In rapidly modernizing India, caste fatally lurks

By C.J. Kuncheria

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(Reuters) - Nirupama Pathak was young, educated and wanted to marry her boyfriend. But in India, where caste determines most things, police suspect the pregnant journalist was murdered by her mother in an "honor killing."

Police arrested the mother after the 22-year-old was found smothered to death last week in her home in the eastern state of Jharkhand. Her boyfriend claimed she was killed as her family opposed their inter-caste relationship.

Behind India's modernization and growing cosmopolitanism, driven by accelerating economic growth, caste is a constant presence, playing roles as diverse as determining governments to denying some access to common facilities like water and schools.

There is evidence murders to restore "honor" are rising, activists say, a conservative backlash from elder males to assert their power against choices made by young people emboldened by education and growing economic opportunities.

Communities have proudly justified the lynching of women and couples, incidents Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram said had forced the nation to "hang our heads in shame."

"It is much more common than one would suspect. Many such incidents are happening regularly, but parents are able to cover them up," Sudha Sundaraman, general secretary of the communist party-linked All India Democratic Women's Association, which has been working against honor killings, told Reuters.

"With the moral baggage the police carry, they think the family is within its rights. So they don't ask any questions."

Nirupama Pathak, a daughter of a bank manager father and a homemaker mother, was a Brahmin at the apex of the caste ladder. Priyabhansu Ranjan said her parents were opposed to her two-year-old relationship with him as he was from a lower caste.

Pathak's father said she committed suicide as she was pregnant and did not want to tell her parents about it.

"We were trying to convince her to marry within our own caste. That does not mean we killed her," father Dharmendra Pathak told reporters in his home town of Koderma.

Over 60 years of democracy since independence in 1947 have eased some of the worst forms of caste discrimination, outlawed by the constitution, but even educated, well-off families still draw the line at inter-caste marriages.

Sunday newspapers carry pages of marriage advertisements, neatly classified by caste and sub-caste. A host of online matrimonial sites cater exclusively to one caste or the other.

"We did not educate her so that she could do everything of her own choice," Dharmendra Pathak said.

Caste underpins much of politics in India, with a rash of political parties championing the cause of particular groups turning kingmakers in a time of coalition governments.

"No political leadership has taken up these matters. They know they will not survive if they oppose these."

CASTE AND BUSINESS

Caste matters even in India's booming service and industrial sectors. A study by Indian economist Sukhdeo Thorat and Princeton University sociologist Katherine Newman found having a low caste surname significantly cut the chances of being called for a job interview.

The South Asian caste system, which is determined by birth and which fixes social standing, has been assailed by critics for creating an oppressive hierarchy that denies a large section of the population access to education, health and jobs.

There is not a single low caste Indian billionaire. The list of richest Indians is dominated by the business Bania castes, who are in the middle, along with a few Brahmins and Muslims.

The benefits of India's rapid economic growth have trickled down slowly to the bottom of the caste structure, with government data showing the formerly untouchable castes still poorer, more illiterate, and having worse health than the general population.

U.N. agencies have tried to include caste discrimination as an abuse of human rights based on race, but India opposes this, saying race and caste are not the same. Critics say the country does not want international scrutiny of the practice.