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Negotiating Regional Identities on Digital Media through the Paradox of Freedom and Control

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Abstract

The contemporary global world is inter-connected through increased digital access and internet connectivity. The gradual shift of mainstream media towards digital platforms is widely propagated through social media channels and OTT platforms with global outreach. These platforms offer individuals the opportunity to express themselves freely without any restrictions. The present paper is based on the content analysis of 80 popular Haryanvi songs, including those banned by the government for allegedly promoting violence and gun culture. The paper discusses that these songs operate within dual dynamics: songs reasserting Haryanvi culture and reclaiming regional identity in a modern world concurrently inviting criticism and scrutiny by the government to regulate cultural expression in the name of maintaining public morality and social order. The paper interrogates that although digital media platforms have enhanced individual freedom leading to emergence of regime control and regulation. The study attempts to contribute to research on the paradox of mediated freedom and autonomy through state-led intervention in contemporary popular media cultures, making digital platforms a negotiated space for expression.

Keywords*: Identity, culture, language, social media, freedom of speech and expression*

Introduction

The government of Haryana, in an order of March 2025 followed by an order of January 2026 banned (without publicly issuing the official list) some of the contemporary popular media songs from the YouTube channel promoting violence, hooliganism, and openly supporting gun culture . Since YouTube is considered the second most used and one of the most popular social media platforms after Facebook[1], with a wider reach across the youth of Haryana due to easy digital access and internet connectivity. The state government claimed that these songs show little respect for the governmental institutions maintaining law and order in the state and cause direct provocation against the state . The Khap Panchayats of Haryana, functioning as a cultural gatekeeper in the society, have also endorsed the initiative to prohibit songs that celebrate gun culture within the state, and also called for stringent measures against the glorification of obscenity and violence in the songs. Khap members argued that the language of these songs is often vulgar and abusive against the ethos and cultural fabric of society. But there has been no protest against them from civil society at large; does it indicate that such songs have been absorbed by mainstream society as popular media culture?

The new media[2] enables content creators to express themselves freely and is considered a powerful medium for freedom of speech and expression without strict control and restrictions. As per one estimate, about 491 million Indians are active on social media platforms, which makes its regulation a concern . There are emerging cases of defamation, hate speech, obscenity, misinformation, etc., on the internet, but the government is in a nascent stage of regulating social media platforms and OTT (over-the-top) channels. It has only recently amended the Information Technology Act 2000, IT Rules 2021 (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code), and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 to enforce accountability and make the internet a safer place free of abuse and unlawful content. The songs were banned under section 79(3)(b) of Information Technology Act 2000 and rule 3(1)(d) of Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code 2021.

This issue revives the core question of political obligations and the limit of the sphere of state actions along with the community norms and ethos. As an established principle, the state should

[1] Biggest social media platforms by users 2025| Statista
[2] New Media is a term used for expressing and sharing user-generated content through internet in a digital world.

not interfere in the individual choices and preferences, but at the same time, if these choices transgress the individual limit, then the state may have an option to resort to the harm principle in regulating such behaviour. The state, being the sole upholder of the sovereign power, exercises an upper hand, and the action may probably be placed under the category of the common good. This paper compares the contending arguments advanced in the respective direction by the state (enforcement without any transparency) and propagator of individual liberty (artists calling it an arbitrary act, hampering creativity and digital freedom) through the content analysis of the 80 *Haryanvi* songs (out of which some were banned). Also, it explores the growing contradiction between the limits of individual freedom and public morality in a digital world.

Constitutional Provision & Legal Exposition

The proponents of social media platforms consider the ban on songs on YouTube as an illegitimate act and a barrier to freedom of speech and expression in the form of digital art and music . This opens the long-debated question of freedom of speech and expression on one hand, with reasonable restrictions imposed by the government on the other hand. The freedom of speech and expression is a guaranteed fundamental right under Article 19(1) (a) of the Indian Constitution[3]. However, it is not an absolute right, as under clause Article 19(2), reasonable restrictions can be placed by the state, namely in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, security of the state, friendly relations with other countries, public order, decency or morality, contempt of court, defamation, and incitement to an offence[4].

These two clauses of Article 19 strive to create a balance between freedom of speech and expression and need to regulate it. The constituent assembly debate also highlighted that "rights guaranteed in Article 13 (Article 19 at present) are cancelled by that very section and placed at the mercy of the high-handedness of the legislature. These guarantees are also cancelled when it is stated that, to safeguard against the offences relating to decency and morality and the undermining of the authority or foundation of the State, the existing law shall operate". The members of the constituent assembly also contended that if the mala fide intent of the government or any authority

[3] Part III of Indian Constitution, Fundamental Rights
[4] https://www.epw.in/engage/debate-kits/article-19-mapping-free-speech-debate-india

placing restrictions is not proved due to the wider expression of the terms used in the article. Then the Apex Court will not have any option but to justify the act by the government.

