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HONOUR KILLING IN INDIA AND TAMIL NADU: A DEEP SOCIO-LEGAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Honour killing remains one of the most stark and disturbing forms of socially sanctioned violence in contemporary India. Despite constitutional guarantees of liberty, equality, and dignity, and despite statutory criminal prohibitions, the persistence of violence conducted by family or community members against individuals who transgress patriarchal, caste or religious norms reveals profound socio-cultural fractures in Indian society. This paper argues that honour killings in India are both a symptom and a reinforcement of oppressive caste hierarchies, patriarchal control over women's autonomy, and failures within the criminal justice system. Focusing particularly on the southern state of Tamil Nadu, this research analyzes socio-cultural dynamics, legislative frameworks including the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and its replacement the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023, constitutional and human rights implications, judicial responses, conviction patterns, and campaigns for legal reform. Through case studies such as the Udumalai Shankar murder case, the Kannagi-Murugesan killing, and the 2024 murder of Praveen, this paper highlights the systemic challenges in addressing honour-motivated violence and proposes pathways for legislative reform and stronger enforcement mechanisms. The paper reviews government crime statistics, human rights commission interventions, NGO reports, academic scholarship, and contemporary debates on need for separate legal provisions. It situates honour killings within the larger context of caste violence and gender bias, providing an integrated critique of cultural practice and legal shortcomings. This thorough investigation ultimately underscores that honour killings are deeply rooted in socio-historical power structures that legal reform alone cannot eradicate; but that without targeted legal recognition and socio-legal reforms, justice will continue to elude survivors and their families.

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INTRODUCTION: HONOUR KILLING AS A SOCIAL AND LEGAL PHENOMENON

Honour killing refers to the murder of an individual—usually by close family members—motivated by a perception that the victim has brought shame or dishonour upon the family or community, often due to choices regarding marriage, romantic relationships, or other personal autonomy decisions. Although the term “honour killing” does not appear as a specific offence in Indian criminal law, such killings are prosecuted under conventional homicide provisions. The absence of a distinct statutory framework for honour killing in the Indian legal ecosystem significantly complicates both data collection and accountability, resulting in under-reporting, misclassification of cases as general homicides or suicides, and inadequate recognition of motive as a social crime rooted in caste or patriarchal norms. In India’s socio-legal landscape, honour killings are closely interwoven with caste hierarchies, community vestiges, and intense social stigmas attached to inter-caste, inter-religious, or love marriages, reflecting a tension between individual constitutional rights and collective traditionalism.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ROOTS OF HONOUR KILLINGS IN INDIA

In India, Honour Killing is firmly rooted in historical, cultural, and social structures that predates modern legal systems. In essence Honour Killing is based on the belief that what an individual decides for themselves, specifically concerning their marriage, sexual orientation, and/or relationships, is not their choice but a choice made by the family/community. The entrenched patriarchal and caste hierarchy continues to influence day-to-day behaviours throughout the country.

In Indian society, historically, a patriarchal kinship system determines how lineage and determining inheritance/societal continuance are structured through pre-arranged marriages. So, women’s sexuality/marital choices are, in most cases, controlled or monitored in a way to ensure that caste purity/societal continuity is intact. As a result, if an individual deviates from these prescribed behaviours (such as choosing to marry outside of a caste or religion), there is a belief that their behaviour threatens the honour of their family; therefore, Honour Killings are implemented in order to bring about extreme social punishment by restoring the moral fabric of our society.

The cultural origins of honour homicide have their roots in the customs based on tribalism and feudalism that were characteristic of South Asia. In a feudal environment, family reputation was

primarily based upon the ownership of land, the formation of political alliances, and the projection of power within society. Marriages, therefore, were a means of furthering those interests that protected the family unit's honour and legitimacy. If a family or community were to experience a violation of their marital norms, such would be construed as violating the authority of the entire collectivity. In the tribal or clan structure, group identity typically has greater significance than individual rights, and there exist lineages that « sanction » people to conform; these sanctions can often include violence. Therefore, in a tribal context or clan system, honour killings come about as a vehicle of enforcing the authority of the collective rather than of avenging the wronged.

