

Love jihad: restricting women

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Shilpa Phadke

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The continuum of curbing and controlling women plays out again in a different context



Love jihad is in the news again. Commentators have variously pointed out that such accusations are not new and have historical precedent in colonial India; that this is part of a communal agenda and there is in fact no such thing taking place at all; and thirdly that if love jihad is intended as a means of conversion it is a remarkably inefficient one.

Choice marriages have long been a fraught space where families and communities try, often, in vain, to control the marital choices of their young. Dutiful young people, especially women have no business choosing whom to marry, in fact the very act of choosing it is suggested marks them as unbecomingly bold and therefore a bad bet for the role of subservient daughter-in-law.

Even as global visions of [India](#) project images of the modern couple, in some ways the choices offered are restricted to which brand of product to consume. A real or fake ad circulating on the Internet had the tag-line, 'I did not choose my husband, but I can choose my jewellery' – demonstrating clearly the limited nature of choices being offered.

The ease with which anxieties about love jihad are being whipped up in communal fervour reflects the desire for endogamy in marriages as a way of reinforcing class, [caste](#) and religious boundaries often seen as a way of retaining the purity of the community. Women are then the boundaries of their communities and keeping them on the 'straight and narrow' is a way of keeping the bloodline pure. The Parsi community, which will not permit the children of Parsi mothers who marry outside the religion to become members of the faith, takes this vision of purity to an extreme. Such restrictions have long been lifted for the children of Parsi fathers endorsing a widely held idea across communities that children belong to the [community](#) of their fathers.

This belief is partly responsible for the burning desire demonstrated by families and communities to control whom their daughters marry and reproduce on behalf of – for within such a vision women are mere vessels for children not active decision makers.

Anxieties about love jihad do not exist in a vacuum, they exist along a continuum which encompasses a range of fears in regard to the potential outcomes of women's mobility and exercise of agency of any kind, particularly sexual agency.

In our research on women's access to public space in Mumbai, still arguably one of the more accessible cities in India, we found that women, particularly young women, often did not tell their parents and families of [harassment](#) for fear of restrictions being imposed on their own mobility. We also found that while families were anxious about the possibility of their daughters being assaulted against their will in public, they were equally worried about the possibility that their daughters would have consensual relationships with the wrong kind of men. This is reflected in the sporadic dictats against women using mobile phones or riding two-wheelers, both of which might conceivably allow them greater freedom and the possibility of subversion,

even horror or horrors, rebellion.

Recent reports by journalists and lawyers have pointed out that a disproportionately large number of reported cases of rape are in the category of abductions which the alleged victims claim were consensual. Many of the young women assert that they were being restricted or confined by parents and that they had eloped with the alleged perpetrator of their own will.

The contemporary discourse of safety is perfectly compatible with these ideas about women's place. Restrictions placed on young women are inevitably articulated in the language of protectionism, that is women must be protected from the 'dangerous' outside world. The language of protection and safety hides the real agenda, that of controlling women's sexuality.

As writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain suggests in her fictional piece *Sultana's Dream* (1905), rationality is a strange thing. It is possible to present as logical and rational something which is not, by articulating it in a language that makes it appear so – for instance, as Hossain's story reflects, the irrationality of locking up potential victims when potential perpetrators walk the streets freely. In the contemporary context, it would not be rational to suggest that women should not be in the public because they may meet the wrong kind of men -- but saying that women are unsafe because of the possibility of violent sexual attack has a kind of altruistic rationality: it is for women's own good. This dictate then covers both possibilities with one stroke: it protects women both from those outside men they do not want to know as well as those they might actually want to know.

While families worry about strangers raping their daughters, this worry is about unsanctioned strangers, for they seem to have little argument with the 'eligible' strangers that they marry their daughters to. The law ratifies this too – among the changes suggested for many years by feminists academics, lawyers and activists and more recently by the [Justice Verma Committee Report](#), among those not incorporated into the new law, was the inclusion of marital rape as a category of rape under the criminal law.

I would like to argue that acts of extreme coercive violence against women must also be understood in relation to the repressive response that greets women's consensual acts as agents, particularly as sexual agents.

Women's actions as sexual agents are often seen as posing a threat to a refined notion of 'Indian culture' and undermining the established order of family, community and even nation -- and these institutions are willing to use violence in order to protect themselves from this threat.

Whether it is access to public space, the question of safety, the exercise of sexual agency or the choice of whom they are to marry, women's consent is so completely irrelevant to this debate that it does not figure at all.

