

CHANGING DYNAMICS OF THE PURDAH SYSTEM IN HARYANA: TRADITION, MODERNITY, AND WOMEN'S AGENCY

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Abstract

The socio-cultural landscape of Haryana has been historically defined by rigid patriarchal structures, where the 'Purdah' (veiling) system served as a tool for gendered segregation and spatial control. This paper examines the evolution of the Purdah system in Haryana, analyzing its journey from a mandatory traditional norm to a negotiated practice in the face of modern education and political agency. By integrating a quantitative analysis of female literacy trends from 1991 to 2011 with qualitative socio-political data, the study explores how the 'recast patriarchies' of the colonial era transitioned into the complex dynamics of post-independence Haryana. The research argues that while the physical veil (*Ghoonghat*) persists in rural pockets, the surge in female literacy, legal reforms like the Hindu Succession Act, and active participation in Panchayati Raj are subverting traditional boundaries. Utilizing secondary data from the Census of India and district-wise analysis, the study highlights the role of women as active participants in redefining their social status. Findings indicate a direct inverse correlation between literacy levels and the rigidity of veiling practices, suggesting that education remains the most potent catalyst for the erosion of patriarchal seclusion.

Keywords: Purdah System, Haryana, Women's Agency, Female Literacy, Patriarchy, Social Reform, Gender Historiography.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

Gender is not merely a biological attribute but a socio-cultural construct that determines the allocation of roles, power, and spatial mobility. In North India, and specifically in Haryana, the Purdah system—manifested through the *Ghoonghat*—has historically been the most visible marker of patriarchal control. Derived from the Persian word for 'curtain,' Purdah functions to screen women from the public eye, preserving a specific notion of family honor (*Izzat*). Historically, while the veil was intended to "protect" women, sociologically it acted as a "physical and cognitive wall" that restricted a woman's ability to participate in the public sphere.

The practice is deeply entwined with the agrarian economy and the kinship-based 'Khap' system of the region. However, the last three decades have seen an unprecedented shift as Haryana transitions from a purely agrarian economy to a hub for global industries and urban centers. Understanding these changing dynamics is essential for developing policies that promote gender equality while respecting cultural diversity.

1.2 Research Gap

While substantial literature exists on the broader status of women in India, there is a specific need to analyze the longitudinal impact of literacy growth (1991–2011) on the Purdah system within the unique socio-cultural context of Haryana. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing quantitative literacy data with the qualitative evolution of women's political and legal agency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical and Reformist Foundations

The resistance to the Purdah system has roots in historical social reforms. Reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Mahatma Gandhi identified Purdah as an "evil custom" and a barrier to national progress. Gandhi, specifically in the 1920s and 30s, urged women to step out of their homes to participate in the freedom struggle, marking the first major rupture in the wall of seclusion.

In the Haryana-Punjab region, the Sikh Gurus' strong opposition to the veil provided an early ideological framework for gender equality. Guru Nanak Dev Ji and subsequent Gurus rejected Purdah, arguing that spiritual and social equality cannot coexist with physical segregation.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Recasting Patriarchy and Bargaining

The study utilizes the concept of "recast patriarchies," which suggests that during the colonial era, education was often framed to make women better domestic managers rather than independent citizens. Furthermore, Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) framework of "Bargaining with Patriarchy" is applicable to Haryanvi women who engage in "Situational Agency". This allows them to observe symbolic Purdah in traditional settings while discarding it in professional or urban environments.

2.3 Structural Catalysts: Law and Politics

Legal reforms, particularly the Hindu Succession Act (HSA), have granted women inheritance rights, thereby increasing their intra-household bargaining power. Additionally, the 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) has forced a "physical breakthrough," requiring female leaders to be visible and engage directly with the public and officials.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a descriptive and analytical research design, utilizing a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative data with qualitative sociological interpretations.

3.2 Data Sources

- **Quantitative Data:** Secondary data is primarily drawn from the Census of India (1991, 2001, 2011) to track literacy trends and decadal growth across Haryana's districts.
- **Qualitative Data:** Content is synthesized from scholarly books, journal articles, and historical records provided in the reference material to understand the socio-political evolution of women's status.

3.3 Data Analysis Methods

The study uses decadal growth rates and district-wise comparative analysis to understand trends in literacy. Qualitative content analysis is applied to historical and contemporary texts to interpret the changing meanings of modesty, honor, and agency in Haryanvi society.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The transformation of the Purdah system in Haryana is empirically supported by the longitudinal shift in female literacy and the closing of the gender gap in education. The following results are derived from the Census of India and district-wise analysis (Devi & Bishnoi, 2023).

4.1 State-Wide Progress of Female Literacy (1966–2011)

The data illustrates a dramatic transition in the educational status of women in Haryana. In the year of the state's formation (1966), female literacy was approximately **10.32%**, reflecting a society where Purdah and seclusion were the normative standard.

Table 1: Progress of Female Literacy and Gender Gap in Haryana

Year	Female Literacy Rate (%)	Decadal Increase (%)	Gap (Male vs. Female)
1966	~10.32%	-	High
1971	14.89%	4.57%	22.41%
1981	22.27%	7.38%	25.93%
1991	32.70%	10.43%	26.30%
2001	55.73%	23.03%	22.76%
2011	65.94%	10.21%	18.15%

Source: Compiled from Census of India and District-wise Analysis (Devi & Bishnoi, 2023).