Honour-based violence is also understood to occur predominantly within societies that possess a strong degree of localised social identity and within which kinship/caste relationships influence how marital behaviour is performed. Within this type of social structure, the normative expectations surrounding honour are enforced via informal institutions (caste councils, clan leaders, community leaders). There are several regions/cultures where honour killings have become common practice. In addition to there being regional or cultural variations regarding the form of honour killing, all honour killing practices across cultures and regions are characterised by strong, patriarchal dominance, an inflexible social hierarchy, and minimal or ineffective state intervention; India clearly demonstrates this view. Even with the presence of constitutional protection for equal and personal freedoms, there continues to exist in India a continuing practice of honour killing because of adherence to prevailing customary norms or practices. Legal changes have still not been able to effectively change the social framework of holding family honour as more important than individual freedom; hence, the dissonance that exists between the legal system and social practices continues to exist, and is especially noticeable in more rural areas of India, where monitoring of community behaviour and enforcement of sanctions against those in violation of customary norms is more active and widespread. On the other hand, this problem is not limited to rural areas; increasing numbers of urban-based honour killings demonstrate that cultural values will survive regardless of the form of geographic and economic mobility.

An even greater degree of imbalance occurs when examining the geographic distribution of honour killings in India. States such as Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan are often cited as having the largest number of honour killings and are generally associated with large dominant caste hierarchies and male-oriented ownership of agricultural land. In southern states, particularly Tamil Nadu, honour killings typically occur in conjunction with an individual originating from a specific caste preventing inter-caste marriage; perpetuated primarily by Dalits (those who were previously referred to as

"untouchables") who marry into other castes. Although the differences between regional types of honour killings illustrate there are different forms of social organisations that have honour-killing elements, all honour -based organisations have honour-killing elements.

Data about honour killings in India is inconsistent and incomplete. Honour killings were only recorded as a motive for murder by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in India between 2020 and 2022. Reports from that time frame show sporadic records of honour killings; therefore, the absence of record-keeping does not mean that honour killings do not occur but that selecting categories within the data was done inconsistently.

The issue with the NCRB data on honour killings has been that they are not defined by the Indian Penal Code (IPC) as a separate crime; therefore, many cases are instead reported as murder, suicide or accidental deaths and do not demonstrate the specific motive of honour. Police officers in charge of the cases may not want to label them as honour killings, due to pressure from community members, political representatives or lack of clear policies. Additionally, the families of the victims may not disclose the harm done to their loved ones to avoid social stigmas and/or retaliation, creating issues with under-reporting.

When looking at NCRB statistics versus reports from independent researchers/civil society organisations the difference between what the data say and what actually happens is very apparent. The NGOs who work with caste violence, women's rights and inter-caste marriages provide many more honour killings than those represented in the NCRB data. This shows that using only state data cannot convey the entire story of honour killings.

Honour killers have an entire cultural story that legitimises the use of violence to correct moral issues. Language and terminology used to describe the honour killings (like family shame, loss of respect, community loss of honour etc.) all imply that the victim of honour killing is responsible for the violent act against them. This provides a misleading representation of the violent and coercive nature of honour-based control. The media's framing of honour killings as a family tragedy rather than as systemic violence reinforces this framing of honour killings as an accepted cultural response.

The continued existence of honour-based killings indicates the persistent failure of social change to reach private domains such as the family and marriage. While the public domain has seen some level of change through increased access to education and employment, private decision-making still occurs using traditional norms. Marriage is one example of a place where control, caste and patriarchy intersect to the fullest degree.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDIA: PENAL PROVISIONS AND CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS

At present, Indian law does not define “honour killing” as a unique category of crime; instead, perpetrators are charged under general homicide, abetment and conspiracy provisions in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and its successor, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023. Under the IPC, offences that encompass honour-motivated violence include culpable homicide and murder (formerly Section 300 IPC), attempt to murder (Section 307 IPC), and related offences such as abetment and conspiracy.² Following the passage of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, which replaced the IPC in 2024, murder continues to be treated as a primary offence (BNS Section 103) along with provisions addressing criminal conspiracy and abetment.³ In addition, Indian constitutional protections including Articles 14 (Equality before law), 15 (Prohibition of discrimination), 19 (Freedom of expression and association), and 21 (Right to life and personal liberty) provide normative safeguards against caste- and gender-based violence inherent in honour killing.⁴ Nonetheless, the absence of a dedicated statutory offence acknowledging the social motive of honour crimes has led to advocacy for specific legislative reform, including proposals like the Prohibition of Unlawful Assembly (Interference with the Freedom of Matrimonial Alliances) Bill, 2011, which sought to criminalise collective intimidation against lawful marriages.⁵

