old Muslim girl was gang raped by Hindu men in a temple. Despite the brutality of the act, the accused were supported by some BJP MLAs of Jammu and Kashmir (Ahmad 2018). As we write this piece, India is once again torn and outraged by the gang rape and killing of a 27-year-old female veterinary doctor in Hyderabad on 27 November, 2019, and more recently the gang rape of a 19-year-old Dalit girl by upper-caste men in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh on the 19 September, 2020. Bearing insidious similarities with the Delhi gang rape case of December, 2012, these cases point towards gendered inequalities, devaluation of women and restricting women’s mobility in the urban public sphere (a space claimed largely by men), whereby any encroachments are seen as transgressions which have to be punished. These violent crimes against women and the tacit support

to their perpetrators occur against a backdrop of larger development-oriented and women-centric agendas advocated by the government.

In this paper, we conceptualise these paradoxes through the framework of “violence[s] of development” which refers to processes that can lead to either the denial of access to the benefits of development or an exclusion from development in itself- thus undermining the transformatory potential of development. Market liberalisation and economic globalisation that underpin rapid economic growth, carried out in the name of development, tend to accelerate processes which ingrain existing inequalities even further (Kothari and Harcourt 2004). Escobar (2004) argues that violence is not only endemic but also *constitutive* of development. By this, he means that the level of violence created by “development” is not a short-term, small feature or side effect, but is actually persistent, normalised and depoliticised. Yet, too often, the relationship between development and violence is overlooked because violence and suffering have traditionally been conveyed factually or quantitatively, which fails to fully take into account how “suffering is structured by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire [. . .] to constrain agency” (Farmer 1996, p. 263). Explicating further the “close relationship” between development and violence, Nandy argues that those who are seen as impeding the process of development are seen as retrogressive and, “deserve to be thrown into the dustbin of history” (Nandy and Kothari 2004, p. 9). Thus, the dislocation and suffering they undergo is often seen as brought upon by themselves. In fact, post-development imagining has prompted scholars to search for “alternatives to development” rather than “development alternatives” (Escobar 1992, p. 27).

We would like to make two additive clarifications. First, we are not suggesting that all aspects of development are violent or that the Indian state only governs through violence, as might come across when Escobar (2004) argues that development is inherently violent. Nonetheless, we would like to highlight the possibilities of violence(s) when (a) the state as the main architect of development programmes forms close alliances with entrenched power interests; supports local powerful players or chooses to remain silent; (b) when poverty reduction interventions for the marginalised (for example, social protection schemes such as MNREGA) reinforces traditionally entrenched social hierarchies; or when (c) the state, driven by the logic of the market, pursues its neo-liberal agenda over and above those whose livelihoods are fragile and exploitable. Second, the current development trajectory in India, we will argue, is inherently paradoxical. While the Indian government has initiated several schemes for the empowerment of women, these progressive processes are

often accompanied by escalating violence against women, which cannot be abstracted from cultural configurations of gendered practices and socio-economic contexts in Northern India. In an earlier work, Kapadia (2002) highlights the increased state investment in women's education and employment opportunities as pointers of growing female autonomy in India. Arguably, while this has created economic opportunities, it has simultaneously heightened other forms of inequalities and vulnerabilities. For instance, women still remain largely bracketed in the unregulated informal economy together with the prevalence of gender bias and devaluation of women.

To reflect upon the paradoxical nature of development, together with the context, causes, trends and implications of gendered inequalities in India, the paper focuses on critically assessing the all-inclusive idea of development. It delineates the paradox by juxtaposing government-led women-centric development discourses with prevalent gendered practices of son preference and bride trafficking. These practices are buttressed by extra-constitutional yet politically influential bodies like Khaps, which enjoy tacit political patronage in North India.

