

**BULLETS IN THE BEAT: GLORIFICATION OF GUN CULTURE
IN PUNJABI SONGS AND CINEMA, ITS SOCIAL IMPACT AND
THE LIMITS OF LEGAL REGULATION IN PUNJAB**

by

Taranjot Singh

Research Scholar, Department of Laws
(Panjab University, Chandigarh)

Nakul Sihag

Research Scholar, Department of Laws
(Panjab University, Chandigarh)

Dr. Sunny Sharma

Assistant Professor, University Institute of Legal Studies
(Panjab University, Chandigarh)

ABSTRACT

Punjabi popular music and cinema now command a global audience, and a substantial part of that output turns the firearm, the criminal case and the defiance of police into emblems of status. The murder of singer Shubhdeep Singh Sidhu (Sidhu Moosewala) in May 2022, a series of first information reports against singers, executive bans on a gangster film and on songs that glorify weapons, and judicial directions of the Punjab and Haryana High Court have together made the question a live socio-legal controversy. This paper asks two questions. First, whether, and to what extent, songs and films that glorify gun culture contribute to violence and to the deterioration of law and order in Punjab. Second, whether the legal response of the State, comprising criminal prosecution, executive prohibition, film certification, digital takedown and judicial direction, is consistent with Article 19 of the Constitution of India. Drawing on media-effects scholarship, licensing data, reported prosecutions and case law, the paper argues that such content is better

understood as a risk factor that normalises violence than as an independent cause of crime, and that the present regulatory approach is episodic, vague and vulnerable to constitutional challenge. It concludes with suggestions for a narrowly drawn, procedurally fair and evidence-based framework that targets incitement and real-world firearm misuse rather than aesthetic expression as such.

Keywords: Gun Culture; Punjabi Music; Censorship; Article 19(2); Arms Act, 1959; Cinematograph Act, 1952; Public Order.

I. INTRODUCTION

On May 29, 2022, Shubhdeep Singh Sidhu, known to millions as Sidhu Moosewala, was shot dead in Mansa district of Punjab. Commentators noted the grim irony that he was killed with the very kind of assault rifle with which he had often been photographed, and which had drawn criticism that he popularised gun culture in the State.¹ The killing came a day after the State Government withdrew security cover from 424 persons, including the singer.² Within six months the Government of Punjab issued an order prohibiting songs that glorify weapons and violence, banning the public display of firearms including on social media, and directing a review of every arms licence in the State.³

The episode crystallised a debate that had been building for a decade. On one side stands the claim, accepted by the Punjab and Haryana High Court in 2019, that the glorification of violence in songs has contributed to a culture of gangsters in Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh and affects children of impressionable age.⁴ On the other side stands the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech and expression, which protects artistic expression even when it is coarse, provocative

Indian Journal of Contemporary Legal and Social Issues

¹ "From Pop to Politics: Sidhu Moosewala's Tragic Death" *Gulf News* (Dubai), 2022, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/music/from-pop-to-politics-sidhu-moosewalas-tragic-death-1.88248098> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

² "Punjab Government Bans Public Display of Weapons, Songs Glorifying Gun Culture" *Scroll.in*, Nov. 13, 2022, available at: <https://scroll.in/latest/1037331> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

³ "Punjab Bans Songs Glorifying Guns; to Review Arms Licences" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), Nov. 13, 2022, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/punjab-bans-songs-glorifying-guns-to-review-arms-licences-450711> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁴ *Reet Mohinder Singh v. State of Punjab*, CWP No. 6213 of 2016 (P&H HC, decided on July 22, 2019), along with connected matters including *Panditrao Dharenavar v. Principal Secretary to Government, Punjab*, CWP-PIL No. 27011 of 2016; reported in "'Glorification of Violence Has Given Rise to Culture of Gangsters': P & H HC Bans Songs Glorifying Violence in Public Events" *LiveLaw*, July 28, 2019, available at: <https://www.livelaw.in/news-updates/p-h-hc-bans-songs-glorifying-violence-in-public-events-146757> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

or offensive, and which permits restriction only on the grounds exhaustively listed in Article 19(2).⁵

This paper examines both sides of that debate with reference to Punjab: the cultural record (Part II), the evidence of effects (Part III), the constitutional and statutory framework (Parts IV and V), the judicial response (Part VI), governmental measures and law and order (Part VII), and suggestions (Part VIII). The method is doctrinal and socio-legal. Songs are identified by title, artist and year and their content is paraphrased, often through the police description, rather than reproduced, since verbatim lyrics are unnecessary to the analysis and would raise copyright concerns.

