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# Special Papers

**Title: Pre-emptive Mnemonic Strikes: Place-Renaming as a Tool of Populist Governance in India and Turkey**

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**Introduction**

Narratives of the past are inscribed not only in texts but also on the landscape. Place-names, while seemingly mundane markers of everyday usage, carry within them the weight of memory, history and political contestation (Azaryahu 1996, 312; Foote and Azaryahu 2007, 126). When a place is renamed, a particular version of the past is celebrated; another is suppressed. A community's presence is affirmed; another's is silenced. The landscape becomes a site of mnemonic governance, a space where states assert their authority over collective memory and shape the possibilities of political belonging for generations to come (Alderman 2008, 196; Rose-Redwood and Alderman 2011, 2).

In October 2018, the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh renamed Allahabad as Prayagraj. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath highlighted the event as a restoration of 'Hindu civilisational memory' that had been 'distorted' by 'Mughal invaders' (Jaffrelot 2021, 114; *The Hindu*, 16 October 2018). Within weeks, a name that had persisted for four centuries, *Allahabad*, was largely removed from official signage and administrative use (Government of Uttar Pradesh Order No. 12/2018). The official government website of Prayagraj today doesn't have any mention of the name Allahabad. In Turkey, a longer and quieter process has unfolded. The predominantly Alevi-Kurdish region of Dersim was renamed Tunceli ('Bronze Hand') in 1935 following a military suppression that killed thousands (Houston 2009, 47). Thousands of Kurdish village names have been Turkified cumulatively since the 1920s (Şahin 2020, 118; Çolak 2006, 62). Biblical and Armenian toponyms have been erased from official maps (Çolak 2006, 63). These acts, separated by geography and history, share a common logic: the pre-emptive erasure of minority presence from the official landscape.

This article examines place-renaming in India and Turkey as a form of pre-emptive memory politics. It argues that renaming functions not merely as commemoration but as a *pre-emptive mnemonic strike*, an institutional act that erases minority toponyms before they can be mobilised as counter-narratives, territorial claims or alternative identities (Scott 2014, 78; Connerton 2008, 62). Unlike retrospective redress (post-apartheid South Africa) or revolutionary consolidation (post-genocide Rwanda), renaming in India and Turkey targets living minority communities (Muslims in India; Kurds, Alevis and Armenians in Turkey) with formal citizenship, is future-oriented, and procedurally unconstrained (Winder 2020, 88; Buckley-Zistel 2009, 46). The article first outlines the theoretical framework, then examines case studies from India

and Turkey, and concludes with reflections on majoritarian governance and memory politics in the Global South.

## I

### Theoretical Framework

Critical toponymy has systematically dismantled the fiction that place-names are neutral. Building on Azaryahu (1996, 312), Rose-Redwood and Alderman (2011, 2) and Vuolteenaho and Berg (2009, 3), this literature has shown that naming and renaming are thoroughly political acts, involving power dynamics. As Storey (2011, 1132) notes, critical toponymy ‘exposes the power relations embedded in the seemingly mundane act of naming places.’ Place-names encode relations of power, commemorate chosen pasts and materialise ideologies onto the everyday landscape (Yeoh 1996, 298). This scholarship has largely framed renaming as *retrospective*, a response to a prior wrong, a past regime or a historical rupture (Azaryahu 1990, 35; Connerton 2008, 60). Whether in post-apartheid South Africa, post-genocide Rwanda or post-communist Eastern Europe, the analytical emphasis falls on how states *respond* to past injustices.

This article offers a different proposition. In revivalist majoritarian democracies such as India and Turkey, place-renaming is often not primarily about responding to a past wrong. It is about *pre-empting a future claim*. The target of erasure is a name that might, in the hands of a minority community, become the anchor for a counter-narrative, a territorial demand or an alternative political identity (Houston 2009, 48). Drawing on Scott (2014, 78), who analyses ‘pre-emptive counter-revolution’ in Grenada, I propose the concept of the pre-emptive mnemonic strike. Scott argues that counter-revolutionary violence targets not only existing revolutionary institutions but ‘the conditions of possibility for future revolutionary mobilization’ (Scott 2014, 78). I extend this insight from revolutionary warfare to symbolic governance: pre-emptive renaming targets not only existing minority toponyms but the conditions of possibility for future minority claims. The concept has intellectual antecedents in Connerton’s (2008, 62) ‘repressive erasure’, the deliberate forgetting of inconvenient pasts, but shifts the temporal orientation from past to future. Where Connerton focused on how states erase memories of events that already happened, the pre-emptive mnemonic strike erases the *toponymic infrastructure* that might anchor future memories and claims.<sup>1</sup>

*A pre-emptive mnemonic strike satisfies four conditions:* first, *temporal asymmetry*: the erased toponym is associated with a living minority community that has not made an active claim at the time of renaming, (though the absence of documented claims is not proof of absence, but the burden of evidence lies with demonstrating such claims existed); second, *prospective justification*: the state justifies the change as future-oriented, ‘for future generations’, ‘so that our children know the true history’; third, *mnemonic*



*foreclosure*: the state actively suppresses the old name's survival in official domains, textbooks, signboards, gazettes, postal codes, (although foreclosure is rarely total and old names often survive in institutional names like Allahabad High Court, but the state's intent is systematic suppression); fourth, *speed without crisis*: the renaming is executed rapidly (weeks to months in cases of spectacular pre-emption; years to decades in cases of bureaucratic pre-emption) in peacetime. Where these four conditions converge, renaming is pre-emptive. Where one or more are absent, renaming follows a different logic, consolidating (post-genocide Rwanda) or restorative (post-apartheid South Africa).<sup>2</sup>

To understand the political work that pre-emptive renaming performs, I turn to Gramsci's (1971, 12) concept of hegemony, the production of a 'common sense' that forecloses alternative worldviews. Pre-emptive renaming is hegemonic work: it naturalises the majoritarian story so thoroughly that the minority story becomes unnameable. When a minority child in Prayagraj grows up seeing no sign of 'Allahabad' on official signage, the question 'Were we here too?' becomes harder to ask. The landscape ceases to invite it. This is hegemony enacted through toponyms (Gramsci 1971, 12; Chatterjee 2011, 67). Chatterjee (2011, 67) reminds us that political society in post-colonial democracies is constituted through the negotiation of space and identity. Pre-emptive renaming forecloses that negotiation. It says, in advance: *This space is not for negotiation. It is already settled*. The minority is not expelled from the territory; it is expelled from the *name* of the territory.<sup>3</sup>

## II

### The Case of India

Place-renaming in India is not new. The decades following independence saw renaming aimed at decolonisation: Bombay officially became Mumbai in November 1995 (Shiv Sena-BJP coalition, following decades of popular and political demand); Madras became Chennai in 1996 (DMK government, reflecting Tamil linguistic nationalism); Calcutta became Kolkata in 2001 (Left Front government, reflecting Bengali linguistic nationalism) (Jaffrelot 2021, 116; Hansen 2001, 145). These changes were political and retrospective, aimed at correcting colonial distortions. What distinguishes the current wave of renaming under BJP governments since 2014 is its larger *pre-emptive* character, the justification is future-oriented, and the speed is rapid and often spectacular. (Jaffrelot 2021, 114).

*Uttar Pradesh*: Uttar Pradesh, India's electoral and political heartland, has been governed by the BJP since 2017, under the Chief Ministership of Yogi Adityanath. In October 2018, Allahabad became Prayagraj and in November 2018, Faizabad became Ayodhya. Similarly, Mughalsarai Railway Station was renamed as Pt. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Junction in June 2018. Each change targets a toponym associated with Islamic

political presence: Mughal, Nawabi or syncretic, and replaces it with a Hindu civilisational marker. Prayagraj was implemented within three weeks. Televised ceremonies, lighting of diyas and aerial flower showers accompanied the announcements (*The Hindu*, 16 October 2018; *The Times of India*, 5 August 2018).

*Applying the four conditions to Uttar Pradesh:* Condition one (temporal asymmetry): A conspicuous absence of any documented attempt by Muslim organisations to resist the renaming of Allahabad at the time of name-change. Such names carried the memory of Islamic presence, but there was a lack of active mobilisation to resist the change; condition two (prospective justification): Adityanath's speeches framed the renaming as necessary 'so that future generations know the true history' (reported in *The Hindu*, 16 October 2018); condition three (mnemonic foreclosure): the state silences the old name through changes in textbooks, signboards and official documents, though 'Allahabad' did survive in institutional names like Allahabad High Court; condition four (speed without crisis): the process took three weeks in peacetime.

*Beyond Uttar Pradesh:* In Madhya Pradesh, Habibganj railway station was renamed Rani Kamalapati Railway Station, in November 2021 (*The Hindu*, 15 November 2021). The name 'Habibganj' derived from Nawab Habibullah Khan, who donated land for the station's development, or from the Arabic 'Habib' (beloved/beautiful), and the renaming was explicitly framed by the BJP as replacing Muslim legacy (*The Indian Express*, 15 November 2021). As Jaffrelot (2021, 118) notes, Madhya Pradesh's BJP government undertook several renaming initiatives. In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena proposed renaming Aurangabad as Sambhajinagar, Bal Thackeray first suggested it in 1988. The City Corporation passed a resolution in 1995; the state government finally gazetted the change in June 2022 (*The Times of India*, 4 May 2020; *The Indian Express*, 30 June 2022). In Tamil Nadu, the DMK renamed Madras as Chennai in 1996, asserting Tamil identity while erasing colonial toponyms (Ramaswamy 1997, 52). These cases illustrate that pre-emptive logic existed in regional majoritarian politics before becoming national policy after 2014.

### III

#### The Case of Turkey

Turkey's toponymic politics predates the AKP government. The early Republican period under Atatürk (1923-1938) saw extensive Turkification: tens of thousands of Greek, Armenian, Kurdish and Ottoman names were changed cumulatively since 1923 (Houston 2009, 44; Çolak 2006, 58). Dersim, a predominantly Alevi-Kurdish region, was renamed Tunceli in 1935 following a military suppression that killed thousands (Houston 2009, 47; Şahin 2020, 112). This early Republican renaming was assimilationist

and secular. The AKP, in power since 2002, has intensified this politics with a Sunni-Turkish Islamist register (Gökarıksel and Secor 2015, 14).

*Kurdish village names.* Since the 1920s, thousands of Kurdish village names have been Turkified cumulatively. Scholars estimate that over 10,000 name changes occurred across the Republican period, with renewed intensity in the 1980s-2000s following the 1980 coup (Houston 2009, 48; Çolak 2006, 62). Villages with names evoking Kurdish identity were renamed with Turkish words (Şahin 2020, 118). As Gökarıksel and Secor (2015, 18) argue, these changes are acts of ‘spatial assimilation’ that strip Kurdish communities of linguistic evidence of their historical presence. A Kurdish child growing up in a village officially renamed Yenışehir has no toponymic memory of the place’s Kurdish past, unless elders transmit it orally. This is pre-emptive erasure across generations.

*Dersim/Tunceli:* The AKP has refused to restore the name Dersim despite several demands from Alevi and Kurdish groups. In November 2011, Erdoğan apologised for the 1937-38 Dersim massacre but dismissed any possibility of renaming the province (Şahin 2020, 121; *Hurriyet Daily News*, 24 November 2011). Şahin (2020, 121) argues that the name Dersim is a ‘latent resource’ for Alevi-Kurdish memory and keeping it suppressed pre-empts future claims. The refusal to restore the name, even after apologising for the massacre itself, reveals the logic at work, i.e., the state does acknowledge the historical wrong but categorically refuses the symbolic correction because that correction would restore a mnemonic resource to a minority community.

*Christian and Armenian toponyms:* Across Anatolia, place-names derived from Greek, Armenian and Syriac have been systematically replaced. The island of *İmroz* (Greek) became *Gökçeada* (‘Sky Island’) in 1970 (Houston 2009, 49). Biblical sites such as *Laodicea* and *Philadelphia* survive as archaeological sites but not as living toponyms (Çolak 2006, 63). The cumulative effect is a landscape that appears naturally, timelessly Turkish, an appearance produced by deliberate mnemonic intervention. The 1915 Armenian genocide and the 1923 population exchange removed the populations; toponymic erasure completed the work of making their absence appear natural.

*Criminalisation of counter-narratives:* Using Kurdish toponyms has led to prosecution under anti-terror laws. Human Rights Watch (2017, 34) documents cases where activists were charged for referring to Tunceli as Dersim. In 2016-2017, multiple HDP mayors, including Gültan Kışanak of Diyarbakır and Fırat Anlı of Mardin, were removed from office and prosecuted; official correspondence using Kurdish names was cited among the grounds (*Bianet*, December 2016). The criminalisation of vernacular toponymy reveals the state’s understanding of names as political acts (Gökarıksel and Secor 2015, 21). To say *Dersim* is not

to describe geography; it is to claim an alternative memory, and therefore an alternative political future. This is the most extreme form of mnemonic foreclosure which not merely suppresses the old name but punishes those who speak it.

*Applying the four conditions to Turkey:* Condition one: most Kurdish communities were not engaged in active secessionist violence at the time of renaming; the threat pre-empted is the mnemonic infrastructure that might sustain Kurdish identity across generations; condition two: Erdoğan's speeches frame toponymic unity as a condition of national integrity (reported in *Hurriyet Daily News*, 28 October 2014); condition three: the state criminalises use of old names through anti-terror laws, ensuring that even vernacular memory is punished; condition four: the process proceeded through administrative decree without judicial oversight, in peacetime, over decades.

#### IV

#### Critical Reflections and Limitations

The comparison between India and Turkey reveals both similarities and differences in pre-emptive renaming. In both countries, renaming targets minority communities whose toponyms serve as latent resources for alternative memories. The justification is future-oriented ('for future generations', 'for national unity'). The state actively suppresses old names through institutional means (textbook revisions, signboard replacements, gazette notifications, criminalisation). The process is procedurally unconstrained, no public hearings, no right of appeal, no judicial review comparable to South Africa's SAGNC process (Winder 2020, 90).

Yet the political technologies differ. India's renaming is spectacular, televised and tied to electoral cycles. It generates popular legitimacy through visible performance (Sharma and Sharma 2025, 45-46). The renaming of Prayagraj was accompanied by lighting of diyas, aerial flower showers and Ramayana tableaux broadcast live on national television. Turkey's renaming is bureaucratic, incremental and low-spectacle. It does not require televised ceremonies because the state's control over administrative naming is sufficient, and because criminalisation of counter-narratives makes opposition impossible. As Houston (2009, 51) notes, 'the bureaucratic machinery of renaming operates silently but relentlessly.'

These different technologies reflect different political contexts. India's competitive electoral politics requires spectacular legitimation: the BJP must perform its Hindu nationalist credentials for a mass audience. Turkey's more authoritarian political sphere, with weaker opposition parties, less independent media and criminalisation of dissent, allows for silent, bureaucratic erasure (Şahin 2020, 126; Human

Rights Watch 2017, 36). Both achieve the same result: the systematic, pre-emptive erasure of minority toponyms from the official landscape.

The distinction between spectacular and bureaucratic pre-emption has broader implications for understanding majoritarian governance.<sup>4</sup> Spectacular pre-emption, as in India, relies on the active emotional engagement of the majority population. It is a democratic technology in a specific sense: it requires an audience, a performance, and the cultivation of affective attachment to the new names. The televised ceremonies, the lighting of diyas, the Ramayana tableaux, all are designed to make the majority feel that the renaming is not an act of erasure but an act of recovery, of reclamation, of justice, of pride. Bureaucratic pre-emption, as in Turkey, relies on the passive acquiescence of the majority. It does not require the majority's active enthusiasm; but only requires that they do not resist. The criminalisation of counter-narratives ensures that the minority cannot counter, and the majority, seeing no visible conflict, accepts the new names as natural. While both are effective forms of hegemony, they operate through different mechanisms of consent and coercion.

*Limitations and counter-evidence:* The comparative framework has limitations. First, the scale of renaming differs dramatically: India's case involves a handful of high-profile city renamings, while Turkey's involves tens of thousands of village name changes. This makes the scale of comparison quite different. Second, the article's focus on state-led erasure understates minority agency. In both countries, there is a counter-assertion by various ways. For example, minorities continue to use old names in vernacular speech, 'Allahabad' remains common in everyday conversation, and Kurds continue to call Tunceli 'Dersim'. Therefore, the pre-emptive strike never works in totality. Third, the causal claims about pre-emption remain somewhat difficult to verify: we cannot know what future claims *would have* been made, had the toponyms not been changed or erased. The argument, therefore, is not about measurable outcomes, but about state intention and logic. These limitations suggest need for future research, which may include ethnographic studies of vernacular naming practices and longitudinal studies of generational memory loss.

What is at stake is nothing less than the shape of political society. As Chatterjee (2011, 89) argues, political society in post-colonial democracies is constituted through the claims-making of marginalised groups. Pre-emptive renaming forecloses those claims before their articulation. It removes the toponymic evidence that a minority community was ever present, thereby disabling the mnemonic infrastructure that might support future claims to space, belonging or citizenship. Gramsci (1971, 12) understood that hegemony is most effective when invisible, when the dominant order appears not as domination but as common sense. Pre-emptive renaming naturalises Hindu or Turkish majoritarianism so thoroughly that the minority's absence from the landscape comes to feel inevitable. The signboard does not say, 'We erased the Islamic past'. It

says simply 'Prayagraj'. The map does not say 'We erased the Kurds'. It says simply 'Tunceli'. And that silence is the most effective hegemony of all.

## V

### Conclusion and Way Forward

The implications of this argument extend beyond toponymy. Right-wing populism and religious majoritarianism operate not only through legislation and electoral mobilisation but through the quiet violence of erasure, making minority presence unnameable on the landscape (Lefebvre 1991, 38). As Lefebvre argued, space is produced. In contemporary India and Turkey, space is being produced as majoritarian, apparently purified of the memory of religious and ethnic others. This production of space is not incidental to majoritarian politics. It, in fact, is very well constitutive of it. A landscape that bears no trace of the minority's presence naturalises majority belonging and makes minority claims appear as intrusions (Nora 1989, 19).

What happens to the minority community when its toponyms are erased? The signboards say Prayagraj, not Allahabad. The textbooks say Prayagraj. The maps say Tunceli, not Dersim. The old names survive in the memories of the elderly, in the archives of scholars, in the vernacular speech of those who refuse the new names. But they do not survive on the official landscape. And the landscape, as Nora (1989, 19) taught us, is where collective memory lives. The pre-emptive mnemonic strike does not kill memory. It starves it of places to live.

To rename a place in revivalist India or nationalist Turkey is to say: *This space was never yours, and it will never become yours*. The future, thus addressed, has no reply. Yet the task of the scholar is to give it a reply, to recover the erased names, to restore the silenced memories and to insist that the past is never as settled as the signboards claim. The pre-emptive strike may win the battle over signboards, but it cannot win the war over memory. Memory, as vernacular narrative traditions have long demonstrated, is stubborn. It lives where it is least expected.

#### Notes:

1: Connerton (2008), 64 discusses institutional mechanisms of state-sponsored forgetting. Azaryahu (1996), 321 analyses speed as a tactic in renaming. The distinction between Connerton's 'repressive erasure' (past-oriented) and the 'pre-emptive mnemonic strike' (future-oriented) is author's contribution. For consolidating logic in Rwanda, see Buckley-Zistel (2009), 45-48. For restorative logic in South Africa, see Winder (2020), 88-91.



2: The four-part diagnostic test is author's original contribution. Also, the qualification about partial foreclosure (Allahabad High Court) acknowledges the limits of mnemonic foreclosure.

3: Gramsci (1971), 12 defines hegemony as the production of 'common sense' that naturalises the dominant order. Chatterjee (2011), 67 analyses political society as the site of negotiation between state and marginalised communities. The phrase 'expelled from the name of the territory' draws on Houston (2009), 55.

4: The distinction between spectacular and bureaucratic pre-emption is author's application of the performance/routine distinction to toponymic politics, resonating with existing literature on state power (e.g., Foucault's disciplinary power). For India's spectacular renaming, see Sharma and Sharma (2025), 45-46. Note: Sharma and Sharma (2025) is the author's own previously published work in *Indian Studies Review* 6(2), 39-52, cited here for theoretical continuity.

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## Digital Welfare and Populist Welfare Delivery: Evaluating Orunodoi's Direct Benefit Transfers in Assam

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### Abstract

*The growing emergence of digital welfare mechanisms in India has completely redefined the interrelationship between the state and its people, shifting from the traditional idea of public good to direct benefit delivery to a targeted private population. The rapid expansion of digital mechanisms has transformed the structure, delivery process, and political significance of social welfare programmes in India. Over the years, the state's growing reliance on DBT mechanisms has been promoted as an instrument for enhancing transparency, efficiency, and financial inclusion among disadvantaged populations, particularly women. The present study explores that the digital architecture of Orunodoi scheme enhances efficiency, transparency, and financial inclusion, and its targeted and highly visible nature, which aligns the Orunodoi scheme with strategies of welfare populism in the contemporary Indian political landscape. The present study puts an attempt to provide a foregrounding picture of the experience of rural women, by examining the critical debates on digital welfare, populist strategies, cash transfers, and women's empowerment in India's evolving welfare state.*

**Keywords:** Digital Governance, Welfare Populism, Direct Benefit Transfer, Unconditional Cash Transfer, Orunodoi scheme

### Introduction

Digital welfare refers to the use of information and communication technologies in delivering benefits and services of social welfare programmes to the people. It uses electronic platforms and digital technologies as a medium to formulate, implement, and deliver welfare benefits in a more efficient and transparent way to the targeted group. The rapid expansion of digital mechanisms has enabled the government to give a significant push from the traditional bureaucratic welfare

delivery mechanism to a technology-enabled model that minimizes the leakages and administrative delays. The introduction of mechanisms like Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) has transformed the whole welfare delivery mechanism in a crucial manner. The DBT has transferred the welfare benefits directly into the bank account of beneficiaries, which ensures that benefits are reached by the intended recipient in a direct, timely, and transparent manner. By eliminating the role of traditional intermediaries, the DBT mechanism directly linked the women to the formal banking system. This welfare mechanism has gone beyond its developmental and administrative objectives and has acquired a strong political milestone in the state's atmosphere.

Within this broader context, the Indian state of Assam's 'Orunodoi Scheme' represents a significant milestone in the case of a gender-targeted digital welfare strategy. The Orunodoi scheme is introduced as a flagship programme of the government of Assam, which provides monthly cash assistance to financially vulnerable women of the state. The amount of the scheme is directly credited to the bank accounts of beneficiaries of the scheme through the DBT mechanism. The scheme is launched to eradicate poverty from each household of the state by financially empowering the women of the state. The scheme is the largest DBT scheme in socio-political history of Assam by covering 40Lakh women across the state. The scheme has evolved over time from Orunodoi to Orunodoi 2.0, further expanded to Orunodoi 3.0 by increasing both coverage and impact, which has strengthened Orunodoi's position as the biggest DBT scheme in the social welfare history of Assam. The studies have revealed that the success of the Orunodoi scheme demonstrates a pathway to large-scale UCTs programmes to work effectively, which also encourages other Indian states to adopt such a women-centered welfare mechanism. The gender targeted nature of the scheme reflected a broader policy tendency that places women as efficient conduits of welfare within households, and simultaneously recognizes them as political subjects whose economic condition renders them receptive to state welfare intervention. The Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCTs) to women's bank accounts further embed the Orunodoi scheme with the discourse of financial inclusion and women's empowerment promoted by the developmental state. However, at the same time, the political framing, timing, and public representation of the scheme highlighted its operation as a populist logic. The high visibility, association of political leadership, and emphasis on direct state- beneficiary interaction place them in a populist position that

transcends purely administrative objectives. The study adopts a qualitative approach by collecting data from the secondary sources such as government reports, published articles, newspapers, books, journals, government surveys and digital sources. With this context, the present article critically examines the Orunodoi's influences on women's household conditions, women's empowerment, and state-people interactions, while it also explores the broader governmental and political implications of the digital cash transfers programme.

### **Re-conceptualizing the welfare state in the era of digital governance**

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed the conceptual framework and operational mechanism of the contemporary welfare state. The idea of 'welfare state' was adopted in India after independence to reconstruct the Indian society by addressing the basic needs of the people to tackle rural poverty and food security, which later became a complex phenomenon in Indian society. The 'welfare state' in India has undergone a significant shift over the passing times by socio-economic, political, and technological advancements. By ranging from the universal developmental policy to right-based policy towards target-oriented policy, the welfare state has a major turning point during the early 1990s with the economic reforms, which started focusing on target-oriented social protection mechanisms for specific disadvantaged groups. This shift reflected a broader universal trend in social welfare policies where governments started adopting target-oriented cash transfer programmes to address extreme poverty and social exclusion of disadvantaged sections in society. The transformation continued, and from 2014 India's welfare architecture shifted to strategic reorientation, which prioritized the universal access to basic needs and health security over the fragmented subsidies (Jha 2025, 2).

In recent years, the rapid expansion of digital governance has restructured the welfare delivery mechanism in India. Basically, digital governance refers to the use of information and communication technologies in delivering welfare benefits to the public, improving the efficiency and transparency in governmental mechanisms and increasing people's active engagement in decision-making processes of government (Dorasamy 2025, 290). This technological innovation of the government improves transparency and accountability in delivering benefits to people. This

technological innovation mediates the inter-relationship between people and the welfare mechanism. This technological innovation includes biometric identification, digital databases, a digital payment system, and a real-time monitoring mechanism to track the distribution of welfare benefits to people. In India, this technological transformation is closely associated with the development of the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanism, which helps the government to directly transfer the financial benefits into the bank accounts of beneficiaries. The DBT mechanism has transformed India's welfare distribution framework by eliminating the role of intermediaries and ensuring the reach of financial assistance towards recipients more effectively and efficiently. As Gupta has identified, the DBT mechanism represents a structural change in welfare governance because it establishes a direct interaction between the state and beneficiaries, which redefines the relationship between citizens and public institutions (Gupta 2025, 218).

The targeted cash transfer programme for social protection of vulnerable sections, such as women, the aged, children, and so on, is a crucial element of changing the welfare nature of states in India. The government increasingly started the direct monetary support initiative to vulnerable households of the state rather than relying on the traditional subsidiary programme. This cash transfer programme integrates technological innovations in providing benefits to beneficiaries with greater flexibility in spending the money and reduces the administrative complexities in distributing physical goods. However, this growing expansion of cash transfer programmes, particularly for women, has also generated debates regarding the political agendas in implementing these welfare policies. The scholars have pointed out that the welfare policies are increasingly being utilized as an instrument of welfare populism, where the government distributes targeted assistance to some specific social groups to strengthen the political legitimacy and electoral support. So in the democratic discourse, the welfare policies serve both developmental and political roles, which reshape the relationship between the state and its citizens.

### **Welfare populism and redistribution: political perspective on social protection**

In the present scenario of Indian states, welfare policies are closely intersected with the political strategies of the government. The welfare policies are often designed to provide social protection

to address the structural inequalities, reduce poverty, uplift the vulnerable population and enhance the social welfare of people belonging to marginalized groups. However, these policies are also operate with the broader goals in the political context to maintain the government's political legitimacy, help in electoral politics, and strengthen the relationship with the people. As "the society gets increasingly democratized, political leaders have to respond to the rising aspirations of common people to secure education, health, housing, improve livelihood, and lead a life of dignity and better opportunities" (Suri 2024, 54). So leaders who promise such benefits have enjoyed an edge over other leaders in the election contests. This situation is the prime reason for the growth of 'welfare populism' in a democratic setup like India. Thus, the concept of welfare populism has emerged as an analytical mechanism that utilizes the social protection programme in a simultaneous way as a developmental policy and political strategy to maintain a balance between the government and its people (Raychaudhury 2024, 87). Thus, populism is conceptualized as 'a discourse that emerges as a response to transform the state-society relations and the idea of statehood' (Tripathy 2025, 1).

Populism is generally described as a political ideology or strategy that characterizes politics as a struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite', positioning political leaders as the representation of the people's interests (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). In this context, welfare policies became the symbolic tools in the hands of political leaders to demonstrate their commitment to the welfare of the disadvantaged population. In the Indian scenario, welfare populism is a political strategy of leaders who are often charismatic; ensure people's needs and aspirations to garner support for welfare policies that champion the overall well-being of the common people (Akanhsha and Kumar 2024, 2). Welfare populism has grown significantly as the government has expanded social protection policies to address extreme poverty and social inequality. One of the crucial characteristics of welfare populism in contemporary states is the high visibility of benefits and unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) programme, which became more conducive as a populist welfare strategy due to its immediate delivery and high visibility in nature. The DBT became the crucial mechanism to deliver the UCTs to beneficiaries, which creates a more direct and personalized relationship between the government and the people. The technological transformation became a crucial element for the politics of welfare. It enables governments to



directly deliver the benefits regularly to the beneficiaries, which strengthens the perception that political leaders are actively supporting the people's welfare. These generate a populist narrative that political authorities are the providers of social protection, and economic security which enhances the idea of digital welfare.

In the Indian context, the state government plays a pivotal role in the expansion of targeted welfare policies that reflect the dynamic nature of welfare populism. Most of the Indian states have introduced the UCTs programme by supporting the economically vulnerable households, particularly supporting to the women population engaging in household work (Singh 2025, 36). These UCTs became the new political competition among the political parties by demonstrating their commitment to social welfare. Within this framework, the North Eastern state of Assam has also implemented several social welfare programmes by addressing poverty and social inequality. Among them, the Assam Orunodoi scheme represents the largest targeted social protection scheme that intersects the digital governance with gender targeted welfare policy.

### **Direct Benefit Transfer: a welfare delivery mechanism**

The introduction of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) in welfare delivery has significantly transformed the welfare governance in India. It was introduced in India as an integral part of broader public administration, which focuses on reformation by modernizing and streamlining the social welfare delivery system. It refers to a system through which the government transfers the welfare benefits, subsidies, or financial assistance directly to the bank accounts of beneficiaries by using the digital payment mechanism. The DBT was introduced to improve the efficiency, transparency, and accountability in the service delivery by eliminating inefficiencies and reducing administrative leakages. By re-engineering the existing mechanism, "DBT has enabled the government to channel resources directly to beneficiaries with greater precision and speed" (Sharma et al. 2023, 40). This digital transformation has become more crucial in developing countries like India, where ensuring the timely and equitable distribution of resources plays a pivotal role in alleviating poverty and inclusive growth (Gupta and Pal 2020, 787).

The DBT mechanism was formally launched in India on 1 January 2013, as part of broader goal of reforms in governance by enhancing accountability, transparency, and efficiency in public service delivery (Thakur 2025, 1152). But the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge to the welfare delivery mechanism across the globe, and India was no exception. In response, the Indian government has started to rely heavily on the DBT mechanism to transfer immediate financial benefits to the vulnerable population. The DBT mechanism primarily relies on the digital management tools that integrate the banking networks, biometric identification systems, and electronic payment databases. The DBT also incorporates technological innovations, such as the Aadhaar-enabled payment system, Public Finance Management System (PFMS), and Unified Payment Interface (UPI). The major success of the DBT mechanism is the JAM trinity- “Jan Dhan bank accounts, Aadhaar identification, and mobile technology- which enables the direct transfer of benefits to citizens, by minimizing the role of intermediaries and reducing the risk of fraud” (Dar et al. 2022). Further, the integration of Aadhaar with DBT became foundational to transforming the welfare delivery mechanism in India. Aadhaar provides a core identification and authentication, while DBT functions as a mechanism to transfer the welfare benefits directly to the beneficiary’s bank accounts. This integration eliminates the ghost or duplicates beneficiaries, minimizes leakages, and enhances transparency in the implementation of social welfare programmes.

The Assam Orunodoi scheme represents a crucial example of a social welfare programme adopted through the DBT framework. The scheme transfers monthly financial assistance through DBT to women beneficiaries from the economically disadvantaged households. The use of the DBT framework in the Orunodoi scheme demonstrates the role of digital welfare delivery in promoting the financial empowerment of women. It also highlighted that the digital technologies has improve the social welfare delivery by targeting the broader objective of poverty reduction and women empowerment. The Orunodoi scheme reflected an evolving nature of welfare schemes which integrates the DBT mechanism, targeted UCTs, and gender-oriented policy design, while it also operates within the broader framework of welfare populism.

### **Orunodoi scheme: an evaluation**

The ‘Orunodoi scheme’ was launched in 2020 by the Assam government to provide financial support to economically disadvantaged household of the state. The scheme aims to socio-economic inclusion of women who belong to economically vulnerable families, particularly divorced, widows, the elderly, and physically disadvantaged women of the state through the sustained financial assistance with the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). The scheme gives economic support to women-headed households of the state by providing UCTs to women beneficiaries by recognizing their unpaid household and care work (Kotiswaran 2022, 15). In the initial period, the beneficiaries received Rs 830 per month, followed by two revisions of Rs 1000 in October 2021 and Rs 1250 from October 2022.

The integration of the DBT mechanism in the welfare delivery of the scheme has prominently contributed to the financial inclusion of women, particularly those women who have been previously excluded from the formal banking system. The primary requirement of the scheme is to have an active bank account of beneficiaries, which encourages women to engage with the formal banking institutions. It expanded women’s access to credit, savings, and other digital financial services. This integration of the scheme with formal financial mechanisms has helped to facilitate technological advancement and the digital literacy system. The studies reported that the Orunodoi has helped them become familiar with the banking system, financial management practices, and digital transaction mechanisms. So in this context, an Orunodoi function not only as a welfare mechanism but it also plays a significant role in the digital and economic empowerment of the women population of the state.

The growing integration of digital technologies in welfare governance has predominantly transformed the structure in which the state designs, communicates and implements the social welfare policy. In Indian states, populist programmes have presented a complex duality, yielding both positive outcomes that boost the governance mechanism and negative outcomes that undermine its foundations (Tripathy 2025, 7). In the emerging landscape, the DBT became a prominent tool in delivering social protection efficiently and transparently to the beneficiaries and simultaneously it reshapes the political dynamics of the state’s people interaction. The Orunodoi

scheme utilizes the DBT as the prime mechanism of welfare delivery, by transferring money directly to the women beneficiaries of the state. These direct UCTs to women became a new populist strategy among the state governments. The programme creates a direct engagement and tangible relationship between the state and the women's population, which reinforces the perception that the state government is actively working for women's household conditions or welfare. The key element that links Orunodoi's DBT with populist mechanisms is the visibility and timely distribution of benefits, which made cash transfer more popular than other subsidies because the fund can be immediately utilized for consumption. The beneficiaries experience a regular and timely deposit of money in their bank account on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of each month; strengthen the symbolic presence of the government in everyday living, which reinforces the narratives of responsive governance mechanisms.

Furthermore, the Orunodoi scheme can be characterized as a 'techno-populism' where the state has utilized the direct benefit transfer as a mechanism to establish a stable interrelationship between the political leaders and the women population of the state. By leveraging digital technologies to reduce the traditional bureaucratic middleman and local power brokers, the Orunodoi have minimized the 'administrative leakage' and maximized the 'political credit' attribution of the government. Again, the Orunodoi scheme acts as a tool for competitive credit-claiming of the political leaders, where the expansion of financial transfer is seen as a 'social contract' between the electorate and the government. While the scheme aligns with the Gandhian principle of Antodaya (uplifting the last person of society), its implementation revealed a modern populist strategy that seeks to transform social welfare into a sustainable political capital. By transferring unconditional money directly to women beneficiaries as a 'right', the state government legitimizes the populist strategy through the language of poverty reduction and empowerment. This synthesis of digital tools into social welfare as unconditional money transfer and women-centric targeting policies helps state governments to create or consolidate a 'silent' but substantial political base across the state, which makes the Orunodoi scheme a decisive case study in the evolving structure of the welfare state in India towards a performance-oriented populist measure. The Orunodoi scheme has targeted the women population from lower-income families, regardless of their religion or caste, and has created a new class of 'Beneficiary' (Labharthi) identity who are

primarily loyal to the provider of the cash. By removing the intermediaries, the Orunodoi created a direct emotional bond with women and the chief minister of Assam. Most of the beneficiaries started seeing the Orunodoi's benefit as a 'gift' from a specific political leader rather than as a 'right' from social welfare. This will turn the social welfare programme into a powerful tool in the hands of political leaders to acquire political loyalty from the masses.

Despite the potential benefits of UCTs programme, it can also have significant negative consequences for governance, particularly raising serious concerns regarding fiscal stress and sustainability. The Orunodoi scheme also raises continuous and recurring expenditure to transfer monthly financial assistance to 40 Lakh women beneficiaries while Orunodoi plays a crucial role in reducing financial vulnerability and enhancing women's household welfare, but it places a high pressure on the state's limited financial resources and leads to increased debt if such programme not managed carefully. This can result in a reduction in public investment in other essential sectors, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Tripathy 2025, 8). Again, the long-term economic sustainability of the Orunodoi scheme is often a thinkable and questionable matter as it relies on direct financial transfer, which may not be sustainable in the long run. The populist policies often prioritize the short-term gains over long-term planning, which lead to short-termism in policy making and governance (Tripathy 2025, 8). The Orunodoi scheme reflects a short-term welfare planning which prioritizes the immediate relief for financially disadvantaged households through regular cash transfer to women beneficiaries. Orunodoi addresses the urgent consumption needs like daily expenses, food, basic healthcare, and child education, by stabilizing the household welfare in the short term, and does not focus more on the long-term capacity building of women, such as skill development or employment generation. This short-term planning can have a negative implication on economic growth and development of a state which ultimately harms the very population that populist schemes are intended to benefit (Tripathy 2025, 9).

## Conclusion

The digital welfare delivery has enhanced transparency, accountability and direct state-people interaction through the DBT programme. The UCTs became an easy way to empower women through the DBT mechanism. The Orunodoi scheme has significantly improved financial stability, women's economic autonomy, and decision-making power in the households. At the same time, it also reflected the crucial elements of welfare populism by providing direct, visible, and targeted benefits to women that reinforce the political legitimacy. While these programmes provide immediate relief and improve household consumption capacity, they do not fully reduce structural inequalities in society. It became a risk for welfare policy because the cash transfer programmes are more likely to be associated with consumption-oriented rather than transform-oriented. Again, the full reliance of the DBT system also raises concerns due to digital literacy, exclusion, and access, which may affect the inclusive nature of such a programme. The study revealed the potentialities of digital governance to make the social welfare initiative more accessible and efficient to people, but there needs to be a balanced approach to integrate the immediate cash transfer programme with the long-term developmental mechanism.

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## Reading Divergent Pathways: Indian Literary Aesthetics and Dalit Aesthetics

Chandrasmita Borgohain

**Abstract:** *This paper critically examines the evolution and contestation of Indian literary aesthetics by juxtaposing the classical Sanskritic tradition with the radical interventions of Dalit aesthetics. It traces the development of aesthetic theory in India from the ancient Vedic corpus through the emergence of Sanskrit poetics, highlighting key concepts such as the Rasa theory, which systematised the aesthetic experience through the interplay of emotions, and its sophisticated application in canonical dramas like Kalidasa's Abhijnanashakuntalam and Sudraka's Mricchakatikam. The classical tradition, refined by theorists such as Bharata Muni, Anandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta, emphasises the pursuit of universalised emotional pleasure and beauty as the core objective of art. In contrast, Dalit aesthetics—articulated by figures like Sharankumar Limbale—rejects abstract notions of beauty and instead foregrounds lived experience, social truth, and the imperative for resistance against oppression. Through close readings of both classical and Dalit texts, the paper demonstrates how Dalit writers subvert classical notions of aesthetic enjoyment, insisting that art must reflect the realities of marginalised communities and incite social change. Finally, this comparative analysis reveals that Indian literary theory is deeply political, as the ongoing tension between classical and Dalit aesthetics challenges static definitions of art and beauty, necessitating the continual re-evaluation of literary canons and the function of literature in a diverse and unequal society.*

**Keywords:** *Indian Aesthetics, Dalit Aesthetics, Rasa, Sanskrit Poetics*

### Introduction:

Aesthetics, the philosophical exploration of art, systematically investigates the origins and qualities of beauty, distinguishing between objective and subjective aspects of beauty. It seeks to clarify why certain artistic forms are pleasing and how they impact both individual and collective human consciousness. In literary theory, aesthetics examines the qualities and effects of language, form, and theme within texts. Poetics, a subset, focuses on literary forms and devices, notably through Aristotle's Poetics, which analyses tragedy and its effects on the audience.

The vast panorama of Indian literary tradition spans three millennia, encompassing more than a chronicle of narratives and poetic forms—it is a manifestation of deeply embedded aesthetic theories. Tracing Indian

literary aesthetics involves recognising the foundational Sanskrit poetics, which emerged from ancient Vedic hymns and evolved into modern vernacular movements. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is rooted in the Vedas and encompasses disciplines including philosophy, the arts, and sciences. IKS divides knowledge into literary and non-literary sources. The literary sources, under the Sanatana-Dharma framework, include the Core Literature (Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads), Other Dharmic Traditions (Buddhist and Jain literature), and a broader Literary category (epics, poetry, drama, and other works with moral and philosophical insights). The non-literary domain encompasses applied sciences such as mathematics, astronomy, Ayurveda, engineering, and traditional arts and crafts. IKS provides the intellectual, philosophical, and aesthetic bedrock for regional literary growth. (Mahadevan, Bhat, and Nagendra Pavana R.N 2022, 9-11)

Sanskrit literature, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, classical dramas, and poetry, formed the foundation of IKS. Regional languages adopted vocabulary, themes, narratives, and literary devices from Sanskrit. The Bhakti movement (6th c. to 17th c.) broadened regional Indian literatures by bringing devotion and philosophy to ordinary people through vernacular languages, shifting from the exclusivity of Sanskrit. This democratisation sparked the emergence of devotional poetry and narratives across various languages, including Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Odia, and Assamese. Poets like Kabir, Sant Tukaram, Mirabai, Surdas, Tulsidas, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and Shankardeva enriched their regional literatures with spiritual and social messages. IKS perceives these art forms as interconnected, united by spiritual beliefs and aesthetic principles, even as they each retain specific features.

In Sanskrit poetics, art has been dominated by two primary forms: *nāṭya* (a blend of play, dance, drama, and music) and *kāvya* (encompassing poetry and other forms of literary composition). The *Nāṭyaśāstra* delineates the aspects of *nāṭya* in Sanskrit technical terms, such as *āṅgika* (gestures), *vācika* (verbal elements), *ahārya* (make-up and costume), and *sattvika abhinaya* (representation of emotions). Bharata Muni's text *Nāṭyaśāstra* (c. 2nd BCE-2nd CE) is a treatise on performing arts, which is a synthesis of knowledge from the four primary Vedas, with elements such as words borrowed from the Rigveda, music from the Samaveda, gestures from the Yajurveda, and emotions from the Atharvaveda. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, often referred to as the fifth Veda, is a seminal work that laid the foundation for both the *nāṭya* and *kāvya* traditions, primarily due to its conceptualisation of *rasa*. The *rasa*, or the 'aesthetic emotion,' is the theory

in classical Sanskrit literary studies that gives rise solely to pleasure, while real emotions can arouse pain, pleasure, anger, or revulsion.

Subsequently, Bhamaha (c. 7th CE), a pioneer in rhetorical theory, advanced the systematic study of poetic language in his work *Kavyalāṅkāra*, highlighting the importance of ‘Alaṅkāra’ (figures of speech) in poetry. Alaṅkāra refers to the figures of speech and rhetorical devices that enhance literary expression. This focus influenced later aestheticians such as Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta. Following Bhamaha, Dandin (c. 6th-7th CE), a prominent South Indian aesthete, offered insights on literary qualities and figurative language in his *Kāvyādarśa*, also critically engaging with earlier theories. Udbhata (c. 8th CE), a Kashmiri grammarian, is notable for his systematic analysis of Alaṅkāra, even if major commentaries by him are lost. The work of Anandavardhana (c. 9th CE) was transformative for Sanskrit poetics through his text *Dhvanyāloka*, which introduced and clarified the concept of ‘dhvani’ (suggestion). (Sukla 2016, 15-16) In Sanskrit literary theory, ‘dhvani’ refers to the suggested or implied meaning in a poem that extends beyond what is directly stated—often considered the soul of poetry, as it evokes deeper meaning and emotional response. Abhinavagupta (c. late 10th century CE), a Kashmiri Shaivite philosopher, further synthesized ‘rasa’ and ‘dhvani’ in his own commentaries, providing a comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic experience and its philosophical dimensions.

As noted by Chandran and VS, Indian and Western literary theories share similarities, such as the connections between the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Aristotle's *Poetics*, or the concepts of rasa and Longinus's Sublime, as they explore the essence of literature. Longinus's *On the Sublime* (or *Peri Hypsous*) is a classical Greek treatise that explores what makes writing truly great and capable of ‘transporting’ the audience. Longinus defines the Sublime as an ‘elevation of style’ that ‘transports’ the reader, producing a sense of ecstasy, awe, and wonder rather than mere persuasion or delight. (Sublime, n.d.) It is an experience that lifts the soul and reveals the greatness of the human mind or spirit, often evoked by vastness, power, or intense emotion. Similarly, *rasa* is an experience of unique aesthetic pleasure that is distinct from everyday emotions and rational understanding. *Rasa* is conceptualized as ‘the passionate intensity with which a writer feels about an incident or person’, that is reminisced as Wordsworth’s ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’. (Chandran and Sreenath 2021, 45) The connection between *rasa* and the Sublime lies in their shared emphasis on the profound emotional and intellectual elevation experienced by the recipient of art. Prominent Western literary critics, such as Sir Philip Sidney, John Dryden, and Matthew Arnold, have

engaged in inquiries that parallel those of Indian theorists, including Anandavardhana and Rājaśekhara.  
(28)

## Rasa

In early Sanskrit literary theory (*kāvya*), the concept of *rasa*, understood as an aesthetic sentiment, was regarded as a subsidiary element or a type of literary device rather than the primary essence of poetry. The Nāṭyaśāstra by Bharata is recognized as the first systematic exploration of the concept of *rasa*. Bharata encapsulated the *rasa* experience as follows:

‘*Vibhāvānubhāva vyabhicāri saṃyogād rasa niṣpattiḥ*’ (Bharata VI. 31),

This statement suggests that *rasa* arises from the interplay of determinants, consequent reactions, and transient emotions. Early poetic theorists, such as Bhāmaha, classified *rasa* as one among many *alaṅkāras* (ornaments or figures) that enhance the poetic effect. Bhāmaha identified three categories of emotional expression in poetry: *rasavat* (expressions imbued with a particular sentiment, such as love), *preyaḥ* (expressions conveying affection), and *ūrjasvin* (expressions of haughtiness). Similarly, Dandin regarded *rasa* as a form of ornamentation, using the term to encompass both decorative elements and emotional expressions. Vamana, another influential theorist, prioritized poetic qualities (*guṇa*) and style (*rīti*), considering *rasa* less central. Udbhaṭa, despite his prominence as a critic, also treated *rasa* primarily as a figure of speech, though he expanded the classification by adding 'quiescent' or 'samāhita' to the existing categories. These perspectives demonstrate that, in the early stages of *kāvyaśāstra*, the centrality of *rasa* in poetic theory had not yet been fully established. The generation of aesthetic emotion (*rasa*) in literature relies on four key elements: *vibhāva* (foundational causes or determinants), *anubhāva* (consequent expressions of emotion), *vyabhicāribhāva* (transitory emotions that reinforce the primary one), and *sthāyibhāva* (stable or permanent emotions that ultimately transform into *rasa*). Notably, Udbhaṭa's earlier suggestion that simply naming a *rasa*, such as love (*śṛṅgāra*) or sorrow (*karuṇa*), could evoke it was later refuted by Anandavardhana.

