



Honour Killing in India: Is it really Honourable?

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Abstract

India is known as the Jagat- Guru among the rest of the countries in the world because India is home to some of the most ancient civilizations. It is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, with some of the most deeply religious societies and cultures. Religion plays a central and definitive role in the life of many of its people. The Indian culture often labeled as an amalgamation of several cultures, spans across the Indian subcontinent and has been influenced by a history that is several millennia old. One of the most important bases of Indian culture is, the self-pride and honour which every Indian have in his heart.

Keywords: Self-Pride, Honour Killing, Social Standing, Self Evaluation, Dishonour

The feeling of honour is beautifully presented in these lines of a song that is, “Sir kata sakte hain lekin sir jhuka sakte nahi”. The sense of honour is flowing in the blood of every Indians in its extreme. The next question arises is that what exactly honour is? Honour means being true to a set of personal ideals, or being a man of integrity. Honour as a code of behavior defines the duties of an individual within a social group. Margaret Visser observes that in an honour-based society "a person is what he or she is in the eyes of other people" (Visser 13). It is an abstract concept entailing a perceived quality of worthiness and respectability that affects both the social standing and the self-evaluation of an individual or corporate body such as a family, school, regiment or nation. Accordingly, individuals (or corporate bodies) are assigned worth and stature based on the harmony of their actions with a specific code of honour, and the moral code of the society at large.

If we take even a cursory look at history, honor pops up over and over again as a central theme in literature and life. The epic poems of Homer are primarily about honor and man's quest to achieve and maintain it. If you read Shakespeare's plays with a close eye, you'll find that honor and manhood take center stage as reoccurring themes. During the 17th and all the way into the early 20th century, upper class men in Europe and the United States regularly engaged in duels on “fields of honor” to defend their manhood. Across cultures and time, honor and manliness have been inextricably tied together. In many cases, they were

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synonymous. Honor lost was manhood lost. Because honor was such a central aspect of a man's masculine identity, men would go to great lengths to win honor and prevent its loss. Because honour was such a central aspect of a man's masculine identity, men would go to great lengths to win honour and prevent its loss.

Anthropologist Frank Henderson Stewart makes the case that honour comes in two types: Horizontal and Vertical. Horizontal honour is defined as the right to respect among an exclusive society of equals. It is a sense of mutual respect. It must be contingent upon certain unyielding standards in order to maintain honour within the group. A healthy feeling of shame, or the recognition that a person has failed to live up to the honour group's code is necessary for honour to exist. When individuals stop caring whether they've lost their right to respect in the group, honour loses its power to compel and check individual's behavior. Horizontal honour is an all-or-nothing game. You either have the respect of your peers or you don't.

Vertical honour, on the other hand, isn't about mutual respect, but is rather about giving praise and esteem to those, "who are superior, whether by virtue of their abilities, their rank, their services to the community, their sex, their kinship, or anything else" (Stewart 59). Vertical honour, by its nature, is hierarchical and competitive. Vertical honour goes to the man who not only lives the code of honour, but excels at doing so. It is a sense of praise, esteem and admiration. So it may be understood that honour consisted of two parts: respect from the honour group (horizontal honour) and praise from the honour group (vertical honour).

Now the next question comes into our minds is that, what is an honour killing? An honor killing is the homicide of a member of a family by other members, due to the perpetrators' belief that the victim has brought shame or dishonor upon the family, or has violated the principles of a community or a religion, usually for reasons such as refusing to enter an arranged marriage, being in a relationship that is disapproved by their family, having sex outside marriage, becoming the victim of rape, dressing in ways which are deemed inappropriate, or engaging in homosexual relations. *Human Rights Watch* defines "honor killings" as follows:

Honor killings are acts of vengeance, usually death, committed by male family members against female family members, who are held to have brought dishonor upon the family. A woman can be targeted by (individuals within) her family for a variety of reasons, including: refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual assault, seeking a divorce-even from an abusive husband-or (allegedly) committing adultery. The mere perception that a woman has behaved in a way that "dishonors" her family is sufficient to trigger an attack on her life (*Times of India* 3).

Although rarely, men can also be the victims of honor killings by members of the family of a woman with whom they are perceived to have an inappropriate relationship. The



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loose term "honor killing" applies to killing of both men and women in cultures that practice it.¹ Some women who bridge social divides, publicly engage other communities, or adopt some of the customs or the religion of an outside group may be attacked. In countries that receive immigrants, some otherwise low-status immigrant men and boys have asserted their dominant patriarchal status by inflicting honor killings on female family members who have participated in public life, for example, in feminist and integration politics.