HONOUR KILLING AND CASTE: INTERSECTIONALITY OF OPPRESSION

In India, honour killings are one of the most violent forms of social control and occur at the intersection of caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and the authority of the family. Honour killings are often framed as crimes committed in pursuit of tradition or honour; however, at their core, they are acts punishing people primarily women and Dalit men-for crossing rigid caste boundaries by living outside of accepted norms. Examining honour killings from a caste perspective reveals that systemic oppression does not operate in a vacuum; they are supported by systems of intersectionality that create inequality and violence.

Caste is a persistent form of social structure that exists in India and regulates how people relate to one another in terms of marriage, sexuality and family. Historically, endogamy, the practice of marrying within one’s own caste, has been one way to ensure the purity of the caste structure, and thus the continued existence of the caste hierarchy. Inter-caste relationships, including those between Dalit

men and women from dominant (high) castes, are primarily viewed as a direct challenge to this social order; therefore, through honour killings, caste systems re-establish their dominance and reinforce their control over individuals who violate established boundaries. Intersectionality of caste and patriarchy is especially visible when we consider examples of honour killings; we see that women's bodies and choices become mechanisms to assert both family and caste honour, as their autonomy is subordinate to collective reputational interests. Women who make choices about whom they wish to partner with (primarily outside of their own caste) are perceived to be violating both gender-based expectations of obedience and purity ascribed to them by the caste system.

Men of the Dalit caste who engage in inter-caste relationships experience a distinctly different vulnerability than Dalit women engage in similar relationships. When Dalit men are involved with women from dominant castes, those relationships tend to be framed as acts of transgression and defiance, which often elicits violent reactions by their communities. Honour killings in these situations are not simply acts of vengeance stemming from family members; rather, they are collective declarations of caste power. These honour killings often receive support or tacit approval by the extended family networks of the deceased, as well as community members, further highlighting society's legitimization of caste-based violence.

The organisation, commission, and subsequent cover-up of such crimes are often the work of many individuals, including family members and community leaders. The unwillingness of communities to work with law enforcement agencies further cements impunity.

The role of the state and the criminal justice system cannot be overemphasised in determining the outcome of honour killing cases. While honour killing is not a crime under Indian law, the courts have been consistent in labelling such crimes as serious violations of the right to life and dignity under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. However, the failure of law enforcement agencies to act, such as the late response of the police, failure to register complaints, and failure to protect threatened couples, betrays institutional complicity in the perpetuation of caste violence.

The concept of intersectionality is critical to understanding honour killings. The term was coined to describe the intersection of different forms of oppression. The victims of honour killings are usually members of a socially marginalized community. A Dalit woman in an inter-caste relationship, for example, is discriminated against on the basis of her caste, gender, and class. Her marginalization cannot be remedied by a single-axis approach that focuses only on gender or caste.

The psycho-social impact of honour killings is another area that establishes the intersectionality of honour killings. The victims of honour killings, such as partners who escape violence or relatives who support inter-caste relationships, are often left traumatized, ostracized, and impoverished. Women who survive honour-based violence are abandoned by both their natal and marital families, while Dalit women are subjected to double discrimination on the basis of their caste.

The caste aspect of honour killings is often watered down in the media and public discourse, being represented as cultural outliers or family feuds. The lack of official statistics on honour killings also makes them invisible, making it difficult to design targeted policies. The role of NGOs and civil society groups in documenting honour killings and helping survivors is critical, but their data is not often incorporated into government policies.