The Nāṭyashastra outlines eight *Sthayi Bhavas* (permanent emotional states) in Indian aesthetics. Each *Sthayi Bhava* is accompanied by its corresponding *Vibhavas* (determinants or causes), *Anubhavas* (consequences or effects), and *Sanchari Bhavas* (transitory feelings).

1. Rati (Love):
  - o Vibhavas: Season, flowers, ornaments.
  - o Anubhavas: Looking sideways, coy glance, sweet words.
  - o Sancharibhav: Transitory feelings like lassitude, suspicion, jealousy, and affection.
2. Hasya (Mirth):
  - o Vibhavas: Peculiarity of dress or speech, quarreling.
  - o Anubhavas: Squinting, mimicking.
  - o Sanchari Bhavas: Sloth, mockery, laughter.
3. Karuna (Compassion):
  - o Vibhavas: Loss, death, calamity.
  - o Anubhavas: Tears, fainting, lamentation.
  - o Sanchari Bhavas: Sorrow, trembling.
4. Rudra (Horror/Anger):
  - o Vibhavas: Anger, violence, treachery.
  - o Anubhavas: Red eyes, rubbing hands, biting lips.
  - o Sanchari Bhavas: Sweating, excitement, impatience.
5. Vira (Heroism):
  - o Vibhavas: Determination, strength, bravery.
  - o Anubhavas: Courageous acts, generosity.
  - o Sanchari Bhavas: Decision, arrogance.
6. Bhayanak (Fear):
  - o Vibhavas: Frightful things, lonely nights, darkness.
  - o Anubhavas: Trembling, pallor, losing voice.
  - o Sanchari Bhavas: Fainting, hurrying, standing rooted.

7. Bibhatsa (Disgust):

- o Vibhavas: Bad news, bad intoxication.
- o Anubhavas: Nausea, spitting, turning up nose.
- o Sanchari Bhavas: Fainting, illness, death, hate.

8. Adbhuta (Awesome or Wonder):

- o Vibhavas: Seeing unusual things, achieving the desired magic.
- o Anubhavas: Wide or staring eyes, thrill, exclamation.
- o Sanchari Bhavas: Emotion, curiosity. (Vatsyayan 1996, 65)

Although Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* originally described eight *rasas* (aesthetic flavours), the commentator Abhinavagupta later introduced a ninth, Shanta Rasa. This addition completed the concept of Navarasa, representing a state of harmony among mind, body, and universe. (Shanta Rasa, n.d.) Shanta Rasa (calm) signifies peace and tranquillity, with its Sthayi Bhava (dominant emotional state) being *sama* or stoicism. Its Vibhava (determinants) include knowledge and truth, and its Anubhava (consequents) are self-control and meditation. The Vyabhichari Bhava (transitory emotions) associated with Shanta Rasa include calmness, closed eyes, and purity. Abhinavagupta defines rasa as an emotion aesthetically stimulated by artistic circumstances. Human personality is composed of 'primary emotions' (such as love, mirth, sorrow, anger, heroism, fear, disgust, wonder) that reside deep within the subconscious and unconscious. These are termed 'dominant emotions' or *sthayibhav*. Each *sthayibhav* manifests through various sentiments, resulting in the emergence of permanent emotions such as love or hate, heroism or anger. Abhinavagupta's theory of *sadharanikaran* (universalization) posits that, during aesthetic experience, the spectator's mind is freed from ego-driven obstacles. This liberation enables a shift from the personal and egoistic to the general and universal, so that emotions depicted in art are universalized and collectively experienced by the audience, transcending individual limitations. (Gnoli 1985, 52-65)

### **Dalit Aesthetics**

Dalit literature is defined by its authorship, subject matter, and perspective: it is written by Dalits, centers on Dalit experiences, and is shaped by a distinct Dalit consciousness. Sharankumar Limbale is central to

this movement, advocating for a radical redefinition of aesthetics. He argues that Dalit literature should be analyzed through a sociological lens, explicitly rejecting traditional aesthetic theories that prioritize conventional beauty. (Limbale, 2004) Instead, Limbale proposes a 'new aesthetic' that is life-affirming and realistic, directly reflecting the lived realities of Dalit existence.

Limbale's groundbreaking reinterpretation of the classical Indian aesthetic triad of *Satyam*, *Shivam*, and *Sundaram* (Truth, Goodness, Beauty) underpins this new aesthetic. For him, 'truth' (*Satyam*) lies in the recognition of humanity as primary, asserting that all individuals are fundamentally human. 'Goodness' (*Shivam*) is defined as the liberation of human beings from oppressive structures and systems. Finally, 'beauty' (*Sundaram*) is equated with the realization of humanity in its fullest sense. This redefinition entirely subverts the traditional, often spiritual or form-centric, interpretations, grounding these concepts firmly in the social and existential realities of Dalits. (Limbale 2004, 22)

Dalit aesthetics deliberately employs colloquial languages, idioms, and dialects to reflect Dalit culture and daily life authentically. Limbale characterises this as the 'uncouth-impolite language of Dalits' and the 'spoken language of Dalits,' highlighting its intentional departure from the standard language validated by dominant cultural groups. The language used by Dalit writers is direct, forceful, and confrontational, often breaking conventional grammatical rules to convey the agony and rebellious spirit of the oppressed. This rejection of upper-class, ornate language is a deliberate political act that democratizes literature, making it more accessible to a broader, previously marginalised audience. The forms adopted are fluid and innovative, reflecting the dynamic nature of Dalit society and underscoring the need for aesthetic principles grounded in lived experience rather than prescriptive norms. Dalit aesthetic theory is thus characterised as indigenous, drawing imagery and language from native speech and personal experience rather than external observation of nature.

Dalit aesthetics rejects the concept of universal aesthetic pleasure, contending that such claims often conceal upper-caste biases and privilege. It critiques the pursuit of beauty for its own sake as a luxury disconnected from the urgent realities of systemic injustice. (Rao 2017, 158) Instead, Dalit literature prioritises *truth* and lived *experience* (*anubhava*). The function of art is to expose oppression, provoke

anger, and inspire action toward social equality. The raw and disturbing depiction of suffering is not considered a flaw but a necessary reflection of reality.

| Feature           | Classical Indian Aesthetics                                                    | vs | Dalit Aesthetics                                                                             |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Foundation        | Classical Sanskrit poetics, Brahmanical philosophy, elite experience.          |    | Lived experience of caste oppression, Ambedkarite thought, struggle.                         |
| Primary Purpose   | Aesthetic pleasure ( <i>Ānanda</i> ), spiritual transcendence ( <i>rasa</i> ). |    | Protest, liberation, social transformation, assertion of dignity.                            |
| Concept of Beauty | Formal harmony, ornamentation ( <i>Sundaram</i> ), universal appeal.           |    | Truth ( <i>Satyam</i> ), justice, freedom; beauty in the struggle against oppression.        |
| Content Emphasis  | Mythology, heroism, love, devotion, nature, elite lives.                       |    | Caste atrocities, indignity, exploitation, suffering, anger, rebellion.                      |
| Form vs. Message  | High value on formal perfection, stylistic elegance.                           |    | Message, social commitment, effectiveness in raising consciousness; 'artlessness' as virtue. |
| Language          | Highly Sanskritized, refined, sophisticated.                                   |    | Colloquial, regional, 'rough,' direct, unpolished.                                           |
| Perspective       | Predominantly upper-caste, universalizing.                                     |    | Exclusively subaltern, insider's view, challenging dominant narratives.                      |

In Indian literature, Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* is revered as a quintessential text for understanding the intricate framework of Rasa theory, not merely for its exposition of individual *rasas* but for their dynamic interplay and evolution throughout the narrative. (Bavaliya 2025) While the play purportedly foregrounds *Shringara* (love), *Karunyam* (compassion), and *Shantam* (peace), a critical examination reveals how Kalidasa skillfully integrates and manipulates the other six *rasas* to achieve a profound and multi-layered aesthetic experience. A crucial aspect of Kalidasa's application of Rasa theory in *Abhijnanamshakuntalam* lies in his dynamic manipulation of *rasas*, particularly the dramatic shift from the initial, pervasive *Shringara* (love) to a profound and prolonged *Karunyam* (compassion). This is not just a simple progression but a strategic use of the curse and Dushyanta's memory loss as a narrative device



that not only generates intense pathos but also critically examines the fragility of human connection and the interplay of fate and duty. While the play ultimately resolves into *Shantam* (peace) with the reunion, Kalidasa's genius lies in showcasing how an ideal, initial *Shringara* must undergo the crucible of suffering and separation, mediated by elements of *Raudram* (anger) and *Bhayanakam* (fear), to achieve a more mature and enduring union, thereby elevating the emotional experience beyond mere entertainment to one of profound philosophical reflection on human knowledge and divine will. (Sharma 2016, 10)

Sudraka's *Mricchakatikam*, featuring Charudatta and Vasantasena, is notable in Sanskrit drama for its sophisticated and dynamic application of Rasa theory, presenting a range of human emotions rather than a single dominant sentiment. While *Shringara* between Charudatta and Vasantasena forms the central narrative, it is continually challenged and enriched by the presence of other rasas. The love story, though sincere, is infused with *Karuna* due to Charudatta's poverty and undeserved suffering, which prevents the *Shringara* from becoming overly sentimental. The play effectively evokes *Raudra* and *Bhayanaka* through the villainy of Samsthanaka, whose jealousy and cruelty drive much of the conflict, especially during the false accusation and trial. The play is further distinguished by its incorporation of *Hasya* elements, primarily through Maitreya, the Vidushaka, whose humor and blunt observations provide a counterpoint to the dramatic tension. This comic relief humanizes the otherwise serious situations and underscores the absurdity of the corrupt society.

The political subplot, involving the overthrow of King Palaka and the rise of Aryaka, introduces elements of *Vira* and a sense of transformation, culminating in *Adbhuta* with the reversal of fortunes and the triumph of justice. Sudraka skillfully interweaves these rasas, ensuring that none dominates the narrative. (Chakraborty 2025) Through this integration, *Mricchakatikam* offers a comprehensive and engaging aesthetic experience, demonstrating the versatility of Rasa theory in Sanskrit dramaturgy. The play's transitions between the romance of Charudatta and Vasantasena, the pathos of the trial, the humor of Maitreya, and the anger directed at Samsthanaka exemplify its masterful application of Rasa principles.

Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan*, powerfully embodies this sentiment. The very title, meaning 'food left on an eater's plate' and carrying connotations of ritual pollution, encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of Dalits forced to survive on such scraps. Valmiki vividly describes the 'wretched socio-economic conditions,' the 'muck strewn everywhere,' and the 'overpowering stench' of the Chuhra basti, evoking a profound sense of pathos. (Ranga 2021, 25) His personal experiences of discrimination in school, being forced to sweep the playground, and the physical abuse inflicted by the headmaster further

amplify this *Kāruṇyam*, aiming to ‘awaken the human feelings by connecting the pain and struggle of the Dalits with the feelings of the reader’. Similarly, Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* and Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* powerfully convey *Kāruṇyam* by highlighting the ‘multilayered oppressions’ and the ‘triple burden of caste, class, and gender’ faced by Dalit women. These narratives depict domestic violence, forced labour, lack of fundamental rights, and the intense internal struggle against societal degradation, illustrating the stark reality that Dalit existence itself is slavery. In Bandhumadhav’s short story ‘The Poisoned Bread,’ the tragic scene where the starving grandfather, denied sustenance after a day’s toil, resorts to eating bread ‘rejected by the cow, which had molds and urine on them’, is a stark, visceral portrayal of the pitiable conditions and the ‘inhumane and cruel’ denial of basic human needs, designed to evoke deep sorrow and compassion in the reader (Ghosh 2022).

In classical *rasa* theory, *Kāruṇyam* can lead to a detached, contemplative ‘relish’ of sorrow, providing a form of aesthetic pleasure. However, Dalit literature explicitly states its focus on ‘suffering and revolts,’ not ‘beauty or pleasure’. The *Kāruṇyam* evoked in Dalit literature is not intended for passive aesthetic enjoyment or a generalised sense of pity. Instead, it serves a distinct socio-political purpose: to act as a ‘critical jolt to the elite’, compelling non-Dalit readers to confront uncomfortable truths and ‘revisit their past actions’. The suffering is presented in its raw, unvarnished form to cultivate the audience’s ‘sensibilities’ and make them acutely ‘aware of the expressions of pain, anguish, trauma’. (Singh 2018, 567)

In contrast to traditional Indian aesthetics, which often prioritise idealised portrayals and universalised emotion, Dalit literature is grounded in concrete and frequently harsh realities. The *bhavas* and *vibhavas* in Dalit texts are derived directly from social, economic, and cultural contexts, resulting in an immediate and impactful experience. While traditional Indian literature seeks *rasanubhava* (aesthetic enjoyment) and emphasises detached pleasure, Dalit literature is committed to ‘art for life’s sake.’ Its purpose is didactic, revolutionary, and oriented toward social transformation. As Kumar notes, Dalit literary works function as tools for exposing injustice and promoting liberation.

Classical aesthetic theories, rooted in Sanskrit traditions, prioritise universalised emotional experiences and formal beauty, often neglecting or erasing the realities of social hierarchy. In contrast, Dalit aesthetics foregrounds lived experience, pain, resistance, and the imperative for social transformation, thereby

challenging and expanding the definitions of 'art' and 'beauty' in the Indian context. Although occasional shared artistic principles may exist, the fundamental socio-political disparities between these traditions result in significant divergence.

This comparative analysis is essential for a comprehensive understanding of Indian literary history, revealing a dynamic and contested aesthetic landscape rather than a monolithic tradition. It highlights the inherently political nature of aesthetics, demonstrating that theories of art are deeply embedded in social power structures. The ongoing tension between these aesthetic paradigms necessitates continual re-evaluation of literary canons, representations, and the fundamental purpose of literature in a diverse and unequal society.

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## **India and the G4 in United Nations Security Council Reforms: Opportunities, Constraints, and Strategic Dilemmas**

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### **Abstract**

*This study offers a comprehensive geopolitical and institutional evaluation of the Group of Four (Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil) proposal for Security Council reform, focusing on the strategic, material, and theoretical dimensions of their joint candidacy. The study argues that the UNSC's current structure no longer reflects present-day geopolitical and economic realities and therefore faces a growing crisis of legitimacy and representational imbalance. Through a qualitative analysis of diplomatic initiatives, institutional negotiations, and scholarly discourse, the paper assesses the strengths and limitations of the G4 framework as a collective strategy for institutional reform. It further examines the competing dynamics between multilateral coalition-building and India's potential independent candidature. The core of this paper is the question, 'To what extent has the G4 framework strengthened or constrained India's pursuit of permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council?' The paper finds that while the G4 enhances the international visibility and legitimacy of India's claim, it also intensifies resistance from rival regional actors and entrenched P5 members of the Security Council. The research concludes that India's most viable strategy is to maintain public commitment to collective reform while strengthening bilateral strategic partnerships and parallel institutional engagements. The study contributes to broader debates on global governance, institutional legitimacy, and the fluid redistribution of power in a transforming world order.*

**Keywords:** Group of Four, Geopolitical, Legitimacy, Coalition-building, Global governance

## **Introduction**

The architecture of global peace and security, forged in the immediate aftermath of World War II, stands today as a monument to a bygone geopolitical era. The UN Security Council (UNSC), the premier executive body entrusted with maintaining global order, reflects the power distribution of 1945—a ‘snapshot’ of the victors of a global conflagration that has long since ceased to define the contours of contemporary power. For decades, the imperative to reform this body has been universally acknowledged but diplomatically paralyzed (Pirozzi et al. 2023, 1-16). As a result, there are ongoing concerns about whether the Council's choices accurately mirror the global community's shared interests. Instead, these decisions frequently align with the interests of a limited number of nations that possess disproportionate representation within the Council's membership. Japan, Germany, and the EU have emerged as significant global economic giants, whereas Great Britain and France have declined to middle-ranking status. This shift, along with the substantial increase in United Nations membership, has sparked a vigorous debate over reforming the Security Council (Bourantonis 2004, 27-39).

While the diagnosis of the Council's malaise—its lack of representativeness, its crisis of legitimacy, and its frequent operational paralysis—is shared by the vast majority of the 193 Members, the prescription for its cure remains the subject of a fierce, intractable, and highly sophisticated diplomatic trench war. The collapse of the bipolar world order catalysed renewed interest in and revitalisation of the United Nations, leading to various reform initiatives. These initiatives were articulated by heads of state, diplomatic groups, private organisations, and academic professionals (Müller 2010, 31-89). However, their effort to bring all the groups on a single agreed framework has so far remained elusive. At the centre of this deadlock stands a fundamental philosophical and structural schism between these various competing models of global governance, the procedural mechanisms of delay, and the theoretical underpinnings of state behaviour.

In recent decades, India has advanced its claim through active participation in multilateral diplomacy, significant involvement in UN blue-helmet missions, and engagement with emerging global governance initiatives. Various frameworks for expansion have been put forward by the contending countries aimed at increasing the membership of the UNSC. One such group is G4 (Group of Four). This paper comprehensively analyzes the G4 proposal,

evaluating its effectiveness in engaging key stakeholders within the UN framework. Additionally, it explores the implications of the reform efforts for New Delhi's aspirations for a permanent seat within the primary organs of global governance. It argues that the failure of reform is not merely a diplomatic accident but a structural inevitability born of "Defensive Positionalism" and the "Consensus Trap."

### **Group of Four (G4)**

A major push for reform occurred in 2005 when Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan tabled a joint resolution before the General Assembly.<sup>i</sup> Known collectively as the G4, these four states sponsored the draft motion on the 'Question of Equitable Representation on and Increase in the Membership of the Security Council and Related Matters' to formalize their collective bid for expansion. Consequently, this collaborative blueprint is widely recognised in institutional literature as the G4 Plan. A 'Strategic Cartel' of major powers seeking to break the P5 monopoly, this coalition operates on the principle of mutual endorsement, presenting a unified model for reform to the UN General Assembly (UNGA). By banding together, these four nations increase the 'Geopolitical Gravity' of their demand. Under the G4 architecture, the Security Council would undergo a structural expansion from 15 to 25 seats, creating 6 new permanent and 4 non-permanent seats (United Nations General Assembly 2005). Their argument is grounded in a *Sovereign Power Model*: this line of reasoning maintains that international institutional legitimacy relies entirely on how faithfully an organisation reflects real-world, material capabilities today

Since the 1990s, the G4 countries have engaged in collaborative efforts to collectively lobby for permanent status on the UN Security Council. In 2004, they collectively endorsed one another's institutional bids within an expanded executive framework (Swart 2007, 19-41). The 2004 Report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change proposed two models for reforming the United Nations' decision-making processes. The Group expressed a preference for Model A, which prioritises regional representation. This approach aims to mitigate competition among the four contenders for membership. Furthermore, the panel recommended that the election of new members be conducted by the UN General Assembly, with the stipulation that these members be granted veto power (Nafey 2005,91-124). This

reform would create a structure comprising eleven permanent members (P-11) alongside fifteen elected members (E-15) (Nadin 2016, 46-72). The proposed plan seeks to rebalance the Council's core by distributing six permanent slots across key geographic areas: a dual presence for both Africa and the Asia-Pacific, alongside single permanent representations for the Latin American-Caribbean region and Western Europe. Furthermore, it suggests adding four non-permanent seats, each with a two-year term. Because the G4 brings together nations generally perceived as having the strongest credentials for permanent status, its formation has institutionalised India's reputation as an indispensable candidate for high-table inclusion (Blum 2005, 632-49). While Berlin and Tokyo's justifications for a permanent seat have focused on financial underwriting and budget contributions, New Delhi and Brasilia often support their bid with a focus on their roles as leaders of the "global south." (Blum 2005, 632-49).

### **Veto Flexibility**

Regarding the veto, G4 has recently changed its stance on the right to exercise it. In their statements about extending the veto, the G4 mentioned that 'the new permanent members would not use the right of veto until the issue of extending the right of veto to new permanent members has been decided within the framework of a review conference' (United Nations 2008). This "Joint Veto Strategy" was primarily aimed at appeasing the P5. Scholars supporting this (like Chinmaya Gharekhan) argue that a collective compromise is more likely to succeed than an individual demand for full veto power (Gharekhan 2007, 193-224). In an effort to gain unequivocal endorsement, the G4's joint declaration committed to endorsing 'Africa's representation in both the Permanent and non-permanent membership in the Security Council' underscored the critical importance of 'adequate and continuing representation of small and Medium-sized Member states, including the small Island Developing States, in an expanded and reformed Council' (Ministry of External Affairs 2016). India, on behalf of the G4, has recently proposed a 'Flexible Reform Model'. This includes expanding the UNSC from fifteen to 25–26 members, with six new permanent seats (The Hindu 2024).



## **The Illusion of Democratization: Power Preservation and Strategic Rivalry in UNSC Reform**

The four nations emphasised the need for a fixed timeframe to reform the Security Council. However, they are facing a persistent pushback from the 'Uniting for Consensus' coalition, colloquially termed the 'Coffee Club,' which is against new permanent seats and the plans of the G4 (Nadin 2016, 64-72). Led prominently by Italy, Pakistan, South Korea, Argentina, Mexico, and others, the UfC is frequently dismissed by superficial analyses as a mere coalition of "spoilers"—a group of jealous neighbours motivated solely by the desire to block the ascent of their regional rivals (Pakistan blocking India, Italy blocking Germany, Argentina blocking Brazil). Established in 2004–2005, the coalition specifically countered proposals to enlarge the Security Council's permanent tier. The central tenet of the UfC's resistance is the argument that expanding permanent membership does not democratize the Council; rather, it entrenches a larger, more invincible aristocracy. In March 2024, the UfC released a refined model proposing a 27-member Council with a significant increase in elected seats for Africa and Asia-Pacific, but explicitly zero new permanent seats. This model is designed to peel away African support from the G4 by offering them "easier" access to the Council via elections rather than the 'impossible' dream of permanent seats (Massari 2025, 1-6). However, analysts believe that these countries act as classic defensive positionalists: While the UfC rhetorically opposes the stratification of the Council, their 2024 proposal—advocating for 'longer-term seats' with immediate re-election—structurally institutionalizes the very hierarchy they claim to reject. By creating a new class of members who serve longer terms than the standard two years, the UfC is not preserving equality; they are engineering a Three-Tier Hierarchy. Thus, their proposal for a "semi-permanent" category is a mechanism of *"Defensive Positionalism"*, which posits that States prioritise the maintenance of their relative position over absolute gains. It ensures that while they may not be Kings (P5), they are never permanently relegated to Commoners, maintaining a 'fighting chance' to inhabit the middle tier alongside their G4 rivals. It is therefore proving that the UfC isn't trying to save the UN from the G4; they are trying to save a seat for themselves.

Additionally, the P5 countries typically resist any expansion of the Council's permanent tier. An increase in permanent members would reduce their unique status and power by weakening

the P5's advantageous position. P5 tacitly played to derail the G4 attempt. Each of these five powers had its issues regarding the G4 proposal. Despite public statements suggesting otherwise, the P5 seems pleased with the status quo and shows no interest in making changes that could contest their authority or increase the membership of their group (Choedon 2007,37-71). The G4 proposal failed to garner support from African nations. While South Africa and Nigeria vied for primacy as the sole permanent African representative, Egypt advocated for an additional seat to ensure permanent representation for Arab countries. A key stipulation was that any new permanent members would need to have the same rights and privileges as the P5. Furthermore, there was a call for broadening the non-permanent tier for Africa, surpassing the provisions put forth by the G4 (Müller 2016, 31-89).

An analysis of the G4 proposals reveals significant shortcomings at both the collective and the individual levels for each aspiring member state. A predominant challenge faced by the G4 countries is the substantial opposition from neighbouring nations, which complicates their quest for greater representation. Furthermore, each state must address its unique deficiencies to bolster its candidacy. For instance, despite Japan's robust economic standing and historic role in underwriting the UN budget, the nation faces a credibility issue that undermines its legitimacy as a serious contender for permanent membership. Japan must prioritise the restoration of its strained relationships, particularly with the Republic of Korea and China, concerning the atrocities committed during World War II, if it aspires to assume a more significant political role within the United Nations. Jiang Zemin once emphasised that a country's wealth should not be the only criterion for consideration; rather, the principles of equitable regional representation and consensus-based decision-making should be fully upheld in discussions surrounding the expansion of Security Council permanent seats (Yang 2003, 306-27). A major obstacle to Germany's permanent seat ambitions is the issue of regional equilibrium. Inducting another Western European powerhouse would further tilt the balance of permanent seats toward Europe, worsening a geographic distortion that many developing nations already reject. Moreover, the limited financial contributions of India and Brazil to the United Nations budget impede their prospects for candidacy as permanent members (Yang 2003, 306-27).

India's partnership with Japan, Germany, and Brazil (the G4) creates a collective pressure for reform. However, this is a "Double-Edged Sword," as the opposition to any one G4 member often translates into opposition for the entire group (Dabhade 2017,1-22). Some International Relations analysts point out that Chinese diplomats have informally hinted they might support India's bid if it were detached from Japan's. Scholars like Amrita Narlikar have explored how India's 'entrapment' in coalitions can sometimes limit its bargaining leverage with the P5. However, it is widely believed that such claims from China can turn out to be a farce and can split the collective approach of these four countries. India counters these geopolitical hurdles by actively pursuing multi-alignment. Through its stewardship of the 'Voice of Global South' summits, New Delhi has successfully anchored its diplomatic identity as a primary custodian and representative of the global majority's interests.

### **Coalition Entrapment and Strategic Autonomy in India's UNSC Bid: Reassessing the G4 Framework**

The discourse surrounding New Delhi's bid for permanent status on the UN Security Council is increasingly shaped by the tension between a unilateral 'Solo' approach and the multilateral 'G4 Coalition' framework. Proponents of an independent trajectory argue that India's growing strategic autonomy and unique geopolitical influence justify a distinct candidacy, free from the baggage of other regional aspirants. Conversely, critics contend that such an approach risks diplomatic isolation, potentially alienating fellow emerging powers and traditional allies who see collective action as the only viable way to achieve systemic reform. Ultimately, this debate reflects a fundamental strategic divide in Indian foreign policy: maintaining sovereign flexibility versus the practical benefits of collective bargaining in a multipolar world order.

*Syed Akbaruddin (Former Permanent Representative to the UN):* As a practitioner and scholar, Akbaruddin has frequently articulated the G4's 'Flexible Model.' He argues that by banding together, the G4 creates a 'critical mass' that makes it impossible for the UN to ignore the demand for reform without losing its own global legitimacy.

*Harsh V. Pant:* Pant notes that the G4 provides India with a structured platform for multi-alignment. By partnering with Japan and Germany, India aligns itself with the world's major

financial contributors to the UN, making it harder for the P5 to argue that the new members wouldn't be able to 'pay their way.'

However, from an analytical perspective, this collective bargaining strategy triggers a severe "multiplied opposition" effect. Because the G4 operates on the principle of mutual endorsement—demanding permanent seats for all four members collectively—the coalition inherits and aggregates the regional rivalries of each individual member (Munjal 2020,7-18). Consequently, Pakistan's opposition to India, China's opposition to Japan, and Italy's resistance to Germany all converge into a single, unified barrier. A political solo effort might allow India to leverage its unique strategic partnerships, but the G4 framework's "entrapment" means that a Chinese veto targeted at Japan automatically derails India's bid as well. Besides, a growing number of scholars argue that the G4 is a 'suicide pact.' They suggest that India's unique credentials—its largest population, largest democracy, and status as a nuclear power—are far superior to those of its G4 partners.

*C. Raja Mohan:* One of the most prominent advocates for "Strategic Realism," Raja Mohan suggests that India's interests are often hindered by its G4 partners. For instance, China's primary reason for blocking UNSC reform is its historical rivalry with Japan. By staying in the G4, India 'imports' Japan's enemies, making a Chinese veto more likely.

*Kanti Bajpai:* Bajpai has analysed India's "Status Inconsistency". He argues that India should leverage its unique 'Southern' identity while simultaneously projecting power as a primary net security provider across the Indian Ocean littoral. In this view, India is a 'Civilizational Power,' a category that Germany or Japan do not occupy, and thus deserves an individual path.

*Sanjay Baru:* As Sanjay Baru observes, anchoring New Delhi's ambitions to the G4 framework may have inadvertently compromised India's diplomatic flexibility. By operating as a bloc, India restricted its ability to independently leverage its own great-power credentials, leaving its permanent seat ambitions vulnerable to the intense regional rivalries that block the other G4 aspirants (Dabhade 2017,1-22).

### **Operationalizing the ‘Dual-Track’ Strategy**

Faced with the structural deadlock of the Consensus Trap and the multiplied opposition of the G4 framework, Indian foreign policy must move beyond binary debates of ‘Solo vs. Coalition’. The reality of contemporary multipolar diplomacy requires a highly sophisticated, simultaneous ‘Dual-Track’ Strategy to maximize New Delhi's leverage and maintain strategic autonomy.

#### **Track One: Sustained Multilateral Alignment**

India must continue to publicly lead the G4 and advocate for IGN text-based negotiations. This track is essential to maintain India's credentials as a responsible, rule-abiding leader of the Global South and to prevent diplomatic isolation (Ministry of External Affairs 2024). By championing the interests of SIDS and aligning with the African Common Position, India ensures that its status-seeking behaviour is viewed as a legitimate, representative quest for global justice rather than a narrow, self-interested grab for elite power (G4 Foreign Ministers 2025).

#### **Track Two: Pragmatic Solo Hedging**

Privately, India must cultivate its bilateral strategic partnerships with individual P5 members, preparing a unilateral "Plan B". If a systemic crisis, geopolitical rupture, or a shift in P5 posture opens a brief window of opportunity for Charter amendment, India must be prepared to immediately decouple its candidacy from Japan and Germany to secure a solo seat (Times of India 2023). Simultaneously, India must double down on its minilateral hedging through BRICS+, the Quad, and regional security frameworks. By establishing its functional indispensability in these parallel arenas, India ensures that its rise is institutionalized globally, signalling to the P5 that the formal boundaries of the UNSC must eventually bend to accommodate New Delhi, or risk breaking under the weight of their own obsolescence.

### **Analysing the G4 Material Asymmetry**

The empirical data exposes a deep ‘contribution-representation mismatch’ that undermines the G4's cohesion. Japan and Germany base their permanent candidacies on their substantial financial contributions to the UN regular budget, contributing at 6.93per cent and 5.692per

cent, respectively. Together, these two nations pay more than the combined budgetary footprint of three veto-holding permanent members (the UK, France, and Russia), undermining the contemporary legitimacy of the P5's exclusive status (Butchard, Brien, and Loft 2025, 29-55). Yet, their active, hands-on contribution to global security through UN peacekeeping operations is functionally negligible, with Japan deploying only 4 personnel and Germany deploying 573. In sharp contrast, India acts as a primary security provider for the United Nations, deploying 5,211 military personnel across the globe, ranking third behind only Nepal and Bangladesh. Historically, India has participated in over 49 peacekeeping operations, deploying over 200,000 personnel. However, India's fiscal contribution to the regular UN budget remains at a relatively modest 1.106 per cent (Sharma 2025, para 3).

This material asymmetry within the G4 creates an easy target for defensive positionalist gatekeepers. Opponents of Japan and Germany use their low peacekeeping footprint to argue they lack the security-enforcement capabilities required under Article 23 of the UN Charter, while critics of India and Brazil point to their lower financial contributions to claim they are seeking to 'free-ride' on the financial contributions of the established Western powers. Additionally, highlighting domestic human rights challenges underscores how domestic issues influence perceptions of international legitimacy, making the audience consider the broader implications of internal politics on global standing.

| State | Regular UN Budget Assessment (% of 2025–2027 Scale) | UN Peacekeeping Troop Contributions (Active Deployed Personnel, 2025–2026) | Primary UNSC Reform Model & Veto Stance (Post-2024 Positions)                                          |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| India | 1.106%                                              | 5,211 military personnel (Rank 3rd globally)                               | G4 Model: Proposes expansion to 25/26 members; supports 15-year veto suspension to bypass P5 deadlock. |

|               |         |                                      |                                                                                                                   |
|---------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Japan         | 6.930%  | 4 personnel (Rank 111th globally)    | G4 Model: Financial contribution-centric bid; supports G4 flexible veto model.                                    |
| Germany       | 5.692%  | 573 personnel (Rank 37th globally)   | G4 Model: Financial contributor focus; faces opposition due to European overrepresentation.                       |
| Brazil        | 1.411%  | 276 personnel (Rank 49th globally)   | G4 Model: Regional leadership bid; supports the G4 flexible veto model.                                           |
| United States | 22.000% | 40 personnel (Rank 78th globally)    | US Modernization Plan: Supports two permanent slots for African and an elected seat for SIDS; opposes new vetoes. |
| China         | 20.004% | 2,513 personnel (Rank 11th globally) | Status Quo / Wedge Strategy: Supports African representation but strongly opposes Japanese candidacy.             |

Source: Compiled by authors from different sites

## Conclusion

The Formation of the G4 (Group of Four) in 2005 was a masterstroke in collective bargaining. India, locking horns with three other major economic giants, transformed its bid from a 'National bid' to a 'systemic necessity'. The narrative changed from "India deserves a seat" to "The world governance system is incomplete without these major powers". Over time, G4 has navigated the double-edged risk. Although the four nations' collective bid for permanent membership adds weight, it also invites enemies; e.g., by allying with Japan, India invites stronger Chinese opposition. Allying with Germany invites opposition from Italy and other European states, which feel overshadowed. Additionally, it can prevent P5 and other groups from selecting all four members simultaneously (e.g., China offering a seat to Germany while ignoring India or Japan). The G4 coalition faces major issues due to the stark differences between financial contributions and actual peacekeeping troop commitments. This problem is exacerbated by the UN's looming liquidity crisis in 2025–2026, leading to layoffs and significant cuts in global peacekeeping operations, which changes the importance of these contributions.

However, India has calculated that the economic weight of this group outweighs the baggage of their individual rivals. For India, participation in the G4 has provided diplomatic visibility, collective legitimacy, and strategic leverage in international negotiations. By aligning with major economic and political powers such as Japan, Germany, and Brazil, India has transformed its candidature from a purely national aspiration into part of a broader argument for systemic reform. While the G4 approach is currently the formal diplomatic vehicle, the Solo approach remains a strong 'Plan B.' Most scholars agree that India's best strategy is to lead the G4 publicly while maintaining the bilateral "Structural Power" to pivot to a solo bid if a window of opportunity opens with the P5. Diplomacy requires India to uphold its "Voice of the Global South." A solo move could be viewed as elitist by the L.69 Group (a larger coalition of developing nations), whereas the G4 is often seen as a compromise that offers a middle ground.



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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> These include Afghanistan, Belgium, Bhutan, Brazil, Czech Republic, Denmark, Fiji, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Haiti, Honduras, Iceland, India, Japan, Kiribati, Latvia, Maldives, Nauru, Palau, Paraguay, Poland, Portugal, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Ukraine.

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## Disability Rights and Politics of Exclusion in India: A Study in Representation and Justice

Jameela Akhter and Janib Mohd Wani

### Abstract

*The under-representation of any section of society at any level of governance and decision-making results in a democratic deficit. Balanced political participation and power-sharing among all communities in decision-making is a prerequisite for a viable democracy. In this context, nearly half of the countries use legislated quotas to correct historical imbalances rather than address injustices in the process of representation. In this respect, India has also been successful in formulating reservation policies for the marginalised communities of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes at all levels of governance. The historic 73rd Amendment Act handed over the reins of power to the people at the Panchayat level, with 33 per cent reservation for women within the Panchayat. Nevertheless, the Women's Reservation Bill has yet to see the light of day in Parliament. Amid this whole gamut of positive changes in democratic vectors, one community is still being ignored: Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). Though many legislative Acts have been enacted for their welfare, there is no legal provision to ensure their representation (descriptive, thus substantive) in the decision-making process. They continue to be holistically marginalised in the process of representation, thus development. To date, there have been only 4 PwD parliamentarians and 6 PwD members of state assemblies since independence. This paper examines the evolving concept of disability and the extent of exclusion faced by the disabled community in modern democracies.*

**Keywords:** Disability, Democracy, Representation, Reservation, Empowerment

### Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Bank's *World Report on Disability* (2011), about 15% of the world's population, more than one billion people, live with some form of disability (WHO and World Bank 2011, 29). One can be born with a disability or get the condition through an accident or war at any point in their life due to genetic factors, ageing, and other similar reasons (Shakespeare 2014, 3-5). The interesting point is that the two

words "disability" and "impairment" are used interchangeably in regular usage. Whereas impairment refers to the malformation of a part of the human body, disability refers to its inability to function properly (Barnes and Mercer 2010, 12-14). As per the United Nations General Assembly, a disabled individual is termed as “an individual unable to fully or partially support himself or herself, owing to a deficiency in his/her capability to perform an action, congenital or otherwise, and thereby lacking the ability to provide for himself or herself the basic necessities of life” (United Nations 1975, 1). From this definition, a person’s disability comes before an individual. The healthy versions serve as standards for measuring the human body's abilities.

According to the WHO, “Disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person’s body and features of a society, in which he or she lives” (WHO 1980, 27). The WHO's definition explains the relationship between an individual's disability and his or her treatment in society. Disability is not simply defined as a malfunction of the body's organs. It is also important to consider the social aspects while understanding disability. Hence, studying disability in the light of the social culture prevailing amongst the individual’s surroundings is very important. Consequently, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities says, “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations 2006, 4).

Two key criteria for defining disability as per CRPD are:

1. First, disability is defined as those individuals who have an enduring physical impairment;
2. Secondly, such an impairment, together with the barriers that deny such individuals the right to participate fully in society, makes disability more complex.

CRPD has deliberately kept it open-ended because disability is continually evolving (Quinn and Degener 2002, 14-16). Social aspects of disability have been brought into the limelight by both the WHO and the UNCRPD. Significant emphasis has been laid on bulldozing the attitudinal and environmental barriers in order to reconstruct an egalitarian (just) society for

the better living of persons with disabilities (Oliver 1996, 32-35). The term “Disabled person” has gradually evolved into “Person with disability”. This signifies that person-first terminology highlights that a dignified individual is of greater significance than anything else (Barnes, Oliver, and Barton 2002, 5-7). Zina Bethune, a staunch advocate of American Disability Act and the Arts and Disability Movement, has introduced the term differently-abled. It is used to put forward a discussion about persons with disabilities. She had played an integral role in the advocacy of both acts, and therefore she emphasises the point that these individuals are indeed different, yet capable in their own way, and that’s why they are termed differently-abled (Shapiro 1993, 41-43).

Although there are several definitions of disability, which primarily depend on two elements, namely, impairment and limitations, either at an individual level or societal level, the methodology used by disability researchers in analysing the two elements greatly differs depending on the amount of focus given to each element (Shakespeare 2013, 214-221). Therefore, the models of disability are mainly:

- Medical Model, and
- Social Model

The medical model considers biological deficiency as the cause of disabilities, viewing them from a biological perspective as problems for the individual and their consequences for the individual’s private and social life (Oliver 1990, 2-11). To put it simply, people with disabilities are viewed as ill people who differ from other people in their inability to lead an independent life. Besides, the diagnostic criteria for a medical description pay no attention to flaws and weaknesses in social processes, as a result of which individuals with impairments cannot be accommodated (Barnes and Mercer 2003, 1-9). Individuals who are disabled are seen as requiring sympathy, which is the key element of the medical model. This means that individuals who are disabled are seen as requiring empathy rather than individuals who require their rights to be protected (Shakespeare 2006, 53-55). For instance, Justice V.R Krishna Iyer defines disability as, “Any restriction or lack (resulting from impairment) of ability to perform an activity in any manner or within the range considered normal for a human being” (Iyer 1990, 87).

The Social Model regards disability as being caused by societal barriers and not by impairments in people (Oliver 1996, 39-41). The model states that inaccessible environments and exclusion from participation cause restrictions on PwDs. For instance, a person using a wheelchair needs ramp access as much as a person without disabilities needs stairs. Disability, in this case, is considered a social form of oppression brought about by society (Finkelstein 2001, 2-4). An alternative model that is crucial in disability studies is the Human Rights Model, where PwDs are considered just like any other people with human rights (Quinn and Degener 2002, 10-12).

The present Disability Rights Movement (DRM) employs the social model in promoting the rights of people with disabilities, considering disability as both an identity and a human rights question (Davis 2013, 1-3). The DRM also considers disability as a developmental issue, claiming that development without addressing the problems of disability, in terms of poverty, education, and health, is not possible (Sen 1999, 82-85).

How disability is conceptualised determines how the status and problems of people with disabilities are understood, thus creating two kinds of approaches:

- Welfare-based approach (Medical Model)
- Rights-based approach (Social- Human rights model/ Developmental Model) (Oliver and Barnes 2012, 18-21).

### **An Overview of India's Disability Legislation**

Even with the huge population of over one billion in India, the country claims that 2.2 per cent of its population is severely mentally or physically disabled according to the Census of India 2011 data (Census of India 2011, 3). But disability activists say that the figures are between 4 and 5 per cent, while the World Bank estimates the figure to be 4-8 per cent (World Bank 2009, 12-14). Inclusion of the issue of disability in India has been limited to only the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (Mehrotra 2013, 44). Only a few Ministries and Departments consider issues of PwDs in their schemes and programs (Ghai 2015, 27-29).

Disability Rights Movement (DRM) in India has taken more than four decades to develop (Mehrotra 2013, 51-53). The demands for disability rights began in the seventies and became strong in the eighties, where the emergence of cross-disability groups and Non-Government

Organizations became evident (Ghosh 2016, 88-90). Policy was changing slowly towards development and viewing disabled individuals as development actors (Albert 2004, 18-20). Through protest campaigns and petitions, finally, a significant act called *Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act 1995* was put in place, whereby 3 per cent of government jobs were reserved for PwDs (Government of India 1995, sec. 33).

The United Nations ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the new millennium (2006). India is a signatory and ratified it in 2007 (United Nations 2006, 5). In this period, there were demands made for increasing reservation percentages for PwDs (Jain and Thomas 2018, 73-74). In response, the Union Government passed the Disability Bill in 2012, which came into effect through the Act passed by the Parliament in 2016 (Government of India 2016, 1-3). Prime Minister Narendra Modi has hailed it as a milestone initiative which will add impetus to the Accessible India Campaign (PIB 2015, 1). Under this Act, the number of disabilities recognised has been increased from seven to twenty-one, and more have been empowered to be notified as disabilities (Government of India 2016, sec. 2).

#### Modern Democracies: Inclusive or Exclusive of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs)

Active involvement of every individual in politics is crucial for democratic governance and is enshrined in the principles of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations 1948, art. 21; United Nations 1966, art. 25). Democracies are built on the principles of pluralism, diversity, and suffrage for all citizens (Dahl 1998, 37-39). Disenfranchisement of marginalised communities, including persons with disabilities, creates two major impacts: they will be unable to influence decisions about their well-being, and the democratic process itself will be compromised due to a lack of diversity (Lord and Stein 2009, 483-485).

In addition, exclusion will exacerbate the already existing prejudice against persons with disabilities (Shakespeare 2014, 102-103). In the context of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, almost 400,000 persons with disabilities across 14 EU member states lost their voting rights due to their disabilities (European Disability Forum 2019, 2). Very few EU nations provide equal electoral rights for all persons with disabilities to become candidates in elections,



even though obligations exist according to the CRPD (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014, 45-47).

Access to participation in the political process, including both voting and the ability to contest in elections, has been recognised under various international human rights agreements (OHCHR 2011, 6-8). Article 29 of CRPD, for example, mandates that states guarantee the enjoyment of these rights by all PwDs (United Nations 2006, art. 29). Nevertheless, practices such as discrimination and restrictive laws persist, limiting the access of PwDs to political processes (Stein and Lord 2010, 20-22). In many cases, individuals under guardianship lack the right to vote, and limitations to contesting in elections are still present among persons with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities (OHCHR 2011, 9-10). For instance, Article 326 of India's constitution allows for the disenfranchisement of persons of "unsound mind" (Constitution of India 1950, art. 326).

As an illustration, international research performed by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2011, which included over 64 countries, showed that individuals affected with mental illnesses and mental disabilities were frequently excluded from voting and campaign processes as a result of laws and constitutions in these countries stating that political rights depend on legal capacity (OHCHR 2011, 11-13). At the same time, an international survey carried out by Inclusion International in 2014 demonstrated that 62 per cent of respondents had to deal with societal and cultural barriers in this respect (Inclusion International 2014, 15).

### **Case of India**

The *Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act* (RPDA), 2016, was introduced with an objective to make PwDs a part of a more inclusive society, in addition to other measures like the Accessible India campaign launched in 2015 (Government of India 2016, 1-3). Among the measures taken to enhance the rights of PwDs were increasing reservations in jobs in the public sector from 3 per cent to 4 per cent, the establishment of special courts for each district, free education for children with disabilities aged between 6 and 18, financial assistance from national and state bodies, and making all public buildings accessible within a certain period of time (Government of India 2016, secs. 16, 34, 89).

However, despite a progressive framework of legislation, the RPDA 2016 faces several shortcomings in terms of the political empowerment of people with disabilities (Ghai 2015, 118-120). First, although the right to vote is guaranteed, there is no provision about the possibility of contesting elections (Mehrotra 2013, 142). Second, although the RPDA guarantees the right to vote, Article 326 of the Indian Constitution still permits the disqualification of persons of "unsound mind" from voter registration (Constitution of India 1950, art. 326). Lastly, legal discrimination against disabled citizens still exists in several civil, criminal, family, banking, and taxation laws (Human Rights Watch 2014, 37-39).