II. MUSIC, CINEMA AND THE MAKING OF A GUN AESTHETIC IN PUNJAB

The firearm occupies a long-standing place in the rural self-image of Punjab. A frequently repeated adage held that a man of standing needed a Bullet motorcycle and a double-barrel gun.⁶ The decades of militancy in the 1980s and 1990s added a material base to this sentiment. Data released by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs showed that Punjab had 3,59,349 active gun licences as on December 31, 2016, most of them issued during the two decades of militancy, against a population of 2,77,43,338 at the 2011 Census.⁷

Popular music absorbed and commercialised this heritage. With the rise of Punjabi hip-hop and its production centres in Canada and the United Kingdom, the earlier pastoral and romantic idiom gave way, in a significant segment of the industry, to themes of revenge, rivalry, weapons and caste pride. Critics have argued that the celebration of the Jatt protagonist in these songs is embedded in older structures of patriarchy and caste hierarchy, so that the gun functions as a marker of community honour as much as of individual power.⁸ Four recurring tropes can be identified: the firearm as an extension of masculine and caste honour; criminal cases, jail and court appearances worn as badges of status; open defiance of the police; and the settling of rivalries by force.

⁵ *Kaushal Kishor v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, (2023) 4 SCC 1.

⁶ "Singer Parmish Verma Shot: Why Gun Culture Thrives in Punjab" *DailyO*, Apr. 2018, available at: <https://www.dailyo.in/variety/punjab-drug-menace-and-gun-violence-death-of-parmish-verma-kulwant-chahal-23506> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁷ "Over 35% of India's Gun Licences Are in UP" *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), Oct. 3, 2017, archived at: <https://gunpolicy.org/firearms/citation/news/679> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁸ "Punjabi Music, Jatt Masculinity and Caste" *The Wire*, 2022, available at: <https://thewire.in/film/punjabi-music-jatt-masculinity-caste> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

The prosecutions of the last few years illustrate each of these tropes. In 2020 Sidhu Moosewala released "Sanju", in which he likened himself to the actor Sanjay Dutt, who had been convicted under the Arms Act, 1959. The video opened with a news clip of the singer being booked for firing an AK-47 rifle at a shooting range during the Covid-19 lockdown. The Punjab Police registered a fresh case on the ground that the song glorified illegal firearms and presented the registration of an FIR as the mark of a "real man".⁹ Earlier, on February 1, 2020, the Mansa Sadar police had booked Moosewala and Mankirt Aulakh on a complaint that a stage rendition of their song glorified weapons in violation of the High Court's directions; the song is reported as "Pakhiyan Pakhiyan" in one account and as "Panj Goliyan" ("five bullets") in another.¹⁰

Other singers met a similar fate. In March 2020 the Moga police registered a case against singer-actor Sippy Gill under Sections 153A, 505, 117 and 149 of the Indian Penal Code for his song "Gundagardi", whose very title means hooliganism.¹¹ In January 2021 the Patiala police arrested lyricist and singer Shree Brar over the video of "Jaan" (sung by Barbie Mann, featuring Brar, released in November 2020), in which his character storms the Nabha police station and frees an accused at gunpoint.¹² The phenomenon is not confined to Punjab. In neighbouring Haryana, songs such as "Tuition Badmashi Ka" ("tuition in thuggery") and "60 Mukadme" ("sixty criminal cases") by Masoom Sharma were taken down from YouTube for glorifying gun culture; the titles themselves announce the trope of the criminal record as a credential.¹³

Cinema has followed a parallel course, though with an important difference: feature films pass through statutory certification, whereas music videos released online do not. The most direct Punjabi example is *Shooter*, based on the life of the gangster Sukhvir Singh alias Sukha Kahlwan,

⁹ "Punjabi Singer Sidhu Moosewala Booked for Promoting Violence, Gun Culture in New Song 'Sanju'" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), 2020, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/punjabi-singer-sidhu-moosewala-booked-for-promoting-violence-gun-culture-in-new-song-sanju-115428> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

¹⁰ "Singers Moosewala, Mankirt Booked" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), Feb. 1, 2020, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/singers-moosewala-mankirt-booked-34657> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026); "Punjab: Two Singers Booked for Promoting Gun Culture through Song Lyrics" *Scroll.in*, Feb. 2020, available at: <https://scroll.in/latest/951886> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

¹¹ "Punjabi Singer-Actor Sippy Gill Booked for 'Promoting' Violence" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), Mar. 7, 2020, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjabi-singer-actor-sippy-gill-booked-for-promoting-violence-52514> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

¹² "Punjabi Singer Shree Brar Arrested for Promoting Gun Culture in Controversial Song" *The Tribune* (Patiala), Jan. 5, 2021, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/patiala/patiala-police-arrest-punjabi-singer-shree-brar-for-promoting-gun-culture-in-controversial-song-194058> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