The problem of honour killings needs to be addressed through a multi-faceted strategy that acknowledges the intersectional nature of this problem. Legal changes need to be accompanied by preventive strategies like protection programs for inter-caste couples, witness protection, and holding the police accountable for inaction. Social strategies like education, outreach, and economic empowerment of survivors are also necessary to challenge the caste and patriarchal ideologies that underpin honour killings.

TAMIL NADU FOCUS: PATTERNS, CASE STUDIES, AND NGO EVIDENCE

In South India, Tamil Nadu serves as an interesting case study of the factors affecting honour killings, looking at the complex relationships between caste, authority within the family, state government, and the criminal justice system. Although the state has a history of promoting social progress through different social reform movements, honour killings are still present in both rural and urban Tamil Nadu. In addition to the progressive laws of Tamil Nadu, this combination of progressive and regressive laws make the state an interesting location for academic study. In Tamil Nadu, establishing the actual scope of honour killings is difficult mainly due to the lack of accurate representation through the official crime statistics. Most often, honour killings are included in general categories of murder/suicide in state crime statistics.

In contrast, Honour-related crimes have been documented by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). For instance, the NGO Evidence has been documenting caste-related atrocities that have occurred in Tamil Nadu, India, and they estimate that there have been approximately 80 Caste-based honour killings since 2015, which is in complete contrast to the low number of these crimes

documented by Government Authorities. This underscores the disparity between the State's numbers and actual numbers reported in society.

In Tamil Nadu honour killing cases, a common theme is young partners in inter-caste relationships with a significant other who is of Scheduled Caste, and the case often has multiple levels of family opposition. Family members generally escalate their opposition to young couples through a distinct chain of events: threats, shadowing, emotional coercion, forced confinement, and finally extreme violence. These events suggest that honour killings are not usually impulsive or spontaneous acts. Honour killings are often included many times by family members, either directly or indirectly. Law enforcement agencies typically view initial warning signs of family opposition (such as threats or missing person complaints) as private issues to be dealt with internally; as such, they often fail to intervene early and provide necessary assistance.

The 2024 murder of Praveen in Chennai's Pallikaranai neighbourhood is an example of many systemic failures faced by our society. Praveen was a member of the Dalit caste and was murdered by his wife's family members because of their inter-caste marriage. Tragically, his wife later committed suicide after being unable to bear the violence done to her husband and the lengthy emotional toll brought about by her husband's death and her social isolation and the uncertainty of the future as a result of the legal proceedings to follow.

The Pallikaranai incident represents a range of criminal justice system failures. Despite having received prior threats, reports indicate that police protection was either delayed or poorly executed. This demonstrates a reluctance on the part of law enforcement to intercede in what are deemed to be criminal family matters when there is clear criminal intent to intervene on behalf of a victim. Due to the lack of effective prevention mechanisms, such as safe houses, emergency protection orders, or active engagement in monitoring high-risk couples, individuals are at risk of experiencing fatal acts of violence.

Furthermore, honour killing cases in Tamil Nadu reveal a pattern of disinterest from the legal system towards the aftermath of honour killings through the use of delayed investigations, downgrading of charges, or downgrading of prosecutions due to large social pressure, political influences, or lack of protection of witnesses. Also, in many instances, the family members of the accused turn hostile towards the witness who was victimized, and subsequently, survivors of honour killings are intimidated. Given the low level of convictions for honour killings, there is a culture of impunity that reassures the perpetrators of honour killings that caste-based honour violence has little or no legal consequences.

In addition, there is significant anecdotal evidence and testimonials of honour killings by communities in Tamil Nadu (often through the use of Facebook). Social media narratives and testimonies from both victims and survivors of honour killings (e.g., “Kavin” in Tamil Nadu) demonstrate that honour-based violence continues with alarming frequency. A consistent theme across these narratives is that honour-based violence often results in threats of violence, forced separation, and/or the disappearance of a victim, and then the victim becoming invisible, as there has been little or no communication from authorities. Further compounding the issue of honour killing is the lack of sustained media coverage regarding honour killings and lack of follow-up to legal developments.