There are many other gaps that need to be filled. The percentage of expenditure for disabled persons was the same from 2013 to 2016, which is 0.02% of GDP (NCPEDP 2017, 9). Projects like smart cities, government websites, courts, and disaster management are also not considering accessibility for all (Accessible India Campaign Report 2018, 14-16). There are no facilities provided for independent living support services, and there are insufficient measures taken to secure their privacy (United Nations 2019, 22). There are many social taboos prevailing as well, such as providing incentives to non-disabled individuals for marriage to people with disabilities, and certain marriage and adoption prohibitions based on mental disorders or leprosy (Ghosh 2016, 156-159).

There is also much scope in the areas of education and gender equity. Most of the PwDs cannot afford higher education, while the remaining ones face problems accessing educational institutions (Singal 2014, 95-97). In addition to that, women with disabilities are underrepresented in legislation, welfare, and criminal acts (Mehrotra and Vaidya 2008, 67-69). There is controversy regarding the right to terminate pregnancy if the fetus is severely impaired without the consent of the parents (Puri and Abraham 2017, 88-90). Taxing of assistive devices and the lack of proper recognition for sign language are still important issues (PRS Legislative Research 2016, 11).

Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) have been portrayed as being dependent and defective, emphasising more on what they can't do rather than what they can do (Oliver 1990, 56-58). According to Professor Anita Ghai, "being disabled is to be disabled by society" (Ghai 2015, 25). The main cause of disability is attributed to physical infrastructural barriers, attitudinal

barriers, and legal barriers that deny persons with impairments their rights (Barnes and Mercer 2010, 45-48).

When addressing India in the 'Mann Ki Baat' show in January 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed to use the word 'Divyang' instead of 'Viklang' (PIB 2016, 1). In his address, Prime Minister Modi portrayed the concept of disability in the context of divinity and not deficiency. Nevertheless, most disability activists criticised the terms used, stating that calling PwDs "divine" further segregates them from the rest of society (Ghai 2018, 4-5). Such terms emphasise the problem-first principle that is common in the Medical Model, which denies PwDs their rights as equal citizens (Shakespeare 2014, 53-55).

The existence of social prejudice and deficiencies in the enforcement of legislation on disability rights results in the fact that PwDs are considered unqualified to take part in politics (Lord and Stein 2009, 486-488). There have been few PwD representatives in the Indian Parliament and State Assemblies since the country gained its independence (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020, 212). Nevertheless, all politicians who entered politics proved themselves to be highly qualified professionals because of their performance and not their disabilities. For instance, Jaipal Reddy took charge of several ministries; Sadhan Gupta was the founder of the National Federation of the Blind; Minati Barik was the first woman with a disability who won assembly elections in Odisha; Usha Kiran Naik was working for the benefit of women with disabilities and HIV-infected people; M. Karunanidhi lobbied for the installation of ramps and elevators in government facilities to facilitate access of other wheelchair users (Ghosh 2016, 188-192).

However, despite the above cases, the political participation of Persons With Disabilities (PwDs) in India is very restricted (Mehrotra 2013, 149-151). The political parties are often reluctant to recruit or give a ticket to any PwD on account of their 'electability' and additional expenses incurred for providing assistance during the campaigning period (Agaronnik et al. 2019, 6-8). Moreover, most political parties do not have any disability cells, and some parties mentioned only a few items related to PwDs in their manifestos for the elections held in 2019 (National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People 2019, 3-5). In addition, persons with disabilities are not considered an important 'vote bank' (Ghai 2015, 131).

### **Disability, Representation and Justice: India**

The issue of political representation of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in India is still an underdeveloped one (Mehrotra 2013, 147-149). While the Constitution of India, which was built upon the ideals of social justice, could have provided for some provisions ensuring proportional representation of PwDs in both the Legislature and Local bodies, such steps have not been taken by the government (Austin 1999, 75-78). Although PwDs fall within the scope of the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles of State Policy, as they refer to disadvantaged communities, disability does not constitute a distinct criterion recognised at the time of drafting the Constitution, along with groups like SCs, STs, women, and children (Constitution of India 1950, pts. III and IV).

In order to correct the injustices suffered by these marginalised groups in the past, the Indian government has resorted to affirmative action such as reservation quotas, which are designed to provide substantive equality or “equality of outcome” (Jaffrelot 2003, 2-5). This is because, according to Aristotle, justice is achieved by treating people who are equal equally, and those who are unequal, but only in respect of irrelevant criteria, unequally (Aristotle 1998, 112-114). Similarly, Ronald Dworkin contended that those suffering from disadvantage should be compensated for the inequalities resulting from their circumstances (Dworkin 2000, 87-90).

Whereas women, SCs, and STs have benefited from the affirmative action program, there has not been much political representation of PwDs (Ghai 2015, 131-133). While women have gained reservations for themselves in local government and even in legislatures, PwDs only get a 4 per cent reservation in government employment (Government of India 2016, sec. 34). There has been no system or law which ensures their political representation in the decision-making process (Mehrotra 2013, 151). It is necessary that PwDs participate politically in order to ensure that any policy related to them is developed in accordance with the needs and demands raised by them (Young 2000, 116-118).

“Nothing About Us Without Us” is a worldwide slogan used by the disability rights movement that focuses on the marginalisation of people with disabilities and that no policy concerning them can be formulated without their involvement (Charlton 1998, 3). This slogan is used by PwDs because they are demanding that a rights-based and developmental approach be taken in place of the existing welfare-based approach (Shakespeare 2014, 66-69). The welfare approach

treats PwDs merely as objects who need some services. They are actually active citizens who are capable of participating in the development of policy (Oliver 1990, 45-47).

In the case of the welfare approach to public policy, PwDs tend to be patronised and not consulted in the development of policies concerning them. As Hanna Pitkin once said, PwDs are subjected to infantilisation as members of the political community, treating them like political minors in society (Pitkin 1967, 209-210). In contrast, the rights approach considers that PwDs are equal citizens who are able to claim their rights and make independent decisions on their own (Quinn and Degener 2002, 10-12). In addition, according to Lani Guinier, historically excluded groups will never be able to have equal dignity and political status in society unless they are represented in government bodies (Guinier 1994, 92-95).

PwDs are among the most marginalised groups and, therefore, their exclusion is related to matters of social injustice and lack of recognition (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 7-9). According to Charles Taylor, refusing recognition to a group's mode of being is an act of oppression (Taylor 1994, 25). Moreover, from the perspective of social justice, inclusiveness, equal opportunities, cooperation, and fair access to resources and power are vital (Rawls 1971, 54-58). Finally, Amartya Sen used his capability approach to human development to describe the freedom of individuals to enjoy opportunities in order to lead lives that they consider important (Sen 1999, 74-75).

According to Amartya Sen, justice should focus on human capabilities (Sen 2009, 231-233). In his opinion, justice cannot be defined solely in terms of utility or happiness since people can internalise the condition of deprivation and adjust to injustice. Real justice should allow people to have good options and liberties (Sen 2009, 283-285). Participation and freedom of expression are crucial human functionings, which make justice impossible when deprived of by the disadvantaged groups (Sen 1999, 36-38).

Anne Phillips contends that political presence and representation are necessary for democracy (Phillips 1995, 12-14). For example, previous scholars like Arend Lijphart, through the concept of consociational democracy, noted that very divided societies needed an equal distribution of political power and resources among the parties involved (Lijphart 1977, 25-27). Lijphart believed that exclusion from power by minorities leads to alienation, hence limiting the legitimacy of democracy (Lijphart 1977, 42-44). In addition, Will Kymlicka argued for the

importance of group-specific rights and representation for marginalised groups (Kymlicka 1995, 108-111). This notion, taken together, demonstrates that democracy is not only about politics of ideas but also politics of presence (Phillips 1995, 25-26).

Political equality is also dependent on more than just equality. In the arguments put forth by democratic scholars, all citizens must possess equal weight in political proceedings, although marginalised groups need extra protection to be equally represented in political processes (Dahl 1998, 63-65). Marginalised minorities cannot gain real equality if their presence in the process is not felt (Young 2000, 141-143). The exclusion of marginalised minorities from legislative processes means that policies will continue to be determined by those who make up the majority in political processes. This will have grave implications because the presence of marginalised minorities in such forums will alter the tone of the discussion, expand policy objectives, and give marginalised minorities the opportunity to question societal norms (Phillips 1995, 47-49).

## **Conclusion**

In general, PwDs have always been viewed in relation to non-disabled people rather than viewed as individuals in themselves. The policies and schemes devised for the benefit of the former are usually framed on the basis of assumptions about their needs that are made by the latter. In order to integrate the former properly, it is necessary for them to be regarded as change agents rather than as helpless victims or divine entities. This is precisely why there has been so much criticism of the term “Divyang” in India, because it serves to alienate PwDs from normal society rather than incorporating them into it.

However, it is yet to become fully accepted that the PwDs need not remain the “political infants” and should rather be recognised as representatives and policy makers themselves. This could be achieved, among other steps, through setting aside seats for them within various political systems. It can be seen that a change in their level of participation could also lead to a qualitative shift in policy-making, as can be evidenced in the case of some of the political leaders such as Sadhan Gupta, who formed National Federation of the Blind in India; Usha Kiran Naik, who advocated on behalf of the women with disabilities; and M. Karunanidhi, who advocated accessibility measures in public spaces.

Human capability enhancement for PwDs should be one of the objectives of public policies so that they themselves are able to take steps toward their personal development and full participation in society. Both the politics of ideas and the politics of presence can contribute to bringing about a better and more democratic future. In this respect, seat reservation for PwDs in political organisations can be considered as a good start.

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## **Towards Inclusive Governance: Strategies for Equity and Participation**

**Jisha Abraham**

### ***Abstract***

*Inclusive governance has emerged as a central principle of contemporary democratic societies, emphasizing equitable participation, representation, accountability, and transparency in governance processes. It seeks to ensure that all citizens, particularly marginalized and disadvantaged communities, are actively involved in political, administrative, and developmental decision-making. This article examines the concept of inclusive governance by analyzing its theoretical foundations, democratic significance, institutional mechanisms, global dimensions, and contemporary challenges. Drawing upon scholarly literature, international policy frameworks, and empirical studies, the article explores strategies for strengthening participation and equity in governance systems. It further evaluates the role of stakeholders, technological innovations, and global governance institutions in promoting inclusive governance practices. The study argues that inclusive governance is essential for democratic consolidation, social justice, sustainable development, and institutional legitimacy in an increasingly interconnected world.*

**Keywords:** Inclusive Governance, Equity, Participation, Democracy, Public Administration, Social Justice, Stakeholder Engagement

### **Introduction**

Inclusive governance has become an important framework within contemporary political and administrative discourse, emphasizing the necessity of equitable participation and representation in governance processes. It represents a revolutionary approach to administration that aims to guarantee that everyone has the chance to actively engage in public decision-making, regardless of their socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, religious, or gender background. Inclusive governance extends beyond the traditional understanding of democratic participation by advocating active engagement, transparency, accountability, and institutional responsiveness to the needs of marginalized populations (UNDP 2008, pp.235-255). The concept has gained increasing

significance in the context of globalization, rising social inequalities, and demands for participatory democracy.

The central objective of inclusive governance is to make the voices of disadvantaged and historically excluded communities and integrate their concerns into governance structures and policy-making processes. Governance systems that fail to accommodate diverse perspectives often reinforce social exclusion, unequal development, and political instability. In contrast, inclusive governance fosters social cohesion and democratic legitimacy by recognizing diversity as a strength rather than a challenge (Ansell et al. 2020, pp.571–591). By incorporating multiple viewpoints into governance processes, societies become more capable of formulating effective, equitable, and sustainable public policies.

Inclusive governance also contributes significantly to strengthening democratic institutions and promoting social justice. Democratic systems can only operate efficiently when citizens perceive governance structures as representative, accountable, and responsive to their needs. Consequently, inclusive governance seeks to establish governance mechanisms that encourage participation, equality, and fairness while reducing structural inequalities and institutional discrimination (Milazzo and Goldstein 2019, pp.34–69.). In this regard, inclusive governance has become an essential framework for advancing democratic consolidation and sustainable development across the world.

## **Theoretical Foundations of Inclusive Governance**

The theoretical foundations of inclusive governance are rooted in democratic theory, participatory governance, deliberative democracy, and social justice frameworks. Democratic theorists argue that meaningful participation by citizens is essential for ensuring legitimacy and accountability in governance systems. Participatory governance models emphasize the importance of involving citizens directly in policy-making and public administration processes rather than limiting participation to electoral politics alone (Fung and Wright 2003, pp. 452-460). Inclusive governance thus seeks to democratize governance structures by establishing areas for public participation and collaborative decision-making.

Deliberative democracy further contributes to the conceptual understanding of inclusive governance by emphasizing dialogue, public reasoning, and consensus-building in governance processes. According to deliberative democratic theory, governance decisions should emerge through inclusive and rational public deliberation involving diverse social groups (Habermas 1996, pp.324-351). Such approaches strengthen democratic legitimacy by making certain that governance procedures represent the interests of the group as a whole rather than the preferences of dominant elites.

The concept of social justice also plays a vital part in shaping inclusive governance. Scholars such as John Rawls and Amartya Sen emphasize equality, fairness, and human capabilities as central principles of just societies (Rawls 1971, p.258; Sen 1999, p.375). Inclusive governance seeks to operationalize these principles by ensuring equal access to political participation, public resources, and institutional opportunities. Consequently, inclusive governance is increasingly viewed as an essential mechanism for reducing inequalities and promoting democratic inclusion.

### **Principles and Importance of Inclusive Governance**

Inclusive governance is founded upon several interrelated principles, including participation, representation, equality, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and justice. Together, these guidelines guarantee that governance systems remain democratic, equitable, and people-centered. Participation constitutes the cornerstone of inclusive governance, as it enables citizens to impact choices that have an impact on their life and communities. Representation ensures that governance institutions reflect the diversity of society and include marginalized voices in policy-making processes.

The importance of inclusive governance lies in its ability to strengthen democratic institutions and improve policy effectiveness. Governance systems that incorporate diverse perspectives are more capable of addressing complex social and developmental challenges. Inclusive governance enhances social trust and institutional legitimacy by ensuring that citizens perceive governance processes as fair and representative (OECD 2020, p.27). Furthermore, by empowering marginalised populations and lowering political exclusion, inclusive government promotes social cohesion.

Inclusive governance also functions as a mechanism for achieving social justice and equitable development. Marginalized populations often experience barriers to participation due to poverty, discrimination, illiteracy, and institutional exclusion. By enabling chances for significant participation, inclusive governance enables disadvantaged groups to articulate their concerns and influence governance outcomes (Kaplan 2015, pp.128-158). Such participation contributes to correcting historical injustices and establishing more equitable governance systems.

### **Inclusive Governance and Democratic Deepening**

Inclusive governance plays a fundamental role in strengthening democratic systems and deepening democratic practices within society. Democracy is not confined merely to periodic electoral participation; rather, it encompasses continuous citizen engagement in governance processes, policy formulation, and public decision-making. Inclusive governance enhances democratic functioning by ensuring broader participation, safeguarding minority rights, and promoting equal opportunities for representation within political and administrative institutions (Dahl 1989,356). By encouraging active citizen involvement and participatory decision-making, inclusive governance contributes to the emergence of more responsive, transparent, and accountable governance systems.

One of the central objectives of inclusive governance is to address the exclusion of marginalized and disadvantaged communities from governance structures. In many societies, structural inequalities based on class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status continue to prevent vulnerable populations from participating effectively in political and administrative processes. These inequalities often result in unequal access to power, resources, and institutional opportunities, thereby weakening democratic inclusiveness and social justice. Inclusive governance seeks to navigate beyond these obstacles through institutional reforms and participatory mechanisms designed to ensure fair representation and equitable participation (UNDP 2008, p.256). Such reforms aim to democratize governance by incorporating diverse perspectives and empowering historically excluded communities.

Various institutional mechanisms have been developed to promote inclusive governance and democratic deepening. These include affirmative action policies, decentralization initiatives,

participatory budgeting, public consultations, stakeholder engagement programmes, and community-based governance structures. Affirmative action policies seek to enhance the representation of marginalized groups in governance institutions, while decentralization reforms bring governance processes closer to local communities, thereby increasing citizen participation and accountability. Participatory budgeting and public consultations provide citizens with opportunities to influence policy priorities and resource allocation decisions directly (Fung and Wright 2003, pp.452-460). These participatory approaches strengthen democratic governance by ensuring that public policies reflect the needs and aspirations of diverse social groups.

Inclusive governance also contributes significantly to democratic legitimacy and institutional trust. Public trust is an essential component of stable and effective democratic governance. Citizens are more likely to support governance institutions when they perceive decision-making processes as transparent, participatory, and equitable. Governance systems that exclude certain groups or fail to address social inequalities often experience declining public confidence and political instability. In contrast, inclusive governance fosters stronger relationships between citizens and institutions by encouraging dialogue, responsiveness, and accountability (OECD 2020, p.27). Consequently, inclusive governance strengthens democratic legitimacy and enhances institutional resilience in the face of social and political challenges.

Furthermore, inclusive governance promotes democratic consolidation by encouraging civic participation and political empowerment. Democratic consolidation refers to the process through which democratic values, institutions, and practices become deeply embedded within society. Inclusive governance strengthens this process by expanding opportunities for civic engagement and ensuring that all citizens have meaningful access to governance processes. When citizens actively participate in governance and perceive themselves as stakeholders in democratic institutions, democratic norms become more sustainable and resilient (Habermas 1996, pp.324-351). Inclusive governance therefore functions as both a mechanism for democratic participation and a framework for strengthening social cohesion and political stability.

In contemporary societies, democratic deepening also requires governance systems capable of addressing emerging global challenges such as globalization, migration, technological

transformation, and socio-economic inequality. Inclusive governance provides an adaptive framework for managing these complexities by promoting collaborative decision-making and equitable representation. As societies become increasingly diverse and interconnected, governance institutions must adopt participatory approaches that accommodate cultural pluralism and protect the rights of marginalized communities. Through such practices, inclusive governance contributes to the development of democratic systems that are more inclusive, participatory, and socially just.

Ultimately, inclusive governance is essential for achieving democratic deepening because it transforms democracy from a procedural arrangement into a participatory and people-centered process. By ensuring equitable participation, institutional accountability, and social inclusion, inclusive governance strengthens democratic institutions and promotes a more just and representative society.

### **Mechanisms for Enhancing Participation and Equity**

The realization of inclusive governance depends significantly upon the establishment of institutional mechanisms that promote broad-based participation, equitable representation, and democratic accountability. Transparency, responsiveness, and legitimacy are more likely in governance systems that promote citizen participation in administrative and policymaking processes. In recent decades, governments and public institutions across the world have increasingly adopted participatory governance models aimed at strengthening civic engagement and enhancing public accountability. These participatory mechanisms create opportunities for citizens to contribute directly to governance processes and influence actions that have an impact on social, political, and economic lives (OECD 2020, p.27). Consequently, inclusive governance has evolved from a purely representative model toward a more participatory and collaborative framework of governance.

Among the most important mechanisms for enhancing participation and equity is participatory budgeting, which allows citizens to directly influence decisions regarding the allocation of public resources. Participatory budgeting emerged prominently in local governance systems and has become an important democratic innovation in many countries. Through this mechanism, citizens actively engage in discussions concerning development priorities, expenditure planning, and

community needs, thereby strengthening transparency and accountability in public administration (Wampler 2007, pp.525-535). Participatory budgeting democratizes governance by empowering local communities and encouraging greater public involvement in financial decision-making processes. It also contributes to social equity by ensuring that marginalized populations have opportunities to articulate their developmental priorities and access public resources more effectively.

Affirmative action policies also constitute an essential institutional mechanism for promoting equity and inclusion within governance structures. These policies seek to ensure the representation of historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups in political institutions, administrative bodies, educational institutions, and public employment sectors. Marginalized populations often face structural barriers arising from historical discrimination, social exclusion, and unequal access to opportunities. Affirmative action measures attempt to address these inequalities by creating institutional spaces for underrepresented groups and promoting equitable participation in governance processes (Milazzo and Goldstein 2019, pp.34–69). Such policies strengthen democratic inclusiveness by ensuring that governance institutions better reflect the diversity of society.

Decentralization reforms represent another important mechanism for enhancing participation and equity in governance. Decentralization involves the transfer of administrative, financial, and political authority from central governments to local governance institutions. By bringing governance processes closer to citizens, decentralization encourages greater community participation and local accountability. Local governments are generally more capable of understanding community-specific needs and responding effectively to local developmental challenges (Crook and Manor 1998, pp.348-350). Decentralized governance structures therefore provide opportunities for citizens, especially marginalized groups, to participate more actively in governance and development processes. Furthermore, decentralization strengthens democratic governance by promoting transparency, responsiveness, and citizen-centered administration at the grassroots level.

Public consultations, stakeholder dialogues, citizen assemblies, and deliberative forums significantly play a critical role in promoting participatory governance. These mechanisms facilitate interaction and communication between governments, civil society organizations, community groups, and citizens. Deliberative platforms encourage inclusive dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and consensus-building, thereby improving governance outcomes and policy effectiveness (Ansell and Gash 2008, pp.543–571). Such participatory processes are particularly important in pluralistic and diverse societies where governance decisions must accommodate multiple perspectives and competing interests. By encouraging dialogue and cooperation, deliberative mechanisms contribute to social cohesion and democratic legitimacy.

Civil society organizations and grassroots movements further strengthen participatory governance by mobilizing communities and advocating for marginalized populations. These organizations act as intermediaries between citizens and governance institutions, ensuring that vulnerable groups are represented in public decision-making processes. Through advocacy campaigns, public awareness initiatives, and community engagement programmes, civil society organizations enhance democratic participation and hold governance institutions accountable for their actions (UNDP 2008, pp.235-255). Their involvement is especially important in contexts where marginalized communities face barriers to political participation and institutional representation.

Technological innovations and digital governance mechanisms have also emerged as important tools for enhancing participation and equity in governance systems. E-governance platforms, online consultations, digital grievance redressal systems, and social media engagement provide citizens with new opportunities to participate in governance processes. Digital technologies can increase transparency, improve information dissemination, and facilitate broader public engagement by overcoming geographical and temporal barriers (Bannister and Connolly 2012, pp.3–25). However, governments must also address challenges related to digital inequality and technological exclusion to ensure that digital governance mechanisms remain inclusive and accessible to all sections of society.

Ultimately, mechanisms for enhancing participation and equity are essential for strengthening inclusive governance and democratic deepening. Institutional reforms, participatory innovations,



and collaborative governance frameworks collectively contribute to more transparent, accountable, and representative governance systems. By promoting citizen engagement and addressing structural inequalities, these mechanisms help create governance structures that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of diverse populations. Inclusive governance therefore depends not only upon formal democratic institutions but also upon continuous efforts to expand participation, strengthen equity, and empower marginalized communities.

### **The Role of Technology and Digital Governance**

Technological advancements have created new opportunities for promoting inclusive governance and democratic participation. Digital governance platforms, e-governance systems, and online participation mechanisms enable citizens to engage more directly with governance institutions. Digital technologies can overcome geographical and temporal barriers, thereby expanding opportunities for participation and civic engagement (Bannister and Connolly 2012, pp.3–25).

Social media platforms and digital communication technologies have also strengthened public participation by enabling citizens to mobilize collective action and express political opinions more effectively. Governments increasingly utilize digital platforms to disseminate information, collect public feedback, and facilitate citizen consultations. Such initiatives enhance transparency and accountability within governance systems. However, digital governance also presents challenges related to digital exclusion and unequal access to technology. Marginalized populations often lack adequate digital literacy and internet access, limiting their ability to participate in digital governance processes. Consequently, governments must invest in digital infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives to ensure equitable access to digital participation opportunities (Castells 2010, pp.32-50).

### **Participation of Stakeholder and Collaborative Governance**

Inclusive governance requires the enthusiastic involvement of multiple stakeholders, including governments, civil society organizations, private sector institutions, community groups, and citizens. Collaborative governance frameworks emphasize the importance of partnerships and collective decision-making in addressing public challenges (Ansell and Gash 2008, pp.543–571).

Civil society organizations play a critical role in advocating for marginalized communities and holding governments accountable. These organizations often possess strong grassroots connections and are capable of articulating the concerns and aspirations of disadvantaged populations. Similarly, grassroots movements and local leadership contribute significantly to democratizing governance processes by mobilizing citizen participation and promoting local empowerment. The private sector and non-governmental organizations also contribute to inclusive governance through corporate social responsibility initiatives, development partnerships, and social innovation programmes. Collaborative governance arrangements involving diverse stakeholders enhance policy effectiveness and institutional legitimacy by integrating multiple perspectives and expertise into governance processes.

### **International Perspectives on Inclusive Governance**

Inclusive governance has emerged as a significant global framework for promoting democratic participation, social justice, and equitable development across societies. International perspectives on inclusive governance emphasize that governance systems must ensure the active participation of all sections of society, particularly marginalized and disadvantaged groups such as women, indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and economically weaker populations. International organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the World Bank have consistently highlighted that inclusive governance is essential for achieving sustainable development, political stability, and social cohesion (UNDP 2008, 235-255.; OECD 2020,p.27; Milazzo and Goldstein 2019, pp.34–69). These institutions argue that governance structures should move beyond mere representation and focus on meaningful participation, accountability, transparency, and equal access to decision-making processes.

From an international viewpoint, inclusive governance is closely connected with the principles of democracy, human rights, and participatory development. In developed democracies, inclusive governance is often associated with decentralization, citizen participation, collaborative policymaking, and digital governance initiatives that allow wider public engagement. In developing and fragile states, however, the emphasis is frequently placed on addressing structural

inequalities, poverty, social exclusion, and unequal power relations that prevent vulnerable groups from participating effectively in governance processes (Kaplan 2015, pp.128-158). International scholars observe that exclusion from governance often results in political instability, conflict, distrust in institutions, and uneven development. Consequently, inclusive governance is viewed as a mechanism for conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and strengthening state legitimacy.

Global experiences also demonstrate that inclusive governance requires institutional reforms and policy innovations. Many countries have adopted affirmative action policies, gender quotas, participatory budgeting, community-based governance models, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms to increase inclusiveness in governance. For instance, international studies on collaborative governance highlight the importance of involving civil society organizations, local communities, and non-state actors in public decision-making (Ansell et al. 2020, pp.570–591). Such participatory approaches improve policy effectiveness, enhance public trust, and ensure that governance outcomes reflect diverse social interests. Moreover, international environmental and water governance frameworks increasingly stress stakeholder participation and local community involvement as crucial elements of sustainable resource management (Akhmouch and Clavreul 2017, pp.29–49).

Another important international perspective is the recognition of cultural and contextual diversity in implementing inclusive governance. Scholars argue that there is no single universal model of inclusive governance applicable to all societies. The success of inclusive governance depends on historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural conditions within each country. While some nations prioritize institutional representation, others focus on social empowerment, economic inclusion, or community participation. Nevertheless, the common international consensus remains that inclusive governance should aim to reduce inequalities, empower marginalized groups, and create opportunities for equitable participation in governance processes (Rocha Menocal 2017, pp.559–57).

Furthermore, international discourse increasingly connects inclusive governance with the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16, which advocates peaceful, just, and inclusive societies with effective, accountable, and inclusive

institutions at all levels. In this respect, inclusive governance is a practical requisite for ensuring sustainable and people-centered growth in an interconnected world rather than just a political ideal (OECD 2020, pp.27).

## **Challenges to Inclusive Governance**

Despite its growing importance in contemporary democratic discourse, the implementation of inclusive governance continues to face numerous structural, institutional, and socio-political challenges. Inclusive governance seeks to ensure equitable participation and representation for all sections of society; however, deeply rooted inequalities and exclusionary practices often hinder the realization of this objective. Structural inequalities based on class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status continue to marginalize vulnerable populations from governance processes. These inequalities frequently limit access to political institutions, public resources, education, and opportunities for civic participation, thereby restricting meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes (Milazzo and Goldstein 2019, pp.34–69). Consequently, marginalized communities often remain underrepresented in governance structures, which weakens democratic legitimacy and social justice.

Socio-economic disparities also constitute a significant barrier to inclusive governance. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and inadequate access to information prevent disadvantaged populations from effectively participating in governance processes. Individuals and communities experiencing economic insecurity often lack the resources, awareness, and institutional support necessary for active civic engagement. As a result, governance systems may become dominated by socially and economically privileged groups, thereby reinforcing unequal power relations within society (UNDP 2008, pp.235-255). Inclusive governance therefore requires comprehensive social and economic policies aimed at reducing inequalities and empowering marginalized populations.

Institutional discrimination and entrenched power structures further impede the implementation of inclusive governance. In many societies, governance institutions continue to reflect historical hierarchies and exclusionary norms that marginalize certain groups from political participation and administrative representation. Institutional resistance to reform remains a major challenge because existing power structures often resist participatory and inclusive reforms that may threaten

established political and economic interests (Rocha Menocal 2017, pp.559–575). Achieving inclusive governance consequently requires substantial institutional transformation, political commitment, and administrative reforms capable of dismantling discriminatory practices and promoting equitable representation.

Another important challenge involves balancing majority rule with the protection of minority rights within democratic systems. While democratic governance is generally based upon majority decision-making, inclusive governance emphasizes the necessity of safeguarding the rights and interests of minorities and marginalized groups. Majoritarian politics may sometimes result in the exclusion or suppression of minority voices, thereby undermining democratic inclusiveness and social harmony. In this context, deliberative democracy and consensus-building approaches become essential for promoting inclusive dialogue and collaborative decision-making processes (Habermas 1996, pp.324-351). Such mechanisms encourage negotiation, mutual understanding, and participatory engagement, thereby helping to reconcile competing interests within diverse societies.

Globalization and rapid technological change have also introduced new challenges for inclusive governance. Increasing migration, urbanization, and cultural diversity have transformed social and political landscapes across the world, creating more complex governance environments. Governance systems must therefore adapt to multicultural realities and ensure equitable participation for diverse communities. At the same time, technological advancements and digital governance initiatives have generated concerns regarding digital inequality and exclusion. Although digital technologies can enhance participation and transparency, unequal access to digital infrastructure, internet connectivity, and technological literacy often marginalizes disadvantaged populations from digital governance platforms (Castells 2010, pp.32-50.). Consequently, governments must address digital divides to ensure that technological innovations contribute to inclusion rather than reinforcing new forms of exclusion.

Political polarization, misinformation, and declining public trust in institutions further complicate the implementation of inclusive governance. The spread of misinformation through digital media platforms can undermine democratic deliberation, intensify social divisions, and weaken public

confidence in governance institutions. Inclusive governance therefore requires transparent communication, institutional accountability, and mechanisms that foster civic trust and democratic participation. Additionally, environmental crises, climate change, and resource inequalities present emerging governance challenges that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Governance systems must increasingly adopt participatory and equitable approaches to address these complex global challenges effectively (Akhmouch and Clavreul 2017, pp. 29–49).

Ultimately, the successful implementation of inclusive governance depends upon the ability of governments and institutions to address structural inequalities, reform exclusionary systems, and promote equitable participation across all sections of society. Inclusive governance is not merely a procedural arrangement but a continuous democratic process that requires sustained political will, institutional innovation, and social commitment to equality, justice, and participation.

### **Future Prospects of Inclusive Governance**

The future of inclusive governance is likely to be profoundly influenced by rapid technological advancements, globalization, and changing democratic expectations. In contemporary governance systems, technological innovation has emerged as a critical factor in enhancing transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, blockchain systems, and digital participation platforms possess the potential to transform traditional governance structures by creating more accessible, efficient, and participatory governance mechanisms. Digital governance initiatives can facilitate broader public engagement by overcoming geographical and temporal barriers, thereby enabling citizens to participate more actively in policy formulation, public deliberation, and decision-making processes (Bannister and Connolly 2012, pp.3–25.). Consequently, future governance systems are expected to place greater emphasis on digital democracy, collaborative governance, and citizen-centered policy-making.

At the same time, globalization and increasing social diversity are expected to intensify the demand for governance systems capable of accommodating multiculturalism, social inclusion, and equitable representation. Contemporary societies are becoming increasingly heterogeneous due to migration, urbanization, demographic transitions, and economic globalization. These

developments require governments to adopt governance frameworks that recognize cultural pluralism and ensure equal participation for diverse social groups. Inclusive governance in the future will therefore require policies that promote social cohesion, protect minority rights, and address structural inequalities affecting marginalized populations (Stiglitz 2002, pp.241-248). In this context, governance institutions must become more adaptive and responsive to changing societal realities in order to maintain democratic legitimacy and public trust.

Future governance models are also likely to prioritize participatory and deliberative democratic practices. Traditional top-down governance approaches are increasingly being replaced by collaborative governance models that encourage partnerships between governments, civil society organizations, private sector actors, and citizens. Participatory mechanisms such as e-consultations, participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, and deliberative forums are expected to become more significant in democratic governance systems (Fung and Wright 2003, pp.452-460). These mechanisms strengthen accountability and legitimacy by ensuring that governance processes incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, citizen-centered governance approaches contribute to more effective policy implementation by aligning governance outcomes with public needs and expectations.

However, the future of inclusive governance also faces several emerging challenges. Technological advancement, while offering opportunities for participation and transparency, has also generated concerns regarding digital inequality, cybersecurity, misinformation, and algorithmic bias. Unequal access to digital infrastructure and technological literacy may further marginalize disadvantaged populations, thereby creating new forms of exclusion within governance systems (Castells, 2010, 32-50). Similarly, the spread of misinformation and political polarization through digital media platforms poses significant challenges to democratic deliberation and social cohesion. Governments must therefore develop regulatory and institutional mechanisms capable of ensuring ethical technology use, digital inclusiveness, and information integrity.

Environmental crises and climate change also represent critical challenges for the future of inclusive governance. Governance institutions will increasingly be required to address issues such

as environmental sustainability, climate justice, resource distribution, and disaster management through participatory and inclusive approaches. Marginalized communities are often disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate-related disasters, making inclusive governance essential for ensuring equitable and sustainable policy responses (Akhmouch and Clavreul 2017, pp.29–49). Consequently, future governance frameworks must integrate social justice principles with environmental governance and sustainable development strategies.

Ultimately, the future of inclusive governance will depend upon the ability of governments and institutions to balance technological innovation with democratic participation, social justice, and human rights. Governance systems must remain flexible, transparent, and responsive in order to address emerging global challenges while ensuring equitable participation and representation for all citizens. Inclusive governance is therefore likely to remain a central component of democratic development and sustainable governance in the twenty-first century.

## **Conclusion**

Inclusive governance represents a transformative approach to governance that emphasizes participation, equality, transparency, accountability, and social justice. By ensuring the active involvement of diverse social groups in governance processes, inclusive governance strengthens democratic institutions, promotes equity, and enhances the legitimacy of public administration. It empowers marginalized communities, reduces social exclusion, and contributes to sustainable and participatory development.

Although significant challenges such as structural inequalities, institutional discrimination, and unequal power relations continue to hinder its implementation, inclusive governance remains essential for building democratic and equitable societies. Through institutional reforms, participatory innovations, stakeholder collaboration, and technological advancement, governance systems can become more inclusive, responsive, and representative. In an increasingly interconnected and diverse world, inclusive governance is not merely a political aspiration but a democratic necessity. The promotion of inclusive governance is therefore fundamental to achieving sustainable development, democratic deepening, and social justice in the twenty-first century.



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## The Politics and Poetics of Identity: Negotiation of Bengali Identity Through Representation in Colonial Time

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**Abstract:** *Identity plays a crucial role in society, as through it individuals assert their sense of belonging and locate themselves within a socio-cultural space, while also retaining some personal uniqueness within that shared culture. In the colonial context, the natives (here, the Indians) were constructed as the 'other' in contrast to the 'self', the colonizers or the Britishers. The discourse, as well as the dominance of the colonizers, almost erased the intrinsic identity of the colonized subjects. In response, various writers from Bengal, such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, sought to resist British colonial dominance through their writings, thereby creating a unique Bengali identity. Using the new historicist framework, this paper explores how Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, through his detective Byomkesh Bakshi, articulated cultural and ideological resistance to the colonial discourse by portraying the dynamics of the relationship between the detective Byomkesh and the colonial police. Bandyopadhyay's depiction of the police as a gang of bungling incompetents, in contrast to his intellectual detective, was not only functional and factual but also ideologically significant in constructing a Bengali identity for the detective. However, drawing upon Stuart Hall's theory of identity as a production in the process, this paper examines how colonial encounters in that contested terrain have shaped the formation of Byomkesh's identity.*

**Key Words:** Identity, representation, resistance, new historicism, Stuart Hall, Saradindu, colonial police, Byomkesh Bakshi.

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. [Hall 1990, 222]

The notable poststructuralist thinker Roland Barthes, in his groundbreaking essay 'The Death of the Author', which creates a smooth passage of his transition from structuralism to poststructuralism, after referring to a few lines from Balzac's "Sarrasine" poses certain questions regarding the identity of the speaker of those lines. Finally, he comes to the conclusion that 'We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice ... Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost...' (Barthes 1977, 142). However, this study,

contrary to Barthes' proposal, aims to explore how writing creates identity, specifically cultural identity, through the medium of representations. The insertion of the passage from Barthes might not at first seem plausible here owing to the different context of his enunciation; still, Barthes's certain formulation will have a great, if not perfect, resonance with the tone of this venture. Notably, in a postcolonial or new historical theoretical framework, the text or writing is deeply culturally and politically positioned within the particular context of its production and Stuart Hall's statement reinforces this notion of situatedness: 'We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always "in context", *positioned*' (Hall 1990, 222). Having said this, the study proposes the thesis that the dichotomy between the colonial law and order institution and the independent indigenous intellectual, as portrayed by Saradindu in his detective stories, is very much politically informed and culturally positioned which leads to the formation of such an identity of the indigenous intellectual that not only defies the pejorative colonial construction of the colonized people but also in a nuanced way invests the intellectual with subjectivity and agency. This proposition connects us to the idea of identity as 'being' and as 'becoming'; one is historically fixed and the other is in process or in continuation, as stated by Hall in his famous essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'. This essay is particularly important and relevant here for its emphasis on representation and identity formation. Though the context of Hall's essay is Caribbean cultural identities and migration, his notion of identity is well-suited to our present concern. That being said, we will, at the outset, have a look at the representation of the police in various detective stories.

The concept of modern policing has its precursor in various ancient forms of surveillance at different places around the world. In ancient Egypt, Babylon, China, and Greece, various forms of surveillance were used to facilitate and maintain administrative control. However, modern policing- The Metropolitan Police Service- was first established in 1829 in London by Sir Robert Peel. Interestingly, detective fiction has a peculiar connection with the institutionalised police system, whether in the Western or Eastern part of the globe. The journey of modern detective fiction did not begin until the establishment of the police system in Britain; in India, the detective genre begins with the figure of a police detective. However, the dichotomy between the police and the detective is a well-established phenomenon in detective fiction, starting from Edgar Allan Poe, the inception of the modern detective genre. In Sherlock Holmes stories (commencing in the year 1887), Arthur Conan Doyle highly contrasted his detective with that of the police force in terms of intellect and successful investigation. Even before the arrival of Holmes, there was one real murder mystery, Jack the Ripper incident, that exacerbated the fear of criminals among the minds of the common people. Unfortunately, the police could not solve the case. Hence, an adverse attitude towards the police began to

germinate in the psyche of the people, which was aggravated by the fierce criticisms of some newspapers such as *Punch*. The detective department of Victorian England was mockingly called the ‘defective department’<sup>1</sup> by it. This kind of representation of the police’s ill management and inefficiency had a direct repercussion in Holmes’ stories, and that is why in the first novel *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), Holmes sarcastically says, ‘...some bungling villainy with a motive so transparent that even a Scotland Yard official can see through it’. Even when examining Agatha Christie’s famous detective novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), the same portrayal of the British police is noticeable. The picture that we get in the real world, as well as the fictional world of detective fiction, makes it conducive to further progress into the discussion of the contrasted binary of the police and the detective in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay’s detective fiction.

Before we delve deep into the analysis of this kind of dichotomy between two seemingly warring ideological forces – the police and the indigenous sleuth - it will be helpful if we keep in mind that opposing the police system in a colonised world, here the then India, by an independent indigenous intellectual is quite different from the socio-political context in the Western world. While on the Western side, it will be considered only from the point of intellectual acumen; in the colonised part, the hierarchy of race, colonizers versus colonised, the creation of identity, and other pertinent issues come into the purview of this consideration. However, the first Bengali detective story writer, in the proper sense of the term, was Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, who worked as a police detective at the Lalbazar Police Station from 1878 to 1911. He began to serialise his adventures in a famous magazine called *Darogar Daftar* from 1892 onwards. However, working under the high-ranking British officers like Stuart Hogg and Frederick James Halliday, he could hardly envision an indigenous nationalist identity in his detective stories.

The first evocation of an indigenous identity in the detective sphere of Bengali literature was observed, on the ideological basis, in Saradindu Bandyopadhyay’s detective writings. His stories not only just narrate the crime, the process of investigation, and punishment, but also open up a new horizon for interpreting the relation between the institutional police and Byomkesh Bakshi that takes into account studies such as how representation and resistance form a unique identity for the detective. Byomkesh’s identity as both a detective and a nationalist may sound peculiar, given the largely apolitical nature of the earlier Bengali detective fiction, which seldom incorporated political concerns within its narrative framework. Byomkesh started his journey in 1932, the heyday of anti-colonial struggles in Bengal as well as across India. Therefore, it was a fertile and significant phase for Saradindu to put his detective against the police force

in such a way that would bring up the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised and thereby question the West-imposed binary of the 'self' and the 'other'. For Saradindu, who has evoked the glorious past of the nation in his various history-based novels, percolating a nationalist identity through his detective was quite a familiar phenomenon.

This study, owing to its polyvalent nature, will examine a few Byomkesh texts and some non-literary texts in a new historicist mode of reading and will take up Stuart Hall's idea of identity formation as stated earlier and Bhabha's notion of hybridity to address the issue of indigenous identity formation by Byomkesh. New historicism, it has been argued, is more of a reading practice than an organised theory. Starting with the Renaissance period in the 1980s, new historicism gradually expanded its horizon of study to other periods and now it has become a popular mode of reading or interpretation. New historicism came into vogue with the publication of Stephen Greenblatt's seminal book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980), where he argues that literature is intrinsically linked with other cultural forms of representation. As new historicists contend that literary texts are situated within the social practices and discourse of the time of their production, this paper critically places the argument that the emergence of Byomkesh in 1932 reflects the prevalent anti-imperial sentiment of the time, which was at odds with the role of the police at the hands of imperial power.

Nonetheless, embarking on this unorthodox interpretive mode of literary texts, while giving equal value to the non-literary ones, we do not have any fixed methodology at our disposal owing to the plurality of approaches of this critical framework. This observation is mirrored in John Brannigan's words in his book *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (1998): 'There is no one true method or type of reading from a new historicist or cultural materialist approach. That is to say that there are no strict methodologies, rules, axioms or techniques which we are compelled to use or apply when reading texts from new historicist or cultural materialist perspectives' (Brannigan 2017, 132).

At this juncture, it is worth mentioning the image of colonial police that we get from various sources, ranging from historians' writings to the National Police Commission's observations. The establishment of modern Indian policing in 1861 was the direct outcome of the Sepoy Mutiny in the year 1857. However, the police became the instruments of coercion at the hands of the colonial rulers. Instead of dispensing justice and safety to the common people, their activities gradually created a sense of fear and distrust among the masses. Peter Robb, a prominent historian, observes: 'Placing the developing police force in a broader context of imperial purposes in India, it is seen that it long remained a largely symbolic representation of

power and order, playing its part alongside other such instruments rather than being a force for the detection and reduction of crime' (Robb 1991, 129). Another major political aim of this system was to silence oppositional voices that might come from the native populace and revolutionaries, and, for that matter, to gather information. In this connection, Martin Wynne points out:

Security of the Raj depended upon a comprehensive intelligence system... The system had evolved under the compulsion of threats to British rule from various revolutionary movements since the early nineteenth century and the necessity for the Government to be intimately informed of the labyrinths of Indian politics and communal intrigues. (Wynne 1985, 129)

Apart from being complicit with the foreign rulers, the police lacked dexterity in the task of surveillance, which often exposed their deficiency in maintaining the law and order situation of the state. David Arnold opines, 'Through laxity, corruption, or ineptitude they were often inadequate to meet major crises of rural control' (Arnold 1986, 147).

Therefore, the above analysis illustrates the point that the police machinery was a kind of repressive apparatus (in the words of Louis Althusser, 'Repressive State Apparatus') for facilitating the colonial government's project, and they were also marked by inefficiency and incompetence. They symbolically represented the colonial structure and mindset against which the native writer Saradindu imposed an indigenous detective who not only showed his calibre in the act of detection but also championed the cause of the native people who were relegated to the stigmatised term 'other' with all its negative connotations.

In the pre-independence stories of Byomkesh, we get the impression of the police as bungling incompetents, who, though boast of their method of detection, are actually the opposite of what they try to appear. Sometimes they wrongly arrest the detective, other times they take into custody the innocent in order to fabricate an aura of good surveillance. In the opening story of this oeuvre, "The Inquisitor", despite all their efforts to dismantle the cocaine smuggling racket and identify the murderers, they ended in failure. Like the Victorian magazine *Punch*, in the fictional world of Saradindu, *Daily Kalketu* lambasted the police noting, 'A canny gang has continued to fox the police and conduct its illegal activities for some time now. It is indeed a matter of shame that the den of these miscreants has not been discovered yet, and that the identity of their leader still remains a mystery' (Bandyopadhyay 1999, 4). Byomkesh finally pieced together the truth with his immense power of observation and knowledge of the human psyche. However, he also got arrested and had to remain in custody for some time, which exposes their lack of discretion in their task.

Saradindu did not sacrifice the factual aspects of society for the sake of his narrative; rather, this conventional image of the police system permeated deeply into the minds of the people of that time.

