

THE INTERSECTION OF CASTE AND GENDER: HOW ENDOGAMY RESTRICTS WOMEN'S AUTONOMY AND TRIGGERS HONOUR KILLINGS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The persistence of the caste system in India is sustained by deeply embedded cultural practices. Among these, the regulation of women's roles and choices plays a central role. Women are often expected to embody ideals of purity, divinity, and honour, not inherently, but due to societal expectations. The degree of freedom-from minor personal choices to the significant decision of selecting a life partner-is shaped by social structures. When women challenge caste boundaries through inter-caste marriage, caste-based sentiments are often invoked, sometimes resulting in extreme forms of violence such as honor killings. This paper examines the intersection of caste and gender, focusing on how endogamy operates as a mechanism that restricts women's autonomy and limits social mobility.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Gender, Endogamy, Honor Killing, Social Mobility.

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Introduction

“I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.” - B. R. Ambedkar

Caste is one of the unique features of Indian society. It controls every aspect of human life in India. Socially, culturally, and politically, its stranglehold is increasing day by day. Hundreds of social reformers have tried to eradicate the evils of the caste system in India. Various policies and programmes have also been implemented to overcome the control of caste on individual lives. Even then, the caste system is persisting. One of the evils of the caste system is honour killings. It was restricted to northern states of India. However, in recent times, cases of honour killings have been reported in some states, including Karnataka. Therefore, The Freedom of Choice in Marriage and Prevention and Prohibition of Crimes in the Name of Honor and Tradition Bill, 2026, passed by the Karnataka legislature, represents a significant legal intervention aimed at curbing honour-based violence (Akram, 2026). Similarly, the Supreme Court judgment in *Shakti Vahini v. Union of India* (2018) emphasized the protection of individual autonomy in matters of marriage. These developments indicate growing institutional recognition of the issue.

However, despite such legal measures, caste continues to be deeply embedded in Indian society, particularly in relation to marriage practices. As discussed by Dumont (1980) in *Homo Hierarchicus*, caste operates as a hierarchical system that reinforces social separation and exclusion. This is especially evident in the persistence of endogamy, which restricts marriage within caste boundaries. Furthermore, caste operates unevenly across social groups: it often represents pride for dominant groups while functioning as a burden for marginalized communities. When women assert their freedom of choice in marriage, particularly across caste lines, it disrupts these entrenched norms (Chakravarti, 2003). This creates a structural dilemma in which women are repeatedly positioned at the margins of social mobility. This paper argues that the intersection of caste and gender, reinforced through the practice of endogamy, plays a crucial role in limiting individual autonomy and sustaining social inequality.

Methodology

The stated work has been done based on existing secondary data, following a mixed method. Along with this, some regional case studies have been referred to for further depth and connection. However, no primary data and observations are used in this study, keeping it purely theoretical based on existing narratives.

Caste and Gender

To understand this intersection, it is necessary to examine caste and gender as interconnected social structures. Caste, as defined by Dumont (1980) and Srinivas (1962), is a system of stratification in which individuals are born into fixed social groups that determine their status, occupation, and patterns of interaction. This system inherently limits social mobility. Gender, as conceptualized by West and Zimmerman (1987), is constructed through everyday practices and behaviours shaped by societal expectations. Individuals are expected to conform to these norms in their speech, dress, and conduct. Further, Walby (1990) highlights that patriarchal institutions regulate women's choices, particularly in marriage, thereby limiting their autonomy. Taken together, caste and gender function as mutually reinforcing systems that constrain individual freedom, especially for women.

Caste Pride and Gender: The Intersection

The interaction between caste and gender becomes particularly evident in the preservation of caste pride. This preservation often depends on controlling women's behaviour, especially in matters of marriage, sexuality, and family honour (Chakravarti, 2003). In the Indian context, women are frequently expected to marry within their caste (endogamy), with restrictions imposed to maintain notions of purity and social order. Consequently, women's autonomy is limited, and their actions are viewed as directly affecting the honour of the caste group. Supporting this argument, Ambedkar (1916/1979) emphasized that caste is sustained through the regulation of women's choices and behaviour, as women are seen as carriers of caste identity and purity.

