

“Behind the Veil: Unveiling the Struggles of Rural Women in Haryana Practicing the Ghunghat System”

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Abstract:

More than half of the population in Haryana resides in rural areas, primarily relying on agriculture, where women play a significant role. Women in these communities have excelled in various domains, including space science, sports, academics, and the armed forces. However, alongside their achievements, they continue to adhere to traditional practices such as the ghunghat system. This practice entails married women covering their faces, which is obligatory in the presence of men. Unfortunately, this system poses obstacles to women’s education, employment opportunities, social engagement, and advancement in various fields. Consequently, these factors contribute to the overall control of women's activities within the village community, extending beyond their households. Discrimination against women based on their gender persists in numerous contexts. Human rights encompass the entitlements that individuals claim from the state and society by virtue of being human. Regrettably, rural women in Haryana often face limitations in accessing education and employment rights. It is crucial to acknowledge that every woman has an equal right to live a life of freedom. This paper aims to delve into the challenges confronted by rural women in Haryana, utilizing secondary data as a valuable resource for analysis.

Keywords: Haryana, Ghunghat, Gender, human Rights.

Introduction

**“Ghunghat ki aan-baan,
Mhare Haryana ki pehchaan”**

(Pride of the veil is the identity of my Haryana)

The status of women holds immense significance in today's world, primarily due to the pervasive subordination experienced by women across various cultures. Unfortunately, gender discrimination continues to be a prevalent issue, and there are numerous factors responsible for oppressing and controlling women's behavior in society. One such factor is the practice of the ghunghat system and veiling, which entails women veiling and secluding themselves in the large parts of South Asia, including Pakistan, Northern India, and Bangladesh. This particular region, often referred to as the 'Purdah zone' by David Mandelbaum, encompasses Bangladesh, Pakistan, and several Indian states such as Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, as well as adjoining parts of Madhya Pradesh, Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh.

In Haryana, the practice of the ghunghat system remains deeply entrenched, particularly in certain rural areas. The quotation mentioned above underscores the significance of ghunghat in Haryana. The state of Haryana strictly adheres to a patriarchal system, where sons hold a central position within the family. Agriculture serves as the primary occupation for a significant portion of Haryana's population, with approximately 70% of the people engaged in agricultural activities. Women, who play a crucial role in this sector, often spend their entire day working in the fields while wearing the ghunghat.

It is important to recognize the complex dynamics and the impact of such practices on women's lives. Efforts towards gender equality and empowering women are crucial to challenging and overcoming these discriminatory norms and ensuring a more inclusive and just society.

Objectives of the paper

- To investigate the challenges encountered by rural women who practice the

ghunghat system.

- To examine the impact of the ghunghat system on gender equality and women's empowerment.
- To explore the significance of the ghunghat and its cultural and social implications.
- To understand the rationale behind the practice of the ghunghat system.
- To provide recommendations aimed at improving the status of women in Haryana.

Methodology

This study draws upon secondary sources to investigate the phenomenon of ghunghat practicing in Haryana. To thoroughly explore this topic, the research paper conducts a comprehensive literature review encompassing academic journals, books, reports, and pertinent online sources.

Literature review

Literature review of the study shows how ghunghat is used as a symbol of modesty, status, honor and respect for the women. Ideally, women represent the status and honor of the entire family which makes it mandatory for her to wear ghunghat as this will lead to increase in social status of the family. It is seen from the works of **Mule and Barthel [1992]** that veiling leads to social seclusion as it is practiced only by women. This seclusion exists in private space but they are not considered whereas seclusion in public space is focused. Feminist argues that any form of veiling is the social control **[Marshall, 2005]** controlling women's sexuality in order to see to it that she maintains her loyalty towards the husband.

Purdah does not simply mean covering the face, it includes '*nazar ka purdah*' [curtains on eyes] **[Abraham, 2010]**, where women is not supposed to see anything which will bring threats to the man's and his family's honor. The idea here is, her face must be covered so nobody looks at her with an evil eye and she does not look at some other

male which is an act of being disloyal towards the husband. There is '*awaaz ka purdah*' [curtains on voice], where she must not speak anything which will disturb the family's peace and harmony. This takes away her freedom of speech and expression from her. Therefore we see how the cycle of controlling her mobility, freedom and sexuality continues.

