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Triple murder in India highlights increase in 'honour killings'

New custodians of age-old prejudices behind increase in 'honour killings' in India

Jason Burke in Wazirpur
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Kuldeep and Monica who were shot dead in India Photograph: Imtiyaz Khan

Shobha and Monica were cousins. They walked to school together through the narrow, fly-ridden alleys of Wazirpur, a once rural village now overtaken by the sprawling suburbs of northern Delhi. They were often in each other's homes, narrow apartments with little privacy.

They sometimes met at the dairy, an ill-lit room stacked with steel churns and basins of curd where a friend, Deepak, 18, remembered Shobha as "pretty, fun, outgoing".

Shobha, 20, had a rebellious streak. Sometimes, she even took the bus to McDonald's or the mall in the upmarket neighbourhood just a mile or so away. Friends said she wanted to be a model.

Monica, 24, was more serious. She had married a local boy, Kuldeep, four years ago and was, relatives said, happy with her new life.

Shobha, Monica and Kuldeep were each shot twice in the head last Sunday evening. They had no reason to suspect their murderers. One was Shobha's brother, Mandeep. The other was Monica's brother, Ankit. The third was a local boy known to them both.

There are 1,000 "honour killings" a year in [India](#), according to one recent study, but few reveal the underlying causes as the triple murder of Wazirpur. Significantly, the Indian capital itself has seen an unprecedented spate of such incidents in recent weeks.

All six of those involved in last weekend's murders were living on frontiers: between Wazirpur, their working-class neighbourhood, and Ashok Vihar, the adjacent upmarket suburb; between the increasingly cosmopolitan Indian capital and its deeply conservative hinterland; between the crushing poverty of their parent's childhoods and the relative wealth of their own.

It is a world in which caste, traditional authority and arranged marriage clashed with aspirations to Bollywood-style romance. The age of all those involved is significant, according to Professor Surinder Jodhka of Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University.

All were born around the time of the major changes that liberalised India's economy in the early 1990s, sparking rapid growth.

"They grew up in post-reform India. This is a new generation reaching the age of marriage," Jodhka told the Guardian.

Monica and Kuldeep were on the point of crossing the gulf between the old India and the new. They lived in a rented flat and Kuldeep commuted to his job in a call centre.

They had eloped too – the first from Wazirpur ever to do so. They had also ignored India's system of prejudice and hierarchy as they came from different castes. Yet, their parents had accepted the match. "We were not against it," said Jai Singh Naggar.

Unlike in many "honour killings" – such as that of a girl and her lower caste boyfriend beaten to death with iron rods in another Delhi neighbourhood earlier this month – older family members were not involved.

Nor was there any direct sanction given by community elders. "We cannot stop them. What has to happen will happen. But we do not think it was a good thing to do," said Mahinder Kahri, 64, head of the local council.

The murderers acted alone, albeit having grown up steeped in a culture of honour, patriarchal authority and violent retribution for transgression.

The spark for the killing appears to have been the disappearance of Shobha's sister with her own "boyfriend". Shobha herself had previously run away with a man. She had come back home alone but the damage had been done.

"For years her brother had got no respect round here. Even his friends were taunting him. When Shobha did the same thing, he just felt he had to act," Saurav, 18, told the Guardian.

Shobha's brother thus sought out Ankit, the brother of Monica. He too was being taunted for the shame his sister's unauthorised marriage brought the family. The two enlisted a mutual friend.

Prem Chowdhry, a respected historian and researcher, said it was unsurprising that young men had taken the lead role. In the neighbouring state of Haryana, foeticide of girls has led to a ratio of 800 women to every 1,000 men. Women also "marry up" – Monica's husband came from the higher rajput class – leaving more than a third of lower caste men without wives, she said.

"The social situation is very volatile. The marriage market is very tight and that causes huge problems. Youngsters react very strongly. If a woman makes an independent choice she has to pay the penalty," Chowdhry said.

In Wazirpur yesterday, teenage boys were backing the murderers. "Whatever happened is for the best. There's a limit to how much you can take. I'd do the same to my sister," said Rohit, 17.

After the killings, the three Wazirpur men fled in a borrowed car, first to Ghaziabad and then to the spiritual centre of Rishikesh, where they threw the home-made murder weapon into the waters of the Ganges. Hours later they were arrested.

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