¹³ "Row Continues over Removal of Haryanvi Songs Glorifying Gun Culture" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryana/row-continues-over-removal-of-haryanvi-songs-glorifying-gun-culture> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

who styled himself a "sharpshooter" and was allegedly involved in more than twenty cases of murder, kidnapping and extortion. On February 9, 2020 the Chief Minister ordered a ban on the film, and the police registered an FIR against its producer under Sections 153, 153A, 153B, 160 and 505 of the Indian Penal Code, alleging that the film was likely to instigate young people to take up arms. The producer had earlier given a written undertaking to the Mohali police that he would shelve the project, then originally titled after the gangster.¹⁴ Haryana suspended its exhibition for two months.¹⁵ The film was eventually released in February 2022.¹⁶

A contrasting example is *Uda Punjab* (2016), a film on the drug crisis in the State. The Central Board of Film Certification sought numerous cuts, including references to Punjab itself; the Bombay High Court set aside all but one, observing that the Board is empowered to certify, not to censor, and that depicting a social problem did not defame the State.¹⁷ The two films mark the poles of the debate, a sympathetic portrait of a named criminal and a critical portrait of a social ill, yet both met State resistance.

III. MEDIA EFFECTS AND THE PUNJAB CONTEXT: CAUSE, CATALYST OR MIRROR?

Whether violent songs and films cause violence is ultimately an empirical question, and the legal response ought to be proportionate to what the evidence shows. Two strands of research are relevant. Social learning theory, associated with Albert Bandura, demonstrated that children who watched an adult model behave aggressively were more likely to imitate that behaviour, particularly where the model was rewarded or admired.¹⁸ Experimental work on music specifically found that songs with violent lyrics increased aggressive thoughts and hostile feelings among listeners in the short term.¹⁹

¹⁴ "'Shooter' Banned in Punjab, FIR against Producer" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), Feb. 9, 2020, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/shooter-banned-in-punjab-fir-against-producer-38448> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

¹⁵ "Haryana Too Bans Gangster Film 'Shooter'" *IANS*, Feb. 22, 2020, available at: <https://ianslife.in/entertainment/haryana-too-bans-gangster-film-shooter> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

¹⁶ "Punjabi Film 'Shooter' to Finally Release Two Years after Ban" *IANS*, Dec. 30, 2021, available at: https://www.sacnilk.com/news/Punjabi_film_Shooter_to_finally_release_two_years_after_ban (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

¹⁷ *Phantom Films Pvt. Ltd. v. Central Board of Film Certification*, 2016 SCC OnLine Bom 3862 (decided on June 13, 2016).

¹⁸ Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross and Sheila A. Ross, "Transmission of Aggression through Imitation of Aggressive Models" 63 *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 575 (1961).

¹⁹ Craig A. Anderson, Nicholas L. Carnagey and Janie Eubanks, "Exposure to Violent Media: The Effects of Songs with Violent Lyrics on Aggressive Thoughts and Feelings" 84 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 960 (2003).

These findings must be read with care. A leading review concluded that the short-term effect of media violence on aggressive thoughts and behaviour is well established, while evidence linking it to serious criminal violence is weaker and more contested.²⁰ Other scholars, examining long-run trends, have found that rising consumption of violent media did not correspond with rising societal violence.²¹ No rigorous longitudinal study specific to Punjab could be traced for this paper. A figure widely repeated in the Indian press, attributed to a study by the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, holds that a majority of recent Punjabi songs celebrate violence, liquor and guns; the primary study, however, is not publicly cited in those reports and the figure should be treated with caution.²²

The Punjab data point to structural drivers that music alone cannot explain. Police officials have reported that licensed weapons feature in fewer than one per cent of crimes, compared with illegal arms, and that over 800 illegal weapons were recovered in the State between March 2022 and March 2023.²³ Data for 2023 reported by *The Indian Express* show that Ludhiana recorded the highest number of Arms Act cases in the State that year, 87, of which 83 involved illegal or unlicensed weapons.²⁴ The Punjab Police have also attributed the ammunition used by criminals largely to pilferage from licensed gun houses, while the weapons themselves arrive across the international border and from other States.²⁵ Unemployment, emigration of the young and the drug crisis compound the problem.

At the same time, it would be equally mistaken to dismiss the cultural dimension. The Haryana Police, after removing 67 songs in January 2026, stated that such songs project criminals as role

²⁰ Craig A. Anderson, Leonard Berkowitz *et al.*, "The Influence of Media Violence on Youth" 4 *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 81 (2003).

²¹ Christopher J. Ferguson, "Does Media Violence Predict Societal Violence? It Depends on What You Look at and When" 65 *Journal of Communication* E1 (2015).