In the next story, “The Gramophone Pin Mystery” the police could not capture the criminal even when he was murdering on the open road in the glaring light of the day. His technique of murder was so ingenious that it utterly baffled the police. They did not detect any clue to the murderer even after five murders had been committed. Finally, the sixth person, namely Ashutosh Babu, who narrowly escaped death, came to Byomkesh for the sake of survival. This rupture in the belief system of the masses in the police is neatly captured in the words of that person: ‘The police wouldn’t be able to do anything and so I haven’t gone to them. Just see no less than five of these murders took place right under their noses in broad daylight – could they do anything? And today, they nearly got me too!’ (Bandyopadhyay 1999, 38). This scepticism or fractured consciousness regarding the police’s ability is also very deeply echoed in the report of the Indian Police Commission of 1902, often referred to as the Fraser Commission. The report noted that the police lacked efficiency and were characterized by corruption and oppressive practices<sup>2</sup>. Against this pitiful picture of the police’s incompetence, Saradindu placed his witty detective, who could very well read the mind of the culprit when he came to Byomkesh to deceive him. In their *tete-a-tete*, Byomkesh identified him as the culprit and accepted the invitation. Finally, he captured him red-handed, though the culprit committed suicide in front of them. The police, far from being the protectors of law and order, symbolically become a mere caricature of a dysfunctional system. This kind of representation of police by the author, on a broader spectrum, reflects the distrustful attitude of the *bhadralok* section to the police of that time. Mrinal Basu points out, ‘A corrupt and weak police system in the various districts of Bengal was completely incapable of providing the people with any sense of security. Furthermore, the oppressive measures that came to be associated with the police made the villagers of Bengal extremely apprehensive and fearful of the very system that was established for their security’ (Basu 2008, 110). Through these representations of the indigenous sleuth in contrast to the colonial police, Saradindu debunks the ‘myth’ of colonial discourse that depicted the Oriental people as anything but rational and intellectual and as being unable to rule themselves.

How does Hall’s theory of cultural identity become relevant in our understanding of the formation of Byomkesh’s mediated identity? Stuart Hall distinguishes between two distinct ways of thinking about cultural identity- one is in terms of shared history, one true essential self, and the other is based on similarity as well as on difference. To simplify the matter, identity can be seen as a matter of being, located in some historical past, and the other is identity as a matter of becoming and of being which is not located in some



transcendental past but is constantly being reshaped by various political and ideological forces. In Hall's own words, 'Cultural identities ... Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power' (Hall 1990, 225). Herein lies the crux of the notion of identity, which is politically informed and historically shaped, a concept I infuse in my argument about Byomkesh's identity - an identity that is not a pristine Bengali identity. Rather, in Byomkesh we find traces of other cultural elements as floating signifiers that deter the interpretation of his identity as a purely Bengali one. This aspect destabilizes the notion of a fixed, transcendental signified of Bengali identity, clearly revealing its heterogeneous and mediated nature. The hybrid nature of the detective inevitably leads us to the notion of Homi Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity, which I shall return to later in this discussion.

Byomkesh Bakshi evokes senses of identity - being and becoming - in his encounters with the colonial institution. Byomkesh's cultural locus is the Bengali bhadralok section of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in colonial Bengal, which deeply roots him in the shared sense of Bengali identity. His sartorial choice, his deep moral understanding, and his preference for the term '*Satyanweshi*' (truth seeker) over the English detective signal to the 'shared cultural codes...with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning' (Hall 1990, 223). But another aspect of this identity of Byomkesh, a matter of becoming, is particularly the focus of our discussion here. In his encounters with the colonial police, Byomkesh's identity also gradually evolved from a mere investigator of crimes to a moral arbiter and dispenser of justice, a process that symbolically hints at the 'decolonization of the mind'. His oxymoronic situatedness with the colonial police in the texts not only adds to the structural functionality of the detective stories but also, more importantly, exposes the limitations of this imperial system. Fanon observes, 'Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it' (Fanon 2001, 169). Against this kind of onslaught, the character of Byomkesh represents the reimagination of a Bengali identity through transformation and negotiation across various temporal locations and ideological terrains in Saradindu's narratives. In the first two stories, he is seen as collaborating with the Commissioner, who is obviously, by default, a British officer at that time. However, this kind of strategic collaboration, particularly in situations where their own forces are failing, seriously questions the efficacy of colonial law and order. Later on, in another story, his assistance is solicited directly by the colonial government, a significant watershed in his career that decisively invests the native intellectual with agency and subjectivity. This process of identity formation, from a mere detective at the onset to a safe refuge for the whole government and common people, lies at the heart of the character of Byomkesh as well as of Saradindu's narratives,

which suggest that identity is never static but rather, as Hall would say, a production in a particular historical and socio-cultural space. Therefore, he is not just a detective but a symbol of cultural resistance who reclaims the space of investigation and justice from the colonial authority. This notion of Byomkesh's identity as a continuous process can also be seen through the prism of German philosopher Martin Heidegger's ontological framework.

Crucially, this identity formation is not outside the political 'play' of representation. I use the term 'play' here to suggest the dynamic and fluid nature of representation, a medium used by both the sections - the oppressor and the oppressed - to constitute their respective viewpoints in the contested site of colonial encounters. Therefore, in the Orientalist sense, we are constructed as the other in contrast to the 'self' (the coloniser), and this was possible only through the process of representation and knowledge formation about the oriental people. Taking the notion of Foucault's famous dyad 'power and knowledge', Hall argues, 'Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed', but later he adds in the next line, "this kind of knowledge is internal, not external' (Hall 1990, 225-226). Significantly, Byomkesh never internalised the colonial stereotyping and their construction of the 'other' image of the colonised. Rather, through him, Saradindu creates an alternative regime of representation where the colonial police system faces their true nature in contrast to the false representation of imperial discourse. This (fictional) representation of the colonial police's functional decay, consistent with its factual counterpart in every sense, relocates the epistemic authority within the discourse of indigenous knowledge. This relocation of authority in the indigenous sphere facilitates the creation of an identity that is historically located and politically charged. Therefore, the production of identity is never outside of representation in this cultural reading of Byomkesh Bakshi, which effectively reminds us of Derrida's famous statement in *Of Grammatology*, 'There is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida 1997, 158).

Returning to Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, expressed in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), we would see the process of identity formation, identity as a matter of becoming, through the prism of cultural hybridity. Again, to quote Barthes, '...a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning...but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' (Barthes 1977, 146). Keeping this enunciation in mind, if the character Byomkesh Bakshi could be read as text, we would find a definite resemblance between Byomkesh's identity and what Barthes has observed. The practice of reading a body, especially a dead body, as text is quite a common phenomenon in the critical studies of

crime stories. Gill Plain, in her book *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*, opines, 'Bodies (corpses) are never neutral... they inevitably bear the inscriptions of their cultural production...' (Plain 2001, 12). Byomkesh's identity will also not be found in the pure, pristine state of Bengali culture, as it has been formed through various historical processes and cultural negotiations. We would find traces of Western culture in the embodiment of Byomkesh, the main component of which is rationality, the cornerstone of the Western Enlightenment. Byomkesh derives some behavioural and investigative features from some Western detectives, such as Sherlock Holmes, that place him at the cultural intersection of the East and the West. The rational mode of enquiry in the detective genre that he imbibes into his character is a derivative feature coming from the Western genre. Therefore, in the discursive plane of Saradindu's detective stories, Byomkesh, when read as a text, presents a Bengali identity in which Western traits are discernible. This aspect of traces of another culture is perfectly harmonised with Stuart Hall's theory of *Presence Europeenne* (European presence) in the formulation of Caribbean cultural identities. In the essay, Hall talks about three such presences- African, European and American- in the formation of Caribbean identities, an identity that is creolised, not intrinsic.

Thus, Saradindu's literary texts in the colonial period become an ideological and political site of contestation between two diverse forces through which the detective's identity is negotiated. Situated within the ideological field, his encounters with the colonial police aptly dramatise the resisting propensity of the Bengali mindspace. Yet Byomkesh is the literary representation of the evolving selfhood of the Bengali identity that, through constant negotiation and renegotiation, tends to reclaim indigenous epistemology. Therefore, this is not a pure, pristine Bengali identity but rather a hybrid one yet deeply rooted in Bengal's socio-cultural context. Yet all of these are performed in the sphere of representation. Saradindu's Byomkesh becomes a site where cultural identity and existential authenticity intersect one another, revealing the process of evolving selfhood and identity as a resistance to colonial ideology.

#### Notes:

1. See Reginald Hill's "Holmes: The Hamlet of Crime Fiction" in *Crime Writers*, edited by HRF Keating, BBC, 1978.
2. Mentioned in the *Third Report* of the National Police Commission, January 1980 (NPC, 1980a)

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Inclusive

## Paradox of AI Automation in Mobile Governance Services

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**Abstract:** *This study focuses on how Artificial Intelligence is changing the way mobile government services work. Instead of labelling it as a technical update, we locate it as a deep evolutionary shift driven by user led engagements and negotiations to amplify automation of governance. We trace the journey from the traditional-slow- manual- paper-based style to modern day fast-reliable AI models, to unearth if AI act as real game changers in m-governance or is a mere cosmetic facelift. The study explores if AI has emerged as a force to be reckoned with, or do human still control the leash to align it to our own social values. Building upon secondary data on impact of AI in automation of m-governance from countries like India, China, Brazil, Finland, UAE and Estonia, we foreground that governments are transitioning from slow, bureaucratic frameworks to AI-driven mobile technologies to ensure institutional relevance within increasingly mediatized societies. In nations, such as India and China, prioritizing efficiency through automation has created a paradox of automation, wherein accelerated service delivery concurrently produces digital exclusion, diminished public trust, and algorithmic bias. The study strongly recommends adoption of citizen-centric paradigms, operationalized through the implementation of Explainable AI (XAI) and preserving accountability and democratic values.*

**Keywords:** *Mobile Governance, Artificial Intelligence, Mediatization, Technological Determinism, Public Administration, Ethical Governance*

## INTRODUCTION

For decades the system of governance has hardly witnessed much transitions, more or less anchored into a system based on traditional operations, complex hierarchy and tireless paperwork. The dissemination and adoption of practices in South Asia, especially India, were top-down, with the access to government services necessitated travel to a local government office and a physical appearance, waiting in a long queue just to speak to a government official, often harvesting frustration for an average person.

With societies becoming more modern and advance in technologies, traditional system of governance delivery received a facelift to combat red-tapism and manual methodologies leading to delayed outcomes.

Since the entire system relied on paper and manual activities, it was prone to technical lapses and errors; files getting lost, incorrect recording of data, slow operations, etc (Rao, 2017, 127–140). In some cases, lack of efficiency also opened the door to corruptions (Sajid et al. 2025, 353).

These problems called for an evolutionary change, leading to an overhaul with computer and information technology supported governance to stay relevant in a digital world. In contemporary times, smartphones and digital devices have penetrated most parts of the world, also referred to as "mediatization" of the society, a continuous and constant effect of media on everyday life and social institutions (Miller 2014, 209-226). Hence, the government of various nations have also been motivated to transform, to keep pace with the global digital change. We find that the manual mechanism of governance has been replaced by online applications for seamless interaction and engagement between the citizens and the state.

With the advent and spread of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) and mobile government applications, dissemination of services has become much faster and personalized. But consequently, it has also opened doors for scrutiny, surveillance and scholarly debate. On the one hand there is technological determinism that means technology is the main driving force behind all forms of developmental changes, while the social construction theory suggests that society must set guidelines for AI for ethical consumption (Feng 2022, 1391-1394).

This paper explores how different countries have navigated to cope up with the adoption, negotiation and ethical engagement with AI, to facilitate seamless governance, meet exigencies, without overlooking the risks of data theft, privacy and digital divide. Further, this paper also recommends that swift transition to AI governance should not come at the cost of overriding the principles of fairness and transparency in a democracy; an ombudsman is essential.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Initial studies on governance focussed on the importance of accountability and stability, and were administrative personnel oriented (Nguyen 2026, 1324–1334). But during the late 20th century, research focus shifted to the transition from manual to automation, focussing more on rise of electronic governance or e-governance (Khan and Haider 2025, 698–714). Many experts at the time believed that the internet and computers are the ultimate solution for transparency, providing timely service and challenging red-tapism. They argued that shifting towards online would limit human error and corruption, often found in physical offices. But even then, some scholars cautioned that just making available a form on a website would not solve the problem. Consequently, digital divide emerged as a topic of concern, where some critics

maintained that even if the government was online, many citizens, mostly from deprived, inaccessible locations and poorer areas, still could not access it (Wongmith 2025, 103014; Balakrishna 2018, 9-15).

With the digital penetration, the conversation shifted towards mobile governance or m-governance making it a critical area of research. It has been found that governments around the world transformed their communication techniques to keep up with a fast-paced world of instant messaging (and feedback) and social media (Olsson and Eriksson 2016, 187-204). Further, studies identified that the evolution was not pushed due to the mere demand of efficiency but also the efforts of various governments to stay relevant to the demands of its digitally active citizens (Klijn and Korthagen 2018, 103-113).

It cannot be denied that AI has emerged as prominent tool and has gained centre stage in most academic debates. The optimists support the technological determinism, arguing that AI is a revolutionary technique for handling massive amounts of data, better than any human bureaucrat. They emphasise on smart incentives, like chatbots and predictive analytics as the next step in smooth functioning of the state (Héder 2021, 119-130). Contrary to this idea, some studies have also focussed on the technology used to be more user-centred. It has been also argued that unrestrained adoption of AI without human supervision may lead to more harm by creating vacuums in human-computer-interaction-led governance. It is also noted that algorithmic bias may lead AI to deny services to a certain group in an unfair manner based on flawed data (Kuziemski and Misuraca 2020, 101976).

Despite official safeguards and assurance of food security through public distribution system (PDS), primarily mapped with the Aadhar act in India, beneficiaries were denied free ration owing to their biometrics verification failure during the authentication process (Nagaraj and Prakash 2018, 338-345). In recent instances of Special Intensive Revision of 2026 in the state of West Bengal in India, automated electoral record verification faced AI amplified data-quality problems (Alt News 2026; Hindustan Times 2026; Reporters Collective 2026). Consequently, due to misspelling and faulty translation of names of voters from English to Bengali and vice versa, or unverified AI detection of a voter having more than 6 siblings led to large scale exclusion of voters under the criteria of 'logical discrepancy' from the final published list of 'SIR' 2026 before assembly election in the state (Alt News 2026; Hindustan Times 2026; Reporters Collective 2026). Hence, it is stressed that multistage verification is also a prerequisite for successful adoption of automation and AI in governance. There have been endless research studies highlighting success stories of countries with better digital capabilities while very few have concentrated on the countries with weaker digital infrastructures (Norris 2001). These studies help us identify the areas where AI has significantly helped in governance and the areas where further improvements and focus are desired while restricting digital divide.



## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From the traditional Weberian model of public administration, over the years, it has witnessed a significant improvement; hence, building upon the theories of Mediatization, and Technological Determinism and Social Construct, this paper explores the trajectory of governance from manual to digital and more specifically m-governance. The theory of Mediatization suggests that as digital media became the centre of our lives, every other institution, including the government, had to change its own mechanism to remain relevant (Hjarvard 2008, 105-134). However, since the beginning, government operated on bureaucratic mechanisms that were predominantly slow, stable, and manual. With the advent of smart digital devices, and continued internet supply, the governments across the world adopted these innovations in their service delivery, and facilitating automation, making them available instantly round the clock to adjust to a mediatised world (Meijer and Torenvlied 2016, 143-161). We also borrow from the theory of Technological Determinism and Social Construct, to investigate if technology really drives the government, or vice-versa? The scholars of the former argue that technology is a tool that shape what society wants and the latter is an idea where technology is just an apparatus which society harnesses as per their needs and values (Feng 2022, 1391-1394)

Hence, this paper engages with these three theories to identify how various countries negotiate and navigate with the tools of AI to overcome various hurdles in governance. We focus on identifying whether different countries adopt AI for speedy transformation or carefully interweaving it to various mechanisms to protect fairness and human rights. This framework helps us to go beyond a simple description and allows us to analyse the cause and effect' of a digital journey.

### Global Case Studies: AI Evolution in Practice

#### *The 'Efficiency-First' Path: India and China*

In countries with massive populations, like India and China, the evolution has based largely on speed and scale which is a classic example of Technological Determinism. India's Mobile Seva started as a way to provide door-to-door services for rural citizens having smartphones (Prajapati et al. 2026, 387–392). Prajapati further observes that it has now included AI chatbots that provide real-time feedback as well as customer service and the technology is not just used as a tool to overcome the 'red tapism', but also to ensure a discourse around underserved population who cannot access smart devices. It is identified that comparatively, the City Brain project of China is more advanced where they have integrated AI into traffic management and to provide emergency services in real-time. Further, during the COVID 19 pandemic, this

system was developed to track health patterns and showed how quickly AI can become an integral part of our daily lives (Caprotti and Liu 2022, 1559-1573).

*The 'Citizen-Centric' Path: Estonia and Finland*

On the contrary, nations like Finland and Estonia have shown a Social Construction approach, where the evolution is affected by citizen-centric laws and ethical values rather than just an upgradation. Estonia's X-Road application is popular for its 'safety-first' design, better described as 'secure data-exchange layer' where government is allowed to share data without compromising privacy. This evolution has made online voting and digital health management smoother and more convenient (Nguyen 2025, 1-8).

Also, Finland's AuroraAI initiative is perhaps the best example of ethical evolution which along with being efficient, provides services to the citizens in a more personalized way. It has a dedicated ethics board headed by human through which Finland ensures that the AI stays accountable to the people (Leikas et al. 2022, 836557).

*The 'Smart City' Path: South Korea, Singapore, and UAE*

These nations have revolutionised their state functioning by integrating AI into their entire urban operations, a process heavily influenced by Mediatization. Singapore and South Korea use 'Digital Twins' and AI to simulate city life. From traffic to energy use, they employ AI to control and disseminate relevant services. This shows how a government can evolve to be 'always-there' and predictive (Lu and Li 2026, 1733281; Bae et al. 2025, 152843–152869; Choi and Yoon 2025, 28). The UAE has simplified this growth by crafting a single mobile platform - Smart Dubai, which helps its citizen to access every government service through one single mobile application. The use of the 'Dubai AI Lab' also shows a clear plan to make government services more people-friendly through predictive analytics (Calzada 2025, 1-17).

*The 'Inclusion Struggle': Brazil*

The case of Brazil highlights the 'cause and effect' of moving too fast and has although successfully merged AI to automate social security benefits (INSS), but faces the setback of digital divide. This particular case shows that even with a ready-to-use technology, evolution can fail, chiefly if the citizens do not have the digital literacy to adopt it (Nicolás and Sampaio 2024, 1-24).

## DISCUSSION

The shift from manual paperwork to integrating AI-driven technology is a massive change in how governments function. We analyse this evolution by looking at the specific ‘cause and effect’ relation of these changes across the world.

### *Shift from ‘bureaucratic mechanism’ to ‘media mechanism’*

The first part of this process is described as ‘mediatization’ of the state where the earlier period witnessed manual operations of bureaucratic mechanism leading to delayed services. However, countries like the UAE and Singapore have adopted a media mechanism in order to stay relevant to citizens who have adopted smartphones or digital devices for their daily needs ensuring a fundamental change in relationship between the citizen and the state.

### *Efficiency vs. The Paradox of Automation*

We find that while AI provides services fast, it often creates a new kind of red-tapism. We have categorized the performance of different nations into a ‘three-pillar evaluation’ process to see where they succeed and where they face hurdles. We find a clear trend where countries like China and India focusing heavily on efficiency (technological determinism), whereas Finland gives importance to ethics and equity (Social Construction).

### *The Risk of Digital Exclusion*

A major finding in our study is that this ‘evolution’ is not equally helping everyone. In Brazil and India, the digital divide remains a huge concern, besides the economic incapacities to afford a smart device. Even if the AI is smart, it cannot help a citizen who lacks digital literacy or a stable internet connection like the poor section of the society. Some scholars studying the ‘digital era governance’ (DEG) believe that without proper infrastructure and economic prowess, digital evolution actually creates more gaps, and more inequality (Zhang and Fang 2025, 2568247).

### *Algorithmic Bias and the Need for Transparency*

The most alarming part of this evolution is algorithmic bias that emphasises on the idea that no one actually knows how the AI is taking decisions. Programming and re-programming takes a lot of time and still keeps us in blind. If a system uses biased data, it might deny a social benefit to a marginalized group, making it unfair and unethical (Bahangulu and Owusu-Berko 2025, 1746-1763). To overcome this problem, we argue

that the use of ‘Explainable AI’ (XAI) ensures that the government, headed by humans, should explain the decisions to their citizens which is the only way to keep people’s trust.

### ***The ‘Human-in-the-Loop’ Model***

The primary argument of this study is that the evolution of traditional governance to digital governance should not be entirely based on just the technology. We suggest that a meaningful evolution must adhere to the Social Construction model. This implies that humans must always be in the loop, informed, made aware, and the AI must be supervised. If Finland’s human-headed ethics board or Estonia’s X-Road can work, so could other nations. Countries must give importance to transparency and democratic systems over just being fast and efficient.

### **Challenges and Mitigation Strategies**

Evolution of AI-driven governance is inevitable. Our analyses show that it is currently having some barriers which could possibly stop it from being truly inclusive. To challenge this paradox of automation, we suggest four simple strategies for the governments heading towards this transition.

#### ***Strengthening Digital Literacy***

The foremost challenge in countries like India and Brazil is not the technological ability, but the competencies of its people to adopt and use it. If a citizen does not understand how to navigate an applications interface, they are actually ‘locked out’ of the government services. To reduce this severity, the government must introduce training programs treating digital literacy as a fundamental right, similar to ‘*roti, kapda aur makaan*’ (food, clothing and shelter), or the right to basic education.

#### ***Economic capability***

Government must ensure that its citizens are economically capable to access smart devices in order to receive digital services. It has been found that certain states in India still launch development schemes to create awareness among the underserved population about various digital initiatives (PIB 2025). Hence, it is pertinent for the Government of India to launch more such digital initiatives and provide free smart devices to the digitally untapped population.

### ***Implementing 'Explainable AI' (XAI)***

To solve the problem of algorithmic biases, governments must ensure that the AI systems are not creating incomprehensible black boxes. If AI rejects a citizen's appeal or demand, the system must be able to provide a clear, human-readable reason against that rejection. It is obligatory for the government to strengthen accountability and trust towards its citizens.

### ***Creating Human-led Ethical Oversight Boards***

Taking cue from countries like Finland that have an independent board of experts, headed by human functionaries, including social scientists and lawyers to review and test AI systems before they are launched, developing countries like India should also follow same. The AI systems must be programmed to be as humane as possible in order to overcome the popular 'robotic' tag to ensure the focus of automation on social construction, protecting its citizens from unsaid biases in the data.

## **CONCLUSION**

Public administration has travelled from traditional, paper-based systems to AI-inspired mobile platforms which is more than just a technical upgrade. It is a persistent evolution of a country, and the world as a whole. This study has presented this evolution from its very beginning; from manual bureaucracy to its current stage of data and algorithmic system. Consequently, this transition is not merely about 'going digital' but about a fundamental shift of the 'mechanism' of how the government communicates with its citizens, helping them to adopt the digital system and participate in civic activities. This movement from a slow, manual style to a fast, mediatized system, has helped the state gain an incredible efficiency. But as our analysis shows, this has often come at a cost of the human connection that defined public service in the past.

The evaluation of global initiatives in this paper, like 'Efficiency-First' models of India and China, to the 'Citizen-Centric' systems of Estonia and Finland, show that different countries have taken different paths of digital evolution. It is witnessed that while some nations have successfully 'redesigned' their AI to be more ethical and inclusive, others are still struggling with the 'cause and effect' of moving too fast. The basic difference of these varying adoption lies in the understanding of these nations', whether AI is just about technical growth to prepare speeches for international forums or disseminating actual services to real people. This brings us to the most significant finding of this paper which is the paradox of automation.

Further, we must understand that the more we automate to achieve speed, *aka*, technological determinism, the more we create 'black box' systems, which ignore the demand of the most vulnerable. The paradox also

dictates that the evolution of governance has now reached a ‘tipping point and if we continue to prioritize speed over transparency, we risk a future where the government is ‘smart’ but the citizen is ‘excluded.’ In countries like Brazil and India, the digital divide remains a massive challenge which is almost impossible to overcome with just technology alone. Policymakers must understand that the evolution is to be manoeuvred by social construction which says technology must be shaped upon human values, laws, and ethics, rather than simply letting the technology set the rules for the society. We cannot simply ‘deploy’ an AI and hope for the best; we must actively supervise it.

Finally, the successful evolution of mobile governance depends on moving toward a citizen-centric model, involving implementation of XAI, so as to make the decisions transparent, and creating an independent ethics boards headed by human to detect algorithmic bias before the harm is done. We conclude with the words that the penultimate goal of a digital journey must not only be a more efficient government, but it must also be more democratic and fairer to the people. The shift is inevitable, but its management is in our hands and we must manage it with a heart.

While this paper provides a broad look at the evolution of mobile governance, it has certainly some limitations. Our study relies on secondary data and global case studies and thus it is not based on field studies and primary interviews with the developers of AI systems. In future, researchers must look more closely into ‘hyper-local’ governance systems. It would be very interesting to see how AI serves at micro-levels; within a single city or even a small municipal area where they use AI to interact with their citizens. Moreover, further studies are required on the ‘psychology of trust’ as to why some people trust a chatbot more than a human official while others resist the change. Exploring social behaviour and human emotions could shed more lights on this novel and complex innovation of AI automation.

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## Commerce, Craft, and Connectivity:

# Rethinking India's Non-Agrarian Economy Under the Mughals in a Global Context

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### ABSTRACT

*This manuscript explores the economy of Mughal India (1526-1739) from the perspective of global economic history, situating India's craft production, commercial networks, and monetary systems within a broader global analytical framework. In contrast to the assignatory survey, this paper suggests that the non-agrarian economy of Mughal India was not simply a domestic complement to agriculture, but a sophisticated economic formation that operates globally and that defies Eurocentric narratives of early modern capitalism. In addition to drawing upon the foundational historiographical works of Irfan Habib, Tapan Raychaudhuri, Satish Chandra, and Ashin Das Gupta, this paper examines the condition of craft industries, trade infrastructure, foreign commerce, and production costs as reflected in the contemporary accounts of Edward Terry and François Bernier. It argues that this economy was never an automatic, subservient one to European colonialism, but rather was forced to become so by extra-economic factors, primarily military and naval, applied to the already complex, competitive and mutually interconnected commercial economy.*

Keywords: Mughal India; Global Economic History; Craft Production; Commercial Networks; Colonial Political Economy

## **INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETING INDIA'S PAST IN A GLOBAL FRAME**

For much of the twentieth century, interpretations of Mughal India's economic history were shaped by narratives that highlighted imperial grandeur or by perspectives that viewed it as an inevitable precursor to colonial domination. Both interpretations tend to overlook the intricate systems of production, exchange, and institutional structures that shaped the Indian subcontinent from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth century. Recent historiography has increasingly situated Mughal India within wider circuits of global exchange, challenging both nationalist romanticism and colonial teleology (Habib and Raychaudhuri 1982, 1-15). This paper contributes to that revisionist scholarship by reinterpreting the non-agrarian economy of Mughal India as a significant case of early modern economic globalisation.

The term "non-agrarian economy" refers to economic activities beyond cultivation, including artisanal production, commerce, monetary circulation, credit networks, and the material conditions shaping economic life. Under Mughal rule, these sectors developed on an extensive scale, were supported by complex institutional arrangements, and remained closely integrated with regional and transregional networks extending from Bengal and the Persian Gulf to Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean (Das Gupta 1994, 7-11; Habib 2011, 303-310). To treat them merely as secondary to agriculture or as background to imperial politics is to underestimate the dynamism of pre-colonial India's economy.

This manuscript contends three related arguments. First, the Mughal craft industries and, in addition to metallurgy, saltpetre and shipbuilding, constituted a proto-industrial economic formation, which was formalised in the household of the artisans and in the form of merchant capital and state-sponsored karkhanas (Habib 2011, 286-302; Chandra 2007, 248-252). Secondly, Mughal commercial infrastructure, such as roads, sarais, the hundi credit system and the networks of brokers, was at a level of sophistication similar to contemporary Europe and in some respects exceeded it in terms of geographic reach and social integration (Raychaudhuri and Habib 1982, 365-372; Das Gupta 1994, 94-101). Third, the loss of Indian commercial strength in the eighteenth century was not due to a lack of internal economic capability but to coercive military and naval

measures by the European trading companies that disrupted an already competitive and integrated commercial system (Parthasarathi 2011, 295-301).

By advancing these arguments, this paper seeks to interpret India's economic past not as a narrative of stagnation and inevitable decline but as one of commercial vitality, institutional complexity, and contingent transformation within an evolving global order.

## **I. THE ARCHITECTURE OF CRAFT PRODUCTION: FROM VILLAGE ARTISAN TO ROYAL KARKHANA**

The artisan, the labourer who created and supported the rest of the economy, is the starting point on any serious examination of Mughal non-agrarian production. Pre-colonial India was predominantly agrarian, but it created significant jobs beyond agriculture for skilled and unskilled labour involved in various production and exchange activities (Raychaudhuri and Habib 1982, 269-277; Chandra 2007, 245–248). This suggests that non-agricultural activities were not merely a peripheral part of the Mughal economy but played a significant role within it.

The artisan varied in institutional status across location, specialisation, and markets. Hereditary artisans met local needs by conventional methods of limited land allotment and payment in kind at the village level (Habib 1999, 156-158). Local redistributive arrangements included carpenters, potters, weavers, and various other occupational groups; however, recent scholarship has questioned the idea of the village economy as static and economically self-sufficient (Ludden 1999, 56-63). When a trade opportunity arose, the village craftsmen would expand their trade networks and market their products in the regional market (Bayly 1983, 24-29).

Above the village economy, more complex arrangements existed for organising production. First, independent urban artisans produced for expanding markets in towns and commercial centres whose growth reflected the increasing importance of non-agrarian activity (Moosvi 1987, 183–188). Second, merchant-financed workshops operated through capital advances and resembled a putting-out system that linked production to commercial demand (Das Gupta 1994, 81-88). Third, royal and aristocratic karkhanas functioned as centralised workshops that employed artisans as

wage labourers to produce luxury commodities and courtly goods (Habib 2011, 286-291; Richards 1993, 190-194). Contemporary accounts indicate that elite patronage and court demand played an important role in sustaining specialised craft industries (Bernier 1916, 225-229).

The institutional diversity of craft production under the Mughal Empire carries significant implications for understanding and interpreting economic history. The coexistence of village production, independent artisanship, merchant capital, and state patronage reflects not economic backwardness but the integration of multiple productive systems within a complex commercial order. Rather than serving solely as extractive institutions, royal karkhanas also encouraged technological transmission, refinement of artisanal skills, and the circulation of specialised labour into wider markets (Subrahmanyam 1990, 312–318; Parthasarathi 2011, 54–60).

### **The Textile Industries: Global Commodity, Local Labour**

Among all Mughal craft industries, textiles held an overwhelming significance. Cotton manufacture was known to every village; the principal centres of production, Jaunpur, Banaras, Patna, Burhanpur, Lucknow, and Dacca, were among the most productive sites of commodity manufacture in the entire early modern world (Srivastava 1966, 231-232). The industry drew in the labour of cotton-carders, spinners (predominantly women), dyers, printers, and washers across a vast spatial range, constituting what was effectively a distributed, proto-industrial production system decades before European industrialisation.

Dacca was particularly celebrated for its fine muslin, so sheer as to earn the names “woven air” and “running water” in the poetic hyperbole of contemporary observers. This was not an exotic craft curiosity but a mass-scale export commodity whose production involved the organised labour of thousands. The dyeing subsidiary industry flourished in tandem: the English traveller Edward Terry recorded his astonishment at the permanence of Indian dyes, noting that cloths were printed with well-shaped and colourful figures which no water could wash out (Terry 2007, 108–109). This observation is not merely picturesque; it points to a sophisticated chemical technology developed by Indian artisans that European cloth manufacturers of the period could not replicate.

The practice of silk weaving flourished under imperial patronage at Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Lahore, and at textile centres in Gujarat and Bengal (Moosvi 1987, 170-174; Chandra 2007, 251-254). The modern commentators often remarked on the extent of textile production in Bengal. François Bernier claimed that Bengal was a highly productive region that produced cotton and silk goods not only for Mughal India but also for external markets in Asia and Europe (Bernier 1916, 437-439). His observation reveals Bengal's presence in wider commercial circuits and implies that Mughal textile production operated within interconnected regional and global economies rather than catering solely to domestic demand.

Kashmir's shawl and carpet industries also played a significant role in elite consumption networks, alongside the cotton and silk industries. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Kashmiri shawls emerged as highly valued commodities across the Islamic world and subsequently gained prominence in Europe's luxury markets as commercial exchange expanded (Digby 2004, 237-241). The Mughals fostered refinement and specialisation in this area, and demand for it went far beyond the imperial court. Likewise, carpet manufacturing was concentrated in Lahore, Agra and Kashmir, where Persian and Central Asian styles and influences were fused with local techniques to create a unique Mughal aesthetic tradition (Kumar 2005, 132-136).

In addition to the textile industry, Mughal India had a varied industrial economy that included shipbuilding, artisanal manufacturing, saltpetre production, and mineral extraction and metallurgy. The iron industry was common, copper mining was established in Rajasthan, and the diamond mines of Golconda were famous (Richards 1993, 191-195). Saltpetre became a strategic product utilised for military production in the country and was also an important export to European trading firms (Habib 2011, 294-296; Parthasarathi 2011, 67-70). Craft industries also produced paper, pottery, leather goods, bricks, and furniture to meet the increasing demand for domestic consumption and export markets. The merchants invested in arms manufacturing, and there were extensive commercial distribution networks (Srivastava 1966, 232-234) for arms, swords, guns, etc., as well as for military machinery.

The other vital part of Mughal industrial production was shipbuilding. The commercial hubs of Gujarat and Bengal supported riverine, coastal, and overseas trade through developed shipping networks and played a significant role in promoting commercial expansion across the Indian Ocean. European companies increasingly gained naval superiority, but Indian-built vessels remained significant commercially until well into the eighteenth century (Das Gupta 1994, 23-28; Subrahmanyam 1990, 349-353).

Taken together, these developments indicate that pre-colonial India possessed a diversified industrial structure, challenging portrayals of India as technologically stagnant or exclusively agrarian. There was regional specialisation in non-agrarian production, institutional variety, and connection to wider global markets in the Mughal era.

## **II. THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF COMMERCE: ROADS, CREDIT, AND CONNECTIVITY**

The sophisticated craft production described above could not have achieved its global reach without a correspondingly developed commercial infrastructure. The inland transport system of Mughal India, though it has often been dismissed as inadequate by comparison with contemporaneous European road networks, was in fact an extensive, functionally differentiated system that connected village markets to regional entrepôts and ultimately to the ports from which goods entered global circuits of exchange.

Rivers served as natural arteries for heavy traffic; ox-carts traversed the subcontinent; camels carried goods across the arid northwest; and the semi-nomadic banjara communities—hereditary carriers and cattle-breeders—moved large consignments of grain and bulk commodities across seasonal routes that would otherwise have been impassable (Habib 1999, 71). The sarais (rest-houses or inns), situated at roughly a day’s journey from one another along major routes, provided infrastructure for both travellers and traders, ranging from “splendid masonry structures” to simpler mud-built quadrangles (Habib 1999, 69). The administrative messenger system (dak

chauki), with its relay stations and runners, ensured the rapid transmission of commercial intelligence across vast distances, supplemented by the private courier networks of merchants and bankers.

This infrastructure supported a commercial system of considerable spatial extent. At the local and regional level, markets in foodgrains, coarse cloth, salt, and daily necessities connected villages to towns in patterns of exchange that generated surplus and stimulated further specialisation. At the interregional level, commodities moved from the hinterland to entrepot centres, Agra, Lahore, Patna, Surat, Masulipatnam, through networks of merchant factors (byuparis and gumashtas) whose presence at distant locations reduced transaction costs and allowed large-scale commercial operations across the subcontinent.

### **The Monetary and Credit System: Sophistication and Reach**

The commercial economy was underwritten by a monetary system of remarkable uniformity and purity. The Mughal emperors issued silver rupees (standardised at 178 grains troy, later increased to 180 grains) from mints established across the empire. The coinage was effectively free: anyone could present bullion at the mint and receive stamped coin for a modest fee, with freshly minted coin commanding a small premium over older issues (Raychaudhuri 1960, 16). This system of free coinage, coupled with the widespread distribution of mints, allowed the money supply to expand in response to the inflow of silver that influenced the global economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The monetisation of the Mughal economy, including the demand for cash revenue payments, both reflected and reinforced this expansion.

Above the monetary base stood an extensive system of commercial credit organised around the hundi, the bill of exchange, which enabled large commercial transactions to be conducted without the physical movement of coin. The widespread use of hundis gave rise to what contemporaries described as “bill-money,” a form of commercial liquidity that reduced the costs and risks of long-distance trade (Habib 2008, 141). Insurance practices developed alongside bill discounting, with



the rule that those who discounted a bill earlier also assumed responsibility for its ultimate discharge serving as an effective risk-pooling mechanism. Deposit banking, conducted by the sarrafs (money-changers) and mahajans (bankers) who occupied strategic positions in the commercial networks of every major city, provided the institutional backbone of this credit system.

The banking and brokerage professions were predominantly but not exclusively organised along caste lines—Banyas in northern India, Khattris in the Punjab, Komatis in Andhra, but the universal institution of brokerage enabled outsiders to access these caste networks without belonging to them, reducing the exclusivity that might otherwise have constituted a structural bottleneck (Habib 2008, 141). The scale of operations achieved by the most successful Indian merchants of this era, Virji Vora of Surat, with a capital estimated at eight million rupees, and Abdul Ghafur, who operated more ships than the entire English East India Company, decisively refutes the characterization of Indian commercial enterprise as small-scale, risk-averse “peddling” advanced by the Dutch economic historian van Leur and later extended by Niels Steensgaard.

### **III. INDIA IN THE WORLD: FOREIGN TRADE AND THE INDIAN OCEAN ECONOMY**

The importance of India’s economy during the Mughal era becomes clearer when situated within the wider framework of Indian Ocean commerce and global trade networks. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, India held a pivotal position in what K.N. Chaudhuri and other scholars termed the Indian Ocean “world system”, an interconnected network of exchange that linked East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and extended into the Atlantic economies via the Cape route. Indian merchants, Indian textiles, and Indian commercial institutions played an important role in the functioning of this system.

Cotton fabrics in all their amazing styles, along with indigo, pepper, opium, saltpetre, and sugar, were the principal exports of Mughal India, sold in Asia and Europe. These included bullion (mainly silver), horses, metals, silk, ivory, coral, amber, precious stones and luxury manufactures from Persia, China and Europe (Srivastava 1966, 232-233). What was most remarkable about this

trade was its regularity; millions of precious metals entered India each year, and the money paid for the monetisation of the domestic economy kept the purchasing power of the elite and the producing classes alive.

The principal sea-borne outlets for this trade were the ports of Gujarat (Cambay, Surat, Broach), Sindh (Lahori Bandar), the Konkan and Malabar coasts (Bassein, Chaul, Goa, Calicut, Cochin), the Coromandel coast (Masulipatnam, Negapatnam), and Bengal (Satgaon, Chatgaon, Sonargaon) (Srivastava 1966, 233). Lahore was linked to Kabul through overland routes, while Multan maintained connections with Kandahar, together forming vital trade corridors that connected the Indian subcontinent to the overland commercial networks of Central Asia and the Middle East. This is partly because these routes are maritime and terrestrial, western and eastern, but not because of the peripheral or dependent nature of their connection with world traffic, but because of the multi-directional nature of their commercial engagement.

### **Indian Merchants and the Competition with European Companies**

The earlier scholarly interpretation that Portuguese, Dutch, and English trading companies decisively displaced Indian merchants from maritime trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been substantially reconsidered in light of later research. Ashin Das Gupta's painstaking analysis of Surat's commercial records demonstrated that at the end of the seventeenth century, the city's annual turnover was approximately sixteen million rupees, of which the combined European share amounted to only two million, one-eighth of the total (Chandra 1999, 403). Indian trade and shipping declined and were replaced by European carriers only after the establishment of colonial rule, not before.

The competitive advantages of Indian merchants over their European rivals were substantial and deserve systematic attention. Indian merchants were prepared to operate with profit margins ranging from ten to fifteen per cent on their transactions, whereas Dutch and English trading companies generally regarded returns below forty per cent as inadequate (Chandra 1999, 408).

Freight charges on Indian-owned vessels were lower, sometimes half the rates charged by Dutch and English ships. Indian merchants operated extensive and efficient information networks, maintained factors at distant locations, and cut costs through local knowledge, long-established relationships, and the flexibility of small-scale operators who, because they invested little and expected correspondingly modest returns, could never be entirely driven from business by large corporate rivals.

These structural advantages help explain how Indian merchants remained competitive with European trading companies in South-East Asia and West Asia throughout much of the seventeenth century. Indian traders were well-established at Aden, Mocha, the Red Sea ports, and the East African entrepôts; they exploited the improved security of overland routes in Safavid Iran and Ottoman Arabia; and they maintained the cotton-textile trade, the most universally demanded commodity in Asian commerce, as a virtual Indian speciality (Chandra 1999, 403-408).

What ultimately shifted the balance was not economic efficiency but armed force. The success of European trading companies was due, in the last analysis, not to their relative efficiency in commerce, but to superior armed power, which ultimately laid the foundations of colonialism (Raychaudhuri 1982, 339-344). This is the central interpretive conclusion that this paper endorses and extends: the transformation of Mughal India's globally competitive non-agrarian economy into a subordinate appendage of British industrial capitalism was a political and military achievement, not an economic inevitability. It required the sustained application of violence, naval, territorial, and fiscal, against a commercial world that, left to its own devices, would likely have continued to evolve in directions that need not have led to colonial subjugation.

#### **IV. THE SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF ECONOMIC LIFE: INEQUALITY, CLASS, AND MATERIAL CONDITIONS**

The expansion of Mughal India's non-agrarian economy did not produce evenly distributed prosperity. Economic dynamism coexisted with marked inequalities in wealth, social status, and

access to material resources. At the base of society stood artisans, labourers, and cultivators whose productive activity sustained the wider economy. Their living conditions were often modest: diets depended largely on coarse grains, household possessions remained limited, and housing was typically constructed from inexpensive local materials (Habib 1999, 103-112; Moreland 1920, 175-180). Contemporary accounts by García da Orta and François Bernier, together with later economic reconstructions, suggest persistent disparities between the wages of productive classes and elite consumption (Bernier 1916, 315-320; Srivastava 1966, 234-235).

Between producers and nobility existed an intermediate social layer composed of cavalrymen, clerks, minor officials, urban professionals, and merchants. While materially more secure than labouring groups, they remained socially subordinate to aristocratic elites (Habib 1995, 206-207). Merchants such as Virji Vora and Abdul Ghafur accumulated substantial wealth but remained exposed to political uncertainty and state intervention (Das Gupta 1994, 45-49).

At the top stood the Mughal nobility, whose wealth was organised through the mansabdari system and concentrated significant revenues among a limited elite (Richards 1993, 59-63). Elite consumption sustained demand for luxury textiles, jewellery, metalwork, and decorative industries and contributed to employment through imperial and aristocratic karkhanas (Chandra 2007, 263-266; Moosvi 1987, 178-182).

Yet this concentration of purchasing power also limited the growth of a broad domestic market. As eighteenth-century political instability and colonial restructuring weakened elite patronage and redirected trade, many craft industries experienced decline (Parthasarathi 2011, 112-118). The transformation of the Mughal industry was therefore shaped by the interaction of social inequality, political change, and shifting commercial structures.

## **V. MUGHAL ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS AND THE QUESTION OF “CAPITALISM”**

A major historiographical debate concerns whether Mughal economic institutions represented a form of proto-capitalism and why they did not develop into industrial capitalism comparable to

Western Europe. Influenced by Marxist interpretations, particularly those associated with Irfan Habib, scholars have examined the relationship between state power, commercial expansion, and capital accumulation (Habib 1995, 220-225).

Several features of the Mughal non-agrarian economy resembled early capitalist forms: merchant-financed craft production, large trading houses, commercial credit through hundis, wage labour in karkhanas, and substantial private accumulation of capital (Subrahmanyam 1990, 318-325; Das Gupta 1994, 81-89). At the same time, merchant wealth remained dependent on political authority, commercial security was uncertain, and institutional conditions limited autonomous industrial investment.

Habib's argument that surplus extraction constrained capitalist development remains influential, though later scholarship has revised it. Recent studies emphasise that state expenditure on workshops, infrastructure, military provisioning, and monumental construction also stimulated production and organised labour (Richards 1993, 201-205; Moosvi 1987, 183-188). The Mughal state thus functioned as both an extractive and productive institution.

The absence of industrialisation in India cannot be explained solely through internal limitations. Colonial military expansion, changing global trade relations, and fiscal restructuring altered the trajectory of Indian commercial development and contributed significantly to later deindustrialisation (Parthasarathi 2011, 146-151; Bayly 1983, 90-96). Understanding this transition requires attention to both indigenous institutions and external historical interventions.

## **CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A DECENTRED HISTORY OF MUGHAL ECONOMIC LIFE**

This paper has aimed to demonstrate that the economy of Mughal India was not simply an outgrowth of its agrarian foundation but constituted a complex, institutionally organised, and globally connected economic system that occupied a significant place in the early modern world. The craft industries, such as textiles, metallurgy, saltpetre and shipbuilding, produced goods for

regional and international markets in various forms, from village production to merchant-financed workshops and royal karkhanas (Habib 2011, 286-302; Moosvi 1987, 170-182). A well-established network of commercial infrastructure – roads, sarais, hundi networks, brokerage institutions and a reasonably stable monetary system facilitated sustained exchanges within the subcontinent and beyond (Raychaudhuri and Habib 1982, 365-372; Richards 1993, 198-201). The Indian merchants retained their commercial vitality and active participation in global trade networks throughout much of the early modern period, until their involvement in political and military competition changed the conditions of economic competition (Das Gupta 1994, 81-89; Parthasarathi 2011, 112-118).

This interpretation carries broader implications for understanding India's past. Rather than viewing pre-colonial India as a static or "traditional" society awaiting modernisation, the Mughal economy suggests a more dynamic picture of active participation in global economic processes whose trajectory was reshaped by colonial intervention rather than created by it (Subrahmanyam 1990, 356-360). Concepts such as stagnation and backwardness are insufficient to explain the institutional complexity and commercial vitality evident in the period.

At the same time, this argument does not intend to idealise or romanticise the economic conditions of Mughal India. The non-agrarian sector remained marked by social inequality, elite concentration of resources, and constraints on the broader expansion of commercial capital (Habib 1995, 206-210; Chandra 2007, 263-267). These limitations were historically significant, yet they should not be conflated with assumptions of economic inertia. Instead, they reflect the tensions of a complex economic order undergoing transformation under changing political and global conditions.

Understanding Mughal India, therefore, requires analytical attention to its institutions, commercial practices, and historical contingencies rather than teleological assumptions of decline. This paper has sought to contribute to that broader effort by situating the Mughal non-agrarian economy within its regional and global historical context.