In the contemporary digital world, free media culture is quite prevalent, raising questions on applicability of clause 2 of Article 19. Free media does not restrict social media (YouTube, Facebook, blogs) and other OTT (over-the-top) platforms delivering streamed content via internet-connected devices. The evolution of Article 19 in the age of individual truth has been shaped by controversies in landmark cases such as *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015), examining the constitutionality of Section 66A of IT Act 2000. The Supreme Court upheld Article 19(1) (a) by striking down Section 66A and reiterated that such ambiguous laws cannot form the basis for restricting free speech. In *Ashutosh Dubey v. Netflix & Ors.,* concern was raised about content regulation on digital platforms and creative freedom versus defamation and morality under Article 19(2). In *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* (2020), the Supreme Court held that the freedom of speech and expression also encompasses the right to carry on trade or profession through the internet. Any restriction on these rights must comply with the requirements of legality, necessity, and proportionality under Articles 19(2) and 19(6).

The undefined nature of the term reasonable restrictions imposed by the state, provide State an upper hand; however, judicial interpretations from time to time by the Supreme Court have been successful in expanding the scope of the freedom of speech and expression. Additionally, laws such as the Information Technology Act 2000 and the Information Technology Rules 2021 (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) provide the government with the authority to censor (a form of silent censorship) and regulate the content that is deemed objectionable or harmful to the public interest without any due notice. However, the broad and wider expression of the term ‘public interest’ and its undefined nature create an incongruity in its applicability in the digital world. Against this backdrop, the ban on such songs by the Haryana government on digital media be viewed as a legitimate or an arbitrary act is a valid question to be raised.

Research Methodology

The paper is premised on the content analysis of eighty songs, using purposive sampling method. The songs were selected from the period 2015-2025 as the period marks era of digital

transformation with an increased visibility of regional cultures on social media. The banned status of the songs was determined by the media reports and data provided at the artist level along with thematic filtering of songs associated with gun culture and violence. The popularity of the songs was determined by more than one million views and its presence in the most trending songs list streamed on YouTube platform (excluding the folk songs *raagini or saangs*). The audio lyrics of the songs served as a primary text (translated from dialectical to English language) for in-depth content analysis. The keywords were identified from the recurrence and were grouped into broader themes for analysis.

The major themes identified includes: regional and cultural identity, performing patriarchy, caste-based assertion, violence and crime. The analysis is contextually grounded emphasizing the symbolic meanings and sentiments associated with the songs based on socio-cultural norms of the region. The culture in songs reflects the increased use of local dialects and regional language, thereby reconstructing a regional identity in the digital world. The paper also examines why the reclaim of cultural, regional autonomy and the need to preserve this distinct identity has emerged in globalized world. But before providing any possible answer to it, it is pertinent to understand the social setting and contextualize the cultural and economic transformation of the Haryana.

Structural Transformation of Haryana

The state of Haryana is located in the northern part of India, sharing its border with Punjab, Himachal Pradesh to the north, with Rajasthan to the south-west, with Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand to the east. According to the data of Haryana government, about 40 percent of the State forms a part of the National Capital Region (NCR). Since the formation of Haryana as a separate state in 1966, the economic structure of the state has been dominated by agriculture and allied activities. Since agriculture remains a prime economic activity, the larger culture of the state aligns with it and has rapidly established a unique position within the Indian economy.

Industrialization has transformed the state into a genuine center of knowledge, an expanding industrial powerhouse. The State is marked by progression in the field of Information Technology, automobiles, electronic hardware, high-technology industries, software, and textiles. The State is positioned as a manufacturing leader in products like cars, footwear, tractors, two-wheelers, etc. Gurugram (cyber hub) being a base to offices of multiple international & national corporations has

also emerged as a center of the service industry. The share of Agriculture and its Allied Sectors in GSDP has declined from 60.7% in 1969-70 to 21.3% in 2006-07, while the share of Industry Sector has increased from 17.6% in 1969-70 to 32.1% in 2006-07, and the share of Services Sector has increased from 21.7% to 46.6%. The emergence of industry and tertiary sectors created a new set of economic relations with a rise in disposable income of the middle class and working professionals. However, industrial growth is confined only to the pockets of the NCR region and other areas show continued dependence on agriculture as their prime occupation. Thus, Haryana exhibits feature of both a traditionally agriculture-sustained society along with industrialization, resulting in conflictual tendencies.

Modernization and industrialization have brought profound social and cultural changes by weakening traditional agrarian hierarchies and identities[5]. The inflow of skilled and semi-skilled migrants from the bordering states, emergence of nuclear-type families in the urban areas (metropolises), increased access to education, health services, and economic independence of women, ushered a change in the society. Consumerism a direct outcome of a new capitalist economic system generated by mass media culture through art, music, movies, and television . It creates a condition of one-dimensionality, where individuals tend to identify with dominant structures through consumerism, mass media leading an increased demand for luxury goods, brands, entertainment, and shopping malls . People are reduced to passive consumers due to the need for homogenized products, consequently, the focus is shifted towards instant gratification, thereby reducing the chances of dissent for any societal change .