Endogamy as an Invisible Barrier to Social Mobility

Building on this intersection, the practice of endogamy plays

a central role in maintaining caste boundaries. Indian society is characterized by segmented social structures and internal divisions (Srinivas, 1976). These divisions are reinforced by geographical separation and the organization of communities into distinct social and occupational groups (Srinivas, 1955; 1962). Within this framework, endogamy obliges individuals to marry within their own social group (Ambedkar, 1979). While exceptions may occur, they are often conditional and subject to community approval (Srinivas, 1976).

Rise of Honor Killings in India

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (2025), honor killings are classified as murders motivated by the perceived need to restore family or community honor. Caste and honor killings in India are inter-linked social phenomena. Traditional caste hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and community control over marriage promote the killing of a girl or a boy. Based on recent information, honor killings remain a significant social problem in India despite economic growth and modernization. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, India recorded 25 cases of honor killings in both 2019 and 2020, with a rise to 33 cases in 2021; however, these numbers are widely acknowledged as highly underreported-actual cases are estimated to be much higher. Worldwide, nearly 5,000 women and girls are killed annually for honor, with about one-third from India. As per the data of the NCRB, Uttar Pradesh recorded 50 cases (27.93% of the total), Bihar 25 cases, Rajasthan 20, Haryana 15, Punjab 12, and Madhya Pradesh 10 cases; these six states collectively represent 68.7% of total cases (NCRB, 2024). Recently, cases of honour killings have also been reported in Karnataka.

Why Honor Killings Persist: Root Causes

Deep-rooted Patriarchal Norms: The concept of “honor” is closely tied to male control over female sexuality. Unfortunately, women’s autonomy is perceived as a threat to family reputation, and female virginity and chastity are seen as family assets that must be protected.

Caste Rigidity and Endogamy: In India, 70% of cases involve inter-caste relationships (NCRB, 2023). Caste endogamy (marrying within caste) is enforced to preserve social hierarchies. Marriage

alliances serve as tools for economic resource retention within caste groups. Dominant castes use marriage to maintain political and economic power.

Recent Developments and Challenges

Increasing Cases Despite Awareness: There is a recent spike in cases, especially involving inter-caste relationships. Cases are also reported across various states, including Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Kerala. Paradoxically, violence increases where caste hierarchies are being challenged through education and empowerment.

Underreporting Issues: Many cases go unreported due to social acceptance within communities, police reluctance to register cases, fear of community backlash, and families covering up murders as accidents or suicides.

Social Media Impact: Social media platforms sometimes glorify caste pride. Vigilante narratives normalize punishment for defiance and create echo chambers reinforcing traditional values.

Conclusion

Honor killings in India represent a complex intersection of patriarchy, caste hierarchy, economic factors, and weak legal enforcement. While India has made significant economic progress, this social evil persists due to deeply entrenched traditional values. The solution requires a multi-pronged approach combining legal reforms, education, economic empowerment, and sustained social change efforts. The recent increase in cases, particularly in states witnessing social mobility challenges to caste hierarchies, indicates that social transformation often meets violent resistance. Addressing this issue is crucial not only for human rights but for India's progress toward becoming a truly modern, egalitarian society. These incidents often occur in response to inter-caste or inter-religious marriages, particularly when women exercise their autonomy. The Karnataka bill of 2026 ('Eva Nammava, Eva Nammava', The Freedom of Choice in Marriage and Prevention and Prohibition of Crimes in the Name of Honour and Tradition Bill, 2026), introduced following incidents such as the Dharwad case (Akram, 2026), represents a legal attempt to address this issue. Although its implementation is still evolving, the bill marks an important step toward protecting individuals' rights

to choose their partners and challenging entrenched social norms. As India progresses socially and politically, significant challenges remain in ensuring individual autonomy in matters of marriage. Despite legal advancements, deeply rooted cultural practices continue to restrict freedom of choice. There is an urgent need for both legal enforcement and social awareness to address these issues. Ambedkar's vision of a progressive society-measured by the status of women-remains highly relevant in this context.

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