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## FORENSIC VOICES FOR SILENT VICTIMS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF VETERINARY EVIDENCE IN ANIMAL ABUSE CASES

Meenakshi Kaushal & Abhinav Pradhan

### Abstract

*Veterinary forensics takes a central stage in animal cruelty cases across common law jurisdictions, where animals cannot provide testimonial evidence and courts must reconstruct harm through scientific interpretation. However, blind trust on science often overlooks the very nature of forensics that lies thinly between the truth and the errors thus making it either probative or ambiguous. Despite its increasing importance, caveat as to overreliance on veterinary reports due to methodological uncertainty, chain of custody issues, and interpretive subjectivity amongst other considerations may hinder the justice delivery. This article undertakes a comparative doctrinal analysis of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, South Africa and India, focusing on how each jurisdiction regulates admissibility and probative weight of veterinary forensic evidence. It finds that while veterinary evidence is welcomed by the common law jurisdictions, caveats are always attached as to questions to its reliability thus involving judicial gatekeeping mechanisms.*

**Keywords:** Animal cruelty; veterinary forensics; expert evidence; common law; judicial gatekeeping; forensic science

### I. Introduction

*“Behavioural responses to pain vary greatly from one species to another, but it is reasonable to suppose that the pain felt by all of these animals is similar to that felt by man”.*  
(Broom, 1989)

Animal cruelty adjudications present a distinctive evidentiary challenge in criminal justice systems that the primary victim is a non-human entity incapable of speech, memory narration, or testimonial participation. Consequently, courts in common law jurisdictions rely heavily on veterinary forensics to reconstruct facts surrounding injury, neglect, abuse or unlawful killing (Townesley et al. 2025). Veterinary expert reports and testimonies function as the principal mechanism through which animal suffering is translated into legally cognizable evidence. This has acquired a strong relevance especially with jurisdictions aiming to tackle illegal traffic, avoid the loss of biodiversity, and protect endangered species. (Cardinali, Tancredi, and Lancioni 2023). Recently, in *Vantara* inquiry (C.R. Jaya Sukin v. Union of India 2025), clinical and scientific assessments of animal health comprised veterinary examinations, treatment records, and welfare evaluations used to assess the physical condition, care standards, and rehabilitation outcomes of rescued animals.

Veterinary experts are the scientific experts that translates the technical findings into understandable facts before a courtroom dealing with animal abuse case. (Royal College of

Veterinary Surgeons 2023) Veterinary forensics on one hand significantly enhances probative value by providing objective understandings of injury, neglect, and cause of death or abuse, however on the other hand, a key jurisprudential contrast arises from the tendency of courts to treat scientific evidence as inherently reliable or infallible. This flair for science's infallibility can lead to overdependence on expert conclusions without sufficient scrutiny of methodological limitations or alternative explanations. (Edmond and Roach 2011)

Common law systems though have readily accepted the science, is still very cautious of degree of reliance it can place on it, which is constantly challenged through evidentiary safeguards such as expert admissibility standards, methodologically validity, and corroboration through cross-examination or other relevant facts. Such appreciation allows challenging assumptions, highlight uncertainties, consideration to alternative causal interpretations to ultimately prove a claim beyond reasonable doubt. (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine and Federal Judicial Center 2011) The central challenge in common law jurisprudence remains to avoid both extremes and find balance.

This study attempts a comparative analysis across common law jurisdictions: the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and India focusing on admissibility thresholds for veterinary expert testimony, judicial reliability on forensic reports and caveats during judicial gatekeeping around interaction between veterinary expert opinion.

## **II. Comparative Analysis of Animal Abuse Cases: Statutory Framework & Judicial Reliance on Veterinary Forensics**

Common law legal systems have recognized animals as beings with rights of their own that deserves legal protection. In protection of such rights, veterinary forensics, a branch of science that involves interplay of medicine, toxicology, pathology and scientific principles gains relevance when it comes to reconstruction of facts and possible theories before a courtroom to understand facts and events leading harm to animals (Brooks 2018).

Scientific veterinary evidence includes detailed examination and documentation of external as well as internal injuries or harm such as abrasions, bite marks, burns, patterned trauma, as well as injuries identified through imaging modalities (Yamada et al. 2023). Post-mortem investigations, necropsy findings provide comprehensive insights into organ pathology, time since death estimation, and potential toxicological exposures, thereby establishing cause and manner of death. (Brooks and Munro 2016) Critical use involves interpretation of injury chronology and mechanism to assess wound healing stages and tissue response to determine whether injuries are acute, chronic, or repetitive and systematic neglect in nature. Additionally, toxicological screening for substances such as pesticides, heavy metals, pharmaceuticals, and illicit drugs provides insights on internal facts (Maurer et al. 2022).

The evidentiary value of veterinary forensic findings in animal abuse cases is contingent upon strict adherence to statutory requirements, procedural standards and appropriate appreciation by judiciary. (Cole 2002) This part elaborated statutory framework and procedural standards in common law jurisdiction related to use of forensics in animal abuse cases, followed by discussion on how the evidence so acquired is appreciated in a courtroom.

## **India**

In India, animal welfare is constitutionally grounded through (Constitution of India, art. 21), which has been judicially interpreted to include dignity and protection from unnecessary suffering, along with (Constitution of India, art. 48), which directs the State to promote scientific animal husbandry and improve livestock, (Constitution of India, art. 48A), which mandates protection of environment and wildlife, and (Constitution of India, art. 51A(g)) which imposes a fundamental duty on citizens to show compassion toward living creatures. These constitutional protection make way for principles are operationalized through statutory law. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960 [hereinafter “PCA”] is the primary legislation, where (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1960, s. 11) defines cruelty to include physical abuse, neglect, and unnecessary suffering. Criminal liability for harm to animals is now addressed under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 [hereinafter “BNS”], particularly provisions corresponding to mischief causing damage or harm to animals. Wildlife protection is further strengthened under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, which regulates hunting and safeguards endangered species.

Statutory provisions either expressly require or implicitly mandate veterinary examination, certification, or forensic assessment in animal cruelty investigations and prosecutions. Certification by a veterinary officer before a court may be required to order destruction of a mortally injured or animal incapable of survival without further suffering where the owner does not consent. (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1960, s. 13) Police has been authorized to seize animals suspected to be subjected to cruelty and produce them before a magistrate or veterinary officer for examination (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1960, s. 34). Further, Courts have been authorized to direct treatment, care, or euthanasia of animals based on veterinary certification regarding the condition and survivability of the animal. (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1960, s. 35) The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 requires veterinary and wildlife forensic examination in cases involving illegal hunting, poisoning, trafficking, or death of protected species, particularly for species identification and cause of death analysis. On evidence front, BSA recognizes expert opinion as admissible evidence. (Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023, s. 39) Rules framed under the PCA framework relating to animal transport, breeding, experimentation, and markets also require veterinary fitness certificates, inspection reports, and health examinations for animals subjected to commercial handling or movement.

Judicial interpretation in India has founded that basic principle of reliability that veterinary and forensic reports are valuable, but they are only one component of proof and cannot substitute judicial reasoning. Reliability of the expert evidence is dependent on government veterinary certification, post-mortem integrity, chain of custody, corroboration with other relevant facts, amongst other judicial considerations (Ramesh Chandra Agrawal v. Regency Hospital Ltd. 2009). In (State of Himachal Pradesh v. Jai Lal 1999), Supreme Court of India imposed a core caution guideline that expert evidence is only opinion evidence which is non-binding and court must independently evaluate reasoning, check scientific basis and corroborate with other evidence.

In (State v. Mustafa 2019), court has shown openness towards accepting scientific evidence to assess transport violations and animal condition assessment under PCA. While interpreting Section 35 of PCA Act related to custody of animals, the Supreme Court in (Manager,

Pinjrapole Deudar v. Chakram Moraji Nat 1998) found veterinary/clinical assessment crucial for deciding interim custody, determining animal fitness for survival considering it essential for welfare based judicial decisions, while stating caveat that magistrate retains discretion. In a landmark case (Animal Welfare Board of India v. A. Nagaraja 2014) related to Jallikattu bull cruelty, court relied on expert understanding of pain and stress physiological assessment of animal suffering, considering it essential to interpret ‘unnecessary suffering’ under PCA Act. In recent developments, veterinary forensic laboratories examined seized meat samples in Bhopal cattle slaughter & meat seizure forensic cases, where court evaluated chain of custody, decomposition and sample integrity, reliability of veterinary lab conclusions before relying on them (Mohan 2026).

In (State of U.P. v. Chhotey Lal 2000) relating to alleged cruelty to cattle, where prosecution relied on a veterinary inspection report to prove injury, Supreme Court held that the report could not be treated as conclusive evidence because it lacked proper foundational details, failed to clearly link injuries to the accused, and its methodology was not adequately proved. The Court ruled that expert evidence must be supported by reliable facts and reasoning, and a defective expert report cannot, by itself, sustain a conviction. A Kerala case where allegations of cruelty in circus animal training and captivity were claimed, conflicting expert opinions on animal suffering came to light, the Court relied on credible expert and welfare based assessments and did not place decisive weight on unreasoned or insufficiently substantiated material (N.R. Nair v. Union of India 2000). In another temple elephant welfare case, the Madras High Court has held that veterinary fitness certificates issued by owners or temple authorities are not conclusive and must be tested against independent inspection and actual indicators of animal welfare (Rangarajan Narasimhan v. State of Tamil Nadu 2022). Similarly, where the question was whether veterinary opinion alone can establish guilt, court must be wary of placing undue reliance on expert opinion without independent corroboration, especially veterinary evidence was found insufficient without corroboration and investigation and other evidence did not align with medical opinion (State of Punjab v. Jagir Singh 1974).

### **The United States**

Reliance on forensic evidence majorly revolves around evidentiary principles established the judiciary. On account of states legislatures, anti-cruelty statutes across various states criminalizes intentional injury, torture and negligence towards animals, requiring proving of pain, suffering, and duration of neglect, which can be established through veterinary forensic with assistance from expert reports (Touroo et al. 2020). For instance, Florida (Florida Statutes, s. 828.12) and California (California Penal Code, s. 11199) prohibits cruelty to animals including causing excessive or repeated infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering.

Admissibility of scientific evidence is majorly governed by Rule 702, Federal Rules of Evidence and the principle remains applicable to forensic evidence in animal abuse cases. (Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc. 1993) founded the contemporary reliability standard emphasising on openness beyond ‘general acceptance’ earlier established through (Frye v. United States 1923) of scientific techniques and methodology being employed to examine probative value of the evidence collected. The general acceptance assessment involves

testing on factors including whether the technique can be tested, peer-reviewed or publication received, it known or potential error.

Judicial precedent specific to animal abuse generally involves reliance on expert report adding in injury assessment. (United States v. Peace, Phillips, Taylor & Vick 2007), a case involving interstate dogfighting operation, known as 'Bad Newz Kennels', involved veterinary examination of injuries to animals, necropsies on dead dogs, blood and physical evidence, fighting pits and training equipment to reconstruct the facts in and establish guilt.

## **UK**

In absence of a written Constitution, the rights are largely dependent on the statutory framework along with judicial interpretation. The primary legislation is the Animal Welfare Act 2006 that criminalizes causing 'unnecessary suffering' to a protected animal (Animal Welfare Act 2006, s. 4). A duty of care lies on persons responsible for animals to ensure adequate food, shelter, treatment, and protection from pain and disease (Animal Welfare Act 2006, s. 9). Veterinary forensic may be used to establish the injury, extent and methods of the injury along with examination as to justify seizure by authorities, euthanasia amongst others. (Animal Welfare Act 2006, s. 20).

On admissibility front, veterinary forensic evidence is governed the Criminal Procedure Rules, particularly Part 19 relating to expert evidence. Additionally, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons provides professional guidance requiring veterinarians to maintain detailed clinical records, preserve forensic integrity, and report suspected cruelty where necessary (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons 2023).

Turner (R v Turner 1975) founded the core expert evidence admissibility, stating that expert evidence is only admissible where the matter is outside ordinary experience of the court. Court can have access to expert veterinary assessments in cases related to animal cruelty involving dog-fighting (R v Woodward 2017).

## **Canada**

Legal framework with respect to animal abuse includes (Criminal Code of Canada, ss. 445, 446) that criminalizes causing unnecessary pain, suffering, injury, or neglect to animals. And Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act, 2019 along with Animal Welfare and Safety Act, Additionally, the Health of Animals Act supports scientific examinations and animal health investigations relevant to forensic veterinary practice.

Canadian Supreme Court has laid down reliability test stating expert evidence is admissible only if it is relevant, necessary to assist the trier of fact, not subject to an exclusionary rule, and given by a properly qualified expert (R. v. Mohan 1994). This case forms the baseline for expert evidence in the country. In another significant animal cruelty case involving 107 cats, heavy reliance was placed on veterinary findings to determine reasonable foreseeability of suffering to establish malnutrition, dehydration and chronic neglect, confirming that veterinary

pathology findings are treated as highly probative expert evidence in sentencing and culpability assessment (R v Way 2016). Courts continues confirming reliability of veterinary forensic reasoning when methodologically grounded (R v Tieu 2020).

### **Australia**

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 criminalizes acts of cruelty causing unnecessary pain (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979, s. 5) including aggravated cruelty involving serious injury or death (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979, s. 8). Law authorizes inspectors to seize animals believed to be suffering, often on the basis of veterinary examination or certification (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979, s. 24).

Judicial precedent on expert evidence admissibility depends on whether the expert possesses requisite knowledge and skill (R v Bonython 1984). In case specific to animal cruelty, in (Brighton v Will 2020), necropsy performed by a forensic veterinarian on the exhumed remains of the dog. The forensic expert was able to determine mannerism and extent of injury caused stating that the animal has been subjected to brutal killing methods.

### **South Africa**

Animals Protection Act 71 of 1962 criminalizes acts such as overloading, beating, starving, confining, poisoning, or causing unnecessary suffering to animals (Animals Protection Act 1962, s. 2). Courts are authorized to order destruction of severely injured or suffering animals, often based upon veterinary certification regarding the animal's condition and prognosis (Animals Protection Act 1962, s. 3). National Council of Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and inspectors have been empowered to investigate cruelty. Veterinary forensic examination is frequently required in cases involving poaching, poisoning, trafficking, or unlawful hunting of wildlife punishable under law (National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act 2004).

The admissibility of veterinary forensic evidence is allowed by the law (Criminal Procedure Act 1977). Veterinarians may testify as expert witnesses where specialized scientific knowledge is necessary to assist the court in interpreting medical findings. Also, the South African Veterinary Council regulates professional standards and ethical obligations of veterinarians (Veterinary and Para-Veterinary Professions Act 1982). Courts have relied on veterinary findings to justify seizure and prosecution, in addition to demonstrating judicial acceptance of veterinary evidence as primary proof of suffering. In a serious wildlife crime case related to poached rhinoceroses and their seized horns, DNA forensic matching was done to link the materials involved the crime with the offenders. (Harper 2016)

### **III. Conclusion and Findings**

Interdisciplinary nature of veterinary forensic evidence enhances the accuracy of abuse assessments and strengthens judicial outcomes in cases involving animal cruelty and neglect (Gilbert et al. 2026), (Munro and Munro 2013). Continued advancements in scientific technologies, standardized protocols, and forensic training are essential to improving the reliability and global applicability of veterinary forensics (Lockwood and Arkow 2016). On comparative analysis, it is noted that the common law trend is toward increasing towards integration of scientific evidence into animal cruelty cases while accepting ever-changing dynamics between law and science.

While common law jurisdictions shows significant acceptance of scientific methodology for relevancy and authenticity of forensic evidence, differences lies on how the forensic evidence are appreciated by the courts. A comparative analysis of the treatment of veterinary evidence in common law jurisdictions demonstrates that India follows an advisory expert evidence model, the United States applies the Daubert reliability framework, the United Kingdom relies upon discretionary judicial reliability assessment, Australia operates under the Uniform Evidence Acts regime, Canada follows the Mohan reliability and necessity model, and South Africa adopts a relevance and reliability approach. Indian courts generally reject veterinary or forensic reports where there is lack of proper methodology or scientific basis, break in chain of custody, given that as per law, expert opinion alone is insufficient to prove guilt.

While inadequate training in veterinary forensic techniques, poor collection and preservation of forensic evidence, broken chain of custody, weak coordination amongst shareholders including forensic labs remains challenges across the jurisdiction, United States and Australia demonstrate systematised forensic documentation, while India and South African contexts experience weak systems. forensic infrastructure, which can weaken prosecutorial strength even where substantive The United Kingdom showcased operational dependence on local enforcement capacity.

Overall, the key distinction across these jurisdictions lies in the approach to scientific gatekeeping. The United States applies the most stringent reliability screening under Daubert, Australia use structured but flexible reliability based tests, Canada adopts a comparatively balanced approach focusing on relevance, necessity, and expert qualification, while maintaining judicial discretion over weight, while the United Kingdom and South Africa, and to a large extent India rely more on judicial discretion and expert competence rather than strict methodological admissibility thresholds. Common law jurisdictions collectively demonstrates that veterinary forensic evidence is universally indispensable yet variably regulated in terms of judicial scrutiny and gatekeeping.

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## **Empowering Voices: Women in Politics in Jammu and Kashmir**

**Salam Khan and Mubashir Ahmad Shah**

### **Abstract**

*Empowering women in politics is not just about equality, it's about enriching governance with diverse perspectives, priorities, and solutions. By breaking barriers and fostering inclusive environments, we pave the way for a more representative and effective democracy. This paper explores the evolving role of women in the political sphere of Jammu and Kashmir. It examines historical contexts, socio-cultural barriers, and systemic obstacles to women's political participation. The study highlights initiatives and movements that have increased women's representation and impact, while also documenting the challenges they face. The research underscores the importance of fostering an inclusive political environment to amplify women's voices and advocates for sustained efforts and policies to support women's political empowerment in the region*

**Keywords: women, Politics, empowerment, Jammu and Kashmir**

### **Introduction**

The issue of women in the former state of Jammu and Kashmir, now a Union Territory, needs to be examined from various angles. Initially, the uniqueness of Jammu and Kashmir lies in its diverse and inclusive nature. Unlike most Indian states, Jammu and Kashmir is predominantly Muslim but also has a significant Hindu minority. However, its diversity goes beyond religion, encompassing various ethnic, cultural, linguistic, tribal, and caste identities. These differences are so pronounced that they create a complex context defying simple categorization. It would be incorrect to assume that this region lacks internal diversity. Instead, it has multiple layers of identities that intersect in some areas and clash in others (Shekhawat Seema, 2015 p.100-106). Moreover, the previous state has been marked by conflict, both externally and internally. Not only has it experienced volatility along its borders during times of war and peace, but it has also grappled with internal unrest. Over the past three decades, particularly in the Kashmir Valley, this region has been confronted with militancy and separatist movements. The context of conflict has significant societal and political implications (Chowdhary, 2016 p.34). Until recently, this was the sole state in India with special constitutional status, enjoying formal autonomy under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. However, a significant shift occurred in August 2019 under the Nation Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, which revoked its special constitutional status and divided it into three union territories (Kazi Seema, 2022 p.2). This discussion primarily focuses on women in the context of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir while also referencing the Union Territory of Ladakh.

### **The evolution of political awareness, rights, and political change: Women's status in Jammu and Kashmir**

The political changes that began unfolding in the 1930s and 1940s introduced the discourse of rights and the ideals of equality. The movement in Kashmir against the monarchy and feudal

system politicized the peasantry and artisan classes. The resulting political dialogue focused on the liberation and empowerment of marginalized groups (Bazaz, 1954 p.56). The National Conference (NC) emerged as a progressive and people-centric party in 1939, adopting the New Kashmir Manifesto in 1944, which included separate provisions for peasants, artisans, and women. The Women's Charter within this manifesto pledged various rights for women, emphasizing the collaborative role of men and women in nation-building. The comprehensive charter outlined numerous socioeconomic, political, and legal rights, such as the right of women to hold public office, access employment opportunities, pursue any profession they are capable of, receive social insurance and healthcare benefits, access free education, and have the right to choose marriage partners and seek divorce (New Kashmir Manifesto, 1944). These rights were subsequently integrated into the state's constitution (Chowdhary, 2010 p.34). Although the women's issues were addressed progressively during the 1940s and early 1950s, they took a back seat later. The conflict situation that arose post-1950 marginalized the NC's progressive agenda and the state's focus shifted towards the "Kashmiri identity" issue, prioritizing it over other concerns.

With the removal of socioeconomic issues from the state's mainstream politics, progressive and socially driven politics, including the women's movements of the 1970s, largely bypassed the state. While northern India saw the rise of the Dalit movement, the women's movement, and the right to information movement, Jammu and Kashmir remained unaffected by these. The focus on political identity overshadowed other concerns, with Kashmiri nationalism dominating Kashmir and regional identities shaping the politics of Jammu and Ladakh. Despite the regional differences, political identity and questions took precedence over socioeconomic issues. In Kashmir, political mobilization after the 1950s centred around Kashmiri identity, sidelining gender issues and relegating women's concerns to a secondary status.

The progressive goals of the New Kashmir Manifesto no longer shaped Kashmiri politics, and patriarchal aspects of Kashmiri identity politics remained unchallenged. This was evident in the significant issue of a domicile-related law concerning the rights of permanent residents, protected by Article 35A. The law defined 'Permanent Residents of the State,' who had special privileges related to land ownership, state government jobs, state fellowships, admissions to state-run professional institutions, and voting and contesting in state panchayats and the legislative assembly. However, administrative practices distinguished between male and female permanent residents. Women's Permanent Residence Certificates (PRCs) were often marked 'valid till marriage,' and if a woman married someone from outside the state, she lost her permanent resident status. This practice was only discontinued in 2004 following a High Court decision, but the discriminatory aspects persisted as women who married outside the state could not transfer their property to their children.

While children of men who married outside the state enjoyed full rights as permanent residents, children of women who married outsiders were denied PRCs. Despite the discriminatory nature of this law, there was a strong consensus in Favor of it within the Kashmir Valley. Any discussion about changing the law was strongly resisted, as it was perceived as a threat to the 'Kashmiri identity.' The prevailing argument was that granting permanent resident status to women married outside the state or to their children would alter the state's demographics and

jeopardize its 'Muslim majority character.' This stance clearly subordinated gender rights, overshadowing women's issues with the broader issue of Kashmir's 'political identity'". (Sobhrajani Manisha, 2008 p.16).

### **Women Actively Engagement in Politics**

In Jammu and Kashmir, similar to other parts of India, women have not become a significant political constituency. They do not vote as a unified bloc and are not seen as a powerful enough group to attract political parties' attention. Unlike caste, religion, and community, which are key factors in: electoral politics, gender does not hold significant importance. Women are not considered crucial voters capable of influencing electoral outcomes. Consequently, political parties' manifestoes and campaigns lack gender specificity or sensitivity. There are no targeted appeals or programs for women voters. Women's involvement in electoral politics is limited to voting, and even in this aspect, there is a noticeable gap between male and female voters. Since 1972, electoral data shows trends in female voter participation: the gap between male and female voters was about 15 percent in 1972, decreasing in subsequent elections. It was around 13 percent in 1977 and about 5 percent in 1983, then slightly increased to around 8 percent in 1987. By this time, approximately 70 percent of women, compared to about 75 percent of men, were participating in elections. This was a significant improvement from 1972, when only around 54 percent of women voted (Chowdhary, 2010 p.77).

Women's voter participation in the state was severely impacted by armed militancy. While overall voter turnout was affected by the violence, female voter participation declined more sharply, dropping from 70.36 percent in 1987 to 46.98 percent in 1996 and 38.27 percent in 2002. This indicates that women were more adversely affected by the conflict compared to men, as the gap between male and female voters widened to around 15 percent in 1996. Although the gap narrowed in the 2002 elections, the overall percentage of female voters remained low at 38.27 percent, with about 60 percent of women abstaining from the electoral process (Chowdhary, 2010 p.78). However, this trend reversed in 2014, with higher female voter participation compared to men.

### **Women competing as candidates in elections**

Women's participation in activities beyond voting is very limited. Electoral data reveals a significant disparity between the number of male and female candidates, with women contestants remaining few. Women are also not very visible in party politics, despite most political parties having a women's wing. These women's wings are subordinate and marginalized in decision-making processes. Women in leadership positions are typically appointed by party leaders, often being relatives of male leaders, rather than rising through the ranks. Overall, the percentage of women candidates has not exceeded 5 percent, highlighting the male dominance in the electoral process. During the 1972 assembly elections, only 8 out of 342 candidates were women. The number of women candidates was at its lowest in 1977, with only four women participating, making up less than 1 percent of the candidates. Although the

number of women candidates slightly increased in later elections, their percentage remained minimal (Chowdhary, 2010). In the 1996 elections, despite a twofold increase in the total number of candidates compared to the 1983 and 1987 elections, female candidates constituted less than 2 percent, largely due to the peak of militancy, which deterred many women from running for office.

The number of women candidates increased to 30 in 2002, marking the largest number and percentage of female contestants up to that point. Compared to the 1.46 percent female candidates in 1996, this rose to 4.23 percent in 2002. The peak was reached in 2008 when 67 women contested the assembly elections, constituting 4.92 percent of the candidates, the highest percentage in any assembly election. However, the number declined to 28 women in the 2014 elections. The number of women elected to the legislature is even more disappointing. In 1972, four women were elected, but only one in 1977. No women won in the 1983 elections, and only one woman won in 1987. In 1996 and 2002, two women were elected each year. Three women were elected in 2008, while only two were elected in 2014 (Chowdhary, 2010). A study of female candidates reveals regional differences in participation. In the 1972 assembly elections, out of eight female candidates, three were from Kashmir and five from Jammu. In 1977, three of the four female candidates were from Jammu, and only one was from Kashmir. In 1983, all seven female candidates were from Jammu, with none from Kashmir.

### **JandK Women political leaders in politics**

Begum Abdullah has been one of the most prominent women politicians from Jammu and Kashmir. As the wife of Sheikh Abdullah, she played a significant role in the state's politics, particularly as a Member of Parliament. Though she initially entered politics through her family and remained in her husband's shadow for a long time, she grew politically after his death, becoming an important figure as the patron of the National Conference.

More recently, a few women politicians have risen to prominence due to their family backgrounds. Mehbooba Mufti, as the leader and co-architect of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), has become a significant political figure in her own right. While her entry into politics was influenced by her father, Mufti Sayeed, a veteran politician, she evolved into a powerful leader. Mehbooba played a crucial role in establishing the PDP as a regional party alongside the National Conference. After the PDP's launch in 1999, she engaged in political mobilization, moving from village to village in Kashmir as part of the 'Healing Touch' policy, developing personal contact with the people and offering support during the conflict. Her significant presence helped popularize the PDP, leading to its success in the 2002 assembly elections and the formation of the government (Vibhuti Ubbott 2023). Although she did not join the government at that time, she was recognized as the most influential leader of the party besides her father. She contested several parliamentary elections, representing South Kashmir in Parliament, and eventually became the first woman Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir after her father's death.

As the president of the PDP, Mehbooba Mufti's role regarding women's issues in J&K was paradoxical. Despite being the first effective woman leader in Kashmir's politics, she did not always take gender-sensitive positions. One notable instance was her stance on the discrimination against women in the state subject law. After the J&K High Court overturned the discriminatory aspects of the law, she, as the president of the ruling PDP, pushed a bill in the state legislature to undo the relief provided by the High Court. The Women Disqualification Bill aimed to disqualify women who married outside the state from retaining the status of permanent residents. After becoming Chief Minister, Mehbooba Mufti implemented a few gender-sensitive policies, such as special buses for women, abolishing stamp duty for women registering property, and establishing all-women police stations. However, her government did not focus extensively on women's empowerment.

Another active woman in formal politics is Sakina Ittoo of the National Conference. Her entry into politics was sudden and not her choice; after her father, a senior NC leader, was assassinated, she abandoned her medical career to fill the 'family vacancy.' She entered politics out of necessity as the elections approached and was a candidate in the 1996 assembly elections, winning and becoming a minister. Shabnam Lone, daughter of separatist A.G. Lone, also joined politics due to her family. A legal professional, she claimed to represent her father's political legacy, despite her brothers Sajjad Lone of the People's Conference and Bilal Lone, a Hurriyat member, already being active in Kashmir's politics. She contested the assembly elections despite a boycott call from separatists, reflecting her independence both within her family and in separatist politics. Overall, there are few women political leaders in the state's mainstream politics. Family connections have been crucial for women like Mehbooba Mufti and Sakina Ittoo in becoming ministers. However, this does not imply that women entering politics through family connections lack political competence. Mehbooba Mufti, for example, despite her family background, made a significant impact and played an effective role in her party.

### **Women's Political Participation and Influence in Jammu and Kashmir**

A traditional patriarchal culture with distinct roles for men and women keeps women away from politics. Despite their education and careers, women are primarily seen as homemakers. Political roles, being public, are not easily accessible to them without family support. Except for certain 'political families' that provide such support, women are generally not encouraged to be visible in public spaces. In extraordinary circumstances, like conflict situations, women gain visibility mainly in roles seen as extensions of their family roles. Thus, 'motherhood' is celebrated, and women are seen as widows or half-widows, reflecting their status in relation to the men in their families.

The domestic space is considered 'private' where women are supposedly protected and secure. Even when they enter the 'public space' for education or careers, it is seen as a necessity rather than a norm. Beyond these purposes, the public space is deemed 'improper' for women, carrying risks to their 'security and safety' and potentially disrupting the social and ethical order.

In conflict politics, although much is said in the name of women, their actual desires and needs remain unknown. Few women's organizations represent their concerns in the conflict situation, so their gender issues are not part of the mainstream discourse. In both mainstream and separatist politics, the lack of a collective women's voice marginalizes their concerns. Women do not form a distinct political constituency, leading to their participation being taken for granted and their support seen as unquestioned. The absence of women's voices in separatist politics is evident in the numerous cases of victimized women living in destitution. While the victimization of women (whether raped, widowed, or living as 'half-widows') is highlighted in separatist discourse, the impact on their lives and their coping mechanisms are not central to the discussion" (Chowdhary and Ubbott, 2016).

### **The Interaction of women, society, and community and their political engagement**

In both the Jammu and Kashmir regions, discussions about women's issues have largely revolved around community identities. Women have struggled to establish distinct gender politics or "identities, often being seen as part of political, religious, or ethnic communities. Gender-related debates are confined within the boundaries of these community identities. Consequently, women's political involvement is viewed through the lens of 'regional' politics, 'ethnic' politics, or 'religious' politics, leading to labels such as 'Muslim women,' 'Gujjar women,' 'Pahari women,' 'Kashmiri women,' or 'Dogra women.' With their gender identity overshadowed by competing political identities in Jammu and Kashmir, women's concerns on gender issues are not prioritized. This is evident among women involved in conflict politics in Kashmir as well as those in the Jammu region, where political mobilization for gender-related issues is lacking.

Although there have been instances of women's mobilization during regional protests or agitations, such as the Amarnath agitation, which was widespread and sustained, these mobilizations have not focused on gender-related issues. In Kashmir, despite continuous mass mobilization of women over the past three decades, there is a notable absence of debates on women's and gender issues. Women's identities are often predefined either in religious terms or as part of the Kashmiri community, effectively overlooking the contradictions between gender identity and community/religious identity. Nyla Ali Khan, in her analysis of women's roles in the Kashmir conflict as detailed in *Islam, Women, and Violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan*, observes that Kashmiri women are often portrayed as a canvas upon which "discourses of religious nationalism, secular nationalism, and ethno-nationalism are painted. She further remarks that the association of native women with the motherland in nationalist rhetoric has become increasingly powerful over time. Essentially, native women are depicted as vessels in which male aspirations are nurtured, and even the most brutal acts are justified as methods to restore the dignity of women. According to Khan, if a woman's body is seen as belonging not to herself but to her community, any violation of that body is viewed as an attack on the honour of the entire community (Khan, 2010). The tendency to attach a community identity to women's bodies, as seen during the Partition and mirrored in Kashmir during the armed conflict, has been widely acknowledged. Women in Kashmir have faced pressure to



conform to cultural, religious, and moral norms in the name of community honour” (Majeed, Mehak,2022).

### **The Empowerment and Autonomy of Women**

Despite community identity overshadowing gender identity, women have demonstrated agency in various ways amid the prolonged conflict in Kashmir. One notable aspect is their active participation in protest politics. As noted by Misri, women have played significant roles in political mobilization, often outnumbering men and making their presence felt in protest rallies and risky political endeavors (Faheem Farrukh, 2020). Apart from joining mass demonstrations, women have been notably active in their local communities, expressing support for armed militants. This support lent a sense of legitimacy to armed militancy and the involvement of Kashmiri youth in violence, with women considering militants as heroes, referring to them as 'our boys,' singing their praises, and offering support, including shelter when needed.

Women's agency in the context of Kashmir's conflict politics is evident in their role in both legitimizing and delegitimizing militancy. Initially, militancy gained social approval largely due to women's endorsement and glorification of it. However, as women began to disapprove of violence and its consequences became more apparent, militancy lost its legitimacy. Women's changed stance towards violence as a political tool sparked wider debates on the efficacy of militancy and the necessity of shifting towards more political forms of resistance. Additionally, women have used their agency in advocating for their family members who have been detained by security forces, navigating legal processes, learning about laws, visiting jails, and traveling extensively to seek justice. Women have asserted their agency not only through vocal means but also silently and forcefully, both individually and collectively. They have silently resisted fundamentalist forces during times of violence when civil society and political opposition were lacking, and women's political groups were absent. The dominant political movement in Kashmir left little space for gender politics and women's movements. Consequently, women expressed their resistance through subtle acts, such as defying dictates on wearing the burqa, using it for anonymity to access freedom of mobility, and challenging attempts at sex segregation in public spaces, like buses in the early 1990s.

### **Conclusion**

Despite facing various pressures, Kashmiri women have maintained their cultural traditions. Despite the prolonged abnormal situation, the prioritization of women's education has remained strong in Kashmiri society. Even two decades after the onset of militancy, women have upheld their cultural practices. Many women view wearing a veil as non-traditional for Kashmiris and proudly highlight that traditionally, Kashmiri women were not veiled and enjoyed freedom of movement. In rural areas, women actively participated in agricultural work alongside men, making veiling impractical. Even in urban settings, there was no established tradition of women wearing veils. Regarding education, although there has historically been a disparity between

male and female educational levels, there has been a notable increase in the number of educated women since 1994. What is noteworthy is that Kashmiri society highly values women's education and does not impose restrictions on their mobility or their ability to receive education in co-educational institutions.

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## **The Politics of Women's Safety in India: Between Protection, Empowerment, and State Control**

**Muzamil Rehman & Mukhtar Ahmad Bhat**

### **Abstract**

*Women's safety has become a major concern in contemporary India, drawing significant attention from policymakers, civil society, and the media. In response to increasing incidents of gender-based violence, the state has introduced various legal, institutional, and technological measures aimed at enhancing women's security. However, important questions remain regarding whether these interventions genuinely empower women or reinforce mechanisms of regulation and control. This paper critically examines the politics of women's safety through the interconnected dimensions of protection, empowerment, and state control. Drawing on feminist political theory and gender studies, it argues that women's safety should be understood not only as protection from violence but also as the assurance of freedom, autonomy, dignity, and equal citizenship. Using a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary sources, including policy documents, legal frameworks, scholarly literature, and feminist writings, the study explores how women's safety is conceptualized and governed in India. The findings reveal that while legal reforms, emergency response systems, surveillance technologies, and institutional mechanisms have strengthened public awareness and expanded avenues for protection, many initiatives continue to operate within paternalistic frameworks. The increasing reliance on surveillance, mobility restrictions, and precautionary advisories often shifts responsibility for safety onto women themselves. The study concludes that legal and technological measures alone cannot ensure meaningful safety. A rights-based, gender-sensitive approach addressing patriarchal norms, institutional weaknesses, economic inequalities, and social discrimination is essential for achieving genuine empowerment, equality, freedom, and democratic citizenship for women.*

**Keywords:** women's safety, Gender-based violence, Autonomy, Mobility restrictions

## Introduction

Women's safety has become one of the most significant socio-political concerns in contemporary India. The issue gained unprecedented national attention following the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, which triggered widespread public protests and compelled policymakers to rethink legal and institutional mechanisms for addressing violence against women (Bhattacharya 2022 p 22). Since then, women's safety has occupied a central place in political discourse, public policy, media narratives, and electoral debates. Governments at both national and state levels have introduced a variety of measures including stricter criminal laws, women's helplines, surveillance technologies, fast-track courts, and digital safety applications to improve women's security. Despite these interventions, violence against women continues to remain a persistent challenge. Crimes such as rape, domestic violence, workplace harassment, trafficking, cyberstalking, honour killings, and dowry-related abuse continue to affect women across social, economic, and geographical boundaries. This contradiction between expanding legal protections and continuing insecurity raises important questions regarding the effectiveness and underlying politics of women's safety policies. The discourse surrounding women's safety is not merely about protection from violence; it is also about citizenship, rights, autonomy, and power. While state institutions frequently portray safety measures as empowering interventions, feminist scholars argue that many such policies are rooted in paternalistic assumptions that construct women as vulnerable subjects requiring protection (Agnes 2011 p 39). Consequently, safety often becomes linked with restrictions on women's mobility, behaviour, and participation in public spaces.

Furthermore, contemporary discussions of women's safety reveal a broader tension between protection and freedom. Governments increasingly rely on surveillance technologies, monitoring systems, and behavioural regulations to address insecurity. While these measures may enhance immediate security, they can simultaneously reinforce state control over women's lives and limit their autonomy. Against this backdrop, this paper critically examines the politics of women's safety in India through the interconnected dimensions of protection, empowerment, and state control. It seeks to analyze how safety is conceptualized, governed, and experienced, and whether existing policies contribute to genuine gender equality or reproduce new forms of regulation and surveillance

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study conceptualizes women's safety as a multidimensional phenomenon extending beyond protection from physical violence. Safety encompasses freedom of movement, bodily integrity, dignity, autonomy, and equal participation in social, economic, and political life. From this perspective, genuine safety is not merely the absence of violence but the presence of conditions that enable women to exercise their rights without fear. The study is grounded in feminist political theory, particularly liberal feminism, radical feminism, and feminist theories of the state. Liberal feminism emphasizes equality, citizenship, and individual rights (Farheen 2023). It argues that women should enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities as men. From this perspective, restrictions imposed in the name of safety such as curfews, mobility limitations, and moral policing—undermine democratic principles and restrict women's participation in public life. Liberal feminists contend that safety should be achieved through stronger institutions, legal accountability, and equal access to public spaces rather than through restrictions on women's freedoms. Radical feminism views violence against women as a manifestation of broader patriarchal power structures (Arjun 2020). According to this perspective, gender-based violence is not an isolated criminal phenomenon but a systemic consequence of unequal gender relations. Radical feminists argue that many protective measures serve as mechanisms for regulating women's bodies, sexuality, and behaviour. Policies framed as protective often reinforce patriarchal assumptions by portraying women as inherently vulnerable and dependent. Feminist scholars challenge the assumption that the state is a neutral actor. They argue that state institutions are influenced by prevailing social norms and power relations, including patriarchal values. Consequently, policies designed to address women's safety may reflect existing gender inequalities rather than transform them. The state's increasing reliance on surveillance technologies, policing mechanisms, and behavioural regulation can therefore be understood as part of broader governance strategies aimed at managing risk and maintaining social order. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a critical lens for examining the politics of women's safety and the relationship between empowerment, protection, and control.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design to examine the politics of women's safety in India through the interconnected dimensions of protection, empowerment, and state control. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy documents, legal frameworks, reports of national and international organizations, feminist writings, and relevant media sources. The study employs a thematic method of analysis to explore the key debates and recurring patterns surrounding women's safety in contemporary India. Particular attention is given to themes such as gender-based violence, state intervention, surveillance and governance, women's empowerment, institutional accountability, autonomy, citizenship, and the role of public policy in shaping women's everyday experiences. By examining these themes, the study seeks to understand how women's safety is conceptualized, implemented, and politically contested within contemporary governance frameworks.

The analytical framework is informed by feminist political theory, particularly liberal feminist, radical feminist, and feminist state perspectives. These theoretical approaches provide a critical lens for evaluating the relationship between gender, power, and governance, and for assessing whether safety-oriented policies genuinely promote women's empowerment or reinforce paternalistic forms of regulation and control. The study further investigates how discourses of protection may simultaneously function as mechanisms of surveillance and social regulation, thereby influencing women's mobility, agency, and access to public spaces. Rather than measuring the effectiveness of specific policies quantitatively, the study critically examines the broader political and social implications of women's safety initiatives. Through this qualitative and interpretive approach, the research aims to contribute to ongoing debates on gender justice, democratic citizenship, and the balance between security, freedom, and state authority in contemporary India.

### **Historical Context of Women's Safety in India**

Understanding contemporary debates on women's safety in India requires an examination of the historical evolution of gender relations and social structures. Historically, the status of women in India has undergone significant transformations. While evidence from the Vedic period suggests that women enjoyed relatively greater social, educational, and religious

participation, their position gradually declined with the consolidation of patriarchal norms and institutions (Chakravarti 1993 p 98). Practices such as child marriage, dowry, purdah, restrictions on inheritance, and denial of educational opportunities reinforced women's subordinate status and limited their autonomy within both public and private spheres.

During the colonial period, social reform movements emerged to challenge discriminatory practices affecting women. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated for women's rights and campaigned against practices such as sati and child marriage, laying the foundation for modern gender reforms (Forbes 1996). Following independence, the Constitution of India guaranteed equality before law, prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, and provided a framework for women's empowerment. Despite these constitutional safeguards, gender-based violence and discrimination remain persistent challenges. Domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking, workplace inequality, and cybercrime continue to affect women across social groups. This historical trajectory demonstrates that women's safety is deeply embedded within broader structures of patriarchy, social norms, and institutional practices that continue to shape women's lived experiences in contemporary India (Menon, 2012).

### **Rethinking Women's Safety Through a Feminist Lens**

Conventional understandings of women's safety often equate safety with protection from physical violence and criminal acts. While protection from harm remains essential, feminist scholars argue that such a narrow understanding overlooks broader dimensions of freedom, autonomy, dignity, and equal citizenship. From a feminist perspective, women's safety is not merely the absence of violence but the presence of social, political, and institutional conditions that enable women to participate fully in public life without fear or restriction (Menon, 2012). Feminist theory emphasizes that genuine safety is closely linked to women's agency and freedom of movement. Women cannot be considered truly safe if they are compelled to alter their behaviour, restrict their mobility, or avoid certain spaces due to the threat of violence. In this context, the discourse of protection has been critically examined for its tendency to portray women as inherently vulnerable individuals requiring protection from families, communities, or the state (Kapur 2005 p 34). Although such protective measures may appear benevolent, they often reinforce paternalistic attitudes and justify restrictions on women's autonomy.



Examples of this phenomenon can be observed in the imposition of hostel curfews for women, parental restrictions on independent travel, limitations on female students' movement within educational institutions, and public advisories that emphasize precautionary behaviour. Such measures frequently shift responsibility for safety onto women themselves rather than addressing the structural factors that produce insecurity. Feminist scholars therefore contend that meaningful safety requires challenging patriarchal norms, transforming unequal power relations, and creating inclusive public spaces where women can exercise their rights and freedoms without fear, surveillance, or discrimination (Agnes 2016).

### **Women's Safety as a Political Problem**

Women's safety in India is commonly viewed as a law-and-order issue requiring stronger policing, harsher punishments, and enhanced security mechanisms. However, a deeper analysis reveals that women's safety is fundamentally a political issue connected to questions of power, governance, citizenship, gender relations, and social justice. It is not merely about preventing violence but also about understanding how the state, institutions, and society define and respond to women's experiences of insecurity. Therefore, women's safety must be examined within broader social, economic, cultural, and political structures rather than through a narrow security framework alone.

In recent years, incidents of sexual violence, domestic abuse, workplace harassment, cybercrime, and gender discrimination have generated widespread concern. Cases such as the 2012 Delhi gang rape and the 2024 Kolkata doctor rape and murder case intensified public debates and compelled governments to introduce various measures, including stricter criminal laws, fast-track courts, women's helplines, emergency response systems, surveillance technologies, and safety applications (Singha 2015 p1405). While these interventions demonstrate governmental commitment to addressing violence against women, they often focus on visible and measurable actions that provide public reassurance rather than tackling the deeper causes of gender-based violence. The increasing political significance of women's safety has also led political parties to include security-related promises in electoral campaigns. Governments frequently present safety initiatives as evidence of responsive governance. However, such approaches often prioritize security management over structural transformation. Policies emphasizing CCTV cameras, facial recognition systems, GPS

tracking, and increased police presence may improve immediate protection, but they do not address the patriarchal norms and unequal power relations that underpin violence against women.

Patriarchy remains one of the most significant obstacles to women's safety. Social norms that portray women as subordinate, dependent, or responsible for maintaining family honour contribute to victim-blaming, restrictions on mobility, and tolerance of gender-based violence (Hasan 2020). Economic dependence further limits women's ability to escape abusive situations or seek justice. Women belonging to marginalized caste and social groups often face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, making them particularly vulnerable.

Institutional weaknesses also hinder progress. Despite legal reforms, survivors frequently encounter insensitive policing, delayed judicial processes, inadequate investigations, and low conviction rates. Such shortcomings discourage reporting and undermine confidence in the justice system. As a result, legal protections alone are insufficient without effective implementation and institutional accountability.

Feminist scholars argue that political discourse often shifts responsibility for safety from institutions and perpetrators to women themselves (Fatima 2023 p 4). Advice encouraging women to avoid travelling at night, dress modestly, or restrict their movements implies that women must change their behaviour to remain safe. This approach normalizes unsafe environments and places the burden of prevention on potential victims rather than addressing the root causes of violence. Furthermore, the expansion of surveillance technologies raises concerns about privacy, autonomy, and state control. Measures introduced in the name of protection may simultaneously increase monitoring of women's lives, creating a paradox where safety policies can also restrict freedom. Therefore, genuine women's safety requires more than protection from violence; it demands structural reforms, gender equality, institutional accountability, and the empowerment of women as autonomous citizens. The politics of women's safety thus reflects the ongoing tension between symbolic governance and meaningful social transformation.

### **Women's Safety in India Between Protection Empowerment and State Control**

The issue of women's safety has become a major concern in contemporary India, leading to the introduction of various legal, institutional, and technological measures aimed at protecting

women from gender-based violence. Over the past decade, governments have implemented initiatives such as emergency helplines, mobile safety applications, CCTV surveillance systems, fast-track courts, women-only police stations, and enhanced security arrangements in public spaces. These measures have been designed to improve women's security, facilitate crime reporting, and strengthen emergency responses. While such interventions are often presented as tools of empowerment, they also raise important questions about surveillance, regulation, and the expanding role of the state in governing women's lives.