Culture provides insight into the lived practices, rituals, and thought patterns of people, defining the character of a society. Homogenized culture often marginalizes the local culture leading to loss of the vernacular language. Since language is a prime medium through which cultural identity is constructed and maintained. Regional identity is not shaped by linguistic practices alone but sustained through various forms of cultural practices and beliefs. Artistic expression in cinema, literature, music, and visual arts serves as a powerful medium for asserting linguistic and cultural

[5] Studies, Population and Family Health. *socio.health/ecology-environment-urban-development/impact-of-modernization-on-society-culture*.15 07 2024. <https://socio.health/ecology-environment-urban-development/impact-of-modernization-on-society-culture/>.

autonomy, particularly in postcolonial societies like India . This is the case in Haryana, where people accept and simulate the content of these songs as popular media culture along with reassertion of their true cultural and regional identity on the other hand.

Regional and Cultural Identity

The social identity of an individual is based on a sense of self-affiliation with a group. Social identity often comes from a perceived membership of a community. The regional and cultural identity hails from the ways certain things are done, like shared values, beliefs, and social traditions of the region . In the Indian society, linguistic and socio-cultural identities are largely recognized as regional identities. The identity of Haryana emerged at a slower pace due to its long-term tagging to Punjab province as a sub-region. Only after its separation from Punjab in 1966, Haryana tried to carve out a separate identity of its own. Although regional identity existed, but its assertion has been of recent origin.

The linguistic identity is not homogeneous since Haryana shares borders with western Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, and the adjoining Delhi NCR region, leading to a convergence of diverse cultures into a cultural zone. Therefore, the language is a mixture of various dialects consisting of *bangru, ahirwati, deswali, bagri and korvi*. The uniqueness of Haryanvi dialect lies in the central region of Haryana, identified as Rohtak, Jind, Hisar and Bhiwani by Grierson in the Linguistic Survey of India. The regional dialect of the heartland is *bangru* (also called as *jatu,* spoken by *Jaats*) which is straightforward and rustic, commonly referred as *thet boli* in local parlance. The regional dialect is reflected through folk songs (*raagini, saangs*) used for entertainment purposes, which beautifully define the true traditional, cultural heritage and wisdom of people. Despite existence of various dialects in the region, a common identity of being *Haryanvi,* regional in character, binds the people together.

The cultural identity, being subjective in nature, is reflected in the form of traditional clothing, including *daaman*- a *52*-yard-long skirt*, chundari (dupatta), ghunghat* (veil) for women signifying modesty, grace, and respect *(sharam-lihaj),* which they have to carry along with traditional ornaments *like jhanjhar, tagdi, tika, kanthi, anguthi, kangan, jutti* showcasing the folk culture of Haryana (depicting women going to fetch water from wells dressed in traditional attire). *Ghunghat* is *(*a long veil*)* not only an outward symbol of patriarchal control rather is also associated with the

identity of the Haryanvi culture. While men wear *dhoti-kurta, kurta-pyjama, khandka*-headgear as a symbol of male honor and pride.

The *desi* food of Haryana consists of *ghee, churma, doodh, lassi, dahi, bajre ki roti*, symbolizing simplicity, rural authenticity in taste, and richness of local cuisine (*doodh dahi ka khana number one Haryana*). The food is prepared in *chullha* and *haara,* which is made up of mudstove. The *desi* food habits and hard work in the fields train the people with muscular strength and good height, physique making them fit for *akhadas* and army. Historically, Britishers started recruiting the youth into the army during World Wars, and the practice continues till date. People proudly speak of the *Jaat* Regiment that created a history by winning medals at the border in wars. Haryana has a distinction of representing India at the international championships in sports and at national level too won laurels. People proudly speak that women raise their heads in sports (*akhada ke maidan mein naam roshan krti hai).* It shows the paradoxical mindset of people where women are culturally constrained to narrow domestic walls in the private sphere on one hand while equally performing and competing with men in public sphere on other hand.

The cultural symbols of Haryana widely recognized are *hukka, khaat, baithak (*depicting exclusive male dominance*),* moustache *(*symbolizing masculinity*) and lath (*meant for protection*).* Elderly people are respected a lot (*bade*, *buddho ka lihaaj)* and children are known after the name of their father. Haryanvi people tend to worship God *shiv, Bhola Baba (*symbol of destructor of evil, ego for transformation*, saath bholenath ka), hanuman (*a symbol of strength, bravery*),* the ancestors are religiously worshipped (*pitra pujan*) at a place called *dada khera or thaan* (an ancestor who settled the village) in villages. The entire village works on the principles of *aapsi bhaichara* (common brotherhood) among 36 *biradari* (all caste groups inhabiting a particular village), depicting a commune way of living in rural areas.

