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# THE CONCEPT AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF HONOUR KILLING IN INDIA

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## 1.1. Concept of Honour and Shame in Indian Society

Honour and shame shape many social interactions in India. These ideas go back a long way. They are based on systems of caste and family hierarchy as well as a community identity. Honour is treated as a collective asset. This belongs not only to an individual but also the whole family. The family is defined by the relatives' perception of its members and their caste groups. Honour is protected through control. Parents feel instilling a sense of discipline is an important part of the process of socialisation. When someone breaks these rules, families feel social pressure. People talk, judge, and question the status of the family. Shame becomes public, and the family tries to avoid this at all costs.

Marriage, sexuality, purity, behaviour and loyalty to the family are linked to honour. In several places, families want young adults to abide by certain rules in relations. Children are expected to accept arranged marriage, maintain caste barriers and practice everything. Honour is also tied to gender. Women are expected to represent family values. Their behaviour is constantly monitored. People will think badly of the family if a woman uses her freedom to decide. This fear of public shame is strong. It shapes decisions, reactions, and forms of punishment.

The community can put shame on you by gossiping about you, excluding you and judging you as a group. Families fear these consequences. They impose strict controls on individual choices to avert shame. This creates conflict between constitutional rights and community expectations. In honouring someone, you control the relationship. When a family believes honour is at stake, we see the use of extreme measures to restore social standing. Honour killing develops within this environment. Individuals partake in this act to erase the sense of shame as well as regain social approval, even though it is unlawful and against fundamental rights<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> National Commission for Women. (2020). Report on Honour Based Crimes in India. Government of India.

Law aims to safeguard individual worth, while social systems emphasise the protection of social honor. Most honour-related violence is caused by this conflict. Honour is not a legal concept. It has no place in the Constitution or in formal law. Nonetheless, it remains a powerful language as it shapes behaviour, identity and status in many communities. When communities place greater importance to honour than life, violence becomes rampant.

## **1.2. Cultural and Regional Patterns of Honour Killing**

Honour killing is not limited to one region of India. It shows up in different states, but the pattern varies according to local customs, caste arrangements and marriage laws. Northern states are mostly harsher compared to other states of the country. Regions characterised by strong caste based organisations, strict rules about clan marriages and close knit village communities. People live close to extended family networks. They rely on help from the community for social and business life. This structure strengthens social control. Community approval becomes important for families. When two people opt for a relationship which is not acceptable to everyone, there is a reaction from the whole community. Families fear exclusion. Honour killing becomes a way to avoid that exclusion.

In southern states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, honour killing usually occurs where inter caste marriages take place especially when the man is a lower caste. The area consists of vigorous non Brahmin identity movements yet marriages are made within castes. Relatives of the victim often plan the violence believing the union has shamed the family. Changing political conditions have not wiped out social traditions. These cases show this.

Cases of interfaith relationships lead to honour-based crimes in particularly Gujarat and Maharashtra, western India. When families perceive a threat to the religious identity of the group, they react strongly. Honour becomes tied to religious loyalty. Communities treat interfaith marriages as betrayal. Families act violently to prevent this.

In eastern states, the issue appears in smaller numbers. But, when social codes are broken, tribal communities sometimes commit honour-related violence. These codes regulate marriage within the group. Violation leads to punishment.

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Supreme Court of India. *Shakti Vahini v. Union of India*, (2018) 7 SCC 192.

Urban areas also report honour killings. Young people typically voluntarily choose partners in these cases. Urban areas may be more liberal in their outlook however families are not. They react violently if their children choose things they can't accept.

In many places, honour killing is still possible because of local customs. Laws in India may be similar, the social systems differ. These differences affect the occurrence and justification of honour crimes.

### **1.3 Role of Caste, Gotra, and Community Norms**

Caste is still one of the most important structures impacting honour-based violence. Inter-caste marriages are habitually perceived as a crime against the whole community by the caste. Caste identity gives families status, purity, and lineage, they believe. They are afraid to lose respect if their children marry outside the caste. This fear creates a strong reaction. Caste councils reinforce these fears. They punish families that do not follow caste rules. This is why a lot of honour killings take place for inter caste couples.