2. Declining Sex Ratio

The historic 1974 *Report of the Committee of the Status of Women in India* brought the dismal status of women in the country to centre stage (Government of India 1974). As compared to pre-independent India in 1901 when the sex ratio (SR: number of females per 1000 of males) was 972 to 946 in 1951, and 933 in 2001, in 2011 it was 940 (Government of India 2011; Anderson and Ray 2012; also see Navaneetham and Dharmalingam 2011). One particular state, which has shown a decreasing trend in the population of women and is a cause of concern, is Haryana (Usha et al. 2007). It has the lowest sex ratio in India and the figure shows 879 (though higher than 861 as recorded in 2001) females to that of 1000 males in 2011.⁸ Despite the slight overall improvement in the SR, the Child Sex Ratio (CSR—child population in the age group 0–6) in India as a whole has declined significantly—from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001 to 914 in 2011. Punjab and Haryana—part of the “Bermuda triangle” for missing females—have buckled the trend. However, despite an improvement between 2001 and 2011, these states still had the lowest child sex ratios in 2011 (Rao and Oommen 2013). The worsening of the CSR points to a further widening of the gender mortality gap—that is, continuing anti-female rates of infant and child

⁸ <https://www.census2011.co.in/sexratio.php> (accessed on 19 March 2020).

mortality as well as a decrease in the sex ratio at birth (SRB). The main explanation of these missing numbers resides in sex-selective abortions (SSA), neglect of young girls during infancy and to some degree female infanticide (made illegal through the Infanticide Act of 1870) (Arnold et al. 2002). The high preference for male children rather than female children, is often encapsulated in the Sanskrit saying, “may you be the mother of a hundred sons” and offered as a blessing to newlywed Hindu brides. Robitaille and Chatterjee (2018) suggest that within individual households’ parents rely on “sex selective neglect” and infanticide to obtain their desired sex ratio among their children. Thus, in households where only the mother has a stated son preference, they, as primary caregivers, are able to eliminate unwanted daughters through medical or nutritional neglect. These small neglects which go unnoticed also contribute to sex selective infant mortality (Robitaille and Chatterjee 2018, p. 48).

In India, determining and communicating the sex of the foetus is illegal, legislated through the *Prenatal Diagnosis Techniques Act* of 1994 and the *Pre-conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique Act* (PCPNDT), 2003. Nonetheless, in May 2019, the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) condemned the stance taken by Dr. Santanu Sen, President, Indian Medical Association (IMA), seeking “comprehensive review, repeal and re-conception” of the PCPNDT Act and deplored the fact that the President and the General Secretary of the highest medical body in India considers it a “harassment” for doctors to maintain transparency of their practice by complying with the rules and regulations of the act. As AIDWA commented, “the problem of son-preference is no doubt a social problem, but obviously identification of sex of the unborn child and elimination of the female foetus would be impossible without the intervention of a section of people inside the medical profession. Hence, people in the medical profession cannot shake off their responsibility to stand up against this social evil and ensure that son-preference is not further reinforced through their own stand. A powerful body like the IMA is duty-bound to generate awareness against son-preference at all levels instead of pushing the burden of such measures on the Government alone”.⁹ As is evident from this recent intervention, national bodies are themselves implicated in shifting medical norms unfavourably towards the girl child. This devaluation, neglect and annihilation of the girl child, arguably, is also buttressed by the extra-constitutional/-judicial structures of caste-based panchayats—the Khaps.

⁹ ‘AIDWA condemns attack on the PCPNDT Act’, Press Release, 10 May, 2019, *All India Democratic Women’s Association*, New Delhi; see, <http://pndt.gov.in/> (accessed on 10 January 2020).

3. Khaps

The word “Khap”, a Sanskrit derivative of “kashtrap” meaning domain, is an institution, which claims sovereignty over a particular area, “either in the name of the clan or the gotra which is dominant in that area or by the name of geographical area” (Singh 2010, p. 17). Though Khap panchayats are believed to be multi-caste (*sarv jatiya*) bodies, in states such as Haryana, Rajasthan and Western Uttar Pradesh, they have come to be dominated by Jats, who have used constitutional protections to expand their political and economic influence (Gupta 2000). This upwardly mobile “backward” caste has come to exercise considerable influence (Bharadwaj 2012; Thapar-Björkert 2006) demographically (on the basis of its population), economically (through extensive farm holdings) and politically (through dominance in local administration and politics). Emphasising caste and gotra identity as well as territorial rigidity, these patriarchal male-dominated Khaps uphold *aikya* (unity), *izzat* (honour), *biraderi* (community) and *bhaichara* (brotherhood) (Chowdhry 1997, 2004a, 2014b; Kumar 2012). Furthermore, they override any notion of gender equality or gender empowerment that the Indian constitution endeavoured to provide women at the grass-roots level through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). In fact, Khaps do not even see women as citizens (Khairwal 2017). Khaps act as agencies of social control, which are involved in resolving local disputes in accordance with customs and traditional values while upholding patriliney, caste endogamy and village exogamy.¹⁰ These contexts of local power enable forms of normative violence against women to continue with impunity.