Historically, Haryana has been part of a semi-arid area with a peasant economy and practiced cattle breeding. Haryana in terms of its geographical location at present has sufficient fertile agricultural land, with water availability and the villages have achieved self-sufficiency and contributed to economic growth largely due to the green revolution. The people are known to have a deep connection to their land, which is tied to their agrarian identity. The agrarian identity is depicted through songs (*kisani khoon mein*) related to farming as a prime occupation, and a sense of pride is reflected in owning farmland (*khet, kille, zamindar*) and producing food grains. Both men and

women work in the fields, but women often take the lead only in harvesting-related activities and contributes equally to the rural economy.

Women are taking the responsibility of both public and private spheres (household and farm-related work), carrying the double burden on their shoulders doing double shift. People are also fond of keeping cattle of various breeds (*murra, sahiwal*) for high milk production, which also helps them in farm-related activities supplementing as agrarian labour (*baladh, jhota, bail*). Women again perform all the care work, collecting fodder and milking of the cattle for supplementing income. This signifies attaining prosperity using traditional farming practices using manure. People often take pride in their tractors (owning a tractor and cattle are associated with wealth, progress), *buggy (*wagon made of wood for local transportation) and other agricultural tools which are worshipped.

Songs like *Roots, Pehli Aali Hawa Rahi Na, and Kitna Badla Desh* reflect that modern influences have undermined the traditional culture of Haryana. The story has ended as there are no remnants of the past- things (*pehle aali baat rhi na phle aala paani, hogi khatam kahani)*. It describes that traditional clothing has been discarded, *desi* food habits have been lost, there is no brotherhood like before (*gaam raam ki thaad nhi*), and elderly no longer hold respect (*gabru jawan, buddhe aage jhukte na*), no joint family structures, and traditional *havelis*. Some of the songs, on the other hand, are striving to preserve their own cultural identity by emphasizing the traditional culture.

The songs lay stress on the village life as heaven with so much warmth in social gatherings, *raaagni*, bull cart rides to farms, clothing at ease, and authentic desi food. Urban people are requested to once visit and witness the village life, which can make them forget gym, fast food, mobile games, and hip-hop culture (*seher ki sadak bhul jagi gaama aali gmmi dekh k*). it is portrayed through songs that even if an unknown person pays a visit to the village, he/she is welcomed with good food and respect. The perspective of modern people will entirely be changed by paying a rural visit and urban life will no longer tempt them (*ek be maar ja geda gaam ka hawa raas kona avegi bhaar ki).* It shows how modernity has erased traditional elements of rural life from the landscape, and an emotional appeal is made through these songs especially to youth to return to their original roots.

Performing patriarchy

Patriarchy is “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.". Friedrich Engels, in his work “Origin of the Family,” argued that man's successful control over production and surplus is the basis on which they have established man's patriarchal control. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is often employed to justify the dominant position of men and subordination of women, a socially dominant model of manhood which is culturally idealized and institutionally reinforced. A fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men, while men are negated as sexual objects for men. Thus, Patriarchy is perpetuated both as a structure of society and deeply rooted in the belief system, exacerbating the prevailing gender inequalities. The gender-based stereotypes portrayed through internalization, socialization, and learning by doing often reinforce the subordination of women by male dominance. These patriarchal relations tend to glorify the power of men over women in both public and private spheres.

The objectification of women is deeply rooted in patriarchal habits and culture, where women are considered as weaker sex to be dominated and controlled by men. Women’s objectification is related to sexual objectification, when the body of a woman is considered separated from herself as a human being, and women are seen as only a physical object of male desire. The organizational structure of the society of Haryana is patrilocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal in nature . The analysis of the lyrics of the songs shows how men visualize the body of a woman more in terms of desirability of women based on beauty *(roop)*, perfect figure (*patli kamar*), and fairness (*gora rang, badan*). As culture is the medium through which the myth of beauty is reproduced and normalized. The beauty is represented through symbols, images, and repetition in everyday life; beauty holds value. The worth of a woman is defined by her physical appearance rather than her intellect, strength, or emotional capability (objectified intelligence). The terms often used in the local language, such as *cheez lajawab, cheez kasuti, chamak challo, 70 watt, patola, matakti chaal*, *kabootari, kamar left-right, gajban* symbolizes her appearance based on physical attributes. These songs repeatedly emphasize terms associated with bodily images, and acceptance of these abrupt, bodily slangs by women as a standard through popular culture.