The debate surrounding women's safety extends beyond the simple objective of protection from violence. Feminist scholars argue that genuine safety should include freedom, autonomy, dignity, and equal participation in social and public life (Mishra, 2024 p 98). Although surveillance technologies and monitoring systems may improve the state's ability to respond to threats, they do not address the deeper structural causes of violence against women. Problems such as patriarchy, social inequality, discriminatory cultural norms, and institutional failures continue to shape women's experiences of insecurity. Consequently, many scholars caution that excessive reliance on surveillance can create an illusion of safety without addressing the underlying roots of gender-based violence.

The tension between protection and control becomes particularly visible in educational institutions, workplaces, and residential accommodations. Women's hostels and paying guest accommodations frequently impose curfews and mobility restrictions in the name of safety, while similar restrictions are rarely applied to men (Kumar 2015 p3). Such measures often assume that women's movement is the source of risk, thereby shifting responsibility away from institutions and perpetrators. Rather than transforming unsafe environments, these policies may limit women's access to education, employment, and public participation. Similarly, public advisories encouraging women to avoid travelling alone at night or to remain constantly vigilant can unintentionally reinforce the idea that women are responsible for preventing violence against themselves.

Women's safety in India is further complicated by deep-rooted structural inequalities. Patriarchal attitudes continue to influence social expectations regarding women's behaviour, mobility, and roles within society. Victim-blaming, moral policing, and restrictions on women's choices remain common, often normalizing violence and discrimination. Women who experience violence frequently encounter social stigma, while perpetrators may benefit

from cultural acceptance or institutional indifference. These realities demonstrate that violence against women is not merely an individual criminal act but is connected to broader systems of gender inequality and power. Institutional weaknesses also present significant barriers to women's safety. Despite the existence of comprehensive legal protections, many women face delayed investigations, insensitive policing, lengthy judicial processes, and low conviction rates. Fear of social stigma and lack of trust in authorities discourage many survivors from reporting crimes. As a result, the gap between legal rights and actual access to justice remains substantial. Economic dependence further increases women's vulnerability, limiting their ability to escape abusive situations or seek legal remedies. Women from marginalized communities, including Dalit, Adivasi, minority, migrant, and rural backgrounds, often experience multiple forms of discrimination that intensify their insecurity and reduce access to institutional support (Mishra 2024). Thus, women's safety cannot be achieved through policing, surveillance, or punitive laws alone. Meaningful and sustainable safety requires structural transformation that addresses patriarchal norms, strengthens institutional accountability, promotes economic empowerment, and ensures equal access to justice. A rights-based approach that prioritizes women's autonomy, freedom, and citizenship is essential. Only by combining protection with empowerment and equality can India create an environment in which women are able to participate fully in public life without fear, discrimination, or restriction.

### **Conclusion, Discussion of Findings and Way Forward**

The findings of this study reveal that the politics of women's safety in India is shaped by a complex relationship between protection, empowerment, and state control. Although women's safety has become a prominent issue within public discourse and policy frameworks, the analysis demonstrates that many contemporary approaches contain significant contradictions. Measures introduced to enhance women's security often function simultaneously as instruments of empowerment and mechanisms of regulation, reflecting the broader tension between security and individual freedom.

The study finds that state interventions have played an important role in expanding legal protections and increasing public awareness regarding gender-based violence. Legislative reforms, fast-track courts, women's helplines, emergency response systems, safety

applications, and other institutional mechanisms have strengthened the recognition of violence against women as a public and political issue rather than a private concern. These initiatives have contributed to greater visibility of women's rights and reinforced governmental commitment to addressing crimes against women. However, the findings also indicate that many safety initiatives continue to operate within paternalistic frameworks that portray women primarily as vulnerable individuals requiring protection. Rather than treating women as autonomous citizens entitled to equal rights and freedoms, many policies emphasize monitoring, regulation, and behavioural management. Consequently, the discourse of protection often becomes intertwined with practices of control. Women are frequently encouraged to modify their behaviour, avoid particular spaces, and adopt precautionary measures, while insufficient attention is given to addressing the structural conditions that enable violence.

A significant finding of the study is the growing reliance on surveillance-based approaches as solutions to women's insecurity. CCTV networks, GPS-enabled applications, facial recognition technologies, and digital monitoring systems are increasingly promoted as effective tools for ensuring safety. While these technologies may improve crime detection and emergency response, they do little to address the root causes of violence. Patriarchal norms, institutional weaknesses, economic inequalities, victim-blaming attitudes, and discriminatory social practices remain largely unaffected by technological interventions. As a result, surveillance frequently functions as a mechanism of risk management rather than a catalyst for meaningful social transformation.

The study further demonstrates that responsibility for safety is often shifted from institutions and perpetrators to women themselves. Public advisories, hostel curfews, mobility restrictions, and safety guidelines implicitly place the burden of prevention on women rather than on society, state institutions, or offenders. Such measures normalize unsafe environments and reinforce the expectation that women must adapt to insecurity rather than demand accountability and structural reform. This tendency highlights the persistent tension between protection and autonomy that characterizes many contemporary safety policies. The analysis also reveals that legal reforms alone cannot guarantee meaningful safety. Persistent challenges such as patriarchal social norms, inadequate policing, judicial delays, low conviction rates, economic dependence, caste-based inequalities, and social discrimination continue to

undermine the effectiveness of existing laws. Women from marginalized communities often experience multiple and intersecting forms of vulnerability that further restrict their access to justice and security. These findings support feminist arguments that genuine safety must be understood not merely as protection from violence but as the ability to exercise freedom, dignity, agency, and equal citizenship without fear.

Moving forward, policy approaches to women's safety must adopt a rights-based and gender-sensitive framework that prioritizes empowerment over control. This requires strengthening institutional accountability, improving police responsiveness, ensuring speedy and survivor-centred justice, and addressing barriers that discourage women from reporting crimes. Greater investment is needed in public infrastructure, including safe transportation systems, adequate street lighting, and inclusive urban planning that promotes women's access to public spaces. Equally important is the promotion of gender-sensitive education and awareness programmes aimed at challenging patriarchal attitudes and transforming discriminatory social norms. Public policy should move beyond regulating women's behaviour and instead focus on creating environments where women can participate freely in education, employment, politics, and public life. Ultimately, meaningful women's safety can be achieved only when protection is accompanied by freedom, equality, dignity, and substantive citizenship. A transformative approach that addresses the structural foundations of gender inequality is essential to ensure that state interventions empower women rather than constrain their autonomy.

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## Geopolitical Trilateralism: Dynamics of the India-Israel-Iran Nexus and Its Global Implications

Sidrat ul Muntaha

### Abstract

*This paper undertakes a rigorous and wide-ranging examination of the growing depth of engagement between India and Israel—two states whose bilateral ties have expanded considerably in recent decades. It investigates how the geopolitical presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran shapes, complicates, and constrains this evolving partnership. By tracing the political, strategic, and diplomatic undercurrents that animate these triangular interactions, the study seeks to illuminate the layered web of interests and pressures driving each actor's foreign policy calculus. Drawing on historical trajectories, contemporary developments, and prospective future configurations, the paper aims to contribute substantive analytical insight into this consequential geopolitical triangle.*

**Keywords:** India; Iran; Strategic; Nexus; Israel; Defence

### Introduction

In the arena of international affairs, the role of converging interests, shared values, and common threats in cementing inter-state partnerships can hardly be overstated. When two countries discover mutual ground—whether ideological, strategic, or economic—the conditions for durable cooperation are often established. India and Israel represent a notable illustration of this logic. Despite their geographic distance and the disparate historical trajectories that shaped their respective identities, both nations have found common cause on several fronts, most visibly in their shared opposition to terrorism and their broadly democratic political systems. Yet the story of India-Israel relations is not one of uncomplicated convergence. India's early recognition of Israel in the 1950s sat alongside its vocal championing of Palestinian self-determination, a tension that reflected the inherent duality of idealism and realpolitik in New Delhi's diplomatic orientation.

The foreign policy posture of post-independence India was conditioned by a complex interplay of domestic compulsions and external pressures. The doctrine of non-alignment, which defined India's Cold War-era positioning, was not merely an ideological stance—it was a strategic calculation by a newly sovereign yet economically fragile state. As Kenneth Waltz (2008) observed, structural constraints in the international system compel states to manoeuvre carefully: great powers assert dominance, prompting weaker actors to balance against potential threats. For India, the imperative was not to align reflexively with either superpower bloc, but to prioritise its own developmental agenda—addressing poverty, infrastructural deficits, technological lag, and social fragmentation—over the pursuit of geopolitical prestige (Waltz 2008, 120-170). Non-alignment, in this context, was a rational choice rather than a naive idealism.

The conclusion of the Cold War introduced a radically altered international landscape. Globalisation expanded economic horizons while simultaneously exposing India to transnational threats, particularly the spectre of international terrorism. These twin pressures prompted a recalibration of Indian foreign policy—away from the studied neutrality of non-alignment and toward a more pragmatic engagement with global powers, including the United States. Regional concerns displaced global ideological commitments as the primary lens through which New Delhi assessed its interests. It was against this backdrop that Prime Minister Narasimha Rao took the landmark step of establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel on January 29, 1992, formalised through the opening of respective embassies in New Delhi and Tel Aviv (Pant 2009, 90-120). This decision signalled a willingness to let strategic utility, rather than solidarity with the Arab world, guide India's conduct.

The India-Israel relationship entered a qualitatively new phase following Narendra Modi's assumption of the Indian premiership in 2014. Observers and analysts have broadly characterised this period as one of diplomatic reinvigoration, marked by a notable shift from the covert and deliberately low-key engagement that had characterised earlier years toward an open, publicly affirmed partnership. Modi's personal affinity for Israel was not new—as Chief Minister of Gujarat, he had visited Tel Aviv in 2006 and expressed admiration for Israel's developmental model. Israel, for its part, welcomed Modi at a time when certain Western capitals-maintained reservations regarding his handling of communal tensions in 2002. The September 2014 meeting

between Modi and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly further underscored the momentum toward a reinvigorated bilateral relationship, with Netanyahu articulating an expansive vision of Indo-Israeli collaboration (Ashwarya 2017, 63-72).

Prime Minister Modi's three-day visit to Israel in 2017 stood as a watershed moment in the bilateral relationship, being the first-ever trip by a sitting Indian prime minister to the Jewish state. A series of substantive agreements were concluded during the visit, pointing toward lasting mutual benefit across multiple domains. Netanyahu's reciprocal visit to India in 2018 further cemented the bond. The contemporary India-Israel partnership spans defence and security cooperation, technology and innovation transfer, agricultural collaboration, and growing trade ties—reflecting a broad-based strategic alignment rather than a narrowly instrumental relationship. Israel has emerged as one of India's foremost defence suppliers, playing a pivotal role in India's military modernisation programme. Taken together, these developments underscore a relationship of considerable strategic depth, with implications that extend well beyond the bilateral plane into regional and global configurations of power.

### **India-Israel Balancing Relationship: Influence on Iran**

In recent years, certain dimensions of Iranian state conduct have begun to register as sources of tangible concern for Indian policymakers. Unlike the challenge posed by Pakistan—which, despite its sponsorship of militant networks targeting India, remains a neighbour with whom engagement is unavoidable—Iran's behaviour introduces a distinct category of threat. Iranian actions have at times directly impinged upon Indian interests, including incidents involving the seizure of Indian-flagged maritime vessels that placed Indian nationals at risk and raised questions about the security of vital commercial sea lanes.

Iran's expanding footprint in India's maritime neighbourhood—a region of immense strategic significance encompassing critical energy corridors and major trade arteries—adds further complexity to New Delhi's calculations. Indian policymakers cannot dismiss Iranian conduct as peripheral: Tehran has, on occasion, provided support to groups and movements that run counter to Indian interests, including factions operating in the Kashmir region and elements sympathetic

to Pakistan's strategic agenda. Moreover, Iran's role in facilitating the spread of radical interpretations of Islam within parts of the Indian subcontinent has been perceived as a challenge to both domestic social cohesion and broader national security imperatives. Unless Pakistan's sustained export of terrorism is durably curtailed—a task that India acknowledges cannot be accomplished without genuine multilateral resolve—the risk of unexpected geopolitical realignments will persist. One scenario that New Delhi views with particular wariness is the emergence of a closer Iran-Pakistan-China axis that would compound pressures on India's strategic environment. Conversely, some analysts have contemplated the paradox of a situation in which shared anxieties about Pakistani instability might drive both Iran and Israel toward parallel, if not coordinated, responses—a development that would dramatically redraw regional alignments and power balances. India's ability to navigate this volatile landscape depends on proactive situational awareness and a coherent long-term strategic framework (Ara 2019, 101-105).

### **Israel's Strategic Perspective on Iran's Influence in India**

From the Israeli vantage point, the most pressing consideration is not to obscure, but to bring into open relief, the defining parameters of India's relationship with Iran. The complex issues surrounding Pakistan, Kashmir, and the broader Muslim world are, after all, not hidden—they are empirically observable features of the regional landscape. Israel does not harbour significant concerns about India's robust ties with the United States, Afghanistan, or indeed with Israel itself. However, what does demand transparency, in Israeli strategic thinking, is India's posture on Iran's nuclear ambitions, the question of Pakistani access to the Iranian strategic space, and the thorny issue of Baluchistan, where external interference continues to generate instability. It is widely understood that Iran continuously seeks to leverage points of pressure against India—most notably by attempting to undercut the India-Israel relationship, constraining India's nuclear engagement, and perpetuating low-level conflict in the Kashmir valley. A clear-eyed Indian appreciation of Iran's leverage capacity would, in Israel's assessment, push New Delhi toward a firmer stance vis-à-vis Tehran and reduce the scope for Iranian manipulation (Barzegar 2018, 70-89).

Israeli analysts have articulated a nuanced reading of the India-Iran dimension in bilateral relations. One prominent Israeli scholar has argued that India's approach to Iran is fundamentally

shaped by its own national interests, with the Iranian factor serving as a secondary, incidental variable rather than the central determinant of India-Israel ties. From this perspective, India could substantially improve its management of the Iranian question—and thereby ease Israeli anxieties—by more clearly articulating, whether publicly or through discreet diplomatic signalling, the nature and boundaries of its relationship with Tehran. By doing so, New Delhi could push the Iranian dimension into the category of manageable friction rather than strategic liability, demonstrating the kind of pragmatic statecraft that Israel would find reassuring.

Despite occasional suggestions of a perfect convergence of views among New Delhi, Tel Aviv, and Washington on the Iranian question, Israel's actual posture reveals a degree of equanimity that goes beyond surface appearances. Israeli policymakers are well-acquainted with India's historically calibrated position on Iran and are cognisant of the economic and energy imperatives that continue to shape Indian engagement with Tehran. Recognising that India-Iran ties are a geopolitical reality given the structural constraints of energy dependency and geographic proximity, Israeli officials have generally refrained from pressing New Delhi to make binary choices or publicly adopt a maximally adversarial stance toward Iran. Instead, the Israeli approach rests on a quiet appreciation of India's compulsions, a degree of strategic patience, and a deliberate avoidance of overreach in seeking to shape India's Iran policy (Barzilai 2001, 100-110).

### **Security Concerns and Regional Transformations**

The substantial qualitative deepening of Indo-Israeli relations over the preceding two decades prompts a fundamental analytical question: does Iran occupy an inherently adversarial position in India's strategic calculus, necessitating a framework of containment? And if so, how does India's historically embedded strategic rapport with Tehran—rooted in civilisational ties, energy interests, and connectivity imperatives—intersect with its expanding partnership with Israel? The weight of historical analysis and realpolitik reasoning suggests that any significant Indian strategic reorientation will inevitably draw it further into the complex dynamics of Iranian geopolitics. India's aspirations to global leadership status are expressed, in part, through its insistence on maintaining comprehensive, non-discriminatory engagement with all major regional actors. This self-image as an autonomous great power forecloses the option of fully subordinating its Iran

policy to the preferences of either Israel or the United States. India will engage the Islamic Republic on terms defined by its own national interest calculus, and it is pertinent to consider whether its various diplomatic gestures toward Iranian stakeholders represent genuinely strategic commitments or primarily symbolic acts of balancing.

As Rajnath Singh has noted, India's security perceptions in Central and West Asia constitute the organising framework within which its connections to broader international issues are situated. The difficulty of safeguarding Indian interests in this arc is well acknowledged. The regional variables that most directly bear on India's strategic calculus include: the deteriorating security environment in Pakistan and its downstream consequences; the bilateral India-Iran relationship and what its trajectory implies for India's engagements with other West Asian actors; the Israel-Iran antagonism and its reverberations for India's West Asia policy; and the intricate nuclear geometry involving non-proliferation commitments and regional arms dynamics. All these factors intersect with India's West Asian security perceptions and its evolving strategic culture, which resists simplistic alignments in favour of layered, multidimensional engagement (Chiriyankandath 2007, 40-50).

### **Iran's Role in Middle Eastern Geopolitics and India-Israel Diplomacy**

The geopolitical architecture of the Middle East cannot be adequately understood without grappling with the centrality of Iran's role in shaping its contours. Tehran's strategic positioning, its active involvement in regional proxy conflicts, and its pursuit of advanced nuclear and missile capabilities collectively constitute a set of variables that profoundly affect the foreign policy orientations and security calculations of both India and Israel (Cheema 2014, 35-49). Any serious analysis of the India-Israel relationship that fails to situate it within the broader Iran dimension will inevitably be incomplete. Iran's web of alliances—its ties to Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthi forces, and various Iraqi militias—alongside its ambitions for regional primacy, directly condition the strategic environment within which Indian and Israeli policymakers must operate. Assessing the evolving Iran-India-Israel triangle through a rigorous analytical framework is therefore indispensable for comprehending the region's shifting power dynamics and security paradigms.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 marked a watershed in Iran's regional conduct. In the revolution's aftermath, Tehran sought to leverage its ideological credentials to cultivate ties with Muslim-majority states across the region, simultaneously seeking to construct an alternative economic architecture that could insulate it from Western financial dominance. By April 1980, Iran was actively urging Asian nations to deepen commercial and banking ties as a means of reinforcing collective self-reliance and reducing dependence on Western-dominated financial institutions. More broadly, the revolution transformed Iran from a passive regional actor into a self-conscious driver of Middle Eastern politics, expanding its presence across political, military, and economic domains and projecting influence into centres of power that had hitherto been beyond its reach.

In subsequent decades, Iran pursued an active diplomatic strategy aimed at cultivating relationships with neighbouring states, Indian Ocean littoral countries, and emerging powers further afield. These alliances reflected Tehran's ambition to shape the regional order in its favour and to position itself as an indispensable player in the management of regional affairs. During the 1980s and 1990s, Iran also made concerted efforts to improve its political relationships with Central Asian neighbours, leveraging historical and cultural affinities to build cooperative frameworks conducive to stability and economic interchange. Through sustained diplomatic engagement and economic initiatives, Iran succeeded in establishing itself as a significant, if contested, pivot of regional politics (Pant 2004, 61-70).

The expanding partnership between India and Israel has attracted widespread scholarly and policy attention, driven in large part by their convergent threat perceptions regarding terrorism. Indian foreign policy discourse has undergone a palpable shift since the end of the Cold War, with former scepticism of close alignments giving way to a more pragmatic calculus that allows for the simultaneous cultivation of ties with both Iran and Israel. India's complex dual engagement with these two actors reflects its broader strategic commitment to maintaining a role as a stabilising force in the Middle East—one capable of engaging across the region's most fraught fault lines. The pivot of the India-Iran connection is particularly significant: understanding its depth and trajectory is essential for appreciating how India navigates the competing pressures and opportunities that the Middle Eastern theatre presents (Gerberg 2008, 120-130).

The India-Iran relationship rests on foundations that predate the modern state system—ancient commercial routes, deep linguistic and cultural interpenetration, and longstanding patterns of human exchange have created bonds of mutual familiarity and regard that neither sanctions nor geopolitical competition has entirely eroded. Economically, the bilateral relationship holds substantial unrealised potential, particularly in hydrocarbons, agriculture, pharmaceutical supply chains, and infrastructure development. For India, maintaining ties with Iran also serves a broader strategic function: as a non-aligned state with aspirations to regional leadership, India has consistently sought to preserve diplomatic access to all significant regional players, including those at odds with one another. Engagement with Tehran enables India to participate constructively in regional diplomacy, articulate its perspectives on contentious issues, and present itself as a credible mediator and stakeholder. This posture enhances India's credibility not only within the Middle East but on the wider global stage (Sajed 2014, 50-70).

### **Key Arguments and Future Challenges**

An important distinction must be drawn between the broader economic and technological relationship between India and Israel and the specifically strategic-military dimensions of their partnership. While commercial cooperation, technological exchange, agricultural innovation, cybersecurity collaboration, and civilian trade have evolved along relatively autonomous trajectories, defence cooperation between the two states is embedded within a far more intricate geopolitical environment. India's engagement with Israeli defence technology cannot be understood merely through the prism of bilateral cooperation; rather, it must be situated within the wider strategic architecture of the Middle East and South Asia, particularly India's simultaneous engagement with Iran, the Gulf monarchies, Russia, and the United States. Consequently, the military component of India-Israel relations necessitate a calibrated and multidimensional diplomatic approach that balances strategic convergence with geopolitical restraint. Israeli civilian technology transfers and commercial interactions with India largely operate on the basis of mutual economic benefit and developmental complementarities. These sectors are relatively insulated from broader geopolitical contestations because they primarily concern innovation, trade, agriculture, water management, digital infrastructure, and scientific cooperation. In contrast, arms



transfers and defence collaboration possess inherently strategic implications that extend beyond bilateral interests. From Israel's perspective, India occupies a uniquely valuable strategic position due to its ability to maintain constructive engagement with rival powers across the Middle East. Unlike many Western states whose relations with Iran remain constrained by ideological hostility or sanctions regimes, India has historically maintained channels of dialogue and cooperation with Tehran. This provides India with a distinctive diplomatic leverage that may indirectly serve Israeli strategic interests. As India's regional prominence expands through its growing economic influence, naval presence in the Indian Ocean, and deepening relations with Gulf states, Israel may increasingly perceive India not merely as a defence customer, but as a critical geopolitical interlocutor capable of influencing regional stability and moderating Iranian behaviour through diplomatic engagement rather than confrontation.

This evolving strategic logic reflects a broader transformation in contemporary international relations where states increasingly pursue issue-based partnerships instead of rigid alliance structures. India's approach toward Israel and Iran demonstrates the operationalisation of strategic autonomy in practice. Rather than aligning exclusively with one regional bloc, India seeks to preserve policy flexibility by maintaining productive relations with competing actors simultaneously. Such a strategy enables India to maximise its economic, security, and diplomatic interests while minimising the risks associated with regional polarisation. In this sense, India's balancing strategy is neither passive neutrality nor opportunistic ambiguity; rather, it constitutes a deliberate foreign policy doctrine aimed at preserving manoeuvrability in an increasingly multipolar international system. Despite periodic normative tensions generated by differing Indian and Israeli positions on the Palestinian issue, the convergence of broader national interests has continued to deepen bilateral cooperation. Shared concerns regarding terrorism, regional instability, maritime security, technological modernisation, and emerging security threats have contributed to a gradual strengthening of strategic trust between the two states. At the same time, India has consistently attempted to preserve its historical support for the Palestinian cause while expanding cooperation with Israel, thereby reflecting its broader diplomatic preference for equilibrium and coexistence over ideological absolutism. This balancing act highlights the

sophistication of India's contemporary foreign policy, which increasingly prioritises pragmatic engagement over binary geopolitical alignments.

Furthermore, India's influence within the Persian Gulf region may gradually emerge as a strategic asset that Israel actively seeks to cultivate. India's extensive diaspora presence, economic interdependence with Gulf economies, energy partnerships, and growing diplomatic credibility provide it with significant regional influence. If effectively leveraged, this influence could facilitate channels of communication and strategic moderation between competing regional actors. However, the success of such a geopolitical arrangement would depend not only upon India's diplomatic capabilities but also upon the willingness of Israel and its regional partners—including major powers such as Russia and the United States—to accommodate India's multidirectional foreign policy approach.

India's Iran policy, therefore, should not be interpreted solely through the lens of Israeli preferences or regional rivalries. India possesses independent strategic interests in ensuring regional stability, preventing nuclear proliferation, securing uninterrupted energy supplies, and maintaining access to Central Asia and Afghanistan through Iranian territory. These priorities compel India to sustain constructive engagement with Tehran despite external pressures. Simultaneously, India's growing strategic partnership with Israel reflects its recognition of Israel's technological sophistication, military capabilities, and intelligence cooperation as important assets for India's own national security objectives. The coexistence of these two relationships demonstrates India's capacity to pursue a complex and layered diplomacy rooted in national interest rather than ideological alignment. Ultimately, the future trajectory of India-Israel relations will depend upon how effectively both states navigate the broader geopolitical realities of the Middle East.

India's Iran policy need not be constructed as a direct counterpoint to Israeli preferences. India's own interest in constraining Iran's missile and nuclear capabilities, combined with its strategic imperative to diversify its energy sources, creates an objective alignment with Israeli and American goals that does not require formal coordination. Both Washington and New Delhi share a preference for an Iran that plays a constructive rather than destabilising role in regional affairs—

one that integrates into the global economic order and adheres to international norms, rather than mounting a direct challenge to the status quo. India is therefore likely to serve as a valuable partner in efforts to embed Iran economically within the regional and global system in ways consistent with international expectations (Yazdani 2007, 351-368). The countervailing influence of China and Russia—both of which provide Iran with financial resources and weaponry—paradoxically strengthens India's significance to Israel as a potential moderating actor in the Iran crisis.

Iran's influence on the India-Israel relationship simultaneously generates challenges and strategic openings. Israel has a compelling interest in encouraging India to develop and maintain a firm stance on Iran's nuclear ambitions, particularly as India's own capacity to shape Iranian conduct grows alongside its expanding regional footprint. Two strategic imperatives define India's Iran policy: preventing Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and leveraging Iran's economic integration into regional frameworks as a counterweight to the influence of Saudi Arabia or China within the Islamic Republic (Spyer 2015, 6-13). These objectives, if consistently pursued, would represent a meaningful contribution to the management of Iranian revisionism and would align Indian and Israeli interests more closely than either government has formally acknowledged.

## **Conclusion**

In assessing India's engagements with the states of the Middle East—and particularly its evolving relations with Iran and Israel—it becomes evident that the credibility and sustainability of Indian foreign policy depend upon pragmatic strategic calculations grounded in empirical realities rather than ideological rhetoric. Over the past few decades, India's Middle East policy has undergone a significant transformation from a largely cautious and reactive framework to a multidimensional and interest-driven approach. This transformation reflects India's growing economic ambitions, expanding energy requirements, security concerns, and aspirations for greater geopolitical influence in West Asia. Consequently, India has sought to cultivate productive and balanced relationships not only with Israel and Iran, but also with key regional actors such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar. These partnerships have increasingly extended beyond traditional

diplomatic engagement into areas such as trade, investment, defence cooperation, technology transfer, energy security, and diaspora management.

At the same time, the expansion of India's regional role must be viewed alongside the structural limitations that continue to constrain its strategic outreach. Administrative inefficiencies, bureaucratic delays, infrastructural weaknesses, and challenges associated with managing one of the world's largest expatriate populations remain important obstacles to deeper regional integration. Furthermore, transaction costs, policy inconsistencies, and the absence of a fully coherent long-term West Asia strategy often limit India's ability to maximise the potential of its regional partnerships. Therefore, while India's diplomatic presence in the Middle East has become increasingly visible and diversified, the effectiveness of its engagement will ultimately depend upon its capacity to strengthen domestic institutions and formulate a more coordinated strategic vision.

Within this broader regional framework, India's relationship with Iran continues to represent the pivotal variable shaping the trajectory of India-Israel relations. Iran occupies a uniquely significant place in India's foreign policy due to its geographic location, energy resources, connectivity potential, and strategic relevance in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Projects such as the Chabahar Port illustrate India's attempt to maintain an independent strategic foothold in the region while simultaneously balancing competing regional interests. Israel, on the other hand, has emerged as one of India's closest strategic partners in areas such as defence technology, intelligence cooperation, agriculture, cybersecurity, and innovation. The strengthening of India-Israel ties since the 1990s demonstrates India's willingness to move beyond earlier ideological hesitations and adopt a more pragmatic foreign policy orientation.

Moreover, India's approach toward the Middle East reflects a broader evolution in its foreign policy thinking—from non-alignment to what may be described as “multi-alignment” or issue-based strategic partnerships. India increasingly seeks to position itself as an autonomous actor capable of engaging with multiple centres of power simultaneously. Its emerging trilateral and multilateral engagements involving the United States, Iran, Israel, and Gulf states indicate an attempt to create flexible diplomatic arrangements that enhance regional stability while advancing

India's strategic and economic interests. Such an approach demonstrates India's preference for equilibrium, dialogue, and coexistence over rigid alliance structures.

Ultimately, the future of India's engagement with Iran and Israel will depend upon its ability to maintain this delicate balance amidst rapidly changing regional and global dynamics. Escalating regional conflicts, shifting energy politics, great power competition, and evolving security threats will continue to test India's diplomatic flexibility. Yet India's enduring commitment to strategic autonomy, moderation, and pragmatic engagement provides it with the capacity to navigate these complexities. In many ways, India's policy reflects a modern adaptation of the Gandhian-Buddhist ideal of the "middle path"—a strategy aimed at avoiding extremes while pursuing sustainable equilibrium and mutual coexistence. The extent to which India can successfully reconcile its relations with Iran, Israel, and the broader Middle East will ultimately determine not only the future character of its regional diplomacy but also its emergence as a credible and influential global power in the twenty-first century.

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## India's Strategic Autonomy in the Ukraine Crisis: Managing the Russia Partnership under Western Pressure

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### Abstract

*This paper examines India's exercise of strategic autonomy during the Ukraine crisis which began in February 2022. Despite intense Western pressure to condemn and sanction Russia, India abstained from key UN resolutions, significantly expanded energy imports from Moscow, and sustained critical defence cooperation. The paper argues that India's response reflects a consistent and pragmatic application of strategic autonomy, balancing historical dependence on Russian defence supplies, energy security needs, and its broader multi-alignment policy. By maintaining ties with Russia while strengthening Indo-Pacific partnerships through the Quad, India has demonstrated its ability to navigate great-power rivalry without compromising core national interests. While the Ukraine crisis has underscored the resilience of the Indo-Russian strategic partnership, it has also exposed the structural tensions and trade-offs that will define India's strategic autonomy in the years ahead.*

**Keywords:** Strategic Autonomy, India-Russia Relations, Ukraine Crisis, Indo-Pacific, Multipolarity

### Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war which escalated in February 2022 marked a major turning point in the conflict that had begun with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (EBSCO 2023, 1-2), to which much of the international community responded with unified condemnation. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution of March 2022, which called for the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces, was adopted with 141 votes in favour (UN 2022, 1). India, however, chose not to support the resolution. Instead, New Delhi abstained, as it did on various procedural votes (Price 2022, 1), while simultaneously expanding its energy and economic engagement with Moscow, even as Western sanctions intensified (BBC 2023, 1-2). India has generally avoided using the term "war" in its official discourse, preferring more neutral formulations such as the Ukraine "crisis" or "conflict" (MEA 2022, 1-6).

India reiterates its commitment to the US-led Quad as a steadfast member (MSN 2025, 1-2). The Quad, comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the US, promotes the vision of a free and

open Indo-Pacific. For Washington, both the Quad and its deepening ties with India are central to its strategy of countering China but must carefully balance this with New Delhi's long-standing relationship with Moscow (Takenaka, Brunnstrom and Martina 2022, 1-3). Moscow regards the Indo-Pacific concept, particularly Quad security cooperation, as anti-China and a threat to its position in Asia, fearing it could disrupt its balance with Beijing and draw India closer to the US, thereby weakening their "special and privileged partnership." India has attempted to reassure Russia by presenting the Indo-Pacific as inclusive and cooperative, but with limited success (Hill 2021, 2-3). Thus, despite being a member of the grouping, India remained the only country that did not condemn Russia (Takenaka, Brunnstrom and Martina 2022, 1-3). However, India has repeatedly underscored the importance of dialogue and diplomacy between both sides in the Ukraine conflict (News18 2025, 1).

This stance puzzled many Western observers. Yet, it was fully in line with India's long-standing foreign policy approach. This paper argues that India's response to the Ukraine crisis should not be seen as a temporary diplomatic deviation or as a lingering Cold War-era alignment with Moscow. Rather, it reflects a conscious and structurally grounded pursuit of strategic autonomy, that is, the effort to preserve independent decision-making, safeguarding national interests, and maintaining ties across rival powers amid competing great-power pressures (Batra 2026, 2-6). To understand this position, it is necessary to examine the historical foundations of non-alignment, the depth of India-Russia ties, the evolving international situation and India's role as a representative voice of the Global South. The Ukraine crisis has placed India's strategic autonomy under significant strain, highlighting both its continued relevance and its challenges.

### **The Doctrine of Strategic Autonomy: Historical Roots and Contemporary Meaning**

Strategic autonomy is not a term invented in contemporary times, rather it has deep roots in the Nehruvian project of non-alignment, which was itself a rational response to the structural conditions facing a newly independent state in a bipolar world and emphasised diversification of partnerships (Batra 2026, 2-6). Non-alignment, as articulated by Nehru, was intended to preserve national sovereignty and avoid involvement in superpower confrontations (Mitra 2025, 2-3). The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), co-founded at Bandung in 1955 gave this instinct a multilateral architecture. It also enabled India to access economic and military



support from both blocs, while positioning it as a leading moral voice of the Global South. While Washington extended food assistance, Moscow provided steel plants, military hardware, and technology transfers. Critics interpreted this as opportunism, whereas supporters viewed it as an expression of strategic autonomy (PubAdmin.Institute 2025). India formally retained its commitment to the NAM, but under Indira Gandhi, the policy took a more pragmatic turn, with a discernible tilt toward the Soviet Union in response to evolving regional security challenges (Mitra 2025, 3). Thus, Non-alignment did not imply neutrality. Despite avoiding blocs, conflicts such as Kashmir pushed India to align with the Soviet Union in defence of its sovereignty (Morales 2025, 2).

In the post-Cold War period, this approach underwent further transformation. India's economic liberalisation in 1991 and a gradual rapprochement with the US marked a shift toward a more flexible and interest-driven foreign policy (Mitra 2025, 3). In the 1990s, Moscow's economic crisis limited Indo-Russian cooperation beyond defence, prompting India to expand ties with the US and partners like Japan, France, which supported New Delhi's expanding role in the Asia-Pacific (Morales 2025, 3). Rather than adhering to rigid ideological positions, India began to prioritise strategic choice and adaptability. Over time, non-alignment thus evolved from a fixed doctrine into a dynamic framework, ultimately taking shape in the 21st century as the broader concept of strategic autonomy (Mitra 2025, 2-4). While the 2006 Indo-US nuclear agreement transformed bilateral ties, defence cooperation stayed constrained. Meanwhile, India sustained its relationship with Russia, which remained its primary arms supplier throughout this period (Morales 2025, 4-7). As leaders consistently emphasised independent decision-making in nuclear and foreign policy, by 2013, officials were formally signalling a shift from non-alignment toward strategic autonomy, framing it as a long-standing principle guiding India's engagement with global power structures.

The Modi-led BJP government's election in 2014 marked a sharper shift in India's foreign policy. Modi's decision to skip the 2016 NAM summit signalled this transition, as he framed expanding global partnerships as expressions of strategic autonomy. Officials described India as issue-based "aligned," not ideological, preserving flexibility, while India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar emphasised a more proactive global role, urging India to engage globally with greater clarity of interests and suggesting a movement beyond traditional notions of non-alignment and even strategic autonomy. Indian journalist Sreemoy Talukdar defines

strategic autonomy as the “exercise of choice driven purely by sovereign considerations and interest” (Smith 2020, 7-12). Today, India’s pursuit of strategic autonomy is multifaceted and complex, involving the balancing of competing interests, championing multilateralism, diversification of partnerships, and emphasis on self-reliance. It reflects an ability to make independent choices while contributing to a stable, multipolar order (Bhadauria 2025, 1-4). India engages the US through the Quad to counter China, maintains economic ties with China despite border tensions, and sustains relations with Russia while participating in forums such as the SCO and BRICS. This multi-alignment strategy keeps options open, with Russia remaining central to India’s strategic autonomy and security interests (Morales 2025, 1-7; Bhadauria 2025, 1-4). As a pivotal state, India has pursued a policy of strategic hedging, avoiding alignment in the US-China and US-Russia rivalries while engaging all sides. This approach enables it to navigate global uncertainty, secure benefits, and maintain its strategic autonomy (Kara 2025, 5-30).

### **India’s Position on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict**

The Russia-Ukraine war began on 24 February 2022 with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, marking a sharp escalation of a conflict that had persisted since 2014 following the annexation of Crimea. The international response included sanctions, and diplomatic isolation of Russia. Amid this polarization, India adopted a carefully calibrated stance, emphasising peaceful resolution while abstaining from key UN resolutions against Russia. This position reflects India’s commitment to strategic autonomy, shaped by its historical ties with Russia, legacy of non-alignment, and evolving global priorities. Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi’s remark to Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Samarkand SCO meeting in 2022 that “now is not an era of war” echoed India’s consistent calls for de-escalation and diplomacy. At the same time, India provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and maintained diplomatic engagement with both Putin and Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. India’s quiet diplomatic role was further reflected in with CIA Director William Burns noting that PM Modi’s communication with President Putin contributed to moderating Russia’s nuclear rhetoric during heightened tensions in 2023 (Meena 2025, 2-16). India has consistently maintained that it is not neutral, but firmly aligned with peace (Singla 2025, 2). India’s most

notable display of calibrated diplomacy was PM Modi's visits to Moscow in July 2024 and Kyiv in August 2024, the first by an Indian PM to Ukraine. The sequence signalled strong ties with Russia alongside close engagement with the West. Michael Kugelman described it as a reaffirmation of India's strategic autonomy. Modi's Moscow trip coincided with Russian strikes in Ukraine that killed at least 41 people, including children in Kyiv. While he called the deaths tragic and deeply distressing, he stopped short of blaming Moscow (Pandey 2024, 1-5). Historically, both India have operated within what scholars term a "*reciprocity of silence*." Soviet Union supported India in its conflicts with Pakistan, and more recently, Russia endorsed India's position on Kashmir following the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019. In return, India has largely refrained from criticising Russia's actions in Syria, Crimea, and the Ukraine crisis (Lalwani, et al. 2021, 3).

### **The India-Russia Relationship: Depth and Dependency and Western Pressure**

The foundations of this relationship extend back to the Cold War era which led to decades of close connections at the highest levels, evolving in the post-Soviet period into what both governments formally describe first as 'Declaration on Strategic Partnership' in 2000 and then into "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership" in 2010 (Kapoor 2019, 1-3).

Russia has been the primary supplier of weapons platforms and military technology to the Indian armed forces for over the decades now. By most credible estimates, between 60 to 70 per cent of India's existing military hardware stock is of Russian or Soviet origin. This includes the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya, the BrahMos hypersonic cruise missile system developed as a joint Indo-Russian venture, the S-400 Triumf air-defence system procured over sustained American objections, a substantial portion of India's fighter aircraft fleet, armoured vehicles, and naval systems (Suciu 2026, 2-4). This level of dependence makes rapid disaggregation difficult. India's defence procurements from Russia often underscore the tension between its strategic autonomy and US expectations of alignment.

Despite growing pressure from Washington and shifting geopolitical dynamics, the India-Russia strategic partnership has remained resilient. It is anchored in enduring factors: Soviet-era support when the West declined help, Russia's readiness to share advanced military

technology without any strings attached, backing for India's nuclear deterrent, a relationship largely free from sanctions, and expanding cooperation in space and science. Together, these elements continue to sustain Indo-Russian the partnership even as India balances ties with other major powers (IDN 2025, 1-3).

Additionally, amid shifting security dynamics in Asia, India leverages its partnership with Russia to offset deepening Sino-Russian alignment. Concerns over both China and Pakistan strengthening ties with Moscow further reinforce this approach. By maintaining strong ties with Russia, India seeks to prevent excessive Russian proximity to either country and safeguard its regional interests (Meena 2025, 3-9).

Before the invasion, Russian crude made up less than per cent of India's oil imports. After Western sanctions, Russia offered steep discounts to Asian buyers, prompting India to scale up purchases. Russia soon became India's largest supplier, aided by established bilateral ties and the creation of alternative shipping, insurance, and payment systems. Consequently, its share in India's crude imports rose to 21.6 per cent in 2022-23, 35.9 per cent in 2023-24, and 35.8 per cent in 2024-25. Although the exact share refined is unclear, Europe's imports of Indian petroleum products increased by 46 per cent between 2022-23 and 2023-24 (Swain 2026, 1-7).

The US accused India of indirectly financing Russia's war through its oil purchases, as New Delhi emerged as the second-largest buyer of Russian crude after China. The US president also criticised India's membership in BRICS, which included Russia and China. Analysts viewed this tough stance either as pressure on Russia or as leverage to push New Delhi to accept Washington's terms in ongoing trade negotiations, as the US threatened India with additional tariffs (AlJazeera 2025, 2-5). India rejected it as unfair, and also cited Western double standards. India defended these imports as securing affordable energy for its citizens, while also enhancing its role as a petroleum exporter (Swain 2026, 1-7). India stated that its Russian imports were within legal norms and had contributed to stabilising global crude prices. Government sources added that New Delhi would continue purchasing Russian oil despite US pressure. Meanwhile, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) described the India-Russia relationship as "steady and time-tested," not to be viewed through the lens of any third country (AlJazeera 2025, 2-5). The West also views India as a counterweight to China and is cautious about disrupting that balance (Pandey 2024, 1-5). In February 2026, the Trump administration

lifted the 25 per cent tariffs imposed over India's Russian oil imports (Vaishnav 2026, 1-33). EAM Jaishankar accused Western states of inconsistency in pressing India over Russia while not adequately addressing India's concerns on Pakistan-backed terrorism in Kashmir, pointing out that if sovereignty is treated as a universal principle, it should be applied equally to both Kashmir and Ukraine (RT.com 2025, 1-2).

The episode highlighted New Delhi's delicate balancing act, strengthening US ties while preserving relations with Moscow, prompting tactical adjustments without a strategic break. As a middle power in a polarised system, India's choices are shaped by asymmetries. Despite frictions, the US remains vital especially in the Indo-Pacific, but to avoid overdependence, India continues to prioritise strategic autonomy through diversified partnerships, including Russia. US President Trump's ambiguous Indo-Pacific and China strategy reinforced New Delhi's view that isolating Russia would be costlier in the long run than maintaining engagement (Vaishnav 2026, 1-33).

### **Multilateral Positioning and the Global South**

During its two-year tenure on the UN Security Council, India positioned itself as a leading voice of the Global South amid contentious debates over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which contributed to severe global food and energy insecurity. Across its interventions in both the Security Council and the General Assembly, India repeatedly urged an immediate halt to hostilities and an end to violence. It also extended economic assistance to several neighbouring countries in the Global South that were experiencing financial strain due to the spillover effects of the conflict (PTI 2022, 2-5). While Western states largely acted in unison, much of the Global South did not frame the war in the same way. Few openly supported Russia, but over 40 abstained or opposed UN resolutions condemning it, and 50 voted against its Human Rights Council (HRC) expulsion. Just like India, Indonesia and Brazil also avoided sanctions against Russia. Contrary to Biden's framing of the conflict as a struggle between democracy and autocracy, major democracies in the Global South did not align themselves with Western positions and prioritised national interests (Rabel 2025, 1005-1021). In 2022, EAM S. Jaishankar, while addressing India's position on the Russia-Ukraine war, stated that Europe must "grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the

world's problems are not Europe's problems." The remark gained international attention and was later referenced by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Munich Security Conference (ANI 2023, 1). The exchange highlighted India's emphasis on strategic autonomy, reinforcing New Delhi's position as an independent major power rather than an ally aligned with any single bloc (Jianxue 2022, 9-12).

Within BRICS and the SCO, India advocated for dialogue and development-focused agendas rather than bloc confrontation, using these platforms to maintain engagement with Russia (IndianDefenceNews 2024, 1-2; newkerala.com 2025, 1-3). India's G20 presidency in 2023 provided perhaps the most visible demonstration of this multilateral management. The Delhi Declaration further emphasized the need to accelerate efforts to address the geopolitical impact on food and energy security. Furthermore, New Delhi brokered a consensus declaration that acknowledged the human suffering caused by the war in Ukraine without directly naming Russia as the aggressor, language representing a carefully negotiated compromise between Western and non-Western positions that allowed Modi to present India as a consensus builder rather than a partisan actor as well as without isolating itself from any side. This achievement highlights India's growing diplomatic influence at a time of shifting global alignments. The Modi government sought to position the country as a pivotal global actor, championing the interests of the Global South while also acting as a bridge with developed nations (Tan 2023, 1-7).

### **Stress Points and Future trajectory**

India's capacity to uphold its independent foreign policy, its strategic autonomy, was significantly tested during the Russia-Ukraine war (Nimesh and Marandi 2023, 2942-2948). India's cautious stance on major global conflicts has invited Western criticism without yielding significant concessions on market access, sanctions relief, or defence technology from them. Multilateral platforms enhance New Delhi's voice but seldom deliver tangible gains. The danger is autonomy might turn into something symbolic rather than strategic. India's choices remain limited by legacy dependencies and persistent vulnerabilities. Russia ties must be bounded by clear limits, not sentiment. Recalibration needs sharper decisions and faster defence indigenisation to reduce supplier risks (Shah 2026, 2-4).

However, it cannot be denied that India's restrained response to Russian aggression, allowed flexibility to safeguard core interests amid shifting geopolitics. Concerned about a deepening Russia-China alignment, and viewing China and Pakistan as primary security threats, India avoids pushing Russia closer to them. Maintaining this balance helps prevent the consolidation of a China-Russia-Pakistan axis while preserving India's strategic space and diplomatic leverage. India's foreign policy approach is carefully calibrated, reflecting its need to engage both major power blocs in the contemporary world order. It relied on the US, European Union (EU) and the G7 to balance China, while also preserving its longstanding and strong ties with Russia, which remains India's largest supplier of military equipment and technology (Nimesh and Marandi 2023, 2942-2948).

Even as the US pressed India to reconsider its longstanding partnership with Russia, India and Russia agreed to diversify economic ties and address the trade imbalance heavily tilted in Russia's favour, which India sought to reduce by boosting exports. Both emphasized strong energy cooperation, decades-long civil nuclear collaboration, and expanding engagement in clean energy, shipbuilding, and labour mobility, while aiming to raise bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2030. They also focused on technology transfer and establishing joint ventures in the defence sector. Thus, indicating that cooperation with Indo-Russian cooperation is set to deepen further (SCMP 2025, 1-3).