²² Shamsheer Chandel, "How Death of a Girl Has Put the Focus on Violence, Misogyny and Alcoholism in Punjabi Music" *DailyO*, Feb. 14, 2018, available at: <https://www.dailyo.in/variety/punjab-celebratory-firing-songs-violence-misogyny-patriarchy-gun-culture-women-objectification-22348> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

²³ "As Gun Culture Spikes, Punjab Police Ask Govt to Cancel over 7,000 Arms Licences" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/as-gun-culture-spikes-punjab-police-ask-govt-to-cancel-over-7000-arms-licences> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026); "Guns and Poses: As Punjab Govt Halts Issuing Arms Licences, Sales at Gun Houses Dwindle" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), 2023, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/guns-and-poses-as-punjab-govt-halts-issuing-arms-licences-sales-at-gun-houses-dwindle-522005> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

²⁴ "Two Gunmen Open Fire at a Pizza Outlet in Punjab" *Brut India*, Aug. 19, 2026, available at: <https://www.brut.media/in/videos/india/society/two-gunmen-open-fire-at-a-pizza-outlet-in-punjab> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

²⁵ "Punjab DGP Gaurav Yadav Orders Quarterly Inspection of Gun Houses in State" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), Nov. 18, 2022, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/punjab-dgp-gaurav-yadav-orders-quarterly-inspection-of-gun-houses-in-state-452219> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

models and that gangsters use digital platforms to lure and recruit young people.²⁶ By October 2026 its Special Task Force reported having counselled nearly 200 young people influenced by gangster culture.²⁷ The Punjab Police similarly ran an operation monitoring social media posts that glorified guns through pictures, songs and couplets, and linked the proliferation of weapons to deaths from celebratory firing at weddings.²⁸

The most defensible conclusion, therefore, is that gun-glorifying content is a risk factor and a catalyst rather than an independent cause. It normalises the firearm, lowers the social cost of carrying one and supplies a script of honour and revenge to young men already exposed to unemployment, drugs and organised crime. The danger is most acute where art ceases to be fiction: where a song boasts of the singer's own pending case, as in "Sanju", or where, as the police alleged in the "Jaan" matter, the lyrics allude to a recent real murder.²⁹ This distinction between general aesthetic glorification and content tied to identifiable criminal conduct is, as Part IV shows, also the distinction that constitutional law draws.

IV. CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ITS PERMISSIBLE LIMITS

Article 19(1)(a) guarantees to every citizen the freedom of speech and expression, which extends to films, songs and every form of artistic communication. Article 19(2) permits the State to make law imposing reasonable restrictions only in the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.³⁰ "Glorification of violence" is not itself a ground. Any restriction on gun-glorifying content must therefore be justified under public order, incitement to an offence or decency and morality. A Constitution Bench has confirmed that the grounds in Article 19(2) are exhaustive and cannot be enlarged by invoking other fundamental rights.³¹

²⁶ "Haryana Police Mute Gangster Songs on Platforms to Shield Youth" *The Pioneer* (Chandigarh), Jan. 2026, available at: <https://www.dailypioneer.com/news/haryana-police-mute-gangster-songs-on-platforms-to-shield-youth> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

²⁷ "Haryana: STF Counsels Nearly 200 Youths, Takes Down 12 Instagram Accounts" *UNI India* (Panchkula), Oct. 8, 2026, available at: <https://www.uniindia.com/north-india/admin-haryana-stf-youth/206925> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

²⁸ *Supra* note 23.

²⁹ "Punjab Singer Shree Brar 'Targets' Cops in Video, Lands Behind Bars" *The Tribune* (Patiala), Jan. 5, 2021, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/punjab-singer-targets-cops-in-video-lands-behind-bars-194185> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

³⁰ The Constitution of India, arts. 19(1)(a) and 19(2).

³¹ *Supra* note 5.

The Supreme Court has consistently insisted on a proximate connection between expression and the apprehended harm. In *Superintendent, Central Prison, Fatehgarh v. Ram Manohar Lohia*, the Court held that the restriction must have a proximate and reasonable nexus with public order, which it distinguished from the wider concept of law and order.³² In *S. Rangarajan v. P. Jagjivan Ram*, the Court held that the anticipated danger must not be remote, conjectural or far-fetched, but must be like a spark in a powder keg, and that the State cannot plead its inability to handle a hostile audience as a ground for suppressing expression.³³ In *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, the Court drew the now-classic distinction between discussion, advocacy and incitement, holding that only incitement may be curtailed.³⁴ Applied to Punjabi music, this means that a song which merely celebrates a weapon, however distasteful, is advocacy at most; a song that urges listeners to attack a named person or police station, or that threatens witnesses in a real case, may cross into incitement.

Films have been treated somewhat differently because of their impact. In *K.A. Abbas v. Union of India*, the Court upheld pre-censorship of films on the ground that the moving image has a greater capacity to stir emotions than the printed word, while warning that the standards must be clear.³⁵ Yet the Court has measured impact by the standard of the reasonable, strong-minded, firm and courageous viewer, not the most vulnerable or hypersensitive one,³⁶ and has held that a depiction of violence must be judged in the context of the work as a whole and its message.³⁷ A film that shows a gangster's rise and violent end may condemn rather than glorify.