The concept of male gaze explains how women are visualized and constructed for male pleasure; women are sexualized and looked at, with men being the exclusive lookers . The objectification of women denies women autonomy and subjectivity over their own bodies. The women with a shy

nature and a sweet voice are praised by men possessing fair skin color and a slim body. The cultural representations break women's bodies into parts: face, breast, waist, thighs. The women with wheatish or black skin tone (*kallo*), curvy and fatty body (*motto)* are mocked with laughter. The broad waist of women is a metaphor for a room, and women are usually named as tension. Women see themselves as vulnerable to sexual harassment or experience sexual oppression, as they are unaware of it.

Women are culturally constructed to view and experience the world through the lens of men. Objectification often turns into self-objectification, where women also tend to see themselves only as a body. The fragmented idea of women's body prevents women from seeing themselves as a whole part reflecting on Gramscian idea of cultural hegemony. The popularity of such songs has considerable influence in shaping the attitude of boys towards girls, which leads to internalized misogyny, acceptance of harassment as harmless, and stalking being normalized (*ye to hota hai, ladke aise hi hote hai*). Women also tend to conform to ideal beauty norms, standards, and body size as set by these songs and attune themselves accordingly. Women are depicted demanding materialistic things (gold items, makeup, branded clothes), and men are usually meeting their demands to keep them silent. Thus, women's choices are shaped around beauty standards set by male expectations.

Men are portrayed as dominant, assertive, strong (characteristics of manliness) and emotionally entitled to a woman's affection, often without her consent or agency. At times, crude metaphors are used to describe female anatomy, non-consensual advances and pressurized romance and such forms of toxic masculinity is often misrepresented as love (do not touch me, do not come closer to me). The masculinity is shown in protecting the of women from the gaze of other man (*koi nazar utha ke ya hath laga ke dekhe*) or in possessing the women they want *(ghar se utha ke bahu bana ke lejaunga*), being associated with male chauvinism, machoism, and virile masculinity (*asli mard*). The appearance of a woman and her way of dressing is known to provoke and distract men. Thus, *Ghunghat* essentially becomes a way to control the sexuality of women, rather than culture, as men have an absolute right to control . It reflects the intersectionality of culture and gender, controlled through a cultural barrier, and how cultural construct is keeping the chastity preserved.

The songs depict a tension between education and entrenched social norms, wherein an educated woman resists the practice of covering her face with a veil. This resistance is countered by a male

voice that invokes the authority of rural tradition, asserting that adherence to such practices is obligatory within the village context (*ye gaon se gori, muh to dhakna padega*). Patriarchal control held women responsible for protecting the honor of the community, family (*kutumb, kul ki izzat ladki ke hath mein hoti ha*). The media act as a tool of socialization, which sometimes establishes cultural hegemony, which legitimizes patriarchal attitudes. The traditional culture of Haryana, which is associated with preserving the honor (*beti, bahu ki izzat)* of women, is in contrast with the popular culture of recent songs which eroticizes and commodifies women. It brings traditionalism in contradiction with modernity; it is not just about a new creation in the name of the modern world but also highlights the structural patriarchal attitude that continues to glamorize male dominance in the society.

Caste-based Assertion

Haryana has a deeply entrenched caste-based hierarchical system where *Jaats* constitute the dominant upper caste group. At the time of demarcation of the state of Haryana from Punjab in 1966, *Jaats* constituted majority of the population (approximately 27% of the total population), giving them numerical strength with control over 80% of arable land. The *Jaats* grew economically prosperous due to benefits of green revolution and became landed elites . Over time, the *Jaats'* focus shifted to accessing state resources and political power, a change influenced by socio-political shifts, especially after the Mandal Commission recommendations. The process of Mandalisation further transformed caste-based politics, prompting the *Jaats* to demand OBC status to maintain political influence and representation . Gradually, the number of *Jaat* elite got elected as legislative elites, wielding their political power and become a dominating agrarian caste in Haryana.