“Ghunghat is Haryana’s pehchaan” [Indian express, 2017], The chief minister of Haryana State promoted ghunghat as “the identity of the state,” which of course sparked debates but demonstrates that types of social control for women like ghunghat are still praised today.

Discussion and Observation:

Meaning:

The practice of seclusion and veiling of women in South Asia is commonly referred to as purdah. However, different regions may use different names for this practice. In the context of Hindu religion, purdah is known as ghunghat, which is predominantly observed in Haryana. The term “ghoonghat,” “ghunghat,” or “ghunghata” is derived from the Sanskrit word “Avagunthana,” which means veil, hiding, and cloak, and the Pali word “Oguntheti,” which means to cover, veil over, and hide. A ghunghat typically refers to a headcovering or headscarf worn by married Hindu, Jain, Muslim, and Sikh women in the Indian subcontinent to cover their heads and sometimes their faces. In many cases, the loose end of a sari known as aanchal or pallu is pulled over the head and face to serve as a ghunghat. A dupatta is also commonly used as a ghunghat. Presently, facial veiling by Hindu women has become a part of their daily life.

In North India, the term “ghunghat nikalana” is used to describe the practice where a woman veils her face in the presence of all male relatives senior to her, including her husband. Ghunghat is better understood as a practice that controls the activities of women within the entire village community, rather than just within the household. It

restricts the interaction of younger women with senior men, who often hold the most power in the community. Additionally, ghunghat serves as a depersonalizing mechanism, making women socially invisible in public contexts.

The term “purdah,” derived from Persian and meaning “curtail,” refers to the religious and social practice of female seclusion prevalent among the Muslim community. Women who observe purdah can be referred to as “pardanashin” or “purdahnishan.” Practices that limited women’s mobility and behavior have existed in India since ancient times but became more prominent with the advent of Islam. By the 19th century, purdah had also become customary among Hindu elites.

Purdah takes various forms: In its most conservative form, it extends to the tone and pitch of a woman’s voice, known as “awaaz ka purdah.” The practice of eye avoidance is referred to as “nazar ka purdah.” Awaaz ka purdah places restrictions on how and when women can converse with certain types of men, as well as on their voice pitch and volume. If it becomes necessary for a purdah-nashin (a woman who adheres to the rules of purdah) to speak to an outsider, she does so from behind a screen. Men and women are not permitted to gaze or fix their gazes on one another under Nazar Ka Purdah.

The Hindu partha- Ghunghat

The practice of ghunghat, deeply rooted in Indian history, serves as a poignant reminder of the country’s various invasions. It is a custom that has endured long after the invaders have departed, continuing to be observed in present times. The origin of ghunghat is often attributed to the Muslim invasions of India. Legend has it that during the 14th century, Alahuddin Khilji, a Muslim invader, visited the Rajput king Rana Ratansen in Chittor Garh. The Mughal ruler’s guest wing was situated just opposite the queen’s quarters. One day, while strolling outside his quarters, he caught a glimpse of Queen Padmini’s uncovered face reflected in the lake that separated their quarters. Enthralled by her mesmerizing beauty, he became infatuated and planned an attack on

Chittor Garh in an attempt to possess her. However, upon his return, he found only the ashes of the queen, as she had chosen self-immolation over succumbing to his desires.

