

HONOR KILLING IN INDIA: A COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CASTE, REGION, AND STATE RESPONSES - (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INDIA, HARYANA, KARNATAKA, AND TAMIL NADU)

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ABSTRACT

Honor killing constitutes one of the most extreme forms of collective violence in India, arising from the intersection of caste hierarchy, patriarchal authority, and community-based mechanisms of social control. While dominant public narratives locate honor killings primarily in northern India, emerging evidence reveals that such violence occurs across regions, manifesting differently according to caste structures, kinship systems, and state responses. This paper undertakes a comparative sociological analysis of honor killing in Haryana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu to examine how regional political cultures, caste dominance, and institutional accountability shape patterns of honor-based violence. Drawing on secondary data, judicial records, National Crime Records Bureau reports, and sociological literature, the study argues that honor killing is not a regional anomaly but a national structural phenomenon embedded in the reproduction of caste and patriarchal power. The paper integrates Standpoint Theory and Liberal Feminist Theory to foreground the lived experiences of women and marginalized caste groups, demonstrating how honor crimes represent systematic violations of autonomy, dignity, and constitutional rights. The study concludes by advocating for a unified legal framework, survivor-centered protection mechanisms, and transformative social interventions.

Keywords: Honor killing, caste system, patriarchy, comparative sociology, Standpoint Theory, Liberal Feminism, India

INTRODUCTION:

Honor killing refers to the murder of individuals predominantly women and, in many cases, their intimate partners by family members or community actors who believe that the victim has violated norms governing marriage, sexuality, caste, or kinship. In the Indian context, honor killings are deeply embedded in the regulation of marriage and reproduction, which are central to the maintenance of caste hierarchy.

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and personal liberty, honor killings continue to occur across India. Public discourse, media representation, and even policy debates often portray honor killing as a culturally specific problem limited to northern states such as Haryana or western Uttar Pradesh. This regionalization obscures the structural nature of honor violence and marginalizes experiences from southern and western India.

This paper challenges such assumptions by adopting a **comparative sociological framework** that examines honor killing across three states Haryana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu each representing distinct caste configurations, kinship systems, and political cultures. By doing

so, the study seeks to demonstrate that honor killing is a **national phenomenon with regional expressions**, rather than a localized cultural pathology.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: CASTE, MARRIAGE, AND SOCIAL REGULATION:

Marriage has historically functioned as the primary mechanism through which caste boundaries are reproduced in Indian society. Endogamy ensures the transmission of caste status, property rights, occupational continuity, and social privilege. Women's sexuality and reproductive capacity have therefore been subjected to strict surveillance.

During the pre-colonial period, customary laws regulated marriage alliances. Colonial codification of caste categories hardened social boundaries without dismantling patriarchal control. Post-independence constitutional reforms introduced legal equality but did not eliminate customary authority at the community level.

Honor killing emerges within this historical contradiction: a modern constitutional framework coexisting with deeply entrenched caste patriarchy. The expansion of education, urban migration, and inter-caste interaction has intensified this contradiction, producing violent backlash against individual autonomy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Existing literature on honor killing in India can be grouped into four strands:

1. **Caste and Kinship Studies** – Scholars emphasize endogamy, clan purity, and lineage control as central drivers of honor violence.
2. **Feminist Analyses** – Feminist scholars situate honor killing within patriarchal control of female sexuality and reproductive autonomy.
3. **Dalit and Subaltern Studies** – These works highlight how honor killings often function as retaliatory violence against Dalit men entering relationships with dominant caste women.
4. **Legal and Human Rights Perspectives** – Legal scholars critique the absence of a specific anti-honor killing law and the normalization of honor crimes as “family matters.”

Comparative, region-spanning studies remain limited. This paper addresses that gap.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

- **Standpoint Theory:** Standpoint Theory argues that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalized groups possess epistemic privilege regarding systems of oppression. Applied to honor killing, this theory centers the lived experiences of women, Dalits, and inter-caste couples rather than dominant caste moral frameworks.

From the standpoint of women:

- Marriage choice represents autonomy.
- Violence represents systemic coercion, not moral correction.