In proclaiming the primacy of male heirs, Khaps in Haryana have worsened the problem of declining sex ratio. For example, in 2004, the Tevatia Khap while deliberating on a property dispute in Duleypur decreed that families with fewer than two sons were not eligible to approach the Khap about property disputes as these “unfortunate” families had “lesser scope” towards carrying forward the father’s name or increasing family assets. They simply “deserved less”, the Khap said. This has had devastating effects as families desperate for the “required” two sons have tried to avoid female births and even resorted to killing baby girls. It was observed that after this pro-male Khap diktat, sex ratio in Ballabhgarh block in Faridabad, governed by the Tevatia Khap, fell from 683 in 2004 to 370 in 2008 (Dixit 2009). Furthermore, this statement by the Tevatia Khap in 2004 offers a revealing

¹⁰ See also, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/chandigarh/khaps-against-lowering-of-age-of-sexual-consent/story-2671qdgQYafmuXYSB6dZwK.html> (accessed on 21 March 2020).

explanation for the shockingly adverse sex ratio. Kanta Singh, member of the Tevatia Khap and father with a daughter older than his three sons, stated that “Sons are a man’s assets. My sons will take my name forward and expand my farms. They will earn money to pay for this girl’s dowry and marriage”. When asked where his sons will find brides, considering the scarcity of girls, he answered rather arrogantly, “they will earn enough not to have to worry about that” (Dixit 2009; Thapar-Björkert and Sanghera 2014).

Furthermore, Khaps derive their legitimacy from political patronage in India. They have been influential in informing political choices of many and thus political parties have repeatedly approached them for strengthening their vote bank. Even though all political parties have benefitted from their support to the Khaps, the recent BJP regime has been more explicit in their support. Narendra Modi, during one of his political rallies in Haryana in October 2014,¹¹ made a statement addressing the Khaps and stated: “I respect your authority” which stands, paradoxically, in contrast with his pre-election statement made on another occasion in 2013, when addressing the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) ladies organisation, he spoke of “inequality”, “gender insensitivity” and the practice of “female foeticide” as hindering the empowerment of women in India.¹² It was for the first time that a political leader, more so a Prime Minister, publicly made a statement in support of Khap Panchayats, who are widely known for their atrocities against women. In a similar vein, the current BJP chief minister of Haryana, Manohar Lal Khattar, during a felicitation function organized by two Khaps in the Jind district of Haryana in 2015, praised Khaps for being “custodians of social customs”. He also appreciated Khaps for their role in the implementation of *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* scheme, which stands in contradiction to the ideological premises of Khaps, though no further details were forwarded on this subject.¹³ Jagmati Sangwan, ex-General Secretary of AIDWA, highlights the important role played by Khaps in BJP’s success in forming central government in India after winning the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. She is of the view that Khaps influence the voting choice of people

¹¹ See also, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/three-firsts-in-haryanas-history/articleshow/44882599.cms> (accessed on 19 February 2020).

¹² Bharat Mata-loving Narendra Modi makes a point about empowerment in his FICCI speech, April 9th 2013: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bharat-mata-loving-narendra-modi-makes-a-point-about-empowerment-in-his-ficci-speech/articleshow/19450687.cms> (accessed on 19 February 2020).

¹³ See also, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/haryana-cm-khattar-praises-khap-panchayats-calls-custodian-social-customs-2260210.html> (accessed on 12 February 2020).

in villages under their control by announcing their support for a particular political party (Khairwal 2017). The political party, in turn, support Khaps in maintaining their control and even nominate Khap leaders during assembly elections, which enhance the chances of Khap leaders to officially enter the domain of political power (Moudgil and Rahar 2019).

The influence of Khaps and their support for son preference, as Kaur (2010, p. 15) argues, have greatly reduced the pool of marriageable women, leading to a “marriage squeeze” (too many men chasing too few brides). Furthermore, to protect the shrinking “pool” of marriageable women, Khap councils have resorted to issuing diktats to punish young couples accused of having transgressed customary norms through disapproved marriage and thus overriding Khap diktats of caste endogamy and *gotra* and village exogamy. Khap panchayat imposes its writ through social boycotts and fines, which includes brutally murdering young couples in full view of the village community or forcing them to commit suicide (Gupta and Seth 2007; Sangwan 2010).¹⁴ The state of Haryana has seen the most extreme cases of these so called “honour” killings, though other states such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab have also witnessed similar incidents.