As a result of this tragic incident, women in Rajasthan and the surrounding states began veiling their faces in the presence of anyone outside their immediate family, including members of their own household. The ghunghat became a symbol of their honor, modesty, and resistance against unwarranted advances or intrusions into their privacy. This tale not only narrates the origins of the ghunghat but also highlights the resilience and courage of women who chose self-sacrifice over submission. The practice of covering one's face with a ghunghat in the Indian culture is deeply rooted in these historical events, reflecting the societal norms and values that emerged from them. While the historical context of the ghunghat is essential for understanding its significance, it is crucial to evaluate its impact on women's lives today. The ghunghat, although rooted in tradition, can also reinforce gender stereotypes, restrict women's visibility and agency, and impede their social and economic empowerment. It is important to foster a balanced dialogue that respects cultural traditions while promoting gender equality and women's rights. Society's evolving understanding of gender dynamics and the pursuit of women's empowerment calls for a nuanced examination of customs like the ghunghat. By critically engaging with these practices and fostering inclusive conversations, it is possible to create a more equitable and empowering environment for women in contemporary society.

Rationale of Ghunghat or Purdah

- **Protection and Subjugation:** Some scholars argue that the ghunghat was initially intended to protect women from harassment. However, over time, this practice transformed into a means to justify efforts to subjugate women, curtail their mobility, and restrict their freedom. It is believed that what may have begun as a measure for safety evolved into a tool used to control female behavior. On the other hand, some argue that these practices were always part of local customs,

which were later adopted by religious rhetoric to exert control over women.

- **Respect:** Supporters of the ghunghat view it as a symbol of honor, respect, and dignity. They perceive it as a practice that enables women to be evaluated based on their inner qualities rather than their physical appearance. According to this perspective, the ghunghat serves as a means to shift the focus from external beauty to a woman's character, skills, and virtues.
- **Individual Motivations:** The reasons why individual women choose to wear the ghunghat can be multifaceted and influenced by a combination of factors. These motivations can range from personal choices to societal pressures and coercion. Women may adopt the practice for religious, cultural, political, economic, psychological, fashion, or decorative reasons. Additionally, employment requirements or social expectations can also play a role in women's decisions to wear the ghunghat.

It is important to recognize that the motivations behind wearing the ghunghat vary among individuals, and there is no singular explanation that applies universally. Women's choices regarding the ghunghat can be influenced by a complex interplay of personal agency, cultural norms, and external pressures. Understanding the diverse rationales behind this practice requires a nuanced exploration of individual experiences and social contexts. Engaging in open and respectful conversations about the ghunghat can help foster a better understanding of its complexities. By acknowledging the potential for both protection and subjugation, respecting diverse viewpoints, and promoting women's agency and empowerment, it is possible to navigate the cultural significance of the ghunghat while striving for gender equality and individual freedoms.

Significance of Ghunghat

The ghunghat holds significant cultural and symbolic meaning, particularly in the context of marriage and the transition of a woman from her natal home to her marital home. In the practice of ghunghat, the veiling of the face by married women is associated with the concept of "laaj" (derived from the Sanskrit word "lajja"), which

encompasses notions of modesty, honor, and shame. The earliest reference to the word “lajja” in the context of veiling can be found in Valmiki’s Ramayana, where it describes Mandodari. However, it remains unclear whether it specifically refers to facial veiling. During the marriage ceremony, the bride is adorned with a veil given by her parents. Subsequently, as part of the ceremony, the bride’s mother-in-law covers her face with the ghunghat, symbolizing her transition from the protection of her natal household to that of her marital family. Following the wedding, the muh dikhai ceremony takes place, which serves as the formal introduction of the bride to her new relatives and extended family. During this ceremony, each family member lifts the bride’s veil, looks at her, and presents her with welcoming gifts. The mother-in-law typically gifts the bride “shagun,” which may include jewelry, clothing, and silverware. Following this ceremony, the bride often continues to observe full veiling for several months or until advised otherwise by her parents-in-law. The practice of veiling in the ghunghat holds cultural significance as it marks important life events and symbolizes the transition of a woman into her married life. It reflects notions of modesty, honor, and the preservation of a woman’s dignity. The veiling process during marriage ceremonies, as well as the subsequent observation of veiling, carries deep-rooted symbolism within the cultural fabric of Indian society.