Two further principles bear directly on the Punjab measures. First, a restriction must be imposed by "law"; executive instructions without statutory backing do not suffice for Article 19(2).³⁸ Second, restrictions must satisfy proportionality: the State must adopt the least restrictive measure that achieves its legitimate aim.³⁹ Against these limits stand the State's legitimate concerns, reflected in the Directive Principles that children be given opportunities to develop in a healthy manner and be protected against moral and material abandonment, and in the fundamental duty to

³² *Superintendent, Central Prison, Fatehgarh v. Ram Manohar Lohia*, AIR 1960 SC 633.

³³ *S. Rangarajan v. P. Jagjivan Ram*, (1989) 2 SCC 574.

³⁴ *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, (2015) 5 SCC 1.

³⁵ *K.A. Abbas v. Union of India*, (1970) 2 SCC 780.

³⁶ *Ramesh v. Union of India*, (1988) 1 SCC 668.

³⁷ *Bobby Art International v. Om Pal Singh Hoon*, (1996) 4 SCC 1.

³⁸ *Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala*, (1986) 3 SCC 615.

³⁹ *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India*, (2020) 3 SCC 637.

abjure violence.⁴⁰ The federal distribution of power adds a further layer: sanctioning films for exhibition is a Union subject, while cinemas, public order and police are State subjects.⁴¹ A State therefore cannot re-censor a certified film, but it remains responsible for keeping the peace where it is screened.

V. STATUTORY REGIME: PENAL, ARMS, CINEMATOGRAPH AND DIGITAL LAWS

Penal law. The prosecutions discussed above were brought under the Indian Penal Code, 1860, which has since been replaced by the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 with effect from July 1, 2024. The relevant provisions now are Section 196 (promoting enmity between groups, formerly Section 153A), Section 353 (statements conducing to public mischief, formerly Section 505), Section 296 (obscene acts and songs, formerly Section 294), Section 351 (criminal intimidation) and Section 125 (acts endangering life or personal safety, relevant to celebratory firing). Section 111 now defines and punishes organised crime, which reaches the gangs that some songs celebrate.⁴² The Shree Brar case also invoked Section 3 of the Police (Incitement to Disaffection) Act, 1922.⁴³ Two doctrinal difficulties deserve notice. The obscenity offence, used in the Brar and Mansa FIRs, concerns lascivious content judged by contemporary community standards;⁴⁴ violence is not obscenity, and stretching the provision to cover gun imagery is legally doubtful. Further, the Supreme Court has held that mens rea must be read into Section 196, that the police must read or hear the words before registering an FIR in such matters, and that a preliminary enquiry is available under Section 173(3) of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 for offences of this class.⁴⁵

Arms law. The Arms (Amendment) Act, 2019 inserted Section 25(9) into the Arms Act, 1959, punishing the use of a firearm in a rash or negligent manner or in celebratory gunfire so as to endanger human life or personal safety with imprisonment up to two years, or fine up to one lakh rupees, or both. The same amendment reduced the number of firearms that a licensee may hold from three to two.⁴⁶ Acting on this limit, the Patiala administration suspended 274 licences held

⁴⁰ The Constitution of India, arts. 39(f) and 51A(i).

⁴¹ The Constitution of India, Seventh Schedule, List I, entry 60; List II, entries 1, 2 and 33.

⁴² The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (Act 45 of 2023), ss. 111, 125, 196, 296, 351 and 353.

⁴³ *Supra* note 29.

⁴⁴ *Aveek Sarkar v. State of West Bengal*, (2014) 4 SCC 257.

⁴⁵ *Imran Pratapgadhi v. State of Gujarat*, 2025 INSC 410 (Criminal Appeal No. 1545 of 2025, decided on Mar. 28, 2025).

⁴⁶ The Arms (Amendment) Act, 2019 (Act 48 of 2019), ss. 3 and 8, amending ss. 3 and 25 of the Arms Act, 1959 (Act 54 of 1959).

by persons with more than two weapons after the State order of November 2022.⁴⁷ These provisions target conduct, not expression, and are constitutionally the more secure instrument.

Film law. Section 5B(1) of the Cinematograph Act, 1952 forbids certification of a film that is against the grounds in Article 19(2) or is likely to incite the commission of an offence. The guidelines issued under Section 5B(2) direct that anti-social activities such as violence are not glorified or justified, and that the modus operandi of criminals or other visuals likely to incite the commission of an offence are not depicted.⁴⁸ The Cinematograph (Amendment) Act, 2023 introduced age-based sub-categories of the "UA" certificate (seven, thirteen and sixteen years) and strengthened anti-piracy provisions.⁴⁹ The Union's revisional power to re-examine certified films had earlier been struck down.⁵⁰ The critical gap is that standalone music videos released on YouTube or streaming services are not films submitted for certification at all, so the most influential gun-glorifying content escapes this regime entirely.

