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POST: HONOUR KILLING: SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF HONOUR KILLING IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Honour killing is one of the most disturbing forms of violence in society. It is deeply rooted in caste discrimination and patriarchal control, where individuals—most often women are killed for supposedly bringing shame or dishonour to their family or community. This study looks at the issue of honour killing in Tamil Nadu from both a legal and social perspective. It pays special attention to how effective India's new criminal laws—the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam, 2023—are in addressing such crimes. The research follows a doctrinal and socio-legal approach. It carefully examines legal provisions, constitutional values, important court judgments, and various secondary sources like reports and academic studies. At the same time, it also tries to understand the social realities behind honour killings, such as rigid caste hierarchies, deep-rooted patriarchy, and the pressure individuals face from their communities.

The study finds that although the new criminal laws have improved procedures and evidence-related processes, they still fail to recognize honour killing as a separate and specific crime.

In addition, problems like poor law enforcement, threats to witnesses, and the continued social acceptance of caste-based norms make it difficult to ensure justice in such cases. In conclusion, the study emphasizes that honour killing cannot be stopped by legal reforms alone. There is a strong need for social change, better institutional support, and effective implementation of existing laws. It suggests introducing a specific law to deal with honour killings, strengthening witness protection systems, and promoting awareness in society to uphold the values of equality and justice guaranteed by the Constitution.

INTRODUCTION

Honour killing in Tamil Nadu is not simply an act of violence carried out in isolation; it is deeply woven into the social and cultural realities of certain communities. To understand why such incidents occur, it is important to look beyond the act itself and examine the values and beliefs that shape people's thinking. In many parts of Tamil Nadu, caste continues to play a powerful role in defining identity, relationships, and social acceptance. For generations, families have been taught to preserve caste boundaries as a way of maintaining purity, status, and respect within society. Marriage, in particular, is not always seen as a personal choice but as a social arrangement that reflects the family's position and honour. When individuals, especially young people, choose to marry outside their caste or enter into relationships that go against traditional expectations, it is often perceived as a challenge not just to the family, but to the entire community's way of life.

The concept of "honour" in this context is closely tied to how others perceive a family. Social reputation carries immense weight, and people often fear being judged, criticized, or even excluded if they do not conform to established norms. This fear can be so strong that it overrides emotions like love, compassion, and understanding. Families may begin to see their own children not as individuals with rights and feelings, but as representatives of the family's image. When that image is threatened, some believe that extreme actions are necessary to restore their standing in society. Honour killings, therefore, are not just about anger or personal conflict; they are driven by a collective mindset where societal approval is valued more than human life.

Patriarchal traditions further deepen this issue by placing a disproportionate burden on women. In many cases, women are viewed as the carriers of family honour, and their behaviour is closely monitored and controlled. From a young age, they are often taught to prioritize family expectations over personal desires. Decisions related to education, mobility, and especially marriage are influenced by what is considered acceptable within the community. When a woman asserts her independence, particularly in choosing her partner, it is often seen as a direct act of defiance. This can lead to severe consequences, as families may feel that their authority and reputation are being questioned. At the same time, men involved in inter-caste relationships are also at risk, particularly when such relationships disrupt established social hierarchies. This shows that honour killing is not only a gender issue but also a reflection of rigid caste structures that resist change.

Another important aspect to consider is the role of community pressure. In many rural and

semi-urban areas of Tamil Nadu, social life is closely interconnected, and individuals are constantly aware of how they are perceived by others. Community leaders, relatives, and neighbours often play an active role in reinforcing traditional norms. In some cases, families may not initially support violence but are pushed towards extreme actions due to constant pressure, gossip, or fear of losing their place in the community. This creates an environment¹ where harmful practices are normalized and even justified as necessary for maintaining social order. The collective silence or indirect support of the community further enables such acts to continue.

Despite these challenges, it is important to recognize that Tamil Nadu is also a state that has seen significant social progress. Higher levels of education, urbanization, and exposure to diverse perspectives have begun to challenge traditional beliefs. Younger generations, in particular, are increasingly questioning rigid caste norms and asserting their right to choose their partners. Love marriages and inter-caste marriages, while still controversial in some areas, are becoming more visible and accepted in others. Media, social movements, and legal awareness have also played a role in highlighting the injustice of honour killings and advocating for change.

However, legal measures alone are not enough to completely address the issue. While laws exist to punish such crimes and protect individuals, the deeper problem lies in changing mindsets that have been shaped over centuries. True progress requires a shift in how society defines honour and respect. Instead of associating honour with control, obedience, and conformity, there needs to be a broader understanding that real honour lies in respecting individual choices, promoting equality, and upholding human dignity. Education, awareness programs, and open discussions can help challenge stereotypes and encourage more inclusive attitudes.

