

## Why political parties are reluctant to ban khap panchayats

Boys will be boys and will commit mistakes (reference to the Delhi gang rape), an old wife loses her charm, mobile phones and jeans used by women are against Indian culture – just a small selection of remarks from prominent politicians which echo the sentiments often expressed by the infamous khap panchayats across north India.

These self-styled kangaroo courts will now have to watch their words since the Supreme Court has castigated them saying: “If people decide to marry, they are adults and you are nobody to interfere.” While the court’s sentiments are laudable, it will take much more to get the khaps to fall in line, secure as they are in the political patronage they enjoy. There are two reasons for this support. One is that many politicians, even some women leaders, are opposed to inter-caste and inter-religious marriages very much as the khaps are. The other is that the khaps control sizeable vote banks and can be called upon to gather support during elections. The apex court has earlier too spoken out strongly against these khaps, which seem to hold the power of life and death for those who come up against them. Many young couples have been hounded out of their homes and some murdered, all in the name of the honour of the family.

These murders, horrific as they are, enjoy a considerable amount of social sanction in the villages where they took place and even the families of the victims have often come out in support of the killings. The court’s ire apart, the killings continue because of the ease with which the killers are able to get away with it or get off lightly.

Often, this is because the witnesses are reluctant to come forward and there is political pressure on the police to go slow or botch up the cases. Even those politicians who do not want to come out in support of khaps have restricted themselves to saying that they are part of traditions and culture. But it is the job of any elected lawmaker to ensure that tradition does not translate into the murder of young people who have committed no crime other than to exercise their freedom of choice of a partner or a way of life.

The Supreme Court’s latest directive was in response to a plea before it to ban khaps altogether. There is little possibility that they will transform into reformation movements in the near future. So odious as bans are, there is some merit in the suggestion that they be neutralised before they do further damage.

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