Russia's proposal to include China as a security guarantor has been explicitly rejected by Ukraine, which has limited such a role to states that actively supported it during the invasion. This exclusion, coupled with Moscow's reluctance to accept Western guarantors as neutral, significantly narrows the field, positioning India as one of the few actors whose involvement would remain broadly acceptable to both sides. India's calibrated blend of principle and pragmatism enhances its global standing, particularly across the Global South, while sustaining the perception that New Delhi could serve as a credible and trusted intermediary in Europe's most devastating conflict in decades (Palve 2025, 1-9).

EAM S. Jaishankar has reiterated that while India has remained in close contact with both Russia and Ukraine, it has refrained from prescribing any specific framework for peace, maintaining that negotiations must be led by the parties themselves. At the same time, he underscored India's constructive role, noting its involvement in facilitating understandings

during the 2022 Black Sea Grain Corridor initiative when it was approached to engage Russia (Banerjee 2025, 1-3). Furthermore, India has also emerged as a prospective partner in Ukraine's post-conflict reconstruction, following Kyiv's invitation to New Delhi to join the rebuilding process (Sharma 2023, 1-2). At another occasion, Jaishankar articulated that India would be open to playing a mediatory role if requested, while maintaining that New Delhi should not initiate such efforts unilaterally. Defending India's ties with Moscow, he argued India's commitment to ending the conflict, while justifying continued defence cooperation with Russia in light of longstanding Western preferences for supplying Pakistan over India. He further emphasised that Europe should recognise India's distinct strategic perspective, noting that, 'If I look at the history of India post-independence, Russia has never hurt our interests...The current relationship with Moscow is based on a stable and always very friendly relationship with Russia' (Chakraborty 2024, 1-3).

Given the significance of Russia on one side, and the West along with Ukraine on the other, for India's trade and defence needs, New Delhi cannot afford to alienate either camp. Although its ability to maintain this delicate balance has long drawn admiration, the coming years will serve as a critical test of the durability and credibility of its strategic autonomy (Singh and Sen 2024, 1-6). India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war reflects a cautious and balanced foreign policy. Without aligning with either side, it has emphasized peace, safeguarded national interests, and upheld its tradition of strategic autonomy, while maintaining strong ties with Russia (Meena 2025, 15). India-Russia relations continue to follow an "upward trajectory" despite Western pressure, with the strategic partnership expected to remain resilient and forward-looking in the years ahead, even amid global headwinds (Upadhyaya 2025, 1-3).

## **Conclusion**

India's navigation of the Ukraine crisis demonstrates that strategic autonomy, though structurally constrained, remains a viable and sophisticated foreign policy orientation. By carefully managing its Russia partnership amid intense Western pressure, India protected its defence and energy interests while positioning itself as a credible voice of the Global South. Through pragmatic diplomacy, G20 leadership, and sustained engagement with both Moscow and Kyiv, New Delhi reaffirmed the resilience of strategic autonomy. While the crisis exposed



certain tensions, its ability to balance relations with Russia and the West without full alignment has reinforced the relevance and resilience of strategic autonomy in an emerging multipolar world.

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## From National Awakening to Global Influence: Sri Aurobindo's Vision for India

Purna Rai

### Abstract

*This paper examines the vision of Sri Aurobindo regarding India's role in the world order and its emergence as a global power. Sri Aurobindo perceived India not merely as a political nation-state but as a spiritual civilisation destined to contribute to humanity's moral and cultural advancement. This paper examines the relationship between nationalism, spirituality, cultural identity, and international influence in his writings, speeches, and philosophical works. Sri Aurobindo's nationalism appears as both a concept of political freedom and a philosophy of civilisational awakening. It exhorts the country to recognise itself as a bearer of consciousness, formed by history and focused on the future, in addition to being a political entity. In addition to sovereignty, this vision calls on India to awaken its Aatma, organise its existence in accordance with its Dharma, and manifest its Shakti as a force of illumination in the larger world. The paper argues that Sri Aurobindo's concept of India's rise transcended material power and emphasised spiritual leadership, civilisational unity, and human evolution. The paper emphasises the ongoing significance of his vision in comprehending India's expanding global influence in the twenty-first century by placing his thoughts within both anti-colonial nationalism and modern international relations.*

**Keywords:** Sri Aurobindo, India, Global power, Nationalism, Spirituality, Civilisation, Dharma, Shakti.

### Introduction

The question of India's position in global politics has grown in significance in the twenty-first century. Scholars are actively re-examining intellectual traditions that foresaw India's future significance on the international scene as the country emerges as a major economic, political, and geopolitical force. Sri Aurobindo holds a unique position among the intellectuals who articulated such a vision through his philosophical and political writings. Sri Aurobindo, a nationalist, poet, philosopher, and spiritual guide, created an all-encompassing vision of India's future that blended political liberty with spiritual and cultural rebirth. This paper examines Sri Aurobindo's vision of India as a global power. It examines how his concepts of nationalism, spirituality, and civilisation influenced his perception of India's universal stature and assesses the relevance of his vision in contemporary politics. Although he is remembered for his contributions to the Indian independence movement and his spiritual philosophy, his concepts also offer a

deep comprehension of India's position in the global framework. Sri Aurobindo perceived India as a spiritual civilisation that aimed to enhance humanity's moral and cultural development rather than only as a political nation-state. His ideology fused nationalism with universalism, therefore providing a distinct perspective on India's role in global matters. Sri Aurobindo argued that India's liberation was essential for both political independence and the growth of humanity's spirituality. He asserted that each nation embodies a distinct essence and purpose, with India's role being to lead the world through the tenets of spirituality, harmony, and human oneness. Sri Aurobindo's nationalism was firmly based in cultural awareness and spiritual principles, in contrast to aggressive form of nationalism. He regarded India as a civilisation capable of integrating material progress with ethical and spiritual values.

Sri Aurobindo's works, such as, 'The Ideal of Human Unity, The Human Cycle, and Foundations of Indian Culture', demonstrate his concern with global peace, unity, and the prospective progress of humanity (Aurobindo, 1997 p, 52). He anticipated the emergence of international cooperation and stressed the importance of overcoming divisions based on race, religion, and nationality. His notion of human unity did not promote uniformity but rather harmony among varied cultures and nationalities. In this regard, his ideas remain highly relevant in the contemporary era of globalisation, international conflict, and cultural crisis.

Furthermore, Sri Aurobindo's vision of India's role resonates strongly with modern India's growing influence in global politics, diplomacy, culture, and spirituality. India's emphasis on peaceful cohabitation, yoga, non-violence, and democratic pluralism reflects many of the ideals that Sri Aurobindo articulated decades earlier. His philosophy and his writings instigate India to act not merely as an economic or military power but as a moral and spiritual force in the world. This paper seeks to examine Sri Aurobindo as a thinker of India's global role by analysing his philosophical and political ideas within the broader context of nationalism, spirituality, and internationalism. It seeks to examine how his vision went beyond anti-colonial nationalism and offered India a global mission to create a more peaceful and spiritually awakened global order. Through a critical study of his major works and ideas, the paper attempts to highlight the continuing relevance of Sri Aurobindo's thought in understanding India's identity and responsibility in contemporary global affairs. His idea of nationalism, concept of national education and his ideal of human unity reflect his broader vision of anticipating India's major role in the contemporary world. Through revisiting Sri Aurobindo's concept of nationalism, national education and human unity, it is essential to explore the role of India in the global politics.

### **His concept of Spiritual Nationalism and the idea of a ‘Nation’**

Sri Aurobindo’s notion of nationalism was far different from political nationalism in the West. For him, the country was a living, spiritual being rather than just a geographical or administrative entity. In one of his famous writing *Bhawani Mandir* (1905), he described India as the Motherland endowed with divine energy and destiny (Aurobindo, 2002, p, 77). Nationalism, therefore evolved from a solely political movement to a spiritual mission. Unlike European nationalism, which frequently developed through militarism and imperial rivalry, Sri Aurobindo’s nationalism placed an emphasis on moral renewal and spiritual enlightenment. He thought that India’s old philosophical traditions particularly the concepts of Vedanta, universalism, and unity of existence were its real strength (Varma, 1924, p, 214). He claimed that political freedom was only the beginning of India’s greater historical role.

He writes,

*‘India cannot perish, our race cannot become extinct, because among all the divisions of mankind it is to India that is reserved the highest and the most splendid destiny (Aurobindo, 2002, p, 84)’.*

This assertion expresses his belief that India had a distinct civilisational continuity that could withstand political oppression and resurface as a guiding power in world history. According to Sri Aurobindo, the freedom of India would eventually liberate humanity from materialism, strife, and moral decay. As a result, the Indian nationalist movement was seen as a part of a broader global revolution rather than only as an anti-colonial resistance. At the time of anti-partition movement of 1905, Sri Aurobindo proposed a new form of nationalism, in which he laid importance in the concept of nation as Mother. It can rightly be termed as ‘Spiritual Nationalism’, in which he proposed the concept of nation as ‘Mother’ (Aurobindo, 2002, p, 82). Some fundamental assumptions have greatly influenced the historiography of Indian nationalism: that nationalism is either an elite political creation, a cultural formation resulting from processes of representation, or a derivative product of colonial modernity. These viewpoints – liberal, Marxist, and postcolonial have greatly advanced our knowledge of the Indian national movement, but their dependence on external, material, or representational forms of explanation still limits its applicability. In these frameworks, the country is imagined, created, or mobilised, but it is rarely comprehended as a more profound ontological or experiential reality (Anderson, 2006, p, 34).

The nation, in his writings, is not merely a collective of individuals or a territorial entity; it is a manifestation of Shakti – a dynamic concentration of consciousness evolving through time (Aurobindo, 2002, p,76). Sri



Aurobindo's philosophy introduces a significant change precisely at this point. As his definition of the nation is based on a philosophical explanation of reality, it cannot be reduced to a political or sociological category. The relationship between the individual and the collective is redefined by this understanding: the country is a greater synthesis in which individual energies are merged into a broader, living whole; it is neither external to the individual nor just the sum of individuals. His assertion that 'the nation is not a piece of earth; it is a mighty Shakti composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation' (Aurobindo, 2002, p, 83), is therefore not verbal but philosophical. For Sri Aurobindo, nationalism was a spiritual awakening rather than just a political movement. He emphasised that India was not merely a geographical entity but a living spiritual force during the anti-colonial revolutionary movement. In his writings in *Bande Mataram* and *Karmayogin*, he described nationalism as a sacred duty rooted in the soul of the nation.

Furthermore, he also demanded the revival of India's national spirit as the foundation of his nationalism. He says, '*It is an attempt to create a new nation in India by reviving in spirit and action ancient Indian character, the strong, great, and lofty spirit of old Aryavarta*' (Aurobindo, 2002, p, 1110). Sri Aurobindo emphasised the necessity of reviving the country's soul, as the first step towards achieving India's freedom. He believed that India was not a new race whose survival depended on its adoption of European apparatus and government. It was to be revived from the oppressed state, from the European strategy that had colonised the nation for their own economic and political gain. His vision for the regeneration of his motherland is to both enhance it with modern elements and restore its noble spirit of the past. He has urged his fellow citizens to recover Aryan philosophy and its discipline, to reinvigorate the Vedic and Gita mantras and apply them to their spiritual lives, and to cultivate a mind strong enough to contribute to the nation's rebirth (Aurobindo, 1997, p, 28). Since he believed that spirituality was the foundation of Indian culture, it also influenced his political ideology. He therefore meant the nation's spiritual rejuvenation in addition to political and legislative reform when he advocated for its rebirth. In this sense, Sri Aurobindo is comparable to Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who first promoted the revival of the Ganapati and Shivaji celebrations in order to enlighten people about India's rich cultural history.

### **National Education: Reimagining India's Global Destiny through Sri Aurobindo's Thought**

This paper's main argument is that political sovereignty, geographical identity, and anti-colonial resistance are not the only aspects in Sri Aurobindo's concept of nationality. It has both a civilisational breadth and an ontological basis (Aurobindo, 1997, p, 12). Sri Aurobindo's concept is founded on metaphysical self-understanding, as opposed to reactive nationalism, which is motivated by ethnic sentiment or grievances. The nation's legitimacy stems from profound spiritual realisation rather than exclusion (Aurobindo, 2003, p, 414).

Education is not a supporting theme in this paradigm. It is the primary means by which a civilisation transmits its consciousness to the next generation (Aurobindo, 2003, p, 417). He believed that India had a special spiritual legacy that might lead people to harmony, peace, and a higher state of consciousness. India could lead both as a politically independent country and a global leader in morality and culture through the rebirth of indigenous education and spiritual ideals. Sri Aurobindo's concepts retain significance in the modern landscape of globalisation, cultural identity, and educational changes, exemplified by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which prioritises holistic and value-oriented education. Sri Aurobindo's concept of National Education occupies a vital place in his overall philosophy of nationalism. He saw that colonial education produced people with an anti-national character and a lack of patriotism (Aurobindo, 1948, p, 47). This alienation was not just rational; it was also civilisational, impacting the generational transfer of values and the continuity of cultural memory. In this state, education turns into a place where the more profound colonial dilemma is faced and possibly resolved. Therefore, national education becomes the main way that a civilisation maintains its continuity and conveys its consciousness. It is a civilisational imperative linked to the maintenance and development of collective identity rather than just an issue of institutional reform.

National education played a significant role during the Indian National Movement's most significant years, from 1905 to 1910. Within the framework of passive resistance, Sri Aurobindo promoted the idea of 'National Education'. His ideas on national education are crucial to understanding the Indian National Movement, even if he is not a true educationist.

Bengal was the epicentre of the emerging nationalism and the hub of the newly founded national schools and institutions during the Anti-Partition or Swadeshi Movement of 1905. It is important to shed light on Sri Aurobindo's early years in Baroda, when he worked as a teacher, and his later enrolment at the National College of Bengal during the 1905 Anti-Partition struggle. His role as a teacher embodies his concept of 'National Education', but it is as important to examine the later part of his life, when he pursued the path of yoga and elevated consciousness. During this time, he concentrated on the other facets of life and the integral philosophy of yoga. He also discussed the different facets of education – 'physical, vital, mental, psychic, and spiritual', collectively referred to as 'Integral Education' (Pavitra, 1961, p, 38). An integral education comprises of the study of – 'physical, vital, moral, psychic and the spiritual education', (Pavitra, 1961, p, 52) and it focusses on the spiritual evolution of the human being into supra-being. According to Sri Aurobindo, an individual and society are interdependent since they coexist and fulfil one another rather than being antagonistic and distinct entities (Pavitra, 1961, p, 44). His teachings on 'integral education' primarily stem from the fundamental idea of education, which states that 'the man, the individual in his commonness and in

his uniqueness, the nation or people and universal humanity' must be taken into account for a true and living education (Aurobindo, 2003, p, 425). Sri Aurobindo's 'Integral Education' promotes the interdependence of moral and religious teachings, which are the primary sources of an individual's physical and mental well-being. This approach challenges the idea that education should only serve administrative or utilitarian purposes and re-establishes its link to the development of the full human being. The epistemological basis for this method is provided by his distinction between 'knowledge by identity and knowledge by representation', in the *Life Divine* (Aurobindo, 2005, p, 44). While knowledge by identification entails a deeper engagement with the object of knowledge, knowledge by representation functions through external observation and conceptualisation. When this distinction is applied to education, it suggests that true knowledge must involve an inner awareness that links the individual with the greater reality of which they are a part, rather than being restricted to information or analysis.

Therefore, education must promote civilisational confidence based on philosophical profundity rather than emphasising rhetorical claims (Aurobindo, 2003, p, 422). The historical declaration of civilisational agency is embodied in national education. Its philosophical culmination is Integral Education. The intellectual and spiritual underpinnings of Sri Aurobindo's nationalism and its significance in determining India's future in the world are embodied in his concept of national education. According to Sri Aurobindo, education should raise the nation's moral, cultural, and spiritual consciousness in addition to producing skilled individuals for economic purpose. He promoted an educational system based on Indian civilisation, cultural history, and spiritual principles, rejecting the British colonial model.

### **Human Unity as a Civilisational Ideal: India's Global Role in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy**

*'India is the Guru of the nations, the physician of the human soul in its profounder maladies; she is destined once more to new-mould the life of the world'* (Aurobindo, 2002, p, 906). This quotation captures Sri Aurobindo's unwavering conviction that India was meant to contribute to the achievement of human unity. Sri Aurobindo's observations on India were influenced by late colonial modernity, the fight for national self-assertion, and the quest for cultural agency under colonial domination. His claim that India has a unique spiritual calling should be interpreted as part of a larger nationalist and philosophical effort to express identity and purpose in opposition to Western domination. As a result, it is a moral and symbolic construct rather than an empirically verifiable hierarchy of civilisations.

During his political career, he asserts that his goal to free 'Swaraj' from British rule sprang from his conviction that India's spiritual awakening would illuminate the way for all people, not just its own (Aurobindo, 2002, p, 873). In his spiritual philosophy, India serves as a conceptual focal point rather than a

measure of cultural standing worldwide (Aurobindo, 1997, p, 25). It is said that its ‘purpose’ reflects a civilisational self-interpretation moulded by historical experience (Aurobindo, 1997, p, 313). The assertion is teleological and aspirational rather than demonstrating objective superiority.

Furthermore, it is evident from Sri Aurobindo’s speech on the occasion of India’s independence on August 15, 1947, that his strategy for achieving India’s freedom included both the country’s political and humanity’s spiritual liberty. Sri Aurobindo is regarded as one of the greatest political visionaries of the 20th century, and his speech on his five goals for India after independence is extremely important in this regard. Firstly, he wanted India to be both independent and unified, with no communal divide between Muslims and Hindus as this would impede its own development and a united India would be advantageous for its own future (Singh, 2000, p, 178). Secondly, he believed that India had a bigger role to play in guiding the materialistic West through the spiritual liberation of the Eastern world, or the revival of the Asian people (Singh, 2000, p, 179). The creation of a World Union, where nationalism would give way to internationalism and a new spirit of unity would serve as the foundation for contemporary governments, was the third ideal (Singh, 2000, p, 180). This served as one of the key pillars of Sri Aurobindo’s ‘Ideal of Human Unity’, in which he explored the fundamental philosophy underlying the concept. Additionally, he contends that the most significant vision of all was India’s gift of spirituality to other countries, where it would illuminate the rest of the world with its light of enlightenment. The ultimate dream was the creation of a new global order or the spiritual development of humanity, which would lead to the realisation of a higher consciousness, in which India would take the lead (Singh, 2000, p, 181).

The ideas he put forward on the occasion of India’s independence support his belief in the country’s predetermined place in the future. It is indisputable that India is leading the world in several areas given the prevailing circumstances. It is undeniable that he supported humanity’s spiritual renewal from the moment he wrote ‘Bhawani Mandir’. He writes, ‘It is she (India) who must send forth from herself the future religion of the entire world, the eternal religion which is to harmonise all religion, science and philosophies and make mankind one soul. In the sphere of morality, likewise, it is her mission to purge barbarism out of humanity and to aryanise the world’ (Aurobindo, 2002, p, 84). Sri Aurobindo’s view in India’s messianic role in the world, which he articulated in all of his political writings, was another important aspect of his spiritual nationalism (Varma, 1924, p, 218). He was convinced that India had a bigger part to play in humanity’s new spiritual rebirth. Like his spiritual predecessor, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo holds that India had a predestined destiny and that the ‘Hindu religion’ and its enormous global appeal made the world’s spiritual revolution possible. He advocates for Hinduism as a global religion because he believes in the Sanatana Dharma, which is a broad theory that incorporates – ‘A great principle of human evolution, a body of spiritual

knowledge and experience of which India has always destined to be guardian, exemplar, and missionary' (Aurobindo, 1997, p, 24).

## Conclusion

Sri Aurobindo held that India was destined to have a revolutionary impact on global society. His idea of global hegemony placed more emphasis on spiritual influence, moral principles, and cultural leadership than it did on military or economic domination. He portrayed India as a link between spiritual understanding and material advancement through his concept of nationalism and human unity. Such nationalism is neither limited by boundaries nor does it lead to power. It transcends both, heading toward a future where the country actively participates in the emerging human unity. This is where Sri Aurobindo's ideas remain relevant and present a more profound challenge. It challenges us to reevaluate not just what the country is but also what it might become. A profound philosophical understanding of history, spirituality, and human development served as the foundation for Sri Aurobindo's vision of India as a developing global order. He saw India as a civilisation with the potential to further the moral and spiritual advancement of humanity, not only as a new political force. His ideas of human unity, spiritual nationalism, and cultural renaissance continue to shape discussions about India's place in the world today. Sri Aurobindo predicted that the world would change from a Eurocentric order to one that is more pluralistic and multipolar, with India playing a significant role. However, because it places a higher priority on moral and spiritual leadership than control, his vision deviates from conventional geopolitical concepts. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy serves as both an inspiration and a required framework for understanding the fundamental significance of both national and global growth as India becomes more prominent in it.

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## Transforming nature of Security in International Studies: From State Security to Human Security

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### Abstract:

*Academically, like other disciplines, International Studies has also experienced changes in multidimensional aspects. International Studies based on the state-centric approach in the post-Westphalian world order have broken the cells of sovereign territoriality and vertically penetrated deep into the smallest unit of society, the individual, while encompassing and broadening all the dimensions of human and natural life. Diverse approaches emerged, centred on humans, where gender differences, human vs. non-human entities, climate change and so on, went beyond the statist approaches and occupied the central point of discourses in the discipline. Significantly, all aspects of the discourses became central only when human life encountered existential threats from the sources in which humans have violently and insensitively engaged. Now, the existential threats posed to human life question the very existence of human civilisation, and thus, the issue has become a matter of great concern in global politics. Therefore, human security as a subject of great importance has become a central referent object of discourse in the age of globalisation beyond the centric Rubicon. Thus, the paper attempts to describe the transforming nature of the subject matter of the international studies discipline while bringing out human security as the referent object.*

**Keywords:** Security, International Studies, State-Security and Human Security

### Introduction:

The nature of international studies has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a state-centric security paradigm to a more inclusive and multidimensional concept of human security. Traditionally, security in international relations was predominantly defined in terms of military power, territorial sovereignty, and national defence, often shaped by the realist school of thought. Realism, a major theoretical approach in international relations, emphasises the competitive and conflictual side of international politics. It posits that states are the primary actors in an anarchical international system (Waltz, 1979, pp.102-125), where military power ensures survival (Walt, 2005, pp.23-45). Moreover, with the end of the Cold War, the emergence of globalisation, and the rise of non-traditional threats such as climate change, pandemics, terrorism, forced migration, and economic instability, scholars

and policymakers have increasingly recognised the limitations of conventional security frameworks (Ibid). This era brought new security challenges, such as civil conflicts, climate change, and health crises, which could not be addressed through traditional military means alone (Buzan, 1991, pp.21-47). Thereby, human security was added to the domain of international relations.

The concept of human security, first formally introduced in the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, marked a departure from traditional security studies by shifting the focus from protecting state interests to safeguarding individuals and communities. This shift in security discourse has led scholars and policymakers to embrace human security, a concept that prioritises the protection of individuals from economic, environmental, and social threats (Walt, 2005, pp.23-45). This approach broadens the scope of security concerns by including financial, food, health, environmental, and political security, acknowledging that human well-being is as crucial as national defence (UNDP, 1994).

Unlike the traditional notion of security, which relies on military preparedness and geopolitical strategy, human security emphasises preventive measures, development policies, and international cooperation to address the root causes of insecurity (Walt, 2005, pp.23-45). This broader approach gained legitimacy through the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. The R2P is a global political commitment endorsed by all member states of the United Nations at the 2005 World Summit, aimed at preventing genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. It emphasises the international community's role in preventing human rights abuses, including genocide and mass atrocities (Evans, 2001). As a result, international organisations, non-governmental actors, and regional security frameworks have increasingly played a role in addressing human security threats (Walt, 2005, pp.23-45).

This study examines the evolving nature of security in international studies through the lens of human security, analysing how contemporary global challenges necessitate a redefinition of security priorities. It explores the theoretical underpinnings of this transition, the role of international institutions in shaping security discourse, and the implications of this shift in global governance. It also presents challenges in policy implementation, state cooperation,



and resource allocation. The study highlights the need for a balanced approach that integrates state and human security concerns to achieve sustainable peace and development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Security in International Studies: A Theoretical Underpinning**

Traditional security studies were deeply rooted in realism, which posits that states are the primary actors in an anarchic international system where military power ensures survival (Morgenthau, 1958, p.390; Waltz, 1979, pp.79-100). The Cold War era reinforced this paradigm, with security being defined as deterrence, military alliances, and state sovereignty. However, post-Cold War developments exposed the limitations of realism, leading to the rise of liberalism and constructivism, both of which emphasise cooperation, institutionalism, and the role of ideational factors in shaping security policies (Wendt, 1999, p.429; Keohane & Nye, 1977, pp.3-31). Unlike traditional security, which prioritises the state, human security focuses on protecting individuals from threats such as poverty, disease, and violence (Newman, 2010, pp.77-94). This shift was driven by recognising that military solutions alone could not address these multidimensional threats and that a broader, people-centred approach was necessary (Acharya, 2001, pp.442-460). This shift challenges the conventional notion of security and calls for a multidisciplinary approach that addresses immediate and structural vulnerabilities (Kaldor, 2007, pp.1-15).

More precisely, the post-Cold War era exposed new security challenges and threats that were developing (Buzan, 1991, pp.21-47). The UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report introduced the idea of human security, defining it as "freedom from fear and freedom from want," emphasising economic, food, health, environmental, and personal security. The UNDP introduced human security, redefining security by prioritising the protection of individuals over that of states (UNDP, 1994). The foundational shift from a state-centric approach to human security can be understood through the evolution of international relations theories.

Structural realism, as articulated by Waltz (1979), Copeland (2000), and Mearsheimer (2001), focuses on the distribution of power among States and the anarchical international system (Waltz, 1979, pp.79-100; Mearsheimer, 2001, pp.1-28). These theories argue that

states prioritise military and economic power to ensure their survival, often sidelining human security concerns. While classical realists view economic power as a tool for state competition (Gilpin, 1981, p.272) Economic globalisation has made financial stability and trade relations crucial for security. Theories of economic interdependence (Ruggie, 1983, pp.195-232; Rosecrance, 1986, p. 268) suggest that security is not just about military dominance but also about ensuring stable economic conditions that prevent crises, such as the 2008 global financial meltdown, which had severe human security consequences (Stiglitz, 2010).

Liberal institutionalism, as discussed by Keohane (1984) and Ruggie (1998), provides a more relevant framework for human security by emphasising the role of international organisations and institutions in fostering cooperation. This perspective highlights how international institutions can bridge the gap between state-centric security and the well-being of individuals, explaining why international actors are increasingly prioritising humanitarian interventions, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability. For instance, climate change is now framed as a security threat for states and individuals whose livelihoods are at risk due to rising sea levels and extreme weather events (Barnett, 2007, pp.639-655). The constructivist lens highlights how evolving global norms shape security policies, rendering human security an integral component of international relations.

Theories emphasising domestic characteristics, such as regime type (Andreski, 1980; Russett, 1995, p.173) bureaucratic politics, and domestic cohesion (Levy, 1989, p.352) offer valuable insights into human security. Democracies, for example, are more likely to uphold human security principles by ensuring political freedoms, social welfare, and economic stability. The democratic peace theory (Doyle, 1986, pp.1151-1169) suggests that democracies rarely go to war with each other, implying that political inclusivity and respect for human rights contribute to global stability and peace.

The human security paradigm, formally introduced by the UNDP in 1994, challenges the traditional focus on state sovereignty by emphasising security at the individual and community levels (UNDP, 1994). This shift aligns with critical security studies, which argue that security should not be defined exclusively in military terms but rather incorporate economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Booth, 2005). Institutions such as the

United Nations, World Bank, and regional organisations have played a crucial and influential role in redefining security to include human rights, development, and humanitarian concerns. The emergence of doctrines such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) underscores the global commitment to human security beyond traditional state interests (*ICISS*, 2001).

Moreover, resource scarcity and environmental degradation are becoming central security concerns, challenging the military-centric perspective of structural theories. Climate change-induced conflicts over resources, such as water and arable land, are already visible in regions like the Sahel and the Middle East (Barnett & Adger, 2007, pp.639-655). Traditional theories do not adequately address these slow-onset crises, even though they contribute significantly to displacement, food insecurity, and violent conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Addressing such issues requires shifting from power politics to comprehensive security strategies (Kumar, 2019), integrating economic and environmental policies with key tenets of the human security paradigm.

From an environmentalist perspective, Climate change exacerbates human security threats by increasing resource scarcity and forcing migration (Barnett & Adger, 2007, pp.639-655). Rising sea levels pose a significant threat to low-lying nations, such as the Maldives, necessitating international cooperation on climate adaptation strategies (Kelman, 2015, pp.117-127). Furthermore, extreme weather events and resource scarcity exacerbate conflicts, as evident in the Darfur crisis, where desertification and water shortages fuelled ethnic violence (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Addressing climate-induced insecurity requires global cooperation, as exemplified by the Paris Agreement, which seeks to mitigate climate change through international commitments (Kelman, 2015, pp.117-127).

Environmental security stands for the protection of ecosystems and natural resources essential for human survival, emphasising the impact of environmental degradation on economic stability, food security, and health (Matthew, Barnett, McDonald, & O'Brien, 2010). Unlike traditional security threats, which often involve state conflicts, environmental security highlights non-military risks that undermine livelihoods and survival. Rising sea levels threaten island nations like Tuvalu and the Maldives, forcing entire communities to seek refuge in other countries (McAdam, 2012). However, international refugee laws, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, do not explicitly recognise climate refugees, leaving them

without legal protection (Betts, 2013). Furthermore, the melting of glaciers and changes in precipitation patterns threaten freshwater availability, exacerbating water conflicts between nations, as seen in disputes over the Nile River and the Indus Basin (Gleick, 2014, pp.331-340). Climate change, for instance, is now framed as a security threat for states and individuals whose livelihoods are at risk due to rising sea levels and extreme weather events (Barnett, 2019).

The Constructivist school of thought (Finnemore, 1996, p.154; Wendt, 1999, p.429) emphasises the role of collective ideas, social norms, and identities in shaping international security. Unlike realism, which sees security as an objective condition dictated by power politics, constructivism argues that security is socially constructed through discourse and shared beliefs. The human security agenda has gained traction partly due to the global diffusion of humanitarian norms and human rights discourses. For example, the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) concept emerged from constructivist thinking, reinforcing the idea that sovereignty is not an absolute right but a responsibility to protect populations from mass atrocities (Evans, 2008).

The Constructivist approaches emphasise that security is not an objective reality but a socially constructed concept that can be reshaped through discourse and policy (Buzan, & Hansen, 2009). The Rwandan Genocide (1994) illustrates the dangerous consequences of identity-based securitisation. The construction of Hutu and Tutsi identities as political categories, reinforced through colonial legacies and nationalist propaganda, led to mass violence and human insecurity (Straus, 2006). Constructivists argue that reframing identity narratives can mitigate conflicts and improve human security. Truth and reconciliation commissions, multicultural policies, and inclusive nation-building strategies have successfully deconstructed exclusionary identities and fostered social cohesion (Hayner, 2011).

Additionally, Feminist IR theorists, such as Tickner and Goldstein argue that traditional security studies have been predominantly male-centric, overlooking the specific security needs of women and marginalised communities (Tickner, 2001, p.200; Goldstein, 2003, p.540). Conflicts in regions such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Syria have demonstrated how sexual violence is used as a weapon of war, making women’s bodies a

battleground for political and military struggles (Enloe, 2000). Even outside of conflict zones, gender inequality restricts access to economic opportunities, healthcare, and education, limiting women's agency and security. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has shown that countries with high gender inequality often experience greater levels of poverty and instability, highlighting the link between gender and broader security concerns (UNDP, 2021). Moreover, women's exclusion from political decision-making prevents the development of policies that adequately address their security needs, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation (Kabeer, 1999). Traditional security paradigms have mainly focused on state sovereignty and military power. However, constructivist approaches to international relations emphasise the role of ideas, identities, and social interactions in shaping security dynamics (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore, 1996).

### **Security in post-Cold War Discourses: Issues and Policies**

The post-Cold War period saw an increase in civil wars, ethnic violence, and humanitarian crises, often within weak or failing states (Kaldor, 2007). Unlike interstate wars, these conflicts are driven by grievances over political exclusion, economic disparity, and ethnic tensions, as well as issues directly related to human security (Paris, 2001, pp.870102). While structural realism views the international system as the primary determinant of security, human security approaches recognise that threats often stem from governance failures, corruption, and social inequality within states. Additionally, it may be argued that many theories disregard the reality that security threats today are increasingly non-military. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed how a lack of investment in global health security can destabilise entire economies, disrupt global trade, and exacerbate socio-political tensions (Fidler, 2020).

Policies promoting inclusive economic growth, social safety nets, and sustainable development goals (SDGs) are key components of human security (UNDP, 2015). The European Union (EU) has integrated human security principles into its foreign policy, emphasising conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and development cooperation. The EU's policies in post-conflict regions such as the Balkans and Africa demonstrate an attempt to implement human security frameworks (Kaldor, 2007). The UN Security Council and international organisations increasingly acknowledge that climate-induced displacement,

resource scarcity, and natural disasters threaten human security (Barnett, & Adger, 2007' pp.639-655). Policies addressing renewable energy, disaster preparedness, and global environmental governance are now integral to the field of security studies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of a human security approach in global health governance. The crisis demonstrated that pandemics can destabilise economies, disrupt governance structures, and exacerbate social inequalities, making health security a central concern in international relations (Youde, 2020). Unlike traditional security policies that prioritise military spending, a human security approach emphasises investments in health, education, and social protection (MacFarlane & Khong, 2006). Addressing human security challenges requires international collaboration, as many security threats transcend national borders. Initiatives such as the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Global Health Security Agenda reflect this need for cooperative solutions (UNFCCC, 2015).

A balanced approach integrating state and human security is essential for global stability. While military preparedness remains necessary to counter external threats, governments must also invest in social policies that enhance resilience against non-traditional security threats such as pandemics, climate change, and cyber threats (MacFarlane & Khong, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the consequences of neglecting health security, as even the most militarised nations struggled to protect their citizens from the virus (Fidler, 2020). Similarly, climate-induced disasters, such as hurricanes and wildfires, underscore the need for a security framework prioritising sustainable development and disaster preparedness (Barnett, 2019). By adopting a comprehensive security (Kumar, 2019) strategy encompassing both state and human security, nations can more effectively respond to the complex security challenges of the 21st century.

Traditional security frameworks focus on military threats and geopolitical tensions, often overlooking public health as a key security concern (Elbe, 2010). However, pandemics, such as COVID-19, Ebola, and HIV/AIDS, have demonstrated that health crises can be as destabilising as armed conflicts, disrupting economies, overwhelming healthcare systems, and exacerbating social inequalities (Davies, 2019). A human security perspective shifts the focus from state-centric security to protecting individuals from health threats, emphasising

access to healthcare, vaccines, and global cooperation (Aldis, 2008). Global GDP declined by 3.5% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating the far-reaching impact of pandemics on the economy beyond public health (World Bank, 2021). The pandemic has reinforced the need for international collaboration, as no single nation can effectively combat global health crises alone (Kickbusch, Nikogosian, & Kazatchkine, 2021).

All the more, critics argue that the broad scope of Human Security weakens its effectiveness as a policy framework, making it challenging to implement and measure (Newman, 2010). Traditional security scholars contend that national governments should prioritise state security, as weak or failed states often become breeding grounds for transnational threats, such as terrorism and organised crime (Krause, 2005). Moreover, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, which emerged from human security principles, has faced criticism for being selectively applied and manipulated for geopolitical interests, as seen in the interventions in Libya and Syria (Evans, 2008). These challenges suggest that while human security provides a valuable framework for addressing contemporary threats, it must be integrated with state security concerns to be effective.

Additionally, one of the primary criticisms of human security is its lack of a clear and universally accepted definition. Scholars argue that the broad nature of the concept, encompassing everything from economic development to environmental sustainability, makes it analytically weak and difficult to operationalise (Paris, 2001). This vagueness results in inconsistent policy applications, as states and international organisations interpret human security differently based on their political priorities (Newman, 2010). Some international relations (IR) theorists argue that the term 'human security' is becoming overly ambitious and all-encompassing, lacking a more precise framework that dilutes its impact on policymaking (Buzan, 2004).

### **Conclusion:**

While concluding, one may argue that the transition from state security to human security reflects a broader redefinition of security in international Studies. Traditional security frameworks emphasise military threats and state sovereignty, contemporary global challenges, including internal conflicts, climate change, and pandemics, require a more

holistic, people-centred approach. The increasing role of international organisations, climate policies, and global health governance suggests human security will continue to shape the future of international studies and policymaking. In short, it may be stated that the transforming nature of International Studies as a discipline has both in policy formulations and theoretical underpinning, attempted to integrate human security into the State security framework.

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## One World or Many? Critical Reflections on Cosmopolitanism and International Politics

Qurat ul Ain Bashir & Touqeer Nazir Sheikh

### Abstract

*This paper critically examines the dialectical tensions between cosmopolitanism and state-centric theories of international relations. Drawing on Kantian philosophical foundations, contemporary theoretical perspectives, and case studies in global governance, it explores the promises and limitations of cosmopolitanism across ethical, political, economic, and cultural domains. The paper interrogates how cosmopolitan norms interact with the enduring realities of sovereignty, nationalism, and cultural difference. It argues that while a fully unified cosmopolitan world order remains normatively contested and practically elusive, cosmopolitan principles nonetheless offer indispensable moral and institutional frameworks for addressing the most pressing dilemmas of contemporary global interdependence. Future research must attend to the democratic legitimacy of global institutions, the motivational foundations of cosmopolitan solidarity, and the imperatives of decolonising universalist claims.*

**Keywords:** Cosmopolitanism; Global Governance; Peace; Justice; Democracy

### Introduction

An unprecedented era of global mobility, transnational connectivity, and mutual interdependence defines contemporary human experience. As individuals increasingly live and work in countries other than those of their birth, the assumption that one's personal actions and life circumstances affect only those in one's immediate locality has become untenable. In this context, cosmopolitanism has emerged as both a normative aspiration and a descriptive reflection of a world in which human fates are irreversibly intertwined. The concept possesses rich historical roots spanning philosophy, political theory, and sociology. In its ancient formulation,

cosmopolitanism involved pledging allegiance not to any singular city-state but to a universal humanity, identifying as a "citizen of the world" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 6). This foundational insight, that our obligations extend beyond the boundaries of any particular community, has animated cosmopolitan thought across centuries and intellectual traditions.

In its most general and enduring sense, cosmopolitanism associates human identity and moral concern with humanity as a whole rather than with the narrower loyalties of family, tribe, nation, or culture. More recently, cosmopolitanism has been re-articulated as a programme of political reform: a demand that the fragmented global political order of sovereign states be reshaped to better reflect the deeply integrated economic and social realities of a globalising world (Held, 1995, p. 227). This reformist agenda stands in tension with the Westphalian state system, which has entrenched territorial sovereignty and restricted the full obligations of citizenship to a single state. The dominant tradition has always presumed that the full-blooded citizen owes all political obligations to one political community and any division of such allegiances was regarded, by many political theorists of the seventeenth century, as tantamount to moral failure (Walzer, 1983, p. 31)

Yet the past three and a half centuries have seen profound changes in the density and reach of cross-border connections in commerce, communication, transport, and cultural exchange. These transformations have rendered the cosmopolitan question not merely a philosophical abstraction but an urgent practical and political matter. The turn from principles of non-interference and collective security, characteristic of classical international order to modern debates about sovereignty-overriding humanitarian intervention marks one important dimension of this shift (Archibugi & Held, 1995, p. 13). This paper traces that arc and interrogates the theoretical foundations of cosmopolitanism, examines its applications across key policy domains, and engages with the range of critiques that challenge both its validity and its claims to universality.

### **Kantian and Enlightenment Roots**

According to Held, Immanuel Kant is universally recognised as the originator of the modern philosophical understanding of cosmopolitanism, and his work, remains the indispensable starting point for virtually the entire contemporary literature in the field. In *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795), Kant argued that the necessary conditions for durable international peace were two: first, that a republican form of government constitutes a structural precondition for peaceful inter-state relations; and second, that an international federation or league of nations, grounded in universal legal principles, is needed to manage conflicts and sustain the conditions for peace. Kant's analysis was simultaneously idealistic in its vision and grounded in a plain reading of history as "a graveyard of countless states destroyed by the ruthless actions of successful conquerors". His argument that commerce and interdependence naturally incentivise cooperation while political institutions must be deliberately reformed to sustain peace, established the dual agenda, that is, normative and institutional.

Kant's association of republican governance with perpetual peace rested on the insight that where citizens bear the costs of war, they will be less willing to authorise it. By contrast, in despotic systems, the costs of war fall on subjects rather than rulers, creating a structural incentive for aggression. His cosmopolitanism was not, however, a call for world government. He rather envisioned a voluntary federation of republican states, bound by common principles of international law and a universal right of hospitality toward strangers. This last principle "that no person may be turned away if doing so would destroy them" represents an early formulation of what contemporary scholars identify as a cosmopolitan duty of assistance to the world's most vulnerable group (Pogge, 2002, p. 14). Kant's Enlightenment framework which placed individual rational autonomy at the centre of moral and political life, provided the normative architecture within which later cosmopolitan theories of human rights, global justice, and democratic governance would flourish.

### **Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives**

Post-Cold War international relations scholarship witnessed a marked revival of cosmopolitan theory as emerging transnational challenges in the form of mass migration, refugee crises, global terrorism, climate change, and systematic human rights violations exposed the inadequacy of state-centric analytical frameworks. Held argues that the traditional assumption of congruence between the state as a political unit, the nation as a cultural unit, and the economy as a territorial unit has been fundamentally disrupted by globalisation, generating what he terms an "overlapping communities of fate" in which decisions made in one polity have profound consequences for citizens of others. Contemporary cosmopolitan theory distinguishes itself from liberal institutionalism by insisting that international institutions require not merely interstate cooperation but genuine democratic legitimation wherein they must be accountable to citizens, not simply to governments (Archibugi & Held, 1995, p. 11).

A structuralist strand of contemporary theory further argues that the maximum cooperative benefit achievable among states can only be realised through genuinely cosmopolitan institutional architecture, one that transcends the bargaining of sovereign states and builds authoritative global governance structures. Realists have increasingly acknowledged that global norms and institutions significantly shape state behaviour and interests, signalling a degree of convergence between previously antagonistic paradigms (Waltz, 1979, p. 88). The post-Cold War era has also prompted a lively realist-liberal debate about the merits of international regimes in addressing threats to global stability, from environmental degradation to financial contagion, further embedding cosmopolitan concerns within mainstream international relations discourse (Keohane, 1984, p. 57).

### **Challenges to Cosmopolitan Ethical Framework**

A central and recurrent cosmopolitan claim is that universal human values, principles, and rights possess moral validity that transcends the limits of particular cultural, national, and religious

traditions (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 29). Economic and cultural globalisation, accelerated by communication technologies and the rapid diffusion of planetary-scale media, has generated additional impetus for debates about human rights, pluralism, and religious and moral tolerance in a shrinking yet richly diverse world. Cosmopolitan advocates argue that principles of collective peace, social order, and the remediation of severe economic asymmetries and inequalities require a normative framework that is genuinely universal rather than reducible to any particular civilisational tradition (Pogge, 2002, p. 36). The forces shaping this debate include the proliferation of international human rights law, the growth of transnational civil society, and the increasing visibility of global injustice through digital media.

The proposition that all individuals belong to a single moral community has made only slow and contested inroads into mainstream international relations discourse. Critics observe that cosmopolitan theorists frequently abstract away from the historically specific social, legal, and political formations from which actual human communities derive their normative authority and motivational energy (Walzer, 1983, p. 29). The ethic of political obligation which provides a basis for the universal protection of individual rights across state boundaries remains, in practice, imprecise and is most potently mobilised only in moments of acute collective crisis when interest in the moral relationship between states and individuals becomes urgent and publicly engaged (Pogge, 2002, p. 21). This gap between the abstract universalism of cosmopolitan theory and the concrete particularity of lived moral communities constitutes one of the most durable and serious challenges to the cosmopolitan project.

### **Political Cosmopolitanism and Global Governance**

Political cosmopolitanism does not demand the abolition of state sovereignty, but it insists on the principled reshaping of the institutions through which states exercise authority at the global level. Held argues that the principles of political cosmopolitanism are compatible with national institutions, provided those institutions are reconstituted to accommodate independent moral judgement about the interests of all persons affected by their decisions. Currently, most political



authority remains sharply circumscribed by territorial and national boundaries, and international political organisations coordinate state policies only in a limited and often technocratic fashion. The cosmopolitan critique is not merely that existing institutions are inefficient but that they lack legitimate democratic foundations: they are not genuinely answerable to the global citizenry whose lives they affect.

Republican scholars study international institutions to highlight continuity between international and domestic political logics as evidence that States "have not gone away." Cosmopolitan scholars, by contrast, treat institutions such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and the World Trade Organisation as imperfect but potentially transformative vehicles for changing the character of international politics. The traditional ideal of political legitimacy, grounded in the consent and participation of those governed, acquires a compromised integrity when transposed to the global level. Deep practical divergences among individuals worldwide mean that no single decision procedure can ground a genuinely universal political authority. Nevertheless, as Habermas argues, communicatively generated international law can bestow rational and moral authority upon specific international legal bodies and their decisions, constituting a legitimate if provisional form of global governance (Habermas, 1998, p. 184).

The cosmopolitan democracy project, Held argues, identifies a fundamental democratic deficit at the heart of global governance. International organisations are not agents of a global constituency and fail to represent the relevant interests of the global populations, and are therefore susceptible to domination by powerful states. The remedy proposed is the progressive democratisation of global institutions and the gradual construction of a form of cosmopolitan democracy in which citizens exercise meaningful control over transnational decisions that affect their lives. This vision has been criticised on both theoretical and practical grounds. Theoretically, critics warn that the cosmopolitan democracy project risks reproducing in global form the particular institutional arrangements of Western liberal democracy, thereby substituting a cosmopolitan cultural imposition for the nationalist one it seeks to overcome. Practically, the prospects for meaningful global democratisation remain remote given the entrenched interests of powerful states in preserving existing governance arrangements. The cosmopolitan democrat must therefore grapple

seriously with how to construct institutions that are genuinely pluralistic rather than thinly universalised extensions of any particular political tradition.