These unlawful killings by Khaps together with SSA, and to a small extent female infanticide, have contributed to demographic anxieties of “surplus” men and “scarce” women which subsequently feeds into practices of bride sale, bride shortage-related marriage migration and trafficking. This is arguably rooted in “patriarchies of oppression that reduce women to commodities available for men’s entitled purchase” (Schwarz et al. 2017, p. 4). The excess bachelors referred to as *malang* (aloof and loopy) in Haryana and *chhara* (a derogatory term for unmarried men) in Punjab is a newly emerging social problem in India.¹⁵ These practices are not confined to India but extend to demographically similar countries such as China where, like India, the imbalance in sex ratio has led to the abduction, sale and prostitution of women (Edlund et al. 2007).

Khaps do not see “bride trafficking” as a problem either. For instance, even in the context of re-selling the already bought women to other brothers in the same family, a Khap leader named Om Prakash Dhankar in Dhakla village of Haryana said, “what is

¹⁴ See also, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-editorial/grisly-tradition-the-fight-in-haryana-is-as-much-against-khaps-as-against-rape/articleshow/16791718.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on 15 March 2020).

¹⁵ <https://www.economist.com/asia/2015/04/18/bare-branches-redundant-males?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/barebranchesredundantmales> (accessed on 15 March 2020).

wrong with that, even Draupadi had five husbands” (Bose 2018).¹⁶ In another Khap panchayat meeting, which was attended by a BJP Member of Parliament, Brijendra Mishra, one of the leaders of the Kandela Khap panchayat named Hoshiyar Singh justified the practice of bride trafficking by commenting that “*Ladkiyan kam hain ji, ab ye bechaare kya karenge*” (There are few girls in this region, what should these poor men do) (Singh 2019). Nonetheless, Khaps and their authoritative interventions in relation to marriage has often been questioned and seen as illegal by the Supreme Court of India recently (Sinha 2018).

Bringing our discussion together on Khaps, declining sex ratio and bride trafficking, the question that arises is how do Khaps, which endorse caste endogamy reconcile with brides from unknown, lower or different castes? Arguably, rules of hypergamy, caste endogamy, *gotra* and territorial exogamy are often negotiated primarily among the Jat communities, who are known for their conservatism. In this context, Hoshiyar Singh, Chief of Kandela Khap panchayat, had also commented, “*Agar ladka jat hai to jatni ban jati hai, harijan hai to harijan*” (if the boy is a Jat, the girl becomes Jatni, if he is a Harijan, she also becomes one) (Singh 2019). This statement reveals how Khaps find ways to accommodate the practice of bringing brides from other castes, which would otherwise be counted as serious transgressions. Nonetheless, there are other cultural adjustments (learning a new language, dietary adaptations, gender-specific social norms) that are expected from brides who are “extracted from their local and cultural context” (Kaur 2004, p. 2601).

4. Bride Trafficking

Bride shortage related marriage migration is a social phenomenon emerging due to the demographic imbalance in India. Over the last decade, numerous reports on “bride trafficking” have been highlighted by the national and global media which have referred to it as “the business of brides”, “*paro pratha*” and “bride-buying” (Chatterji 2018; Gierstorfer 2014; Singh 2019). The trafficked brides are referred to as “slave brides”, “cows and goats”, “commodities that can be recycled and resold” and “cheaper than cattle” (Jolley and Gooch 2016; Raza 2014). According to a 2016 report by the National Crime Records Bureau in India, 33,796 females were abducted for marriage purposes (NCRB 2016).

¹⁶ The Indian epic, Mahabharata depicts Draupadi being married to five brothers, the only instance of polyandry in Hindu mythology, which is adapted by Manish Jha in his controversial debut feature film *Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women* (2003) to depict the consequences of gender imbalance in India.