Gotra plays a major role in northern India. Gotra refers to a clan or ancestral line. Many communities do not accept same gotra marriages. They treat such relationships as violations of tradition. Although lawful and legitimate, local communities deem these marriages as immoral. When couples decide to wed someone from the same gotra, there is tremendous social pressure on the families. Community leaders hold meetings and demand punishment. Families react in two ways: they either separate the couple or commit honour killing<sup>2</sup>.

Community norms act as unwritten laws. These norms shape behaviour within villages and towns. They determine what makes relationships acceptable, rules of marriage, and what's within social boundaries. Everyone follows them since they are social exclusion in the effect. Elders, relatives and cast leaders enforce these norms. They override legal rights in many places. When partners do not fit the norms set by the community, the community sees it as a threat. Violence becomes a method of restoring order.

Law recognises individual freedom. It protects personal choice. Community standards often view personal choice as a threat to social harmony. This conflict is why honour killings still

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<sup>2</sup> Law Commission of India. (2012). Report No. 242: Prevention of Interference with the Freedom of Matrimonial Alliances (in the Name of Honour and Tradition). Government of India.

take place despite the law. Community punishment frightens families more than jail punishment. They know that the law is slow and enforcement is weak. They also know that the community will back them if they commit honour violence. This support reduces the fear of legal consequences.

#### **1.4. Patriarchal Control Over Women**

The honour-based violence seen in India is shaped by patriarchy. Some families still function the same way that men make all decisions regarding marriages, movement and relationships. Women are often seen as the bearers of family reputation. Their actions are monitored from childhood to adulthood. At the age where a woman has the power to choose her own partner, this control becomes stronger. Families are worried her decisions may not stay within the accepted bounds of caste, religion, and class. This fear comes from the ancient belief that a woman's behaviour determines the respectability of the whole family.

A woman must be obedient as per patriarchal norms. She ought to respect the authority of father, brother and later husband. Independence is treated as defiance. Personal choice is treated as a challenge to male honour. When a woman builds a relationship against her family's approval, families express anger and anxiety. They think she will hurt their standing in the community. This anxiety is not only emotional. It has social consequences. Families feel concerned about their neighbours, relatives, and caste groups judging them. They are afraid of being gossiped, criticized or left out. The pressure from the community as well as the desire to uphold their reputation as well as act in ways that are excessive and sometimes harmful<sup>3</sup>.

The most violent expression of patriarchal control is honour killing. One who chooses an inter-caste or inter-faith partner is at the greatest risk. Families view this as a direct attack on social order. The woman's autonomy threatens male authority. To regain that power, relatives use threats, confinement, beating, and even murder. Even when the woman tries to seek help from police, there is hesitation or delay. Officers often advise her to reconcile with her family. Such deep-rooted patriarchal values exist within state institutions.

Patriarchy not only limits women but also pressures men. Men, who are supporters of women's choice or who marry women from other castes or religions, face violence too. The control over women remains stronger because families believe that women symbolise purity of the family.

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<sup>3</sup> National Commission for Women. (2020). Report on Honour Based Crimes in India. Government of India.

The fact that most honour crime victims are young women only underscores the unequal burden of those condemned, who, being young women, have the 'offence' of the exercise of freedom which is guaranteed to them under the Constitution.

### **1.5.Role of Family and Community Councils**

Family plays the most direct role in honour related crimes. The violence is often carried out by parents, siblings, uncles, and other family members. They think of their family honour because they act together. Their decision reflects more than personal belief. It shows the pressure on them by the bigger community. The family does not operate in isolation. It works in a system that awards the individuals who conform and punishes the ones who don't.

Community councils add another layer of pressure. In many regions of northern India, khap and caste councils have taken a leading stance in determining marriage and social behavior. These councils are informal bodies with no legal authority. Yet they command respect among villagers. They hold meetings when they suspect someone has broken a caste or clan rule. They caution, censor and direct families to punish rule-breakers. Though the law forbids interference, the councils still influence judgments because families fear losing financial support. Community councils act as social courts. Judgments create an atmosphere that allows honour killings to happen.