In conclusion, the socio-cultural context of honour killing in Tamil Nadu is complex and deeply rooted in caste, patriarchy, and community pressure. It is not an issue that can be

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1. In *Shafin Jahan v. Asokan K.M.* (2018), the Supreme Court upheld the importance of individual autonomy in choosing a life partner.
 2. In *Arumugam Servai v. State of Tamil Nadu* (2011), the Court strongly condemned caste-based violence and honour killings.
 3. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 introduces updated criminal law provisions aimed at improving justice delivery in India.
 4. The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 focuses on procedural reforms to make the criminal justice system more efficient.
 5. The Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam, 2023 deals with rules of evidence, ensuring better handling and evaluation of proof in legal cases.

solved overnight, but gradual change is possible through continuous efforts at both the individual and societal levels. By encouraging dialogue, promoting education, and strengthening legal protections, society can move towards a future where love and personal freedom are not seen as threats, but as fundamental rights. Only then can the cycle of violence be broken, and a more just and compassionate social environment be created.

ROLE OF CASTE SYSTEM:

The caste system plays a powerful and deeply rooted role in shaping social life in Tamil Nadu, and its influence can be clearly seen in the issue of honour killing. For many families, caste is not just a category but a part of their identity that has been passed down through generations. It is closely connected to their sense of pride, social standing, and belonging within the community. From a young age, individuals are often taught the importance of staying within their caste, especially when it comes to marriage. This belief is not always enforced with harshness at first, but it is quietly reinforced through everyday conversations, traditions, and expectations. Over time, it becomes something that people rarely question, as it is seen as the natural and “right” way of living.

Marriage, in this context, is not viewed as a purely personal decision based on love or compatibility. Instead, it is often treated as a social responsibility, where the choice of a partner reflects not just on the individual but on the entire family. Families prefer arranged marriages within the same caste because it ensures continuity of tradition and helps maintain social harmony within their community. When a young person chooses to marry outside their caste, it is often seen as breaking an unwritten rule. This act can create a sense of shock, disappointment, and even fear among family members, who begin to worry about how others will perceive them.

The idea of “honour” becomes closely tied to this situation. Families may feel that their reputation is at stake, and that accepting an inter-caste relationship would lead to criticism, gossip, or social exclusion. In tightly knit communities, where people’s lives are closely connected, such fears can feel very real and overwhelming. What starts as concern about societal judgment can slowly turn into pressure to take action in order to “correct” the situation. In extreme cases, this pressure leads to honour killings, where violence is wrongly justified as a way to restore lost respect. These actions are not always driven by cruelty alone, but by a deeply ingrained belief that protecting caste identity is more important than individual choice. At a human level, this creates a painful conflict within families. Parents who have spent years

caring for their children may suddenly find themselves unable to accept their decisions. Their love and concern become overshadowed by fear of society and the need to uphold tradition. Instead of seeing their children's choices as an expression of personal freedom, they may interpret them as acts of disobedience or betrayal. This emotional struggle is often intensified by the voices of relatives, neighbours, and community members, who may openly criticize or shame the family. In such an environment, families can feel isolated and pressured, leading them to make decisions they might not have considered otherwise.

It is also important to understand that the caste system does not operate in isolation. It is closely linked with other social factors, such as patriarchy and economic status. Women, in particular, are often placed at the center of this issue, as they are seen as the bearers of family honour. Their choices regarding marriage are closely controlled, and any deviation from expectations is judged more harshly. At the same time, men involved in inter-caste relationships may also face violence, especially if the relationship challenges existing social hierarchies. This shows that the problem is not limited to one gender but is deeply connected to the broader structure of society.

Despite the strength of these traditional beliefs, change is slowly taking place. Education, urbanization, and increased exposure to different cultures and ideas are encouraging people to question rigid caste norms. Younger generations are beginning to see marriage as a personal choice rather than a social obligation. They are more willing to challenge discrimination and stand up for their right to choose their partners. While resistance from society still exists, there is a growing awareness that caste-based restrictions are unfair and outdated.

At the same time, legal measures and social awareness campaigns are playing an important role in addressing the issue. Laws exist to protect individuals from violence and to punish those responsible for honour killings. However, laws alone cannot bring about lasting change unless there is a shift in people's attitudes and beliefs. Real progress requires a deeper transformation, where families begin to value their children's happiness and individuality over societal expectations. It involves creating a society where respect is not based on caste, but on mutual understanding and equality.