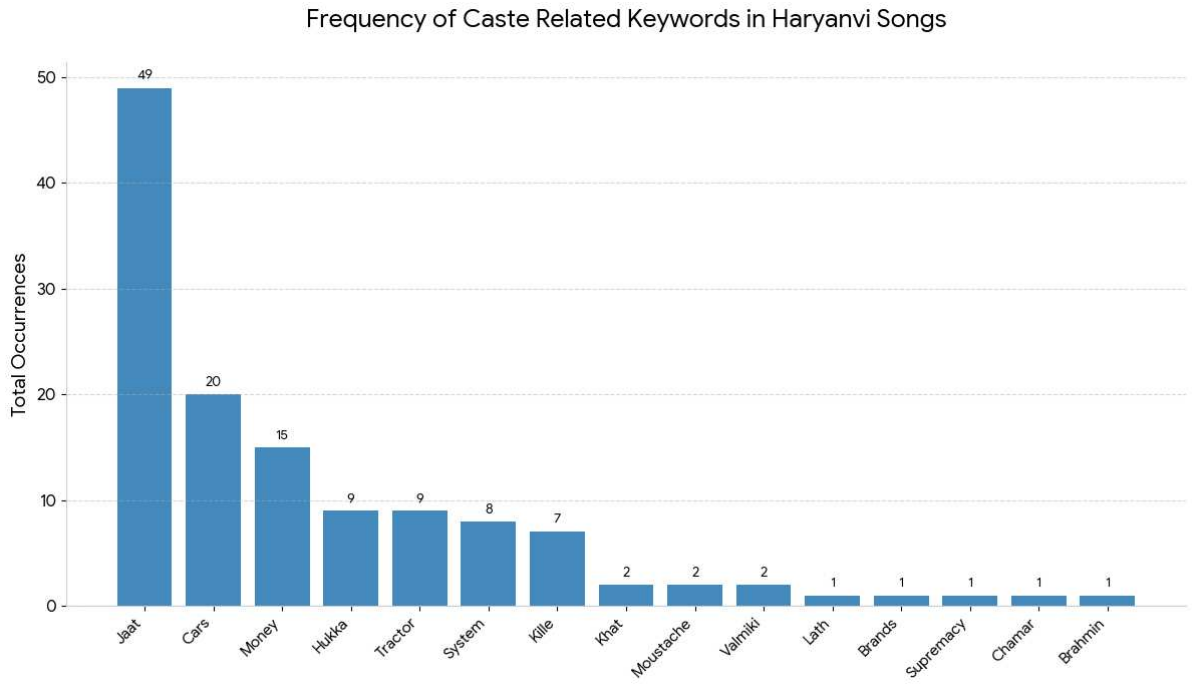


Figure 1 shows the frequency of words widely associated with caste dominance

The analysis of the song through figure 1 suggests that *Jaats* enjoy supremacy (*choudhar puri jaat ki, mooch ki baat*) in the region, and there is a continued fight for ascendency. They own big farmlands (*zamindar*), valuable cars, and tractors. The Haryanvi songs based on *Jaat* identity tend to glorify the dominance as there is no one like *jaat*, nobody can compete them, other castes envy them *(jaat ni hote to kya hota, jaat ke thaat baat, bair jaat ka, jatta ki rees na hove, system pe system bethara chora jaat ka).* They destroy the enemy in a blink (*khoon garam*), they make impossible as possible (16*2=8 disapproving arithmetic), they are men of words (*jaat ki baat sabse upar)*, living life on their own terms (*gulami nhi kisi saale ki*), *jaats* are as brave as lions and a warrior caste ready to fight for any cause (*kisi ka darr nhi*). Their solid attitude (*hathiyar se bhi tez*) and harsh tone (*tedha bol*) always land them in conflict (*rolee*), people in the villages widely acknowledge them by saluting them (*raam raam baje gaaon mn)* as they are considered as providers *(jaat devta).* Thus*, Jaat*, as a caste in the region, is economically rich and socially well settled (*koi kami nhi sa jaata ke, jaat ke thaat: huka, baithak aur khaat*).

Land ownership and control over the land in the state provided *Jaat's* with social, and economic superiority. This enabled them to control the labour of those lower in the caste hierarchy. Due to a

lack of socio-economic power, Dalits (referred to as *dheds, kamins*) became the victims of exploitation, subjugation, and humiliation at the hands of the dominant caste. Against this grim backdrop, Dalits, especially after the green revolution, waged a relentless struggle, pouring their lifeblood into the fight for access to land to attain a life of dignity and respect, which brought them into a confrontation with the upper castes. One of the most significant triggers of Dalit assertion in Haryana has been against the occurrence of caste-based violence. The Mirchpur incident (2010) is a stark example of the deep-rooted caste divisions and discrimination against Dalits, particularly by the dominant castes like the *Jaats*, in rural Haryana. The incident led to the forced migration of Dalits from the village, exposing the deep-rooted caste antagonism in rural Haryana.

The new identity of Dalits emerged against discrimination faced by them and being accorded the lowest status in society, with the tag 'Dalit is Dignified.'. Through it, Dalits sought to amplify their dignity and self-respect in society at par with other sections. Dalit artists have recently begun producing songs with lyrics asserting Dalit pride and Ambedkarite identity by directly challenging the upper-caste dominance of *jaats*. The lower castes of *Valmiki* and *Chamar* (who often fight with each other over reservation benefits) are proudly reasserting their Dalit identity through songs imitating the dominant identity of *Jaats*. The songs lay emphasis on words like *jai bheem (worshipping Ambedkar)* on their cars with VIP number, possessing luxurious cars and farmhouses, wearing branded clothes, possessing weapons like *Jaats*. They are openly celebrating the birth and death anniversaries of Ambedkar and Guru Ravidas.