A field study report cited in United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2013) revealed the effects of sex ratio on marriage patterns. The study was conducted by *Drishti Stree Adhyayan Prabodhan Kendra* NGO covering over 10,000 households, across 92 villages in Haryana. It unveiled that more than 9000 married women in Haryana were bought from economically impoverished villages of Assam, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Odisha (East and North East India) and from neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. The report further states that, “most [women] are untraceable or exploited or duplicated as domestic servants by the agents or men who marry/buy them” and “there are also instances of girls being resold to other persons after living a married life for a few years” (UNODC 2013, p. 11). The main receiving states in North India such as Haryana but also Punjab and Rajasthan have significantly low sex ratios (Kaur 2004; Blanchet 2005; Ahlawat 2009; Mishra 2013).

The process of bride trafficking is executed through well-structured networks facilitated through “dalals” or agents who negotiate the purchase of brides. These girls, more than often, from poor families, are either sold by their own parents to men in Haryana and Punjab for between ten thousand to two lakhs Indian rupees or on many occasions abducted. Poverty exposes these women to the “violences of everyday life” - the routinization and anonymity of suffering- which dehumanises and threatens their lives in all its plurality and diversity (Kleinman 2000, p. 227). An agent in the Jind district of Haryana states that “Brides are being bought from Uttarakhand, Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand with the assurance of their parents that they will not get a case registered. The girl’s photo is shown to the prospective buyer-cum-husband through WhatsApp and later a place is fixed where he and his family are shown an album. The girls are mostly below 18 years of age and are not well-educated” (Bajwa 2019; also see Kapoor 2012). Disturbingly, the district of Jind in Haryana has even witnessed the formation of *randa* or *kunwara* unions comprising of unmarried men who unionised their vote bank before Lok Sabha elections of 2014 with their demand “*bahu dilao, vote pao*” (*Get us brides, get our votes*) (Siwach 2014; Singh 2019).

The practice of bride trafficking arguably has roots in socio-cultural norms prevailing in Haryana. The historic practice (observed in early twentieth century by British administrators) of *karewa* (the marrying of young widows to the brother of the deceased husband) soon became a right and, though still present in Haryana, the older “*karewa* of panchali system” is being replaced by the buying of women from other regions of the state (Khan 2013, p. 45). This is a shock to women who are brought from a social milieu where polyandry is unknown. Furthermore, these brides

experience isolation due to their unfamiliarity with the language and associated cultural alienation (Bose 2018; Kaur 2004). These brides, whose status is lower than the local brides in the villages, are referred to as “paro” or “molki” or “mol-ki-bahu” (a purchased bride) or Jugaad (arrangement), a familiar vocabulary in Haryana, Punjab, western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. The experiences of these brides vividly show their plight as they are forced to do tedious fieldwork, sexually used and abused by husbands and their male relatives, often beaten up by husbands’ families and resold further. They are subjected to sexual slavery and according to 2013 UN Office on Drug and Crime Report, girls trafficked for marriage are “exploited, denied basic rights, duplicated as maids and eventually abandoned” (Estal 2018). Saeeda, one of such brides in Mewat district of Haryana, shared the following narrative: “I was beaten by my husband and his family. They wanted me to obey them, and if I objected they always had the same words for me- we own you because we bought you” (Estal 2018). These trafficked brides do not have their families or any relatives to support them. Saeeda does not even know where she is from as she was bought twenty years ago and has never seen her family since then. Some of these brides are abandoned after the demise of their husbands. Babita, a 55-year-old trafficked bride, shared a horrifying experience of her brother in law trying to run her over in order to kill her so that he could claim the property she inherited from her husband after his demise (Sharma 2019b).

Women who can escape or were rescued from such oppressive circumstances are also not accepted back in their natal homes. Sujana, a 15-year-old rescued bride from Haryana, revealed that she was pregnant when she was brought back to her home in Assam. She now lives with her grandparents and her nine-month-old son. Sujana is aware of the stigma associated with her as a woman raising her child without the presence of a “husband” but she wants to focus on her son and his upbringing. Tahmina, another rescued bride from Haryana, lives with her grandmother in Assam because her parents did not accept her and moved out of their village due to shame (Estal 2018).