Problems faced by rural women due to Ghunghat

Rural women in Haryana face numerous challenges and problems as a result of the ghunghat practice. These problems are rooted in social, cultural, and power dynamics, with variations based on caste and class. The following are some of the problems faced by rural women due to the ghunghat:

- **Loss of identity and self-confidence:** The ghunghat practice restricts women from pursuing higher education and establishing their own identity in society. This limitation hinders their progress and self-confidence. The lack of freedom and constant fear experienced by rural women further diminishes their sense of self.

- **Limited economic opportunities and financial dependency:** The ghunghat system restricts rural women in Haryana from accessing economic opportunities. They often face constraints in seeking employment or engaging in income-generating activities due to societal norms and restrictions. Consequently, they become financially dependent on male family members, perpetuating gender inequalities and limiting their access to resources and decision-making power.
- **No freedom of speech and expression:** The patriarchal system in Haryana denies women the right to voice their opinions and participate in decision-making processes. Women are often silenced and considered shameful or disrespectful if they express themselves openly, further limiting their agency and autonomy within the family and society.
- **Domestic violence:** The violation of the ghunghat norm, even for a short period, can lead to domestic violence against women. The physical and mental abuse resulting from such transgressions can have severe consequences for their well-being and safety.
- **Less political participation:** The Ghunghat restricts women's involvement in political decision-making processes, including participation in government institutions, the judiciary, and trade unions. Limited mobility and discouragement from engaging in political life prevent women from exercising their right to vote, run for political office, or actively participate in the community.
- **Health issues and lack of healthcare access:** The ghunghat system presents challenges to rural women's health by hindering their access to healthcare services. Limited mobility and social interactions make it difficult for them to seek timely and appropriate medical care, exacerbating health issues and preventing early detection and treatment. Cultural barriers associated with the ghunghat system also affect reproductive health services and family planning.

- **Impacts on mental health and well-being:** The challenges posed by the ghunghat system have significant implications for the mental health and overall well-being of rural women. Social isolation, restricted autonomy, limited opportunities for personal fulfillment, and the burden of societal expectations contribute to increased stress, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among these women.
- **Social isolation and limited social interactions:** Practicing the ghunghat system results in social isolation for rural women in Haryana. They are confined to limited social interactions, preventing them from participating in community activities and engaging with individuals outside their immediate family. This isolation leads to feelings of loneliness, exclusion, and a lack of social support networks, hindering their personal growth and development.

Addressing these problems requires comprehensive efforts to challenge societal norms, promote gender equality, enhance access to education and economic opportunities, and provide support systems for the well-being and empowerment of rural women in Haryana.

Impact of the Ghunghat System on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

- **Analysis of how the ghunghat system perpetuates gender inequality:**

The ghunghat system, with its emphasis on seclusion and veiling, reinforces gender inequalities in rural Haryana. By confining women to private spaces and limiting their visibility in public, the system perpetuates the notion that women's role is primarily within the household and that their voices and contributions should be confined to the domestic sphere. This restriction on women's mobility and participation in public life creates a power imbalance, where men hold greater authority and decision-making power. The ghunghat system restricts women's access to education, economic opportunities, and social interactions, further reinforcing their subordinate position in society.
- **Examination of the barriers to women's empowerment in rural Haryana:**

The ghunghat system poses significant barriers to women's empowerment in rural Haryana. These barriers include limited access to education and literacy, restricted mobility and lack of autonomy, limited economic opportunities, and a lack of decision-making power within the household. These factors contribute to women's dependence on male family members and restrict their ability to make choices and decisions that affect their own lives. Additionally, social norms and cultural expectations associated with the ghunghat system create social and psychological barriers that hinder women's self-confidence, self-expression, and personal growth. These barriers collectively impede women's empowerment and hinder their ability to achieve gender equality.