PATRIARCHY AND CONTROL OVER WOMEN:

Patriarchy plays a deeply influential role in shaping the social realities of many communities in Tamil Nadu, especially when it comes to controlling women's lives and choices. It is not always visible in obvious or harsh forms; instead, it often exists quietly within traditions,

expectations, and everyday practices. From a young age, many girls are raised with a clear understanding that their behaviour reflects not only on themselves but on their entire family. They are taught to be careful about how they speak, dress, interact, and make decisions.

While these expectations are often presented as guidance or protection, they also create invisible boundaries that limit a woman's freedom over time.

One of the most significant areas where this control becomes evident is in decisions related to love and marriage. In many families, women are expected to accept arranged marriages that align with caste, religion, and family preferences. The idea of choosing one's own partner, especially through love or outside accepted social norms, is often discouraged or even strongly opposed. This is because a woman's choices are closely tied to the concept of family honour. Her actions are seen as a reflection of how well the family has upheld its values and traditions. As a result, her personal desires are often placed secondary to what is considered socially acceptable.

This control is not always enforced through direct force; it is often maintained through emotional pressure, expectations, and fear of consequences. Women may be constantly reminded of their responsibilities towards their family, and the potential shame their actions could bring. Over time, this can lead to internal conflict, where they begin to question their own desires and choices. In some cases, they may suppress their feelings to avoid hurting their families or facing social backlash. However, when a woman chooses to assert her independence and make her own decisions, especially in matters of love, it can be seen as a serious act of defiance.

In extreme situations, this perceived defiance can lead to honour-based violence. Families, driven by the belief that their reputation has been damaged, may resort to harmful actions in an attempt to regain control and restore their standing in society. These acts are often justified within the framework of patriarchal thinking, where maintaining authority and control is seen as more important than respecting a woman's autonomy. It is important to understand that such actions are not simply the result of individual anger, but are supported by a broader system that normalizes control over women's lives.

At the same time, patriarchy also affects how men behave within this system. Men are often expected to act as protectors and decision-makers, carrying the responsibility of upholding family honour. This expectation can create pressure on them to control the actions of women in their family, even if they may not personally agree with such restrictions. In this way, patriarchy does not only limit women but also shapes the roles and responsibilities of men,

reinforcing a cycle that is difficult to break.

Despite these challenges, there are signs of gradual change. Education, exposure to different ideas, and increased awareness about individual rights are empowering more women to question traditional norms and assert their independence. Many families are also beginning to understand the importance of supporting their daughters' choices and treating them as individuals with their own aspirations. Social movements, media, and legal protections are playing an important role in challenging patriarchal attitudes and promoting gender equality.

However, change is not always easy or immediate. In many rural and semi-urban areas, traditional beliefs continue to hold strong, and women who challenge these norms may still face resistance. This highlights the need for continuous efforts to create awareness and encourage open discussions about gender roles and equality. It is important to create an environment where women feel safe to express their choices without fear of judgment or harm.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PRESSURE:

Family and community pressure are often quiet forces, but they can have a deep and lasting impact on people's lives, especially in closely connected societies like those found in many parts of Tamil Nadu. From a young age, individuals grow up surrounded by family members, relatives, and neighbours who are all part of their everyday experiences. In such an environment, life is rarely seen as purely individual. Instead, every action, decision, and behaviour is understood as something that reflects not only on the person but also on their entire family. This is particularly true when it comes to sensitive matters like love and marriage. What might seem like a personal choice to one person can quickly become a topic of discussion, concern, or even judgment for many others.

Within the family, expectations are usually built on tradition, experience, and a desire to protect both the individual and the family's reputation. Parents often believe that they are guiding their children in the right direction, based on values that have been followed for generations. They may feel a strong sense of responsibility to ensure that their children make decisions that align with social norms. However, this sense of responsibility can sometimes turn into pressure, especially when children begin to form their own opinions and make independent choices. When a son or daughter chooses a life partner based on love, particularly in ways that go against caste or community expectations, it can create a sense of discomfort and uncertainty within the family.

This reaction is not always rooted in a lack of love or care. In many cases, parents are genuinely

concerned about the consequences their children might face. They worry about how society will treat them, whether they will be accepted, and how their decision might affect the family's standing in the community. These concerns, though often unspoken, can create emotional distance between parents and children. Conversations that could have been open and understanding sometimes become tense and filled with misunderstanding. Children may feel unheard or restricted, while parents may feel disrespected or afraid of losing control over a situation they consider important.

The role of the community further intensifies this situation. In many rural and semi-urban areas, social life is deeply interconnected, and people are constantly aware of each other's lives. News travels quickly, and even small matters can become subjects of public discussion. Families may find themselves facing questions, comments, or criticism from relatives, neighbours, or community members. This kind of attention can be uncomfortable and stressful, making families feel as though they are being constantly observed and evaluated.

The fear of gossip or social exclusion can become so strong that it influences how families respond to situations within their own homes.