India does not have any laws which directly tackle the issue of bride trafficking. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA), 1956¹⁷ (subject to a amendments in 1986) and Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2016 (Government of India 2016), have been implemented but they have failed to specifically address the practice of bride trafficking due to inadequate

¹⁷ <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1956-104.pdf> (accessed on 14 April 2020).

conceptualisation of the varied meanings and practices of trafficking. Of the sections (370, 372, 373 and 366) in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) that deal with the problem of trafficking in general, section 366 is the only one to have focused more on bride trafficking by sanctioning punishment for abducting or forcing women for marriage¹⁸. Section 375 IPC also criminalizes sex with minors, which can be seen as a hindrance to the practice of bride trafficking because traffickers have used marriage with minor girls as a pretext for sexual violence and prostitution (Anjickal 2018). Besides this temporary respite in the form of indirect initiatives, more explicit and efficient laws and policies are required to execute a crackdown on the peril of bride trafficking.

Besides government initiatives, there are non-governmental organizations like *Justice and Care*, *Shakti Vahini* and *Empower People* who work towards uprooting the problem of trafficking. Largely self-funded with some support from corporate partners, these organizations often work in collaboration with the government bodies, local administration, police, other non-government organizations and the media. They also work with community-based organizations to identify victims of trafficking, rescuing and empowering them through skill and business training, with the aim of making them self-sufficient. *Justice and Care* state their objectives as “shar[ing] our expertise with governments to shape legislations” and “work[ing] with community-based organizations to prevent trafficking, with government and privately run shelter homes and with educational institutions in regards to research”.¹⁹ *Shakti Vahini* conducts sensitisation programmes to train professionals like police, judges and community leaders on the issue of trafficking and rights of its survivors. Working alongside the police, it has also brought perpetrators to justice through their conviction.²⁰ Similarly, *Empower People* facilitates the education and counselling of the trafficked victims and also connects them with the police and administration. The organization forms village communes at the local level that are spearheaded by trafficked brides. The children of trafficked brides are also taken care of since they run the risk of being discriminated against in the society.²¹ As a result of these sensitization and awareness raising programmes, there are reported efforts taken by the locals themselves to support these *paro* women in the Mewat district of Haryana to regain a sense of dignity. In 2014, a door-to-door survey conducted by *Empower People* revealed 1352 trafficked wives in 85 villages of North India

¹⁸ <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1860-45.pdf> (accessed on 19 February 2020).

¹⁹ <https://www.justiceandcare.org/faqs/> (accessed on 30 April 2020).

²⁰ <https://shaktivahini.org/> (accessed on 30 April 2020).

²¹ <http://www.empowerpeople.org.in/> (accessed on 25 April 2020).

(Parthsaarathy 2018). Similarly, in order to identify trafficked cases, the organization has also carried out demonstrations against bride trafficking which have spread awareness about the gravity of the menace at the same time.

5. Conclusions

The fifth SDG goal to achieve gender equality and empowerment has placed women at the centre stage for achieving economic growth and a sustainable future. Modi's government in India has made a targeted effort to incorporate women within its agenda of economic development through various women-centred schemes. In the recent Delhi assembly elections of February 2020 in India, yet again, all the competing political parties, such as BJP, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and Indian National Congress (INC), substantially focused on issues of women education, their skill development and safety in their respective political manifestos. There were a slew of schemes offering subsidies and rewards for girls to encourage them towards education—from primary schooling until graduation, and a helpline for women's safety (Dutta 2020). In parallel with these progressive women-oriented development schemes, the current Modi government also attempts to reconstitute secular India as a Hindu state together with the incorporation of women into the Hindutva ideological project. It calls upon the discourse of gender equality but, in adhering to a discourse of security of Hindu women and thus the nation, it also violently regulates and disciplines women.

We argue in this paper that development is inherently paradoxical which we conceptualise through the framework of "violence[s] of development", that relates to processes where the transformatory potential of development is undermined. While development envisions the elimination of gender inequalities through economic development, it also recreates them by not responding adequately to these disparities. The northern state of Haryana is exemplary of the paradoxical framework of Indian development. It is second in the country in relation to high per capita income but lowest in relation to gender equality and sex ratio. The devaluation, neglect and annihilation of the girl child and the widely prevalent culture of son preference have exacerbated gender inequality in the form of skewed sex ratios. These practices have been buttressed by the extra-constitutional/judicial structures of caste-based panchayats—the Khaps and contributed to the menace of bride trafficking, rampant in Haryana. These skewed gendered realities, as possible fallouts of uneven development, de-politicise the processes of empowerment set in motion by the SDGs.

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