Many honour killings begin after a council meeting. The family receives public condemnation. Relatives feel humiliated. Only strong actions can help them regain their status, they believe. Essentially, community councils promote murder indirectly. They frame it as an act of discipline rather than a crime. Due to the fact that police officers in these regions are members of the same communities, they often hold back on intervention. Their reluctance allows councils to operate without fear.

Courts have repeatedly condemned these councils. The Supreme Court can't interfere with adult relationships as per its recent ruling. Even so, enforcement remains uneven. Councils continue to shape views and attitudes in rural areas where social life is rooted in caste. Communities will continue to hold honour-based violence as a threat as long as personal rights are undervalued and their impact is lessened.

### **1.6.Intercaste and Interfaith Relationships as Triggers**

People often commit awful honour crimes against inter-caste, interfaith couples. Families consider caste identity a barrier that must remain unbreached. The families of young adults who enter an inter-caste relationship react in shock and horror. They believe the marriage violates purity rules. They also believe it affects the entire caste group. When they see their daughter or son getting married outside the caste, it represents a loss of esteem. Social pressure intensifies this reaction. Gossip spreads quickly. It is being alleged that the family is not controlling their children. To escape humiliation, families commit violence.

Interfaith relationships create similar tension. Families fear to appear disloyal to their own religion. They're worried about being judged by their religious leaders and the community. In some places, families feel a lot of pressure from small groups. Families respond by trying to separate the couple. When separation fails, they use violence. This violence does not stem from religious belief but social insecurity<sup>4</sup>.

The main issue in cases of intercaste and interfaith is control. Families prefer to maintain the social order established by the group. They see personal choice as a threat. The Constitution protects the freedom to marry. All courts have repeatedly stated that adults are free to choose who to love and have full authority over their own relationship. Yet, in the real world, this legal protection does not always match. Social expectations remain powerful. When caste or religion shapes one's identity, families justify violence.

### **1.7 Media Analysis of Honour Crimes**

In India, media forms a major understanding of honour crimes. When media shows a case these days it usually indicates a lot of violence in the family behind the scenes. Police investigations show that honour crimes are not just in far-off villages. They take place in cities, semi-urban regions and educated households. Cases of these kinds typically come to light when journalists start investigating unnatural deaths, forced disappearances, and suddenly happening accidents, as per the police. The media helps people recognize that violence is not a personal family matter. One way to put pressure on the authority is to create public awareness.

Reports in media usually mention how brutal honour killings are. The victims face imprisonment, beating, threats, and violence related to their partner. Many couples tell cops

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<sup>4</sup> National Human Rights Commission. (2019). Report on Prevention of Honour Killings in India. Government of India.

they are not getting protection in time despite approaching the police station. Reports in the news begin a public debate about inaction and what is stronger. The family members were also involved in the above crime. It is not a crime of passion as people believe honour killings to be. It shows conspiring, plotting and co-acting on their part.

The media also focus on community pressure's impact on social media. The neighbors, caste leaders, and village elders are also spoken to. Many such incidents report the crime in the name of tradition. The mindset of society that continues to support honour based violence is revealed within. When media reports on these attitudes, it opens them up to the larger society. This aids in the formation of a public debate that challenges such attitudes. However, some media outlets sensationalize these stories. They are focused more on details than structure. This approach can distort the seriousness of the problem. We should think of honour crimes as violations of rights not cultural phenomena.

The survivor stories are well highlighted in the media. The stories reveal that even when freed from violence, victims still experience social isolation, trauma, and fear. Bombay Bloods explains how they requested help but were refused. Through such accounts, society learns about the loopholes in law. These are a testament to those who choose personal freedom despite threats they receive.

Social media has also changed the landscape. Most media coverage of honour crimes comes from social media videos, texts or photos from the case. When those in charge do not respond, people post updates, call for action and attack them. Social media campaigns have an impact on police investigations. The state governments have been forced to take stricter measures. However, social media also exposes couples to risk. Families sometimes track them using online posts. Report emphasizes the need for giving awareness and caution.

### **1.8.Trends and Data Based on NCRB, NHRC, and Independent Reports**

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<sup>5</sup> Press Council of India. (2020). Report on Media Representation of Honour Crimes in India. Government of India.

<sup>6</sup> Broadcast Audience Research Council. (2021). Study on Media Influence in Reporting Violence and Social Conflicts in India.