Digital law. Online content is governed by the Information Technology Act, 2000. Section 69A empowers the Central Government to direct blocking on grounds that track Article 19(2), under the Blocking Rules of 2009, whose orders are confidential. The removal of Moosewala's posthumous song "SYL" from YouTube in India in June 2022, which had drawn close to thirty million views within days, displayed only the notice that it was unavailable due to a legal complaint from the government; no authority publicly took responsibility for it.⁵¹ Separately, Section 79(3)(b), read with Rule 3(1)(d) of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, obliges intermediaries to remove unlawful content on notice from the appropriate government or its agency. The Haryana Police relied on these provisions to remove 67 songs from YouTube, Spotify, JioSaavn, Amazon Music and Gaana in January 2026, with Masoom Sharma accounting for nineteen of them.⁵² In *Shreya Singhal*,

⁴⁷ "Punjab Clamps Down on Gun Culture, 274 Licences Suspended" *Hindustan Times* (Patiala), Nov. 20, 2022, available at: <https://www.pressreader.com/india/hindustan-times-delhi/20221120/281861532501355> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁴⁸ The Cinematograph Act, 1952 (Act 37 of 1952), s. 5B; Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Guidelines for Certification of Films for Public Exhibition, 1991, guidelines 2(i) and 2(ii).

⁴⁹ The Cinematograph (Amendment) Act, 2023 (Act 12 of 2023).

⁵⁰ *Union of India v. K.M. Shankarappa*, (2001) 1 SCC 582.

⁵¹ "Slain Indian Rapper Sidhu Moose Wala's Song Removed from YouTube" *Al Jazeera*, June 27, 2022, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/27/slain-indian-rapper-sidhu-moose-walas-song-removed-from-youtube> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁵² "'Badmashi' under Scrutiny: Haryana Police Removes 67 Haryanvi Songs from Streaming Platforms" *Newslaundry*, Jan. 15, 2026, available at: <https://www.newslaundry.com/2026/01/15/badmashi-under-scrutiny-haryana-police-removes-67-haryanvi-songs-from-streaming-platforms> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

Section 69A was upheld precisely because it requires reasoned orders and procedural safeguards;⁵³ takedowns by notice that are neither published nor reasoned sit uneasily with that rationale.

VI. JUDICIAL RESPONSE: THE PUNJAB AND HARYANA HIGH COURT AND THE SUPREME COURT

The leading Punjab authority arose, unusually, from litigation on noise pollution. In *Reet Mohinder Singh v. State of Punjab*, decided with four connected petitions including a public interest petition by Panditrao Dharenavar, a Division Bench of Rajiv Sharma and Harinder Singh Sidhu, JJ. took judicial notice that the glorification of liquor, drugs and violence in songs in Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh had increased, that it had given rise to a culture of gangsters, and that such songs affect children of impressionable age.⁵⁴ The Court directed the three administrations to ensure that no one carries firearms to processions or educational institutions, that no songs glorifying liquor, drugs and violence are played in live shows, that children below twelve are not admitted to "A" certified films, and that obscene posters are not displayed near educational institutions, making District Magistrates and Senior Superintendents of Police personally responsible for compliance.⁵⁵

The judgment has had a long afterlife. It has been cited in police complaints alleging contempt by singers,⁵⁶ in the FIR against Moosewala over "Sanju",⁵⁷ and in a December 2024 notice from the State's Department of Women and Child Development to the Ludhiana administration seeking to prevent Diljit Dosanjh from performing certain songs at a concert.⁵⁸ With respect, the direction on songs raises constitutional questions. "Glorifying" was left undefined; the singers and labels whose expression it restrains were not before the Court; and a blanket direction to the police operates as a prior restraint on live performance without an individualised finding of incitement in any particular case.

⁵³ *Supra* note 34.

⁵⁴ *Supra* note 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; "HC Gets Firm on Noise Pollution, Won't Allow Loudspeakers" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), July 2019, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/punjab/hc-gets-firm-on-noise-pollution-won-t-allow-loudspeakers-807876> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁵⁶ *Supra* note 10.

⁵⁷ *Supra* note 9.