From the standpoint of marginalized castes:

- Honor killings are tools of caste terror.
- Violence polices social mobility and intimacy.

This perspective exposes how dominant caste narratives normalize violence while silencing victims.

- **Liberal Feminist Theory:** Liberal Feminism emphasizes individual rights, autonomy, and equality before law, and freedom of choice. Honor killing directly violates liberal feminist principles by denying women:

- The right to choose a partner
- Bodily autonomy
- Legal protection against family violence

Liberal Feminism critiques the failure of the state to protect women from private sphere violence and highlights institutional complicity when family honor overrides women's rights.

- **Caste Reproduction and Patriarchal Power:** Following Ambedkar's analysis, caste survives through endogamy. Patriarchy operationalizes this by controlling women's sexuality. Honor killing becomes an extreme enforcement mechanism when other forms of control fail.

Methodology: This study employs a **comparative qualitative research design**, relying on:

- NCRB crime data (2010–2025)
- High Court and Supreme Court judgments
- NGO and human rights documentation
- Peer-reviewed sociological studies

States were selected to reflect:

- Regional diversity
- Varied caste dominance patterns
- Differences in institutional response

STATE-WISE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS:

1 Haryana: Clan, Gotra, and Collective Sanction: Haryana exhibits the most institutionalized form of honor violence, driven by khap panchayats. Marriage norms prohibit same-gotra unions and inter-caste alliances. Violence is often preceded by social boycott and collective legitimating. Despite judicial condemnation, khaps retain moral authority at the village level, revealing the limits of legal intervention without social reform.

2 Karnataka: Familial Enforcement and Caste Anxiety: In Karnataka, honor killings are typically enacted by immediate family members rather than public councils. Violence is less visible but equally lethal. Dominant agrarian castes perceive inter-caste unions especially Dalit dominant caste relationships as symbolic humiliation. Police frequently classify such cases as domestic disputes, delaying justice and increasing survivor vulnerability.

3 Tamil Nadu: Caste Assertion and Political Context: Tamil Nadu presents a politically charged form of honor violence driven by intermediate caste dominance. Here, honor killings intersect with:

- Anti-Dalit sentiment
- Political patronage
- Regional caste mobilization

Violence functions as both social discipline and territorial assertion.

CASE STUDIES: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HONOR-BASED VIOLENCE IN

INDIA: To move beyond abstract structural explanations, this section presents selected case studies from different Indian states. These cases illustrate how honor killing is experienced, justified, and contested at the ground level. Anchored in Standpoint Theory, the analysis foregrounds the perspectives of victims and marginalized groups, while Liberal Feminist Theory highlights violations of autonomy, consent, and constitutional rights.

CASE STUDY 1: CLAN AUTHORITY AND COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE IN

HARYANA: One of the most frequently cited honor killing cases in Haryana involved a young couple who entered into a same-gotra marriage against the explicit directives of local clan elders. The woman, a college-educated adult, exercised her legal right to choose her partner. However, from the community's perspective, her choice constituted a violation of clan purity and lineage norms.

Following the marriage, the couple faced escalating social pressure. The khap panchayat issued informal sanctions, including social boycott of the woman's natal family. Elders publicly declared the marriage invalid and demanded punitive action. Within weeks, the male partner was abducted and murdered by relatives of the woman, while the woman was forcibly confined.

Analytical Insight: From a Standpoint Theory perspective, the woman's voice and consent were rendered invisible. Her legal adulthood and agency were overridden by collective authority. The dominant narrative framed the killing as a "restoration of honor," while the lived experience reveals coercion, fear, and silencing.

From a Liberal Feminist lens, this case represents a complete collapse of the private–public distinction. The state failed to intervene despite prior threats, demonstrating institutional complicity when community norms override individual rights.

This case typifies Haryana's model of **publicly sanctioned honor violence**, where legitimacy is derived from clan consensus rather than familial secrecy.