Let us have a glimpse on some famous cases of honour killing in India. As the world celebrates 100 years of women suffrage, Indian women continue to fight for things that matter. In the course of history, women's voices have been silenced in the public arena. Call it a co-incidence, a high-esteem of self pride or lack of education, India definitely became the state with the highest number of honour killings in datas. Some of the cases were nerve rattling. The amount of torture the victimized couple had to go through in some of the cases has shook up people badly. Here are some prominent cases related to honour killings:

1 – Manoj and Babli case:-

The Manoj–Babli honour killing case was the honour killing of Indian newlyweds Manoj Banwala and Babli in June 2007 and the successive court case which historically convicted defendants for an honour killing. The individuals involved in the murder included relatives of Babli (Grandfather Gangaraj who is said to have been a Khap leader, Brother, Maternal and Paternal uncle and two cousins). Relatives of Manoj, specially his mother defended the relationship. The killing was ordered by a *khap panchayat* (*khap*),¹ a religious caste-based council among Jatts, in their Karora village in Kaithal district, Haryana.

The *khap* passed a decree prohibiting marriage against societal norms. Such caste-based councils are common in the inner regions of several Indian states, including Haryana, Punjab, western Uttar Pradesh, and parts of Rajasthan, and have been operating with government approval for years. In any event, the state government expressed no concern about the ruling of the *khap panchayat*. The Khap panchayat's ruling was based on the assumption that Manoj and Babli belonged to the Banwala gotra, a *Jat* community, and were therefore considered to be siblings despite not being directly related and any union between them would be invalid and incestuous. Nevertheless, the couple went ahead with their marriage, following which they were abducted and killed by Babli's relatives (*Indian Express*, June 2007).

2 – Abhishek and Bhavna Case:-

In a horrific reminder of how caste and family honour continue to be prized over women's lives in India, a 21-year-old student of Delhi University's Sri Venkateswara College was allegedly murdered by her parents for marrying her boyfriend against their wishes. The reason for her killing: the girl Bhavna had secretly married Abhishek, a boy from a different caste. According to the news reports, the victim Bhavna Yadav a resident of south west Delhi, was beaten up, strangled, and her body then dumped into a car which was driven to Alwar, Rajasthan (where her parents are originally from) and hurriedly cremated. The

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victim's father was a property dealer and mother was a homemaker. A maternal uncle was also allegedly involved in the crime. Bhavna secretly married Abhishek Seth, a 24-year-old assistant programmer at the Cabinet secretariat, because her parents were pressurizing her to call off her relationship with him. While Bhavna was from the Yadav caste from Rajasthan, Abhishek is a Punjabi (*Times of India* 2013).

3 – Nitish Katara Murder Case:-

Nitish Katara a business executive and the son of an IAS officer, was murdered on 17 February 2002, by Vikas Yadav, the son of Uttar Pradesh politician DP Yadav. Nitish had been in a relationship with DP Yadav's daughter Bharti Yadav for a long time and the girl's family did not approve of the relationship. Nitish's murder took place on the night of the wedding of a friend who was known to both him and Bharti. Katara's body was found on a highway. He had been battered to death with a hammer, following which diesel was poured on him and he was set on fire. The murder was committed by Vikas (Bharti's real brother) and Vishal Yadav (Bharti's cousin brother), and Sukhdev Pehalwan (a hired contract killer). All three have now been sentenced to life terms for abducting and killing Katara. During the court case, which dragged on for years, the Yadav family tried to ensure that Bharti was not called in as a witness. While in court, Bharti had repeatedly denied that she was in a relationship with Nitish (*India TV News*).

4 – Kuldeep and Monica Murder Case:-

Another honour killing hit the headlines in Delhi in June 2010 when a couple, Monica and Kuldeep, along with Monica's sister Shobha were killed by their family members. Monica had married Kuldeep, who was a Rajput boy, and their families did not approve of the alliance. Both of them belonged to the Wazipur village of Delhi. Shobha on the other hand was involved in a relationship with a boy belonging to another caste and had reportedly helped her sister elope. According to this *IBN-Live* report, the three accused - Ankit Chaudary, Mandeep Nagar and Nakul Khari- were on the run after committing the triple murders and when caught by the police, had claimed that "there was a lot of pressure on them and that's why they did this (murder)." (*Indian Express* June 2010). The three were allegedly killed for bringing dishonour to their families by marrying outside their community, adds the report. At the time of the murder, the family had shockingly justified the killing and Dharamveer Nagar the uncle of Mandeep and co-accused Ankit, had said that the killings were necessary to uphold the family's honour. Ankit was Monica's brother, while Mandeep was Shobha's brother. For the killers, it was evident that they didn't see anything wrong with the murders.

