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RUNAWAYS

“Kumari has runaway”. It began as a whisper and then became part of the daily conversation for that week. ‘Did they find her?’, ‘Oh, where are they?’ ‘Did the Police get them?’ Ay, ay yoo!

Running away: an act that defies religious, caste, community, and family norms of sociality, sexuality and marriage. Runaways: the new social category of persons that represents new youth rebels, their search for self and individual identities, a social category of persons who are often not treated as persons.

Now a regular feature of rural life, girls and boys run away to be together, to be married, to be companions. And, in this act, they trigger consequences unanticipated by them and their families and manifesting in full bloom the inbuilt caste hostilities, intolerance and lack of sensitivity of Indian society.

As new forms of sociality, identity and aspirations are forged on the anvil of rural India, the youth are bearers of the tides of change but they also bear the weight of society’s unwillingness to change with the times. The rise of a new, rural service economy that is eclipsing agriculture as the primary economic activity has the youth as its key source of labour in a range of varied service and employment opportunities in either towns or cities in the vicinity or in the rural areas itself. Boys work as mechanics, painters, store and errand boys, government employees, sales persons, and in other service jobs. Girls find themselves as sales girls, clerks, assistants, teachers, and helpers. In addition, mass media, mass education, and public transportation are new sites of sociality that have made possible new alliances between girls and boys. Exposure and expectations help segue them into circuits of sociality and relationships that defy the closed boundaries with which their parents lived in. Strict gender segregation at home and in schools and even most colleges is broken by the new opportunities to socialise on their own terms. Rides on buses and local trains, tuition centres, cinema halls, hotels, and shopping centres etc become spaces and times to engage in talk and to interact, bringing new forms of intimacy that conventional society would deem undignified and unacceptable. Machismo drawn from films, a swagger that is an assertion for recognition and male daring is expressed in crude and filmy style. In one case of a runaway couple, the young man called the girl’s fiance and told him about having taken his girl, daring him and the families to find them. Mass media’s overdose of romance acts as the catalyst making individual preference and choice of partners a part of what being modern and educated means.

Each runaway story is a narrative with a twist: a shy, gentle girl lured away by a ‘jeans-pant’ boy of another caste; class-mates from two different religious who kept their families in the dark about their relationship; a young teacher trainee who eloped with a ‘double-mobile’ auto driver from another caste; a young man who defied his family’s insistence on marrying his niece and opted instead to go away with a girl from another village.

In reality, the choice of partners, even from within one's own caste and village, is often not met with familial approval. Rare are the parents who consent to their children's choice of partners, ignoring class, caste or religious differences. Instead, any sign or voice of preferences is met with swift action to separate the couples and to diffuse any possibilities of further alliances. Any persistence or insistence by the youth on such alliances is met with the family's opprobrium and action against such alliances is fast, severe and often violent.

Runaways indicate to us the extent to which families are the sites and repositories of the contestations over social change; structures that should have been social shock absorbers but which are now emitting shocks and quakes that challenge not only social norms but also the basis of humanism. Families and marital relations are now enmeshed in a strange cocktail of sentiments; of caste norms and obligations, patriarchal privileges that must negotiate new rights to women, the continuation of customary rituals that combine with the glamour of consumer commodities. Into this mosaic, the idea of individual preference for a spouse from a different religion, caste, or class acts as a spark that often ignites either intense rejection, and in some cases a defeated acceptance.

Parents often feel let down, shamed, and turn hostile to their children's choices. In the already tessellated relationships within families; of love and care, of demands and dependency, of indifference and subordination, of support and sustenance, the possibility of defying parental choice becomes the fracture that leads to permanent fission. Little wonder that many of the runaways are cases where children have not broached the subject to their parents at all and choose to runaway as a strategy and or last act of desperation. Parents rue this silence or keeping them in the dark, wondering why they were not in the know. And in their criticism and sorrow they cite their own sacrifices including having 'eaten salt and tightening stomachs' to educate them and the child's gift to them has been to run away. Parental response to the fear of children running away is often based on preventing girls from continuing higher education. Travel to high school and colleges is seen as a threat; a possibility that girls will fall into bad company or be enticed away by avaricious and manipulative men. Yet, parental fears about such fate for their girls is not completely unfounded; there are cases of attractive and intelligent girls who have been lured by men with anti-social records and who in the aftermath of failed relationships are left with deep scars and wounds.

Runaways defy the foundational principles of kinship relations. Instead of natal-affinal links that are based on intense give and take, runaway relationships cause deep ruptures between families, castes and communities. In communities that continue to have customary structures of administering jati members, marriage rule violations and runaways invoke punishment by caste councils. While the Southern Indian caste councils in the rural areas have not made as strict and violent decisions as have the Khap panchayats of Haryana, they have resorted to a range of punitive measures against such erring youth. Families themselves are charged with monetary fines and in some cases time-bound social ostracism is imposed. Ostracised, many couples find little support to find their economic feet and the customary care extended to new mothers is often denied to them.

Runaways then become social cast-aways, unable to anchor themselves or to be accepted or integrated. Many live life on peripheries, constantly in fear of being identified by old acquaintances or losing new friends who may discover their secret.

Running away may have been the strategy for quick gratification, a form of resistance, of unplanned actions and emotional submissions. In reality, runaways face a range of punitive actions that make romance and assertions of partner preferences a matter of life and death and have wrought unexpected tragedies and violence that belies the generally benign rural life. One dalit boy, who was forcefully brought home by the police and separated from the girl he had runaway with, feared a jail sentence and committed suicide. Several girls have either returned home to their parents after a few months with their partners, only to face a range of punitive measures at their homes including withdrawal from education and from all social activities. A young trainee nurse who was forced into a quick alliance in order to avoid her relationship with a boy of another caste resorted to setting herself on fire. And as has been reported in the news, there are cases now of families that resort to brutality to end the lives of their errant youth especially girls whom they consider to have brought dishonour to them.

Societal rejection of inter-caste, inter-class, and inter-religious romance draws on a fury that is both collective and family driven. It is not unusual to have 'runaway' incidents trigger internecine violence between caste groups and for the normal functioning of a village to come to a halt. Police intervention and supervision, prolonged court cases, and disrupted social relations result from runaway incidents and become opportunities for families to settle scores and for different castes to flex their muscles against each other. Runaways have given rise to new forms of village vigilantism; small groups of young men scout and keep tabs on girls from their communities, reporting their behaviour and relationships to their family members. Retribution is often quick and sharp. Girls found to be flouting acceptable standards of sociality and decorum are reprimanded publically or reported to their parents. Punishment is often to withdraw and deny the errant girls the opportunity to continue their education with warnings against unacceptable socialisation.

In the changing and yet unchanged rural setting, runaway couples encapsulate the burdens that youth bear. Exposed to new sociality and yet expected to subscribe to established social injunctions, with little leeway and scope for completely new lives, the runaway couple are signature social categories whose lives and experiences indicate to us the travails and tragedies of rural India. Kumari's case did not forge new thinking as to how to deal with the desires of youth. Instead it brought forth a mocking of the new opportunities for girls, the closure of minds, and an intensification of the gossip around runaways.

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