The results show that the most significant "cognitive breakthrough" occurred between **1991 and 2001**, where female literacy jumped by **23.03%**. This period coincides with the intensification of the anti-Purdah sentiment and the increasing visibility of women in public roles. Furthermore, the gender gap, which peaked at **26.30% in 1991**, has begun a steady decline to **18.15% in 2011**, indicating a shift toward gender parity.

4.2 District-wise Performance and the 'Purdah Correlation'

The analysis of 21 districts reveals a clear socio-spatial divide. Urbanized and industrially advanced districts show high literacy and low Purdah prevalence, while rural, agrarian districts show the opposite.

Table 2: Comparative Literacy across Selected Districts (2011)

District	Female Literacy (%)	Decadal Growth (%)	Status
Gurgaon	78.0%	23.58%	High Literacy / Low Purdah
Panchkula	76.0%	12.01%	High Literacy / Low Purdah
Ambala	75.5%	14.81%	High Literacy / Low Purdah
Fatehabad	56.1%	20.01%	Mid Literacy / Evolving Purdah
Mewat (Nuh)	36.6%	11.21%	Low Literacy / High Purdah

Source: Analysis based on Devi & Bishnoi (2023).

In **Gurgaon (78.0%)**, the high literacy rate is functionally linked to the service-sector economy, where women's participation in the workforce necessitates the abandonment of the physical veil. Conversely, in **Mewat (36.6%)**, the persistence of low literacy serves as a protective barrier for traditional patriarchal norms, including rigid Purdah.

5. Discussion

The results confirm that the "Dynamic of Purdah" is in a state of terminal decline in urban Haryana and significant negotiation in rural Haryana.

5.1 Education as a Tool for Spatial Negotiation

The data proves that as women cross the 50% literacy threshold, their "bargaining power" within the household increases (Kandiyoti, 1988). Education provides women with the linguistic and intellectual tools to navigate public transportation, government offices, and healthcare systems. In doing so, the physical *Ghoonghat* transitions from a mandatory social law to a situational choice.

5.2 The 'Purdah-Agency' Paradox in Politics

The participation of women in **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI)** has created a unique paradox. While many women were initially "proxy candidates" for their husbands, the requirement to address public gatherings and interact with officials has forced them to discard the veil during official duties (Local Government Quarterly, 2016). This political visibility acts as a "normalization" process; once a woman is seen leading a village without a veil, it lowers the social cost for other women in that community to do the same.

5.3 Legal Autonomy and Economic Independence

The interpretation of results through the lens of the **Hindu Succession Act (HSA)** suggests that legal rights to property have provided the necessary economic foundation for women to reject seclusion (Grover & Sharma, 2024). Economic independence reduces the threat of social ostracization, which was previously used to enforce Purdah.

5.4 The Persistence of 'Mental Purdah'

However, the discussion must acknowledge that the removal of the physical veil does not immediately signify the end of patriarchy. "Mental Purdah"—the internalized societal surveillance of women's behavior—remains. In districts with mid-level literacy, women practice "Negotiated Modernity," where they are visible in professional spaces but symbolically veiled in the presence of village elders to minimize cultural friction.

6. Conclusion

The Purdah system in Haryana, historically an institutionalized mechanism of gendered spatial control, is currently undergoing a profound structural decline. This research has demonstrated that the transition from a state-wide female literacy rate of **32.70% in 1991** to **65.94% in 2011** served as the primary catalyst for this transformation. The "Ghoonghat," once a non-negotiable symbol of family honor (*Izzat*) and modesty, has transitioned into a situational practice, increasingly discarded by the younger, educated generation.

The study concludes that the erosion of Purdah is not merely a change in attire but a fundamental shift in **Women's Agency**. The convergence of three major factors—educational attainment, legal empowerment through the Hindu Succession Act (HSA), and political visibility in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI)—has provided Haryanvi women

with the "bargaining power" necessary to challenge patriarchal seclusion. While "Mental Purdah" and internalized social surveillance persist in rural heartlands like Mewat, the overall trajectory of the state suggests a move toward a post-Purdah society. The Haryanvi woman is no longer an "invisible subject" but an active participant in the state's economic and political narrative.

6.1 Contributions of the Study

This paper contributes to the existing body of gender studies by providing a longitudinal, district-wise empirical analysis of Haryana's unique socio-cultural evolution. It bridges the gap between quantitative literacy trends and qualitative shifts in agency, offering a blueprint for understanding how traditional customs are reinterpreted rather than simply abandoned in the face of modernity.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

1. **Digital Literacy and Agency:** Future studies should investigate how access to digital spaces and social media is further subverting traditional veiling norms in rural Haryana.
2. **Impact of Sports Culture:** A dedicated study is required to analyze how Haryana's "Sports Revolution" (e.g., wrestling and boxing) has specifically contributed to the normalization of female visibility in public spaces.
3. **Safety and Mobility:** Researchers should explore the "Security Paradox," examining how improving public safety infrastructure can prevent the re-imposition of Purdah as a protective measure in volatile regions.

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