The purpose of these narratives is to illustrate the disconnect between lived reality and legal discourse. Although honour killings are condemned many times by the courts of India based on Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, the enforcement on the ground is still inadequate. In Tamil Nadu, caste functions as a means of social control through honour killings, particularly over women’s marriage choices. Women who enter into inter-caste relationships are doubly victimised: first by violence from their families and then by social isolation from society and neglect by institutions. The fact that the wife of Praveen committed suicide illustrates the ways in which honour violence does not just mean the killing of someone, but also includes psychological coercion and trauma and, eventually, the abandonment of both the family as well as the state. In conclusion, Tamil Nadu’s honour killing cases reveal deep structural flaws in early intervention, victim protection, and post-crime accountability. NGO documentation, case studies like the Pallikaranai murder, and community testimonies collectively demonstrate that honour-based violence remains a serious yet under-acknowledged problem. For researchers, Tamil Nadu offers a critical lens through which to examine how caste, family power, and state inaction converge to sustain honour killings, despite constitutional guarantees and judicial condemnation. Addressing this violence requires not only stronger laws but also proactive policing, community engagement, and institutional recognition of honour killings as a distinct and grave form of criminality.

From a criminological standpoint, honour killings challenge traditional views of crime as an individual deviant act. They are, instead, collective crimes that arise from community acceptance and social norms as well as collusion with institutions (such as law enforcement and judicial systems). The failure of law enforcement authorities to respond to threats of violence against people; the silence of the community in response to acts of honour violence; and the failure to convict offenders collectively normalise any act of honour killing.

JUDICIAL RESPONSES AND COURT PROCEEDINGS

The legal response to honour killing in India, especially Tamil Nadu, through a Madras High Court judgement and subsequent Supreme Court ruling, marks an important evolution of the understanding of honour killing within Indian jurisprudence. Honour killing has not been addressed by a specific provision under the law, but instead has been prosecuted and punished under provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) that can hold those responsible for honour killings accountable. Through various means, including sentence length, the manner in which cases have been reasoned through the lenses of judicial interpretation of the Constitution and other legal concepts, the courts have sought to designate honour killing as a form of homicide that has been aggravated by prejudice against the caste system and social intolerance.

The Kannagi murder case of 2008 exemplifies the judicial response to honour-based violence as well as its willingness to impose severe punishment upon offenders. In this instance, the perpetrator (Murugesan) was murdered by his mother (Kannagi) due to their caste differences. The trial court imposed the death penalty, which reflected how serious it viewed the crime as being part of the “rarest of rare” category under Indian sentencing law. Although this penalty was later converted to life in prison, the High Court upheld his murder conviction and that of the severity of his offence. The court also acknowledged that the murders were committed for honour-killing reasons based on caste and, due to this, recognised motive as an important aggravating factor in determining the sentence to be imposed.

The High Court, therefore, demonstrated how, in the absence of an offence that was labelled as honour killing, the courts may still incorporate hate-based motives into their analysis of the legal issues before them. This was supported by the constitutional principles of equality and dignity expressed in Article 14 and 21. In acknowledging the motive for these crimes, the court provided a strong indication that honour-based violence is not a domestic or private issue but rather a serious public crime against constitutional morality.

In 2025, the Supreme Court upheld the convictions in the killing of Kannagi-Murugesan, and this showed its commitment to honour killings with a much stricter judicial approach.

Another landmark case that shaped the judicial understanding of honour crimes within Tamil Nadu was the Udumalai Shankar case. Shankar was a Dalit man who was killed in public by his wife's family after he had married someone from an upper-caste community in here and by having the severity of both the crime and evidenced by the clear caste motive to commit the crime, the trial chamber awarded death sentences against the key defendants. Subsequently that part of each of the

sentences were later reduced to life imprisonment by the Court of Appeal, and upheld by the Madras High Court (the Court of Origin) in its confirmation of the underlying convictions and the number of individuals that participated as a collective group in the crime, that also included multiple family members who conspired to both plan and execute the murder.

The court's ruling in Udumalai Shankar's case further promotes the growth of a more victim-centred approach toward honour killing jurisprudence. By ordering compensation to be paid by the accused along with imprisonment, the court recognised the social and economic harm caused by honour crimes based on caste-related Honor Crime and made an effort to rectify social and economic harm through a restorative approach within the confines of the criminal justice system, while also providing for the punishment of the offenders at the same time.