Accusations of love jihad, in addition to their horrifying communal agenda, are also one more way of restricting and controlling women.

The author teaches at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai and is co-author of 'Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets'

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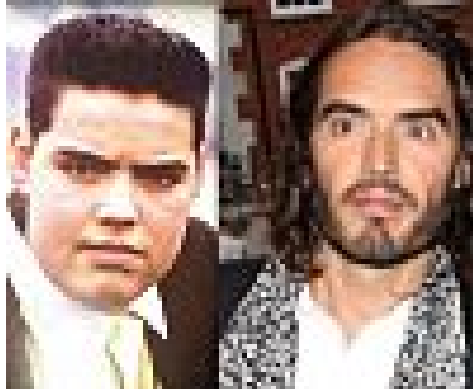
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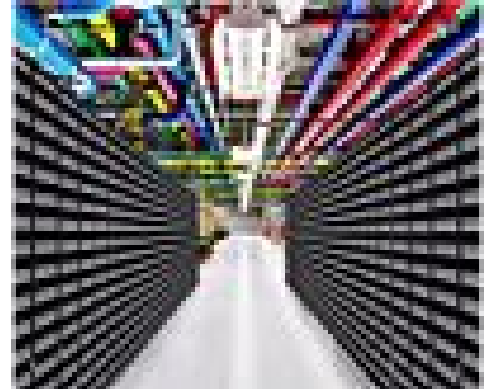
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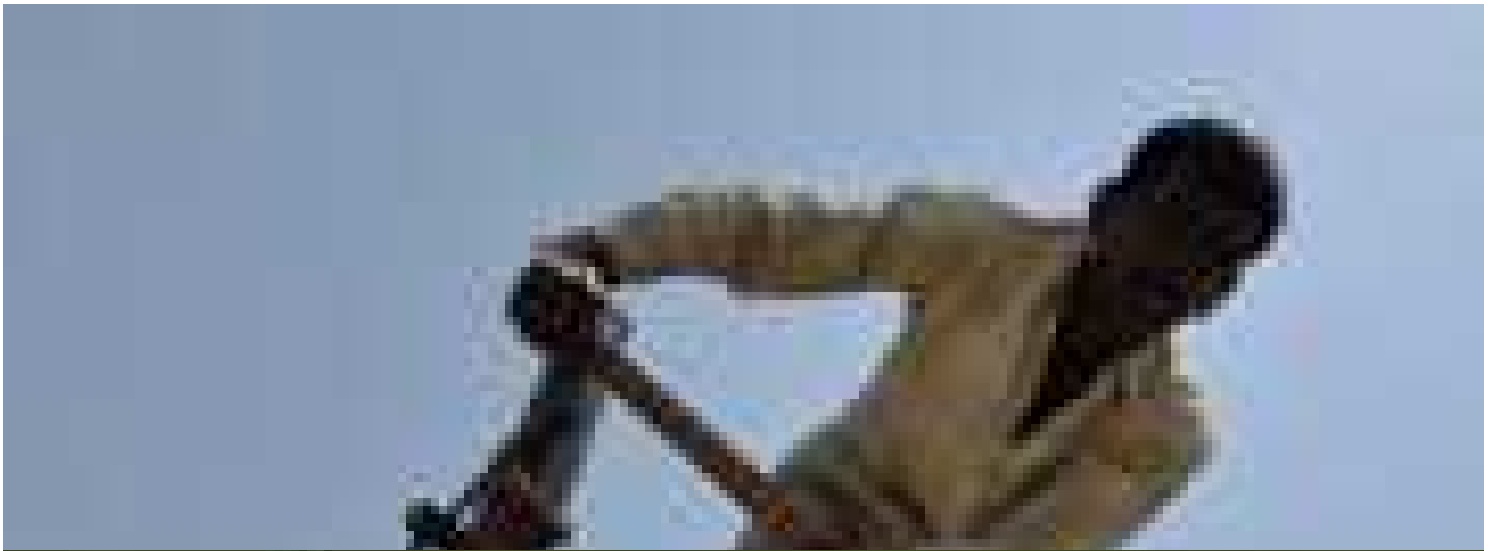
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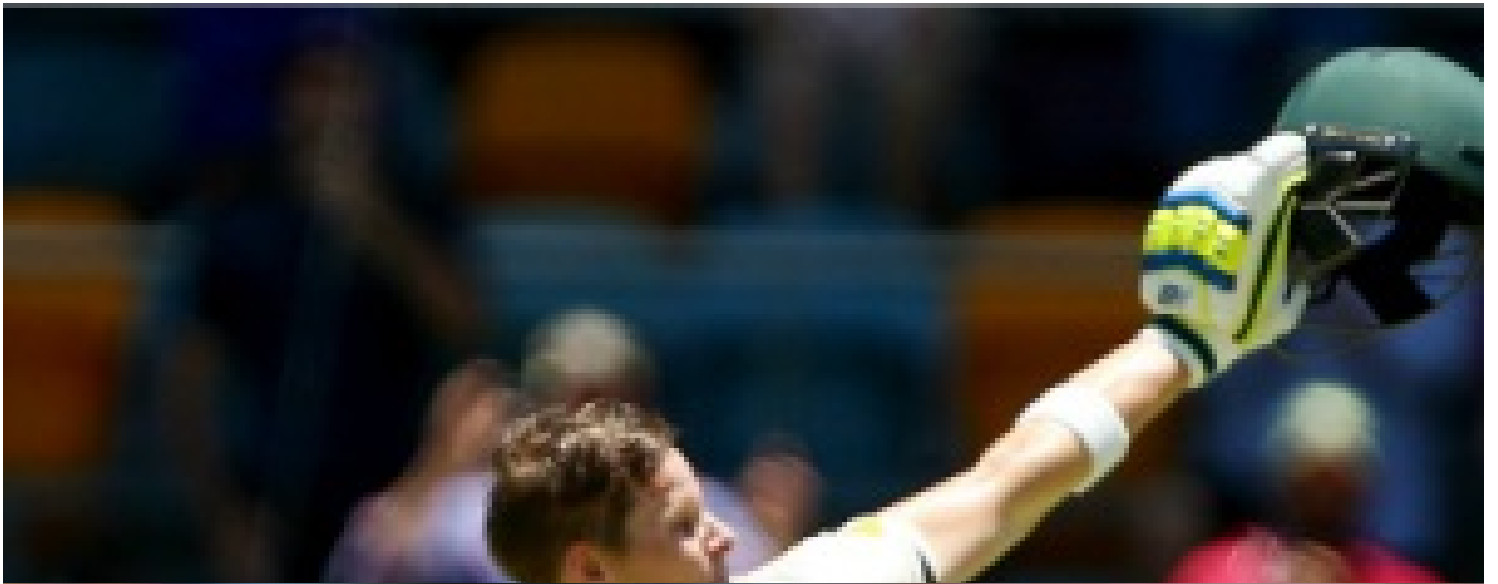
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 **Anjaan** • 4 months ago
The issue is not as complicated as made out to be in this article ... the issue of "love jihad" is quite simple and straight forward ... it is about level playing field ... the Hindu point of view is, there can not be two different set of rules for the Hindu girls and the Muslim girls ... the issue is about the Muslim community allowing freedom to their girls to mix freely with the Hindu boys, when the Muslim boys seek to enjoy free access to Hindu girls ... secularism and liberalism can not be a one way street, where only the Hindus are open and vulnerable to conversion ... there is nothing wrong in genuine love and marriage, but conversion is wrong which must be prevented by all means ... !!
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 **masti**  **Anjaan** • 4 months ago
There are no legal restrictions preventing Hindu girls marrying Muslims and Muslim girls marrying Hindus. So you have a 'level playing field'. But Hindu girls prefer to marry Muslim boys and there are reasons for that. Hindu boys wear khaki knickers and become militants, or join Ram Sene or Bajrang Dal. Nobody would want to marry such types. Plus Hindu boys have shown a tendency for rape and savage behavior. Hence, Hindu girls are better off marrying Muslims, at least Muslims will defend the woman after conversion.
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Prakash → masti • a month ago

What 'level playing field' are you talking about? Making women wear burkhas, not educating girls, treating muslim women like property. Islam prohibits muslim women from marrying non-muslims. Muslim men start the indoctrination early; I have seen muslim girls as young as 3 yrs wearing hijabs, how sick is that?

In any social gathering there will be bunch of muslim guys but zero muslim girls. So where exactly will Hindu guys get to meet Muslim girls? In colleges? In offices? How many muslim girls/women go to college or work?

Interesting thing is Muslim guys very well know all these but try to deflect any honest discussion with lies and by belittling Hindu men & women. Muslim guys are highly insecure, aren't they?

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