

## **In Chennai conference, Dalit scholars call for separate act to prevent caste killings**

*A group of activists from across Tamil Nadu discussed the increasing trend of caste killing in a one-day conference titled 'Confronting Honour Killing – A Multifaceted Approach'.*

Written by: [Nithya Pandian](#)

Edited by: [Vidya Sigamany](#)

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“That pregnant Dalit teen was gang-raped and brutally murdered by dominant caste men. When we tried to meet the family members of the victim as human rights defenders, police officials stopped us,” Asirvatham from human rights organisation People’s Watch said. He was addressing a gathering of more than 100 students at the Madras School of Social Work on ‘Legal Barriers and Challenges in Interventions’ on Thursday, March 21. There was pin-drop silence in the auditorium as he detailed the ordeal that the victim went through before she was murdered and disposed of in a well.

Asirvatham’s talk was part of a one-day conference titled *Confronting Honour Killing – A Multifaceted Approach*, in which a group of activists from across the state discussed the increasing trend of caste killing and what protective measures can be taken. All the participants sought a separate act to prevent caste killings in Tamil Nadu.

Asirvatham was referring to the caste killing of a 16-year-old girl who belonged to the Paraiyar (Scheduled Caste) community by Vanniyar (Most Backward Class) men in Ariyalur in 2016. After it was revealed that the victim was pregnant, the irresponsible official who failed to take action when her father tried to lodge a missing complaint berated the parents and taunted them for “not bringing up their daughter properly”.

“With the police acting as a barrier, we had to fight... fight for everything. There is no separate act for caste killing, so every case would be booked under CrPC 174. It takes all our energy to alter the FIR to include sections under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act (SC/ST POA),” Asirvatham said.

The conference is seen as significant at a time when a brutal caste killing occurred in the state capital just a month ago, and caste leader Suriamoorthi who publicly threatened to kill Dalit youngsters who are in a

relationship with Gounder women was given a ticket to contest in the Lok Sabha elections as part of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam alliance. After backlash, it was announced that VS Madheswaran would replace Suriamoorthi. The participants in the panel discussions ranged from activists who work at the ground level to eradicate the practice of caste killing and caste crimes to renowned advocates who fight for justice for victims of caste killings.

Anti-caste activist Kausalya asked under which sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) her father and other family members would have been booked if she had been murdered in the infamous Udumalaipettai caste killing incident of 2016. "There is no act to try my parents if I had been killed. As I belong to a dominant caste, the case would have been construed as a revenge killing but not as a caste killing," Kausalya said and reiterated the need for separate laws to protect couples from casteist fanatics. "The SC/ST POA Act is to prevent atrocities, but there is no remedy for victims who lose their loved ones to caste crimes if one of the partners is a Dalit," she noted. In 2016, Kausalya's husband Shankar was brutally murdered by her family members in broad daylight as they were opposed to the couple's marriage. Speaking on the topic 'Psycho-Social, Legal Barriers and Coping Strategies', Kausalya also noted how political parties take different stands when they are in power. "O Panneerselvam, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, refused to accept that Shankar's murder was a caste killing. DMK, the then opposition party, promised me that it would support me throughout the case. But after it came to power, there is silence on the separate act against caste killings," Kausalya said, noting that even in the manifesto for the 2024 general elections the DMK has failed to mention the act.

It is to be noted that in the interest of a special central law to prevent caste killings and punish the perpetrators, the Dalit Human Rights Defender Network, a coalition of anti-caste activists and organisations, has put together a 17-page draft Bill titled 'The Freedom of Marriage and Association and Prohibition of Crimes in the Name of Honour Act 2022' and urged the state government to implement it.

"The separate act would not only stipulate the punishment for caste killings but also for any caste crimes that were committed against the young couple once they revealed their relationship with someone who is not from their caste to their family members. The police are always taking the side of parents. Parents subject their children to mental torture. Caste groups and

leaders instil fear and can abet youngsters in killing themselves. These crimes are overlooked. What are the sections available to specifically punish casteist fanatics for such crimes?" Kausalya asked.

In two examples of caste killings that took place in two different regions of the state, Ramani, the general secretary of anti-caste organisation Caste Annihilation Front, linked the role of caste leaders and caste groups and their political affiliations to caste killings and crimes. "There are families that do not want caste parties and groups to interfere in their family affairs. But in certain cases, caste-based political parties were the ones who blew the matter out of proportion and it led to mob lynching and violence on Dalits," she said pointing to the case of Ilavarasan's death in 2013 in Dharmapuri. She also noted that members of Dheeran Chinnamalai Peravai, a caste association for the Kongu Vellala community, were involved in the murder of Gokul Raj in Tiruchengode in 2015. "The government does not take any action on the perpetrators of caste crimes because the government, the institution, is afraid of being abandoned by those caste groups that also act as their party's vote banks," Ramani said.

Arungunam Vinayagam, social activist and president of Naagar Senai, talked about how land has been used as an instrument of power to commit caste crimes and killings. "The land and the ownership of land makes them think that they are superior to their fellow humans. However, the land was once owned by Dalits who were deceived. Now, the non-Dalits have acquired the land. So they frantically make public statements about how landless Dalits could fall in love with women from land-owning communities," he said, adding that land ownership to Dalits is one of the many ways to emancipate them. He urged the government to initiate the retrieval of 'panchami' land (land belonging to Panchamars – the deprived) to solve the imbalance among the different communities.

Arungunam was referring to the Depressed Class Land Act of 1892. The then Chengleput Acting Collector JHA Tremenheere underscored the need to provide land to Dalits to transform their lives and improve their living conditions, and distributed 12 lakh acres of land to Dalits across the Madras Presidency.

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