What makes this pressure even more complex is that it is not always openly expressed. It often exists in subtle forms—through casual remarks, comparisons with others, or expectations that are never directly stated but clearly understood. Over time, these small influences build up and shape people's thinking. Families may begin to prioritize what others might say over what they personally feel. In such circumstances, maintaining social approval can seem more important than supporting a loved one's happiness. This creates a difficult emotional conflict, where people feel torn between their personal values and the expectations placed upon them.

At a human level, this situation can be deeply painful for everyone involved. Parents who have spent years caring for their children may struggle to accept decisions that go against their beliefs. At the same time, children may feel caught between their desire for independence and their sense of responsibility toward their family. They may fear hurting their parents, yet also feel the need to live their own lives. This emotional struggle can lead to frustration, silence, and sometimes a breakdown in relationships. In extreme cases, when fear and pressure become overwhelming, it can even lead to harmful actions that have irreversible consequences.

However, it is important to recognize that change is slowly taking place. With increasing access to education, exposure to different cultures, and the influence of media and technology, many people are beginning to think differently. Younger generations are more likely to value personal choice, mutual respect, and emotional understanding in relationships.

They are more willing to question traditional expectations and speak openly about their feelings. At the same time, some families are also learning to adapt. They are beginning to realize that supporting their children's happiness does not necessarily mean losing their values or respect in society.

These changes may not happen quickly or evenly across all communities, but they show that social attitudes are not fixed. Conversations about individual rights, equality, and acceptance are becoming more common, and they are slowly reshaping how people think about family and community expectations.

Inter caste and inter religious relationships:

Inter-caste and inter-religious relationships represent a meaningful shift in how people view love, identity, and social boundaries. In a diverse country like India, where caste and religion have traditionally influenced marriage decisions, these relationships stand as a sign of changing attitudes. Instead of following rigid societal expectations, individuals in such relationships prioritize mutual respect, understanding, and emotional connection. This reflects a growing belief that personal happiness and compatibility matter more than social labels. Inter-caste relationships, in particular, challenge the deeply rooted caste system that has existed for centuries. By choosing partners from different caste backgrounds, individuals help break down discrimination and promote equality. These relationships send a strong message that all people are equal, regardless of their social classification. However, despite this positive impact, many couples still face resistance from their families or communities. Social pressure, fear of judgment, and traditional mindsets can create emotional and practical challenges for those involved.

Similarly, inter-religious relationships bring together individuals from different faiths, cultures, and traditions. These relationships often require a high level of understanding and respect, as partners may follow different customs, rituals, and beliefs. While this diversity can enrich the relationship and broaden perspectives, it can also lead to conflicts if not handled with care. In some cases, couples may also encounter legal or societal obstacles, especially when it comes to marriage procedures and acceptance by extended families.

Despite the challenges, inter-caste and inter-religious relationships play a crucial role in promoting social harmony and unity. They encourage people to move beyond prejudice and embrace diversity. Such relationships contribute to building a more inclusive society where differences are respected rather than feared. Over time, as more people accept these unions,

they can help reduce discrimination and foster a sense of equality and togetherness.

Ultimately, these relationships highlight the importance of love, respect, and human connection over traditional divisions, paving the way for a more progressive and understanding society.

1. Shankar–Kausalya Case (2016, Tiruppur)

A Dalit man named Shankar married Kausalya from a higher caste against her family's wishes. In 2016, Shankar was brutally hacked to death in a public place by hired men, while Kausalya survived the attack.

2. Kannagi–Murugesan Case (2003, Cuddalore)

An inter-caste couple, Murugesan (Dalit) and Kannagi, were murdered by the woman's family for marrying against caste norms. They were poisoned, and several accused were later convicted.

3. Saranya–Mohan Case (2022, Thanjavur)

Saranya (Dalit) married Mohan from another caste. Her brother invited the couple home and killed both of them with a weapon due to opposition to their marriage.

4. Kavin Case (2025, Thoothukudi)

Kavin Selvaganesh, a young Dalit man, was allegedly killed because of his relationship with a woman from another caste. The case involved family opposition and caste-based motives.

5. Young Woman Murder Case (2013, Tamil Nadu)

A 21-year-old woman who married outside her caste was killed by her own brother along with accomplices. Her husband was seriously injured in the attack.²

1. ² The National Crime Records Bureau regularly publishes data on crimes in India, including cases related to honour-based violence.
2. The Law Commission of India, in its 242nd Report, highlighted the need for a specific law to prevent interference in marriages, especially inter- caste unions.
3. Reports by the United Nations Human Rights Council emphasize that honour-based violence is a serious violation of human rights worldwide.
4. Human Rights