All of these honour killing decisions establish the courts' recognition of honour killings as being one of extreme seriousness, even in the absence of a dedicated statutory framework for honour killings. Over and over, the courts have emphasised that honour killings violate the fundamental tenets of individual autonomy, freedom of choice regarding marriage, and human dignity, which is why the courts imposed severe penalties upon the offenders. All of these factors illustrate that the courts view honour killing as a socially dangerous crime that perpetuates caste-based hierarchies and collective violence.

Judicial engagement has provided some important contributions to limiting honour killings, but they are reactive not protective in most cases, and the courts are limited because they must act within the bounds of existing laws that address homicide. As a result, most judicial accountability occurs only after irreversible harm has occurred.

To conclude, the Madras High Court and the Supreme Court have shaped honour killing jurisprudence through case law arising from the judiciary in Tamil Nadu. The cases of Kannagi–Murugesan and Udumalai Shankar are examples of where the judiciary has determined that honour killings based on caste warrant severe punishment and are unconstitutional. While there is not a specific statutory offence created, the Madras High Court and the Supreme Court's decisions show that courts are capable of ensuring accountability and reinforcing constitutional morality within the structure of present day criminal law.

DATA CHALLENGES AND UNDER-REPORTING

One of the most profound challenges in honour killing analysis is the scarcity and unreliability of data. Official statistics from the Ministry of Home Affairs indicate motive of murder for honour killings

registered under crime data from 2020-2022, but figures are patchy and often show very low numbers, which contradict civil society organization findings. This disjunction is due to inconsistent classification, where honour killings are often recorded simply as murder or suicide, obscuring motive and thereby undermining recognition of the scale of the problem. NGOs report high rates of cases remaining pending in court, with low conviction rates, reflecting systemic judicial bottlenecks. In Tamil Nadu alone, Evidence has reported large backlogs under the SC/ST Act and low conviction rates for caste violence, underscoring that honour killings may be a subset of systemic caste-based crimes poorly captured in official crime data.¹⁰

ADVOCACY, LEGAL REFORM AND THE CALL FOR A SEPARATE LAW

Across India and specifically within Tamil Nadu, activists, legal scholars, and victims' families have demanded a standalone legal framework for honour killings to reflect the unique motive and pre-offence intimidation that precedes such murders. Proposals like the 2011 Bill on unlawful assembly and interference with matrimonial choice sought to criminalise the coercion and intimidation surrounding marriage choices, rather than only the killing itself.⁵ Advocates argue that a separate law would facilitate better data capture, create criminal offenses for pre-murder intimidation acts, and enhance protective measures for threatened couples. Judicial pronouncements in cases like *Lata Singh v. State of U.P.* and *Arumugam Servai v. State of Tamil Nadu* emphasise police obligation to protect couples but rely on existing general provisions, illustrating limitations in current law.⁴

SOCIO-LEGAL IMPACT AND HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

Honour killings represent gross violations of fundamental human rights, including the right to life, equality, and personal liberty. Beyond criminal punishment, such killings have lasting socio-psychological consequences on survivors, families, and communities, reinforcing structural discrimination. The persistence of honour killings reflects the resilience of caste hierarchies and patriarchy, and the failure of social institutions to protect individual autonomy, particularly for women and caste minorities.

CONCLUSION

Honour killings in India, particularly in contexts like Tamil Nadu, are deeply rooted in caste and patriarchal structures that resist constitutional norms of individual dignity and equality. Legal frameworks, while providing punitive measures under general homicide provisions, fall short in addressing the distinct motive and social dynamics inherent in honour crimes. This paper has demonstrated through case studies, legal analysis, NGO reports, and socio-cultural discourse that honour killings require multifaceted responses including introduction of specific statutory offences that explicitly recognise honour killings and related intimidation acts, strengthened protective mechanisms for at-risk couples, including police protocols and witness protection, improved criminal justice processes with specialised prosecutors sensitised to caste and gender biases and comprehensive data collection and reporting frameworks to accurately capture honour-motivated violence across states. Only through such holistic reforms, supported by societal transformation that Rejects caste discrimination and patriarchal control over marriage choices, can India begin to eradicate honour killings.