5 - Deepti Chhikara murder Case:-

In June 2012, reports came out that a young woman Deepti Chhikara was killed, and her body was then dumped in Uttarakhand. The girl, who was a school teacher at an MCD school, was strangled to death by her mother Birmati and brother Mohit, and later her uncle Amit helped the duo in disposing of the body. As this *Hindu* report at the time pointed out,

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"the mother-son duo first beat her up and Mohit later strangulated her to death. Birmati held Deepti by her legs, while Mohit strangulated her." Deepti wanted to marry one Lalit Vats, but her family was opposed to the match as he was from a different caste. Deepti was allegedly killed in April but her family didn't register any complaint. It was Lalit who alerted the police to the fact that Deepti had been missing since she went to her maternal home.

6 – Nirupma Pathak Murder Case:-

In May 2010, Nirupama Pathak, who was working as journalist with a business daily in Delhi, was murdered by her family in Jharkhand because she was in a relationship with a man from a lower caste. According to this *PTI* report, Nirupama was dating Priyabhanshu Ranjan a colleague and friend from her Indian Institute of Mass Communication in New Delhi and had planned to marry him in an Arya Samaj mandir. Nirupama was found dead on 29 April in her parents' house in Tilaya in Koderma district in Jharkhand under mysterious circumstances. Her family then filed a case of rape and abetment to suicide against Priyabhanshu which was later found to be false. Priyabhanshu's father Ramashankar Kanth had told *PTI* then, "My son is innocent. He is no way involved in the case. My son had informed me on the day Nirupama died that he received an SMS from Nirupama that her mother, father and brother have bolted her inside a bathroom at their house". While her mother called it a case of suicide, a post-mortem revealed that the journalist was smothered to death and that she was 10-12 weeks pregnant at the time of her murder. Nirupama's mother was arrested but later the court set her free as the police found a suicide note signed by Nirupama.

7 - Asha Saini and Yogesh murder case:

In June 2010, Delhi witnessed a brutal honour killing in Swarup Nagar in North-east part of the city, when 19-year-old Asha Saini and her boyfriend Yogesh, 20, were tortured, electrocuted and beaten to death by the girl's family. As this *Rediff* report recounts, "the girl's family had disapproved of Asha's relationship with Yogesh, a driver, and had asked the boy to back off." The couple was tortured in a flat owned by the girl's uncle Omprakash and even neighbours who heard the couple wailing for hours and begging for help but didn't step in to help. Allegedly the family threatened the neighbours and told them to "mind their own business," says the report. No one called the police to help the couple.

These are only some of the examples of honour killings in India which is growing day by day with much more brutal incidents. Honour killings have been hitting the headlines quite often and killing in order to save the so called 'honour' of the family is very brutal and dishonourable. The most watched scenes of honour killings in India are reflecting that this is a death that is awarded to a man or woman by the family members only for marrying against their parent's wishes or having premarital relationships with someone who is not chosen by the family. In patriarchal societies like India women often bear the burden of a family's honor - which their parents or spouses might feel is compromised when a woman marries according to her own wishes or else seeks a divorce. In some instances, male relatives or husbands have

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lashed out at women because of a mere suspicion that she is having an extramarital relationship. While a man may well be involved with her, the vast majority of those killed under the pretense of maintaining a family's honor are women.

It is a very shameful condition for a country like India which is known as the world's largest democratic country in the world. It is a big question that what kind of democracy is this, where human beings are massacred and murdered brutally only for the sake of the so called 'honour'. What kind of democracy is this where one can not have the freedom to choose their life partner? The persons who bridge social divides, publicly engage other communities, or adopt some of the customs or the religion of an outside group may be attacked easily only for honour. In a country like India where women are considered as *Devi* and *Durga*, the act of honour killing is a very heated and burning issue for debate that whether the honour killings are really the act of honour or not?

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