Ahir is another caste group known to assert their caste-based identity in *Ahirwari* belt by saying *Roa's* are known by their name in the city (*seher me ruka baje roa sahab ka).* Brahmins are not considered a superior caste in Haryana, unlike South India; they are dependent on the dominant caste for providing them service. However, Brahmins have also asserted their caste-based identity through songs. Brahmins call themselves as a caste of lions *(sher si jati*) and feel pride and honoured (*ghamand, khandani rutba*) in their caste. They compare Brahmins with God *Parshuram* and worship his divine axe (*iske naam pe toofan chale*). These songs reaffirm local pride and caste dominance to assert sub-cultural, caste-based superior identity in the region. Caste-based chauvinism can easily be identified from these songs and their assertion through the popular culture of regional songs. Despite Modernization, regional and caste-based identity (sub-cultural) continues to determine the status and positioning of individuals in contemporary times in society.

People feel affiliated and connected to their caste group, and a sense of identity is reinforced through songs rather than a loss of cultural identity and dismantling of caste under the rubric of the modernity project.

Violence & crime

Traditional Haryanvi music centered on themes based on folk tales, love, rural life, and moral stories. But the shift towards urbanization and popular media culture (due to modernization, global interconnectedness) has led to a break from traditional values, with newer artists focusing on themes that resonate with urban and semi-urban youth and global culture. Global influences, especially hip-hop, have normalized themes of masculinity, which are now replicated in regional music. This transition reflects a broader cultural dislocation, moving from traditionalism towards modernity. Haryanvi music has increasingly drawn inspiration from Punjabi pop culture, particularly the gangster rap glorifying guns, violence, and intoxication. Rising unemployment, rural distress, and economic inequality in Haryana have contributed to frustration among youth. Music has become a space to vicariously express anger, ambition, and rebellion. Songs romanticizing drugs, alcohol and guns reflect a fantasy of power and escape from social marginality, distress providing interim relief from real life.

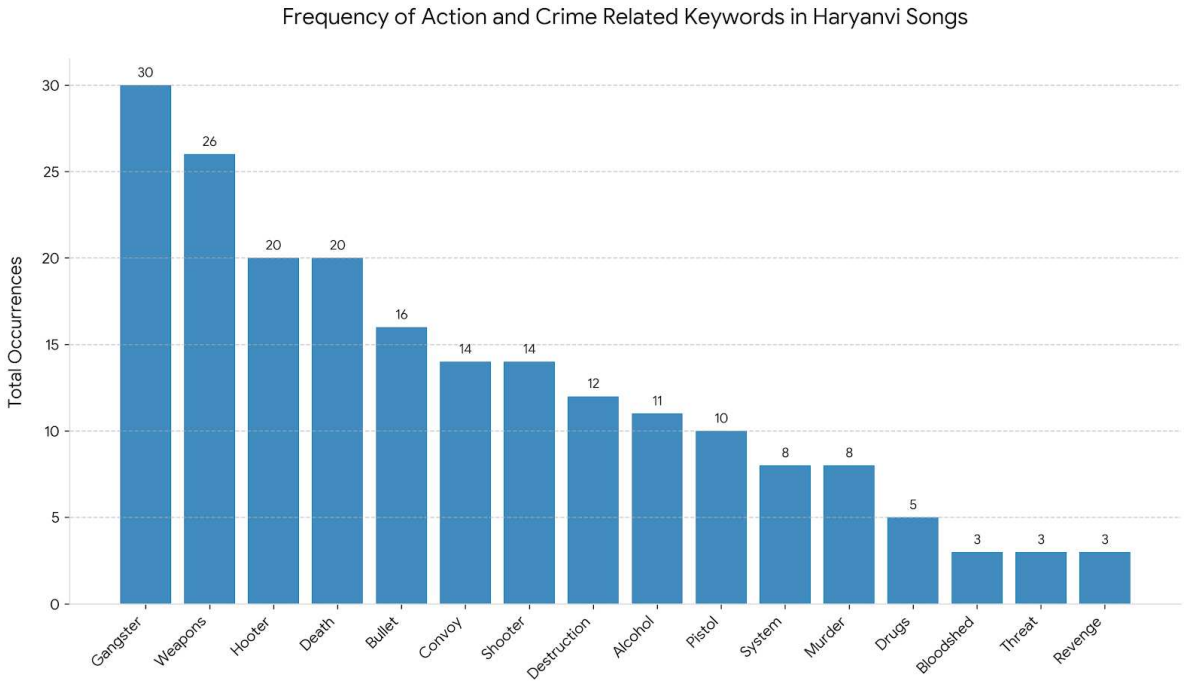


Figure 2 shows the frequency of words associated with crime and action

The analysis from Figure 2 indicates that the keywords noted that fifty popular songs out of eight songs falling under the category of crime and action which normalizes violence in popular culture and glorifies power associated with criminality. The popularity of songs is based on recurring words like murder, death, bloodshed, guns, shooter, hooter, bullets, revenge, threats, drugs, alcohol, destruction, and gangstership, promoting a performative and exaggerated identity**.** The language of the songs is abusive with an aggressive tone. Hyper-masculinity is often portrayed by adhering to male-based gender roles, with a focus on physical strength (*mard to mard hove se, mard ka boda ke hove se*), aggression (*ek bol me jaan nikalde, bina asle ke*), domination (*lagu na rahe lugaiyon ke*), violent acts (*banda marde khel khel mein, din mein gentleman raat mein shooter, goli barsaade*).