- **Societal and cultural implications:**

The ghunghat system in rural Haryana has broader societal and cultural implications. It reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations, perpetuating a patriarchal social order where men hold primary authority and power. This system not only restricts women's individual freedoms and opportunities but also hampers societal progress by limiting women's participation in public life, their contributions to the economy, and their potential for leadership roles. The ghunghat system also contributes to the perpetuation of harmful gender stereotypes, which stigmatize women who choose not to conform to these norms. Challenging and transforming these societal and cultural norms is crucial for promoting gender equality, women's empowerment, and inclusive development in Haryana. Efforts to address these challenges require a multi-faceted approach involving education, legal reforms, community engagement, and awareness campaigns. Empowering women to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles, promoting gender-sensitive policies, and creating supportive environments for women's economic, social, and political participation are essential steps towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in rural Haryana. Furthermore, engaging with local communities, religious leaders, and influential stakeholders can help foster a cultural shift that values and promotes women's rights, agency, and equal participation in all spheres of life.

Summary & Conclusion

In conclusion, the ghunghat system, has a profound impact on gender equality and women's empowerment in rural Haryana. It perpetuates gender inequality by confining women to the private sphere and limiting their visibility and participation in public life. This reinforces traditional gender roles and power imbalances, where men hold greater authority and decision-making power. The ghunghat system restricts women's access to education, economic opportunities, and social interactions, further reinforcing their subordinate position in society. The barriers to women's empowerment in rural Haryana are significant, including limited access to education, restricted mobility, lack of autonomy, limited economic opportunities, and a lack of decision-making power within the household. These factors contribute to women's dependence on male family members and restrict their ability to make choices and decisions that affect their own lives. Additionally, social norms and cultural expectations associated with the ghunghat system create social and psychological barriers that hinder women's self-confidence, self-expression, and personal growth. These barriers collectively impede women's empowerment and hinder their ability to achieve gender equality. The ghunghat system in rural Haryana has broader societal and cultural implications. It reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations, perpetuating a patriarchal social order where men hold primary authority and power. This system not only restricts women's individual freedoms and opportunities but also hampers societal progress by limiting women's participation in public life, their contributions to the economy, and their potential for leadership roles. Moreover, the ghunghat system contributes to the perpetuation of harmful gender stereotypes, which stigmatize women who choose not to conform to these norms. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that involves education, legal reforms, community engagement, and awareness campaigns. Empowering women to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles, promoting gender-sensitive policies, and creating supportive environments for women's economic, social, and political participation are essential steps towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in rural Haryana. Additionally, it is crucial to engage with local

communities, religious leaders, and influential stakeholders to foster a cultural shift that values and promotes women's rights, agency, and equal participation in all spheres of life. Through concerted efforts, there is a potential for positive change and the betterment of these communities.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings presented in the paper, where it is evident that gender awareness is lacking and women face various forms of oppression, including the practice of ghunghat, the following recommendations are proposed:

Government Initiatives:

- The government, at both national and state levels, should prioritize and ensure effective education for all individuals, with a particular emphasis on providing equal educational opportunities for women.
- Seminars and workshops should be organized to raise awareness about the importance of education, gender equality, and women's empowerment.
- Employment opportunities should be made equally accessible to all genders, enabling women to contribute equally to society and the nation's progress.
- The government should recognize that the ghunghat system acts as a barrier to women's development and take proactive measures to address it at the grassroots level.

Women's Participation:

- Women should be encouraged and empowered to actively participate in social, economic, cultural, and political activities. This can be achieved through targeted initiatives and support systems that promote their inclusion and representation.
- Gender studies should be incorporated into the school curriculum from the foundational levels, ensuring that students are educated about gender equality, women's rights, and the importance of challenging discriminatory practices. Textbooks should be updated to include gender-friendly chapters and content.

Awareness and Human Rights:

- Society as a whole, including women and men, should be made aware of human rights principles and the importance of upholding them. This can be accomplished through awareness campaigns, community engagement programs, and media initiatives.
- Organizations and civil society should actively promote and advocate for women's rights, organizing events, discussions, and initiatives that highlight the need for gender equality and the elimination of oppressive practices like the ghunghat system.

By implementing these recommendations, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society where gender equality is valued, women are empowered, and discriminatory practices are challenged. It is a collective effort involving government, educational institutions, communities, and individuals to bring about lasting change and ensure a brighter future for women in society.

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