CASE STUDY 2: FAMILIAL RETALIATION AND CASTE ANXIETY IN

KARNATAKA: In a rural district of Karnataka, a young woman from a dominant agrarian caste entered into an inter-caste relationship with a Dalit man she met during her college education. The relationship remained secret for several months due to fear of familial backlash. Upon discovery, the woman was subjected to intense surveillance, emotional abuse, and confinement. When the couple attempted to register their marriage legally, the woman's family tracked them down. The male partner was assaulted and later murdered by the woman's brother and maternal uncle. The incident was initially registered as a case of "personal enmity" rather than caste-based honor violence.

Analytical Insight: Unlike Haryana, this case demonstrates **privatized honor enforcement**. No formal caste council issued orders; instead, caste norms were internalized and enacted through family members.

From the standpoint of the Dalit male victim, the violence functioned as **caste terror**—a warning against social mobility and boundary crossing. His relationship challenged both caste hierarchy and masculine dominance, making him a primary target.

Liberal Feminist analysis reveals how the woman's right to choice was negated not only through violence but also through administrative apathy. Police reluctance to invoke the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act illustrates institutional failure in recognizing honor killing as structural violence.

This case reflects Karnataka's pattern of **familial honor killing driven by caste anxiety**, where violence is hidden within the domestic sphere yet deeply social in motivation.

CASE STUDY 3: POLITICAL CASTE ASSERTION AND HONOR VIOLENCE IN TAMIL NADU: In Tamil Nadu, a Dalit man and an intermediate-caste woman entered into an inter-caste marriage with legal registration and community awareness. Despite constitutional safeguards, the relationship triggered hostility from caste-based organizations aligned with local political networks. Within months, the Dalit husband was murdered in broad daylight. Subsequent investigations revealed that the killing was not an impulsive act but a coordinated effort involving extended kin and caste affiliates.

Analytical Insight: This case highlights how honor killing in Tamil Nadu intersects with **politicized caste identity**. Violence functions not only as moral correction but also as a display of territorial and caste dominance.

From a Standpoint Theory approach, the Dalit perspective exposes how legal equality does not translate into lived security. The victim's constitutional rights were meaningless in the face of caste-based power structures.

Liberal Feminism reveals selective state intervention while arrests were made, witness intimidation and delayed trials diluted justice. Women's autonomy was acknowledged in principle but denied in practice.

This case underscores how honor killing can become a **symbolic assertion of caste power** within competitive political landscapes.

COMPARATIVE FINDINGS:

➤ **Common Patterns:**

- Inter-caste marriage as primary trigger
- Gendered control of women's choices
- Community complicity
- Weak protection mechanisms

➤ **Regional Variations:**

- Mode of enforcement
- Public vs private legitimacy
- Police responsiveness
- Political acknowledgment

LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS:

Honor killings violate:

- Article 14 (Equality)
- Article 15 (Non-discrimination)
- Article 19 (Freedom)
- Article 21 (Life and Liberty)

Yet, absence of a specific legal category results in:

- Data invisibility

- Inconsistent prosecution
- Reduced deterrence

Modernization, Autonomy, and Backlash: Modernization has expanded women's education and mobility. However, rather than dissolving caste patriarchy, these changes provoke violent resistance. Honor killing thus represents **reactionary violence against social change**.

DISCUSSION: The comparative evidence demonstrates that honor killing is a **structural mechanism of caste survival**. Whether enforced by khaps, families, or caste networks, the objective remains the same: disciplining autonomy and preserving hierarchy.

Standpoint Theory reveals how dominant narratives erase victim experience, while Liberal Feminism exposes the state's failure to protect individual rights.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

- Enact a national anti-honor killing law
- Establish inter-caste couple protection cells
- Police sensitization on caste and gender
- Witness protection programs
- Educational reform addressing caste and patriarchy

CONCLUSION:

Honor killing in India represents a profound contradiction between constitutional democracy and inherited social hierarchy. The comparative analysis of Haryana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu demonstrates that honor violence is neither regional nor cultural in isolation, but structurally embedded in caste patriarchy. From the standpoint of women and marginalized castes, honor killing is not about morality but coercion. Liberal Feminist theory exposes the systematic denial of autonomy, while Standpoint Theory reveals how dominant caste narratives legitimize violence. Eradicating honor killing requires more than legal prohibition—it demands transformation of social consciousness, institutional accountability, and unwavering commitment to individual dignity.

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