This form of toxic masculinity has been internalized and glamorized among both young men and women. The men are often described with loaded guns in their hands, car convoys, always ready to fire, eyes red in anger and intoxication, long hair, beard, gold chains or watches, often engaged in illegal businesses with a criminal history. The women feel impressed and attracted towards criminal lifestyle shaped by risk and rivalry with pistols, car convoys, and brotherhood (*kabi apne bhaiyon pe hath na uthaya, yaar ne rupiya na joda bas bhai jode hai, phirte hai dal or bal ke sath*)

who disobeys state orders. The women are shown waiting for their male boyfriends to come out on bail and marry them (*hathiyaron ke chao me baraat*, with luxurious cars, firing sound in wedding procession) rather than disapproving these violence acts.

The songs depict that the youth of Haryana are so dreadful that they do not fear police and administration. They do not feel threatened by any legal consequences from the police and law, as they have backing within the system (*shifarish moti hai, system tagda ha*). The strength is measured by aggression and the ability to challenge law and order. Crimes are committed in a manner where no legal provisions of the constitution can sue them. Even after committing a crime, they can easily come out on bail. They do not fear landing up in jail as they are habitual to it (*ek khatola jail ke bhitar*), can openly fire in the courtroom, showing an upper hand over criminals in the system (*jailer bhi bhai ke aage kaapta ha, yaar to jange bhitar tuje marwake sehparivar*).

They proudly address themselves as miscreants (*lofar, kungar, khapitar, badmaash*) of Haryana, with HR on their vehicles, breaking toll and barriers on the roads without any fear. These acts are portrayed as public stunts, and presenting themselves as celebrities to the media. The police and intelligence agencies are mocked for not being able to trace down their location and arrest them. This has created identity confusion among the youth; on one hand, there is life based on tradition with agriculture and simple living calling them back to their original roots, while on the other hand, under the influence of global mass culture, there is a rise of popular culture showcasing guns, crime, which is in contradiction with the traditional cultural values of Haryana.

Interpretation & Discussion

In the contemporary digital age with freedom of speech and expression, individuals are increasingly exposed to a multiplicity of cultures and values, resulting in an overwhelming array of identity choices. This overexposure leads to identity fragmentation and confusion, particularly at the individual level, as the coherence of self becomes challenged by conflicting cultural narratives amid globalized norms. Simultaneously, the pervasive reach of global media tends to marginalize local cultures and identities, fostering a sense of regional cultural dislocation.

In response to the perceived alienation and cultural homogenization, free media without any strict restrictions enables individuals to reassert their regional and localized identities at the collective level. Communities tend to assert their regional identities through the means of popular culture,

reclaiming cultural autonomy and preserving distinctiveness. This process of reassertion of regional identity serves as a counter-narrative to global idea of homogenization, emphasizing the continued relevance of localized belonging in the face of global cultural convergence. The society is exhibiting characteristics of both traditionality and modernity, leading to conflictual tendencies- a transformation but without compromising the regional culture and identity.

However, free media is facing challenges and restrictions thereby hampering the free flow of digital content, amounting to a loss of individual liberty to freely express themselves at the hands of a powerful state. A balance must be struck between the two clauses of Article 19 to ensure the sanctity of freedom of speech and expression while retaining legitimate control over regulation through various acts. The recent digital media rules and guidelines can serve as a tool for reshaping digital media content, mandating directions to observe moral responsibilities and ensure accountability. As B.R. Ambedkar rightly argued that, “Rights are protected not only by the law but by the moral and ethical considerations of society.” To maintain a fragile equilibrium between the two, judicial oversight becomes a dire need.

Therefore, the restrictions placed must pass the ‘test of reasonableness,’ a doctrine measuring whether the limitations are essential and proportionate to the intended aim. Especially in the digital world, the law must ensure that restrictions are minimally imposed as much as possible with legitimate public interest and morality. Social media and OTT platforms have often been in limelight, accused of disseminating misinformation, defamation, obscenity, hate speech, contempt, inciting riots and violence. In such instances, restrictions and control becomes the last resort, but such applications must be cautiously applied without undermining individual liberty (as enshrined in the Constitution) in digital space.

Thus, the digital media has become a negotiated and controlled space for expression of individual and cultural identity with questionable intervention by the authorities of state. The digital domain undoubtedly necessitates continuous deliberations and cooperation among all the key stakeholders involved like government agencies, civil society, content creators, media establishments, third party regulators and the citizens of course rather than solely imposing a blanket ban as a solution.

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