⁵⁸ "Diljit Dosanjh Faces Legal Action over Alleged Pro-Alcohol Songs at Ludhiana Concert" *Dynamite News*, Jan. 1, 2025, available at: <https://www.dynamitenews.com/story/diljit-dosanjh-faces-legal-action-after-concert-in-ludhiana-over-alleged-pro-alcohol-songs> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

A later bench approached the matter with closer attention to Article 19. In *Gurbhej Singh alias Bheja v. State of Punjab*, a bail matter in which the Court had already observed that there was no visible change on the ground despite the State's ban on the display of firearms, Harkesh Manuja, J. directed the Director General of Police to file a comprehensive affidavit setting out the songs banned or recommended for ban, and the procedure adopted for doing so in light of Article 19 and of the different media through which songs are broadcast, including television, the internet and live shows.⁵⁹ The question the Court asked, namely by what procedure and under what law songs are being banned, is precisely the question the State has not yet answered.

The Supreme Court's film jurisprudence constrains executive bans of the *Shooter* kind. In *Prakash Jha Productions v. Union of India*, the Court held that once a film has been certified by the expert statutory body, a State cannot suspend its exhibition on an apprehension of law and order trouble, because maintaining order is the State's own duty.⁶⁰ In *Viacom 18 Media (P) Ltd. v. Union of India*, the Court stayed State notifications prohibiting the exhibition of a certified film.⁶¹ In *Indibility Creative (P) Ltd. v. State of West Bengal*, it awarded compensation against a State whose police had informally prevented the screening of a certified film, holding that the police cannot be used to muzzle expression.⁶² To the extent that *Shooter* had been certified, its prohibition by executive order was therefore constitutionally vulnerable; the more defensible route was certification scrutiny under Section 5B. Finally, in *Imran Pratapgadhi*, the Court reminded the police and the courts that poems and songs are protected artistic expression, that judges must protect speech even when they dislike it, and that mechanical registration of FIRs over artistic content is an abuse of process.⁶³

VII. GOVERNMENTAL MEASURES AND LAW AND ORDER: AN ASSESSMENT

Successive governments in Punjab have treated gun-glorifying content as a law and order issue. In 2018 the then Culture Minister announced a Punjab Sabhyacharak (Culture) Commission to counter songs promoting violence, drugs and vulgarity,⁶⁴ and in 2020 the Government was

⁵⁹ *Gurbhej Singh alias Bheja v. State of Punjab*, CRM-M-17922-2024 (P&H HC, interim order dated May 7, 2024); reported in "Submit Details of Songs Banned for Promoting Glorification of Weapons in Punjab: High Court to DGP" *LiveLaw*, May 9, 2024, available at: <https://www.livelaw.in/high-court/punjab-and-haryana-high-court/punjab-haryana-high-court-dgp-punjab-submit-details-of-songs-banned-for-promoting-glorification-of-weapons-257508> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁶⁰ *Prakash Jha Productions v. Union of India*, (2011) 8 SCC 372.

⁶¹ *Viacom 18 Media (P) Ltd. v. Union of India*, (2018) 1 SCC 761.

⁶² *Indibility Creative (P) Ltd. v. State of West Bengal*, (2020) 12 SCC 436.

⁶³ *Supra* note 45.

⁶⁴ *Supra* note 6.

reported to be formulating a law to curb singers who glorify weapons and drugs.⁶⁵ Neither has yielded legislation so far as could be ascertained. Chief Minister Amarinder Singh publicly backed Shree Brar's arrest as correct and justified.⁶⁶ On May 12, 2022, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann condemned the promotion of gun culture and gangsterism by some singers and warned of stern action.⁶⁷

The most comprehensive step was the order of the Department of Home Affairs dated November 13, 2022, issued after the killings of Sudhir Suri in Amritsar on November 4 and of Pardeep Singh in Kotkapura on November 10. It directed a complete ban on songs glorifying weapons and violence, a complete ban on the public display of weapons including on social media, a prohibition on carrying weapons at public gatherings, religious places and weddings, a review of all arms licences within three months with no new licences in the interim, surprise checks, and registration of FIRs for hate speech.⁶⁸ Five days later the Director General of Police ordered quarterly inspection of every gun house under Rule 20.14 of the Punjab Police Rules, 1934, noting that Punjab, with about two per cent of India's population, held nearly ten per cent of its licensed weapons, or thirteen licences per thousand persons.⁶⁹

The firearm-related measures have produced measurable results. By June 2023 the number of licences had fallen to 3,46,153, covering about 4.38 lakh registered weapons;⁷⁰ the Government cancelled 803 licences in March 2023, and the police later recommended cancellation of about 7,000 more, largely on account of celebratory firing.⁷¹ The song ban, by contrast, has no visible enforcement record: no published list of banned songs, no reasoned orders and no identified statutory source. The order is an executive instruction, and under *Bijoe Emmanuel* such an

⁶⁵ "Punjabi Singers Face Scrutiny for Glamourizing Guns, Liquor" *The Daily Pioneer* (Chandigarh), 2020, available at: <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2020/state-editions/punjabi-singers-face-scrutiny-for-glamourizing-guns--liquor.html> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁶⁶ "Punjab CM Backs Singer's Arrest for Promoting 'Gun Culture'" *PTI*, Jan. 6, 2021, available at: <https://english.udyavani.com/article/punjab-cm-backs-singers-arrest-for-promoting-gun-culture/972964> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁶⁷ "Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann Warns Singers Promoting Gun Culture through Songs" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), May 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/punjab-cm-bhagwant-mann-warns-singers-promoting-gun-culture-through-songs-394243> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁶⁸ "Punjab Govt Bans Songs Glorifying Weapons, Public Display of Firearms" *PTI*, Nov. 13, 2022, available at: <https://udyavani.com/?p=1380137> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026); "Punjab Government Bans Songs Glorifying Weapons; No Public Display of Firearms, Including on Social Media" *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), Nov. 13, 2022, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/punjab-government-bans-songs-glorifying-weapons-no-public-display-of-firearms-including-on-social-media-450572> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁶⁹ *Supra* note 25.

⁷⁰ *Supra* note 23.

⁷¹ *Supra* note 23.

instruction cannot by itself restrict speech.⁷² It is unsurprising that the High Court, two years later, found no visible change on the ground and demanded to know the procedure being followed.⁷³

Enforcement has also been criticised as selective. Shree Brar's arrest followed closely on his writing a widely sung anthem for the farmers' movement, and an opposition party alleged that he had been singled out on that account, a charge the Government denied.⁷⁴ In Haryana, Masoom Sharma alleged that the removal of his songs was a targeted attempt to damage his career, while other singers questioned why similar songs had been spared.⁷⁵ The "SYL" takedown, which concerned the river-water dispute rather than guns, shows how such a regime can drift beyond its purpose, and that bans may amplify what they suppress.⁷⁶

On the central question whether these songs affect law and order, the evidence assembled here supports a qualified answer. The serious violence in Punjab is driven chiefly by organised gangs operating across borders, illegal weapons and a disaffected youth population. Songs and films do not create these conditions, but they lend them glamour and legitimacy and may ease recruitment. Measures directed at real firearms, such as licence audits, the two-weapon limit and prosecution of celebratory firing, address the harm directly and have yielded results. Measures directed at expression, when vague, unpublished and selectively enforced, have produced controversy without evident benefit to public order.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Punjab's experience shows both the reality of the concern and the inadequacy of the present response. The glorification of guns, criminal records and defiance of the police in a section of Punjabi music and cinema is real and has been judicially noticed. Media-effects research supports the view that such content can normalise aggression, especially among the young, though it does not establish that it independently causes violent crime. The response has relied on ill-fitting penal provisions, executive orders without clear statutory basis, a judicial direction issued in noise-pollution litigation and opaque takedowns, each open to challenge under Article 19 as interpreted in *Rangarajan*, *Shreya Singhal*, *Bijoe Emmanuel* and *Kaushal Kishor*.

⁷² *Supra* note 38.

⁷³ *Supra* note 59.

⁷⁴ "Shree Brar's Arrest after Kisan Anthem Video Generates Political Heat" *SabrangIndia*, Jan. 8, 2021, available at: <https://sabrangindia.in/shree-brars-arrest-after-kisan-anthem-video-generates-political-heat/> (last visited on Oct. 12, 2026).

⁷⁵ *Supra* note 13.

⁷⁶ *Supra* note 51.

The following suggestions are offered. First, any restriction on content should be enacted by law and confined to the constitutional grounds, defining the prohibited content narrowly as material that incites or threatens the commission of an identifiable offence, or that is tied to real pending crimes, witnesses or police officers, rather than to "glorification" at large. Second, online music videos should be brought within a co-regulatory system of age ratings and content descriptors comparable to that applicable to films and online curated content, so that the response to objectionable aesthetics is classification rather than prohibition. Third, every takedown or ban should be made by a reasoned, written and reviewable order, with notice to the artist where practicable, as the High Court itself sought to ascertain in *Gurbhej Singh*. Fourth, police should follow *Imran Pratapgadhi* by reading or hearing the content and conducting a preliminary enquiry before registering an FIR, and should cease invoking obscenity provisions against violent imagery. Fifth, State resources should continue to concentrate on the real drivers of gun violence: licence audits, enforcement of Section 25(9) of the Arms Act, inspection of gun houses and interdiction of illegal weapons. Sixth, the State should commission independent, longitudinal research on the influence of such content on young people in Punjab, so that future policy rests on evidence rather than anecdote. Finally, the industry and cultural institutions should be engaged to encourage work that draws on Punjab's musical tradition without making the gun its emblem. Regulation that respects the Constitution and targets the harm, rather than the art, offers the most credible path to protecting both the youth of Punjab and the freedom of its artists.