### **Cultural Relativism vs. Cosmopolitan Universalism**

The accommodation of cultural diversity represents both a foundational aspiration and a fundamental challenge for cosmopolitan international relations. Most contemporary international relations theorists, along with the overwhelming majority of diplomats and politicians, tend toward a sceptical account of cosmopolitan morality grounded in the assumption that human beings are primarily members of particularistic cultures and states rather than citizens of the world (Walzer, 1983, p. 5). On this view, shared human identity does not run deep enough to ground the kind of robust obligations that cosmopolitan theory demands. Our identities and interests are strong precisely because they do not cling to a thin cosmopolitan veneer that masks the deeper realities of political life. Cultural relativism, in this regard, is not merely a philosophical position but a practical description of the actual motivational structure of international politics.

Nussbaum argues that Cosmopolitan universalists respond that the relativist position, while compelling as a sociological description, conflates the empirical prevalence of particular loyalties with their normative primacy. The fact that people are in practice more concerned with compatriots than with distant strangers does not establish that this partiality is morally justified. Appiah (2006, p. xxi) advances a model of "contamination" to describe how cultures have always mixed, borrowed, and transformed one another. The idea of pure, bounded cultural traditions that relativism seeks to protect is itself a fiction. A cosmopolitanism that takes cultural difference seriously need not demand uniformity; it can instead foster what Appiah calls "rooted cosmopolitanism"—an identity that maintains particular attachments while remaining genuinely open to the claims of universal humanity.

Theorists of cultural hybridity have offered a more radical challenge to the exclusive and self-centred ontology of conventional international relations, arguing that identity is inherently

relational, context-dependent, and resistant to fixed national or cultural categorisation. Hybrid identity produced in the contact zones where cultures meet, negotiate, and transform one another, opens space for forms of cosmopolitan solidarity that do not require the erasure of particularity but instead thrive on its creative recombination. The dominant tradition in international relations has often denied the importance of identity but in reality, identity is continuously shaped by commerce, migration, media, education, and political mobilisation. Recognising this opens the possibility of building cosmopolitan communities not on the ruins of particular attachments but through their active and reflexive transformation.

### **Economic Globalisation and Cosmopolitan Justice**

Economic globalisation characterised by the transnational flows of goods, services, capital, and technology is at the heart of contemporary cosmopolitan debate. Some argue that internationally integrated economies enhance aggregate welfare, foster technology transfer, and expand market access for less developed countries. The empirical record, however, presents a more ambivalent picture. While aggregate inter-country inequality has narrowed in some respects, intra-country inequality has increased sharply in many states, most notably the United States, and poverty within developing countries has been exacerbated by structural adjustment policies imposed by international financial institutions (Milanovic, 2016, p. 11). The expansion of global trade and capital flows, and the liberalisation of intellectual property rights, risk concentrating the returns to long-run economic growth among those who already own the relevant productive resources thereby widening rather than narrowing global disparities of wealth and power.

The establishment of global markets, with their near-exclusive privileging of property rights, has generated widely recognised moral concerns. Pogge (2002, p. 112) argues that the existing global institutional order actively harms the world's poor not merely by failing to redistribute resources, but by structuring the global economy in ways that systematically advantage wealthy states and their citizens. A cosmopolitan theory of justice must therefore attend not only to outcomes but to the institutional mechanisms through which global inequality is produced and reproduced. This

requires confronting the political economy of international trade rules, intellectual property regimes, financial regulation, and development assistance domains in which ostensibly neutral technical agreements embed deeply partial distributional choices.

Cosmopolitan political thought provides the normative departure point for analyses of global justice that attend to the activities of transnational corporations, financial institutions, and global economic governance bodies. Pogge argues that principles of justice impose demands on the global institutional order analogous to those they impose domestically: just as domestic institutions must be arranged so as to protect the basic rights of all citizens, global institutions must be arranged to protect the basic rights of all persons, regardless of nationality. This implies, concretely, a global resource dividend—a levy on states that extract natural resources, distributed to the world's poor as well as far-reaching reforms to trade and intellectual property rules. A further cosmopolitan commitment to equal access to economic resources, Pogge further contends, implies that any individual facing severe poverty has a valid claim to the means necessary for a minimally decent life. Whether through a universal basic income, reformed international trade architecture, or enhanced development assistance, the cosmopolitan agenda demands that economic interdependence be governed by principles of justice rather than merely of efficiency.

### **Humanitarian Interventions, Global Health Crisis, and Cosmopolitanism**

Since the end of the Cold War, cosmopolitan thinking has increasingly shaped international normative debates through the doctrine of humanitarian intervention and the evolving norm of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Key conflicts in the 1990s in Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo prompted political scientists, legal scholars, and philosophers to conclude that state sovereignty cannot be understood as an absolute shield against international accountability when governments perpetrate or permit mass atrocities against their own populations. The R2P doctrine, endorsed at the 2005 UN World Summit, formally inscribed the principle that sovereignty entails responsibility, and that the international community has an obligation to protect populations where

their own governments fail to do so (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001, p. xi).

The practice of humanitarian intervention, however, has generated significant controversy. Critics argue that selective application, that is, intervening where geopolitical interests align, while ignoring comparable atrocities elsewhere reveals that humanitarian justifications frequently serve as cover for realpolitik (Walzer, 1983, p. 90). The democratic legitimacy of intervention decisions taken by powerful states or coalitions without genuine Security Council authorisation further undermines the claim that R2P represents a principled cosmopolitan advance rather than a new form of imperialism. These tensions highlight the impossibility of separating cosmopolitan normative principles from the structures of power in which they must be implemented, and underscore the cosmopolitan imperative to reform global governance institutions so that they better reflect the interests of all affected parties rather than those of the most powerful.

Global health crises (for instance COVID-19) have demonstrated with particular clarity both the necessity and the fragility of cosmopolitan solidarity in practice. Health threats that do not respect national borders and generate compelling practical reasons for transnational cooperation beyond bilateral regulatory arrangements. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed structural inequities in global health governance: wealthy states secured disproportionate shares of vaccines through advance purchase agreements, while lower-income countries waited for access through international mechanisms such as COVAX, whose performance fell far short of its stated equity objectives. From a cosmopolitan justice perspective, this outcome reflects a deeper institutional pathology: global health governance structures advantage nationals of wealthy states over those of poor ones, in direct violation of the principle that all persons' basic rights must be equally protected.

A genuinely cosmopolitan approach to global health governance would require, at minimum, the reform of international intellectual property rules to ensure that life-saving technologies are accessible to all, the establishment of binding rather than voluntary mechanisms for health-related

technology transfer, and the democratic reform of the World Health Organisation to give greater voice to low- and middle-income countries and to civil society organisations (Held, 1995, p. 281).

### **Critiques and Challenges to Cosmopolitanism**

Realist critics challenge cosmopolitanism on both descriptive and normative grounds. Descriptively, they contend that international politics continues to be governed primarily by the logic of state interest and the balance of power, and that cosmopolitan norms, while rhetorically influential, rarely override strategic calculations when the two conflict (Waltz, 1979, p. 105). Normatively, realists argue that states are not merely strategic actors but moral communities. State is the anchor point within which human beings develop their values, pursue their projects, and sustain the social bonds that give life meaning. On this view, obligations to compatriots legitimately and necessarily take priority over obligations to strangers, and a political order that fails to reflect this priority lacks democratic legitimacy.

Nationalist critics extend this argument by insisting that particular national identities and cultures constitute irreplaceable sources of meaning and solidarity that cosmopolitan universalism threatens to dissolve. The cosmopolitan, on this account, is a person without roots—exempt from the particular obligations and loyalties that constitute genuine moral life. Appiah (2006, p. 5) responds that this caricature misrepresents the cosmopolitan position: a cosmopolitan need not be rootless but can maintain deep particular attachments while also recognising the claims of universal humanity. The challenge is not to choose between particular and universal but to hold both in productive tension—an intellectual and moral achievement that both critics and many advocates of cosmopolitanism have underestimated.

Postcolonial scholars have mounted a fundamental epistemological challenge to cosmopolitanism, exposing its deep Eurocentric assumptions and the historical silences it perpetuates about whose knowledge, experience, and aspiration count as genuinely universal. Fanon (1963, p. 7) argued that the universalist claims of European humanism were structurally dependent on the exclusion

and dehumanisation of colonised peoples, that is, the "universal" subject of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism was, in practice, a particular European subject whose universality was purchased through colonial violence.

This critique demands more than the inclusion of non-Western voices within existing cosmopolitan frameworks; it requires a fundamental rethinking of the concepts, categories, and methods through which cosmopolitan theory is constructed. A postcolonial cosmopolitanism would need to account for the ongoing structural effects of colonial history on contemporary global inequality to challenge the reproduction of colonial power relations in international institutions, and to take seriously the political projects of communities who seek recognition and justice on their own terms rather than those of a universalism imposed from above (Mignolo, 2000, p. 22). These are not peripheral concerns but go to the heart of what a genuinely universal cosmopolitanism would require.

## **Conclusion**

The cosmopolitan question—whether humanity constitutes, or should constitute, a single moral and political community—remains among the most consequential and contested in contemporary international relations theory and practice. This paper has traced the concept's Kantian origins in the aspiration for perpetual peace through republican governance and a federation of free states, its contemporary theoretical elaborations in the work of Held, Pogge, Nussbaum, and others, and its practical expression in global governance debates spanning humanitarian intervention, environmental policy, economic justice, and global health. It has also engaged seriously with the realist, nationalist, postcolonial, and decolonial critiques that challenge cosmopolitanism's philosophical foundations, scope, cultural presuppositions, and practical feasibility.

Three broad conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, the cosmopolitan versus communitarian debate must be conducted with explicit and sustained attention to globalisation as a structural condition that fundamentally transforms what is both normatively required and practically

achievable. The density and reach of contemporary interdependence means that the choice between particular and universal obligations is no longer simply a matter of philosophical preference but of empirical necessity: our fates are deeply interconnected in ways that moral parochialism can no longer adequately address. Second, non-cosmopolitan international institutions—those operating within a state-centric framework but enforcing rights and obligations that exceed the original intentions of their founders—are paradoxically important vehicles for advancing the cosmopolitan project incrementally and in ways that are politically sustainable. The extension of human rights norms, the development of international criminal law, and the gradual democratisation of global governance all represent progress toward cosmopolitan ideals without requiring the prior establishment of a world government.

Third, the internal diversity of cosmopolitan theory, spanning Kantian republicanism, cosmopolitan democracy, economic justice, environmental ethics, and decolonial reconstructions, is a source of intellectual richness and normative resourcefulness rather than of incoherence or weakness. Future research must explore the conditions under which cosmopolitan norms acquire genuine motivational force among citizens and policymakers: how global institutions can be democratised without reproducing the particular political forms of any single tradition, how the legitimate interests of particular communities can be protected within a framework that is truly universal rather than hegemonic, and how the structural legacies of colonialism can be addressed as a prerequisite for, rather than an afterthought to, the cosmopolitan project. A cosmopolitanism that takes these challenges seriously and is genuinely humble about its own partialities while insisting on the moral reality of our shared humanity remains, despite everything, an indispensable ideal for our time.

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## **Tangkhul Women and Political Participation in Manipur: Negotiating Patriarchal Institutions**

Rinyochan Rungsung

**Abstract:** *In Tangkhul society, women have long faced obstacles to their self-growth as the society is patriarchal in nature. Despite their active contribution to society and community life, they face exclusion from decision-making roles and leadership positions due to customary laws and patriarchal norms. This paper examines the political participation and representation of Tangkhul women and analyses how patriarchal customary laws and practices shape their participation in political institutions. Based on a mixed-methods research design, the study draws on primary data collected from 300 women respondents through field surveys, along with in-depth interviews with Tangkhul women leaders. The findings reveal that although women remain underrepresented in formal political structures, there is a gradual shift in attitudes toward women's leadership and political participation. Organisations such as the Tangkhul Shanao Long (TSL) have played an important role in creating awareness and negotiating women's inclusion in traditional institutions. The paper argues that Tangkhul women are increasingly negotiating patriarchal structures and gradually expanding their space within society. The paper concludes that these changes will have a greater impact on the future generations of women, creating greater political participation and inclusion of women in traditional institutions.*

**Keywords:** Tangkhul women; political participation; patriarchy; customary laws; gender inequality; women in politics; traditional institutions

### **Introduction**

Political participation is a prerequisite and a minimum condition for a functioning democratic political system (Bhawana 1996, 9). The central idea of democracy and participation is that all individuals should have an equal chance to participate in political processes, and the continued exclusion of particular groups reflects a major flaw in the democratic system. Despite this democratic ideal, women across societies continue to experience under-representation in political institutions. One of the most persistent constraints on women's political

participation is the entrenched structure of patriarchy (Khelghat and Sibly 2020, 400). In almost every society, the roles of men and women are shaped by the community's customs, social norms, and cultural practices. Although women contribute equally to society, their roles are often unacknowledged, and they are further deprived of equal rights vis-à-vis men. Such inequality stems from a prevailing patriarchal structure and from cultural and traditional practices and norms that society continues to hold (Zafar 2016, 103).

These dynamics are clearly visible in Tangkhul society in Manipur. Despite their active contribution to society and community life, they face exclusion from decision-making roles and leadership positions due to customary laws and patriarchal norms. To examine the political participation of Tangkhul women in decision-making bodies and how they negotiate within this patriarchal institution, the present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design and uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through fieldwork across six villages: Sinakeithei, Awontang (Ukhrul), Somdal, Kamjong, Thoyee, and Chingai, located in the Ukhrul and Kamjong districts of Manipur. A total of 300 women respondents were selected through random sampling to ensure representation across different age groups, educational backgrounds, and socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, data were collected using a mixed-method approach, combining a closed-ended questionnaire with structured and unstructured interviews. Interviews were carried out with women candidates who have contested elections in the Manipur Legislative Assembly and the Autonomous District Council of Ukhrul. The findings discussed in the subsequent sections highlight the ways in which Tangkhul women continue to face exclusion from political institutions while simultaneously negotiating patriarchal institutions to create greater space for participation and representation.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study draws on feminist theories that conceptualise patriarchy as a systemic structure of male dominance embedded in both institutions and social practices. According to Hartmann (1979, 232), patriarchy is an institutionalised system of male oppression characterised by power, dominance, hierarchy, and the subordination of women. This system is sustained by a dominant ideology that justifies male authority on the basis of biological differences between men and women, thereby ensuring the continued dominance of men (Green 2010, 969). Drawing on Kandiyoti's notion of "bargaining with patriarchy," the study further examines

how women negotiate and navigate patriarchal structures within decision-making bodies. Rather than viewing women as passive recipients of patriarchal domination, this perspective emphasises their active role in accommodating, contesting, and reshaping patriarchal norms within specific social contexts (1988).

In many traditional societies, patriarchal structures are reinforced through customary laws and cultural practices. Customary laws consist of rules and practices recognised and followed by members of a particular community, playing a key role in maintaining social order and cohesion. As defined by Black's Law Dictionary (2009), customary law refers to practices and beliefs that are so intrinsic to a social and economic system that they are accepted as legally binding rules of conduct. However, when interpreted within a patriarchal framework, these laws often reflect and reproduce gender biases.

Within Tangkhul society, patriarchy functions as a context-specific system that legitimises male dominance in both public and private spheres through formal mechanisms such as village councils and inheritance laws, as well as informal practices such as social norms, gender roles, the division of labour, and expectations. Zehol (2015, 183) notes that the inferior status of Naga women is partly rooted in a cultural emphasis on male traditions, male-centred knowledge, and male kinship ties, which position women as less permanent and less socially significant members of society. Within this system, men control property, decision-making processes, and the construction of dominant social values based on masculine norms. By analyzing how patriarchal norms, customary laws, and gender roles shape women's opportunities and constraints, this study examines the political participation of Tangkhul women and explores how they negotiate these structural limitations.

### **The Tangkhul Community and its Social Structure**

The Tangkhul community is one of the major Naga tribes living in the Northeastern part of Manipur, spread across the entire Ukhrul district and the newly formed Kamjong district, which was formerly part of Ukhrul. Geographically, they are bordered by Myanmar to the East, Kangpokpi and Senapati to the west and Chandel to the South, and the state of Nagaland to the North. According to the 2011 census, the tribe has a population of 183,998, of which 94,718 are males, and 89,280 are females. The community has 213 inhabited villages. (Census of India, 2011).

The Tangkhuls are mostly located in rural areas, and their villages are politically organised and largely independent regardless of size. Every household in a village belongs to a clan known as *Shangnaos*. Each village is headed by a chief known as *Awunga*, a title similar to the English word King (Horam 2022, 3). The position is hereditary, passed down to the eldest son. Every village also has a governing council known as *Hangva*, the principal governing body, composed of clan leaders known as *Bipa*. All these leadership roles are occupied only by men, as the head of a clan, *Bipa*, is always a man.

The life of the Tangkhuls is largely governed by customary laws, which they call *AIN*. These laws are not written down in any record or book but are passed down from one generation to the next orally. The Tangkhuls are deeply rooted in their traditional customs, and their customary laws are quite rigid, even though they are unwritten. Women are strictly bound by customary laws, and there are many restrictions on what they may do. As rightly pointed out by Odyuo, the people who interpret Naga customary laws are mostly men, and since interpretation is always influenced by individual views, and Naga culture being patriarchal, these laws have always been understood and applied from a male point of view (Odyuo, 2023). As a result of this customary law and practices in Tangkhul society, it reinforces gender inequality by restricting women's participation in traditional decision-making institutions and limiting their role in decision making bodies.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Tangkhul Women and Socio-Political Movements***

Tangkhul women have long played an important role in socio-political and social reform movements despite their limited representation in formal political institutions. In a patriarchal society where women remain largely excluded from decision-making bodies, they have emerged as important agents of peace, social stability and community welfare. Historically, Tangkhul women have played a powerful role as peacemakers known as Pukreilas (Shimray 1986,168; Shimray 2001, 11). During the warring era, the Pukreilas were vested with the power to intervene in the inter-village feud and prevent further bloodshed. This role in peacebuilding continued in contemporary times through the Tangkhul Shanao Long ( Tangkhul Women's League), in which every Tangkhul woman over the age of 15 is a member. Each village maintains its own unit; for instance, Somdal village has the Somdal Shanao Long, Thoyee village has the Thoyee Shanao Long, while the apex body

operates from its headquarters in Ukhrul. The TSL serves as an important platform for women's empowerment by fostering confidence, facilitating participation in decision-making, and providing a collective voice on issues affecting the community. Notably, village authorities have, on several occasions, relied on TSL units for financial support during significant events or times of crisis. They are actively engaged as peacemakers and mediators in contemporary society.

The TSL, guided by the motto "Unity for Justice", has been central in mobilising women across villages against alcoholism, drug abuse, social violence and other social problems. Beyond social reform activities, Tangkhul women have also emerged as important actors in conflict resolution, peacebuilding and community protection in Manipur's volatile socio-political environment. Manipur has witnessed ethnic tensions and armed conflicts involving different communities as well as confrontations between insurgent groups and state security forces. Within this period of instability, Tangkhul women have frequently assumed front-line roles as mediators, negotiators and custodians of community security. A notable example happened in 2009, when there was a confrontation between the Assam Rifles and NSCN-IM in Shirui village, the Tangkhul women from neighbouring and distant villages came together and acted as peacemakers. They kept vigil day and night, preventing an armed confrontation and ensuring safety in the area (Pheiray 2018, 244). Similarly, in the ongoing conflict between the Tangkhul Naga and the Kukis, Tangkhul women continue to guard village gates, negotiate with security personnel and safeguard their communities and land. Their participation reflects not symbolic involvement but active engagement in sustaining social order and safeguarding their lands. Despite their extensive contribution to socio-political movements, peacebuilding and community welfare, Tangkhul women continue to remain largely excluded from formal decision-making bodies and traditional institutions. This contradiction highlights the gendered nature of political authority in Tangkhul society, where women's labour and leadership are valued in times of crisis, yet their participation in institutional power structures continues to be limited.

### **Tangkhul Women and Traditional Political Institutions**

In both formal and informal structures, Tangkhul women have limited participation in decision-making within the family and other organisations. In family matters, while the husbands may consult their wives, the final

decision usually rests with the man. This is even more restrictive at the community level, where women are completely excluded from leadership and governance. One of the most critical consequences of customary laws is the exclusion of women from traditional decision-making bodies. They are even barred from attending the village's traditional court (*Hangvashim*), where decisions are made for the whole village. This traditional institution rests in the hands of the Chief (*Awunga*), assisted by his Council of Ministers (*Hangva*). Although women are formally excluded from these traditional institutions, they exercise their influence indirectly through male family members such as fathers, husbands and brothers. Rather than openly confronting patriarchal authority, Tangkhul women often negotiate influence through informal channels within the family and community. This indirect influence reflects a form of negotiation within patriarchal constraints.

The exclusion of women from formal decision-making institutions reflects the institutional dimension of patriarchy, where authority and governance are structured around male dominance. Women's indirect influence through male relatives illustrates how gendered power operates relationally rather than individually. This aligns with Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of patriarchal bargaining, where women exercise agency within patriarchal constraints by negotiating influence rather than confronting them directly.

The values of equality and inclusivity are sidelined in favour of rigid traditional norms and practices. Despite resistance and strong adherence to tradition, attitudes among women in Tangkhul society are slowly shifting. The Tangkhul Shanao Long (Tangkhul Women's League) are lobbying and negotiating with the *Awunga* (village chief) to allow women to participate in this institution. Women are becoming more aware of their rights and are demanding a place on village councils and permission to attend Village Assembly meetings. Since they are aware that equal representation with men is difficult to achieve, women are asking for a few women representatives and for the complete exclusion of women from these institutions to be done away with (Interview with Thingreiphy, President of TSL, 2025). The demands raised by the TSL do not seek a complete dismantling of traditional institutions but rather gradual inclusion within them. This reflects a negotiated strategy in which women seek incremental participation and recognition while operating within the framework of customary practices. This reflects a process of negotiation in which women seek inclusion rather than challenging the existing structure. Now there has been a slight relaxation: in a few villages, women are now allowed to attend Village Assembly meetings, although they may not always have voting rights. In a 2022 TSL survey of 153 villages, in two Tangkhul villages, women are members of the traditional institutions (two

members each), while in 41 villages, women can now attend the Village Assembly but have no voting rights (Tangkhul Shanao Long 2024, 35–36). These are small changes taking place within society as a result of women's ongoing efforts to challenge practices and assert their rights. Although limited, this partial inclusion represents an important negotiated shift within patriarchal institutions. Such transformations were not easily granted by society; they are the result of sustained struggles, negotiations, and collective action by women to claim their rightful place in society.

### ***Electoral Representation of Tangkhul Women***

Tangkhul women remain significantly underrepresented in formal political institutions even though they actively participate as voters since the very first Assembly Elections in 1972. An examination of arenas such as the Legislative Assembly and the Autonomous District Council reveals a persistently low level of female participation. Although no customary laws explicitly prohibit women from engaging in these political institutions, their representation remains strikingly minimal. Electoral records from the District Election Office, Ukhrul District indicate that Tangkhul women have consistently participated in the electoral process since the very first Manipur Assembly elections in 1972. Over the decades, women's voter turnout steadily increased and in the last five elections female voters outnumbered male voters.

Despite this strong electoral participation, increased voter turnout among women has not led to greater representation for women. This indicates that women voters largely continued to elect male politicians to power. The gap between women's participation as voters and their representation as political leaders remain substantial. Records of Assembly Elections between 1972 and 2022 further demonstrates the marginal presence of Tangkhul women as electoral candidates. Across five decades, only five Tangkhul women have contested in the Manipur Legislative Assembly elections. Among them only one woman succeeded in getting elected, while the others were unsuccessful. Their electoral performance further underscores the challenges faced by women candidates. In the 2012 Manipur Assembly elections, Teresa Rimai received only 55 votes, while Bountia Keishing secured 946 votes (DEO, Ukhrul). Notably, no female candidates have contested elections since 2012.



Even in the ADC elections, only one or two candidates are elected each time; however, none make it to the current election. Mrs Silla Konghay, a former Councillor, stated that even if women want to vote for those candidates, they often cannot stand up to male members and tend to vote for the candidate they favour. She further noted that many women are still not open to women's leadership (Interview with Silla Konghay, Former Councillor, 2025). This is due to stereotypes associating women with nurturing and caregiving roles, while portraying men as more suitable for leadership roles, thus intensifying gender inequality in politics (Goswami et al 2023, 1985). This results in the absence of women in politics and fewer role models for young Tangkhul women, who grow up seeing only men in leadership roles, leading them to believe that leadership is for men.

However, attitudes toward women's participation in politics have been changing. The respondents were asked about their preferences for male or female leaders and whether they would support women in elections. Responses from the field survey indicate a growing acceptance of women's political leadership. A majority of respondents remained neutral regarding candidates, and around 18 per cent of them even want to specifically vote for women, as they want women representatives for a change. Only a small proportion of respondents preferred male candidates exclusively. These findings suggest that traditional assumptions associating political leadership primarily with men are slowly weakening.

The survey further revealed overwhelming support for women's participation in politics, with 95.67 per cent of respondents expressing support for women entering politics and contesting elections. They believe women can be great leaders if elected. They fully endorse women pursuing politics as a career. This suggests that the idea that women belong at home is gradually fading, and Tangkhul women are increasingly beginning to accept that women can be leaders. At the same time, women's political participation often involves subtle forms of negotiation within patriarchal family structures. Some married respondents reported subtle forms of political negotiation within their households. For example, they sometimes vote for a different candidate than their husbands while giving the impression that they have voted for the same one. One 53-year-old respondent explained that she makes her own choice at the polling booth but outwardly behaves as if she had followed her husband's instructions, since openly disagreeing could lead to a fight. This demonstrates how Tangkhul women are asserting their influence and subtly negotiating decision-making power, even within private domestic spaces. Such strategies allow women to exercise political agency while maintaining household harmony within a patriarchal structure.

The growing willingness of women to support female candidates suggests a shift in gender norms and political consciousness. However, the continued underrepresentation of women indicates that structural barriers remain intact. This reflects a transitional phase in which patriarchal norms are being contested but not yet fully transformed. Such gradual change is characteristic of negotiated transformations, where women incrementally expand their political presence within existing institutional frameworks. When Mrs Valleyrose ran for election in 2007, Teresa and Bountia in 2012, they all stated that they did not receive enough support from women. However, it's been more than a decade now since they ran for election. The literacy rate has increased, exposing them to broader ideas, and, as the data indicate, women are ready to support capable women candidates. Whether more women will stand as candidates in future elections depends on whether this change in their minds and attitudes can be gradually materialised.

## **Conclusion**

Tangkhul women continue to face significant barriers to political participation within the traditionally patriarchal society. The study demonstrates that Tangkhul women, though historically excluded from leadership roles and traditional decision-making bodies, have increasingly negotiated their spaces of participation within the existing patriarchal set-up despite the prevalence of customary laws that favour male authority in both private and public spheres. Women are increasingly becoming more politically aware and supportive of women's leadership. The study shows Tangkhul women are not passive victims of society but rather "bargaining with patriarchy." This may not mean they are moving away completely from patriarchy, but it certainly indicates a gradual shift toward more flexible and contested gender relations. The gradual inclusion of women in traditional and political institutions can be seen as a continuous process of negotiated transformation within a society that remains patriarchal.

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## **The Day of the Wedding: Experiences of Negotiation Between Love and Tradition in Delhi**

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### **Abstract**

*For a very long time, marriages in India have been based on religious customs and traditions that are largely been arranged by family elders within the same caste or religion. Marriage ceremonies also play a significant role in Indian marriages and without a set of ceremonies, these weddings are not completed. Taking into consideration how marriages are often arranged and celebrated with great enthusiasm and excitement when they take place with the consent and approval of the family and community, the article explores the experiences of individuals involved in contested inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. Using ethnographic accounts, the article examines how the wedding day often carries meanings and experiences different from those of socially sanctioned marriages for couples who choose their own partners. It further explores how these couples negotiate patriarchal familial norms while constructing a domestic life based on their own choices.*

**Keywords:** Marriage, Ethnography, Ceremonies, Wedding-day, Negotiation

### **Introduction**

Traditionally, the social structure of Indian society has been deeply rooted in caste and religious norms, influencing the lives of individuals in multiple ways. For a very long time, marriage in India has been based on religious traditions and practices, with a strong preference for individuals to marry within their own caste or religion. Another defining feature of Indian marriages is that they have traditionally been arranged by family elders, with careful consideration given to the caste and religion of the family and community. Love marriages or marriages in a different religion or caste group has never been the norm in Indian societies, therefore, they are considered as a deviation of the established norms.

Though Indian state has been providing many schemes in order to promote inter-caste marriages in India, the ratio has still been less. For an instance, according to another newspaper

report<sup>i</sup>, under the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar scheme for social integration through inter-caste marriage, only 11 marriages were sanctioned in Rajasthan in past 3 years. In 2020-2021, only one inter-caste marriage was sanctioned by the state government under this scheme which has declined in comparison to 4 marriages sanctioned in 2018-2019 and 6 marriages in 2019-2020. The state legitimizes inter-religious marriage as well by introducing laws like Special Marriage Act, 1954 in order to promote inter-religious marriages in India, but these marriages are still rare in practice as it usually faces opposition and ostracization by the families. However, many research show that there is a gradual rise in love-marriages over a period of time.

Lina Fruzetti, in her recent study 'When Marriages go Astray: choices made choices challenged' states that the trends in the marriage have undergone change with respect of time. She explained the marriage question thirty years ago by defining it as a sacred bond that connects a person to society and its traditional values and practices. As opposed to the previous understanding, the new relationships are essentially redefining what it actually means to be a person as well as how marriage is constructed in society. New unions challenge the hierarchies of older unions. They determine one's own caste as the unit of equivalency (Fruzetti 2013, 1-16). Similarly, Allendorf and Pandian (2016, 457) observe that arranged marriage practices have changed significantly over time, with young women becoming more actively involved in choosing their spouses, meetings between prospective partners before marriage becoming more common, consanguineous marriages declining, and inter-caste marriages increasing from the 1970s to the 2000s.

In India, marriage ceremonies are associated with two distinct meanings. In addition of being a necessary legal formality for forming a marriage, they also play a significant cultural role that upholds social norms and preserves customs (Sharma 2024, 3). Just like marriage, the wedding day holds great significance, not only in the life of a person but also in the community at large. It requires a great deal of planning, purchasing, ceremonies, and rituals. According to Currie's (1993, 403–421) research of Canadians, there is a propensity to involve extended family members in the wedding planning process so that their demands would be taken into consideration. The brides in her survey stated that the tasks on each checklist for the wedding started anywhere from a year to at least six months before to the big day. Similarly, in the context of Indian society, wedding planning involves considerable time, effort, and financial investment. Apart from selecting bridal attire, preparations also include purchasing gifts to be

exchanged with the groom's family. Beyond the wedding day itself, significant attention is given to various ceremonies, gift exchanges, decorations, and the attire of family members. Marriage is not merely a union between the bride and groom; rather, it is a social event that involves the immediate family, extended kinship networks, and the wider community.

Taking into consideration how marriages are often arranged and celebrated with great enthusiasm and excitement when they take place with the consent and approval of the family and community, the article explores the experiences of individuals involved in contested inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. Bringing attention to the wedding day, which is considered as one of the most emotionally and socially significant events in an individual's life, the article seeks to explore the experiences and realities that often remain overlooked behind its celebratory image, for those who face opposition, non-acceptance and resistance from their families and communities. Drawing upon narratives from the fieldwork, the article reflects upon the ceremonies and practices associated with such marriages. Through these accounts, it examines how the wedding day often carries meanings and experiences different from those of socially sanctioned marriages for couples who choose their own partners. It further explores how these couples negotiate patriarchal familial norms while constructing a domestic life based on their own choices.

The article is divided into two sections. The first section discusses ceremonial practices associated with marriage, with a particular focus on Indian society, and examines how rituals and customs rooted in religious traditions occupy a significant place within weddings. The second section explores the processes of negotiation involved in contested marriages. Drawing upon narratives collected during fieldwork, it highlights the ways in which couples negotiate patriarchal familial norms while simultaneously organising and shaping wedding ceremonies of their own, which may not necessarily conform to established traditions and customs due to experiences of resistance, non-acceptance, and limited familial participation.

### **Ceremonial Practices in Marriage:**

Throughout history and in different cultures, marriage ceremonies have played an important role in marking social change and adulthood. They combine legal procedures with social

customs and religious traditions that hold deep cultural significance. They act as a legal way of recognising a marriage while also serving as an important cultural practice that strengthens social relationships and continues traditions. In Indian societies, marriage ceremonies carry cultural, economic, religious and emotional significance not just for the two individuals intending to marry rather it involves the entire family and community.

In the article “*Cultural Significance of Marriage Ceremonies: A Legal Perspective*,” Sharma (2024, 3) explains that marriage ceremonies in India reflect the country’s diverse cultural and religious traditions, with different religious communities following distinct marital practices. For instance, Hindu Vedic weddings involve elaborate rituals and symbolism centred around the sacred fire (Agni) and the chanting of mantras believed to bless the couple. Rituals such as *Kanyadaan* and *Saptapadi* symbolise the transfer of familial responsibility and the establishment of a lifelong marital bond. In contrast, Islamic marriage ceremonies, known as *Nikah*, are generally characterised by simplicity and an emphasis on mutual consent between the couple. These ceremonies commonly include the recitation of Quranic verses by the Imam, the giving of *Mehr* by the groom to the bride, and the formal acceptance of the marriage contract by both individuals (Sharma 2024, 5-6). Similarly, there are variations in wedding ceremonies in other religions like Christianity, Sikhism or Buddhism.

As wedding ceremonies play a significant role in validating and establishing the legitimacy of marriage Willcox, in the article “Marriage Ceremonies,” argues that marriage ceremonies are present across cultures because they serve multiple social, emotional, and economic functions. He suggests that marriage is not merely a personal union between two individuals, but also an important social transition that involves families and communities. According to him, marriage ceremonies provide emotional and financial support to the newly married couple through the participation of family members and relatives (Willcox1892, 1091). Similarly, in the context of Punjabi culture, Myrvold (2004) in the article "Wedding Ceremonies in Punjab," suggests that marriage is the most celebrated life event in Punjabi culture, lending validity to the bond that is made between two heterosexual people (Myrvold 2004, 155). She explains how different religious societies employ various religious symbols to legitimate the institution of marriage.

A number of rituals are performed in a Hindu wedding. The guardians choose the best date for the wedding by consulting a pandit and using each other's preferences to choose the auspicious



day on the calendar with the bride and groom's approval. The day that the marriage is documented in the calendar is referred to as the auspicious day and hundreds of arrangements are made in advance for this day. Fixing the wedding day is considered a part of the groom's engagement to the bride, and the engagement itself marks the beginning of the marriage ceremony (Khatun et al. 2025, 228). Though there are regional variations in the wedding ceremonies, marriage amongst hindus is treated as a sacred and religious union, amongst muslims, it is viewed as a contract. In both cases, however, the gift of a virgin girl is made by her parents to the family of a boy (Mody 2002, 224). Thus, the concept of *kanyadan*, where a woman is symbolically gifted by her father to the groom, remains a common practice across many regions.

Further, Willcox (1892, 1091) argues that marriage marks a significant change in the social status of individuals, as it symbolizes adulthood, responsibility, and the possibility of parenthood. Through ceremonies and rituals, society reinforces the expectations associated with these new roles and statuses. He also highlights that the financial contribution made by families during weddings reflects parental investment in the couple and their expectations regarding the continuation of the family line. Additionally, he points out that marriage often involves economic exchanges such as dowry, bride-price, or inheritance, which further strengthen alliances and relationships between families. Thus, Willcox presents marriage ceremonies as institutions that carry social, cultural, emotional, and economic significance across societies. It also implies that there is an unspoken focus on dowry in addition to customs and rituals. Dowry eventually becomes ingrained in wedding ceremonies (specially in arranged-marriages) as it is perceived that it will enhance the social standing and prestige of the families involved, even though it is not always publicly acknowledged.

While traditional marriage ceremonies across different cultures and regions in India continue to reflect religious values, family involvement, and social norms, not all couples conform to these established customs. Many individuals choose to marry according to their own preferences, often going against familial expectations, caste and religious norms. Since the wedding day is regarded as one of the most important occasions in an individual's life, using my fieldwork accounts, the article specifically focuses on how the experience of marriage

ceremonies and of the wedding day varies for couples who chose their partners on their own in a different caste or religion. It becomes extremely difficult to negotiate with the existing patriarchal conventions in order to build a domesticity with the person one loves and want to marry. In many instances of elopement or non-acceptance of marriage, the couples plan their own wedding without the assistance of their parents or society. Thus, using ethnographic accounts from fieldwork, the following section examines how not all individuals experience weddings in a similar manner since the lack of societal and familial acceptance frequently influences the significance and experience of the ceremony itself.

### **Negotiations Towards Marriage**

Using the ethnographic accounts of married couple, who have been married in a different caste or religion, conducted as a part of fieldwork in Delhi, 2022, the essay reflects upon how couples have to negotiate with the patriarchal family and society in order to marry a person of their choice.

Atharva and Anisha, a Christian- hindu couple got married in 2021 in Delhi. The negotiation was that the marriage would be solemnize through SMA followed by a blessing ceremony, that happens amongst Christians because Atharva's parents wanted to have a religious ceremony. 'A blessing ceremony, unlike holy matrimony, is conducted in some denominations amongst Christians, specifically for inter-faith marriages solemnized under SMA. For this, one partner has to be a baptized Christian, and the other partner may be from any other faith. A prerequisite in this regard is the marriage certificate from the SMA registration' (Varghese & Rajeev 2021, 269). During fieldwork, while talking about her experience of getting married in a court under SMA and how did they receive social acceptance, Anisha informed that:

“Though our marriage was sanctioned through SMA, we got social acceptance only after the blessing ceremony. For most of the people of his community, the blessing ceremony was the real marriage. Nobody was concerned about that the marriage had already been sanctioned by the court. The Social sanction only comes when a religious ritual takes place”.

In her study, Mody (2002, 247), explains that court marriage is seen as a "steel-proof" and viewed as secure guarantee that opposing families will not be able to separate the couple. Whereas, discussing their experience of being married as an inter-faith couple in Delhi, Verghese and Rajeev (2021, 272), say that a social and religious ceremony was considered necessary for a wedding to be considered legitimate, almost like a social stamp of approval. Thus, whether or not the Indian government recognised a marriage doesn't really matter; what does matter is if our parents are able to inform a friend, neighbour, or family member that their child is married in a church. Atharva and Anisha went through a similar situation; although their marriage was approved by the court through SMA, they didn't receive social acceptability until after certain religious ceremonies were performed.

According to the paper "Analysis of Wedding Rituals" (1980), the wedding ring is perhaps the most ancient and widely used symbol of marriage in Western culture. Couples typically wish to incorporate a lot of traditional customs into their wedding ceremonies due to the need for human approval while passing from one status to another (Chesser, 1980). Similarly, in Indian societies, even if the individuals have chosen their partners themselves, they want all the ceremonies to be performed as per their family ritual. Through this, they seek for validity to the relationship which has been formed after going beyond the conventional norms. From my fieldwork as well, in the cases where relationships are accepted reluctantly because of cultural differences, it has been found that couples try to come to a common ground in order to satisfy their respective families. In two cases of inter-caste marriage i.e., Vikram and Manisha; and Varsha and Shivam, both the couples belong to hindu religion and hence, both of them got married as per hindu-dharma. While talking about how did their wedding happen, the respondents say that:

“In our wedding, we followed our rituals and they had followed theirs. Nobody has pressurised any one's family”. The marriage actually had happened as per the Hindu dharama, followed by saat-phera and kanayadaan”, said Manisha.

“We regionally belong to Kerala, but we have been living in Delhi since our birth. My parents belong to south India but we perform all the rituals and celebrate all festivals as per north India. It was a north-Indian wedding and not a south-Indian wedding. As far as family rituals are concerned, we followed some of our rituals and

some of theirs. We only did some of the basic north-Indian rituals which could suit to both of our families” (Varsha’s Personal Interview).

While examining the wedding customs, Chesser (1980) also notes that honest and open communication is necessary when choosing rituals together that have particular meanings (Chesser, 1980). In both of the narratives above, the spouses have taken the initiative and decided which ceremonies to follow and which not to perform so that both families may be happy that their customs are being upheld. In these situations, couples are free to handle and involved in all the planning rather than their families taking the lead.

In north Indian societies, on the day of the wedding, what usually happens in most of the cultures is when the groom enters with the *baraat* (a celebratory wedding procession that escorts the groom), bride’s family welcome the groom at the door step and all his sister-in laws stopped him jokingly, to enter and ask for money. Myrvold also informs from her research in Punjab how the bride's sisters frequently engage in a game known as "*joota churayi rasam*" with the groom in which they have to hide his shoes and later they bargain over gifts of money in exchange for his shoes (Myrvold 2004, 164). During my fieldwork, Shahid, a Muslim man, married a woman from a different caste but the same religion despite strong opposition from the woman's family informed that:

“In my wedding, nobody came at the front door to welcome me and my family as they were not happy with this marriage. We were also instructed by them to not bring the *Baraat* with the *band-baja*”.

Thus, the idea of marriage which is described as a ‘*Band-Baja Shadi*’, i.e., a marriage with a band playing, or a ‘*Dhoom-Dham ki Shadi*’ by Parveez Mody (2002, 225) does not go well with everybody, especially in the cases of self-choice marriages. While marriage is universally celebrated as a public event, complete with elaborate ceremonies and presentations, as noted by Mody (2002, 223-256), couples in contentious marriages rarely receive support from their families or communities. As a result, the couples do not experience the happiness, joy, and celebration that they anticipate from their families on their wedding day.

As evidenced by popular media, brides often face strong social pressure about what kind of wedding is considered ideal and how they are expected to act, feel, and think about their

wedding. One such argument is that the bride should have the primary responsibility for the wedding because it is her day and hers to organize (Stafford. et al., 2020). Given that these are the aspirations of a bride on the wedding day being 'her' day, this research found a very different experiences of brides in the context of urban Delhi. A few brides have had a wedding ceremony whereas there were others, who did not have such things. Shaheen, a muslim woman, married to Avinay Sharma, a hindu man, also shared a similar experience of her wedding. She informed that,

“On my wedding reception day, my mother and all of my siblings came there but my father did not come as he was against to my marriage and he disowned me. I did not want to invite any other relative from my side because they are very toxic. From my husband's side, everybody came happily and organized our wedding so well. It was a great day for me and everything was perfect.”

Similar are the narratives of other two inter-caste married couples, who eloped and got married. Juhi and Gautam, an inter-caste married couple, eloped and got married in Tis Hazari court followed by saat phere at Arya Samaj temple. The couple reported that they had to elope because Juhi's father had fixed her marriage without even telling her. Since Juhi is from a lower caste than Gautam, his family refused to accept their relationship and his father disowned her. Juhi informed that:

“When we got married, my family started searching for me. They even registered a complaint against Gautam that he kidnapped me, since he got a call from the nearest police station. The next day we had to be present at the district court where my parents also came. On my statement that I had married as per my wish and nobody kidnapped me, my husband was released from the charges of kidnapping but my father disowned me”

Similarly, another account of inter-caste marriage was documented during fieldwork where the couple, Preeti and Sonu belonged to Faridabad, eloped and got married in court as a result of non-acceptance from the woman families. In this case, the woman belonged to a higher caste, and therefore her family refused to allow her marriage to a man from a lower caste. Preeti reported that:

“I had informed my parents when we were going to get marry in the court. When we came back, my mother-in-law welcomed us with full of heart. My in-laws have accepted us but own family has disowned me. After my wedding, my mother called me but my husband was not allowed to visit my house. I rarely visit to my house when I miss my mother a lot but I never take my child to my house”, said Preeti.”

In the narratives discussed above, though Shaheen has had a grand wedding ceremony organized by her husband’s family, her mother and siblings came but her father did not come as he opposed the relationship. Her extended family members and relatives were also not invited as they were also not happy with the idea of marrying a hindu man. In the case of Juhi/Gautam and Preeti/Sonu, these couples eloped and got married as there were resistance to marriage from their own families. Thus, the conventional idea of gifting the daughter to the groom by the father in form of *kanyadan* is completely missing from these narratives. Similarly, the other ceremonies which are celebrated for the purposes of the wedding also did not take place like haldi or mehendi, which are considered auspicious particularly for the bride.

A number of rituals, including the application of mehndi (henna) and haldi (turmeric paste), are carried out to beautify the bride and groom before the wedding day. According to Myrvold (2004, 162), the bride and groom in Punjabi society mark their move into a new social status by taking a bath, shedding their old clothing, and wearing special wedding attire. Before the wedding, the bride and her single friends also decorate their hands and feet with elaborate mehndi designs, which represent prosperity and good fortune in her marital home. Stafford. et al (2020), in their study also explained how a girl is often informed that her wedding day will be the happiest day of her life. This frequent assurance reinforces the societal investment in marriage as a happy place, regardless of whether the sentiment actually coincides with the event (Stafford et al., 2020).

However, no such ceremonies were organized at the wedding of Juhi/Gautam and Preeti/Sonu as there was resistance from the families. Thus, a day which is regarded as one of the happiest days in an individual’s life, especially in the cases of brides, is actually not true in the situations of contested marriages. On their wedding day, after they registered their marriage, Juhi and Gautam were being searched by their families, a kidnapping case was filed against Gautam, they were not getting any place to rent, Juhi was disowned by her father and a numerous other

incidents occurred on that day itself. Thus, the section examined how the couples eventually got married despite resistance, negotiations, and in some cases, elopement.

### **Conclusion:**

The religiously approved ceremony is still essential to consummating a marriage and elevating the bride and groom's social standing. Through my fieldwork, I also discovered that religious ceremonies and rituals were seen as necessary to be carried out by the families, to give social legitimacy to a relationship, even in cases where the court had approved the marriage. In spite of the cultural differences, confronting resistance and opposition from the families and navigating negotiation in their everyday, the couples who were being interviewed for this study, ultimately got married. A few individuals managed to get married through a court solely because their families refused to approve of the union, but others had a formal wedding ceremony planned by them or their families. However, the individuals ended up marrying the person they desired, in the hope of creating a home. Despite the fact that love-marriage couples question conventional notions of "Indian" morality and marriage, they do not entirely distance themselves from the social and moral ideals upheld by those in arranged marriages. From my field research, I also learned that when people get married out of love, they often long for their parents' approval and try to convince them to approve of it because they want their involvement and support.

Additionally, the research also shows that the idea of being a bride or groom, getting jewels all around, draped in a beautiful wedding attire doesn't prove to be necessary in the cases of contested marriages. Many couples who encounter resistance from their families endure ongoing struggle and disagreement instead of enjoying joyful involvement and support throughout their wedding celebrations. In situations of elopement, where couples may encounter greater resistance, social rejection, and emotional pain, the situation frequently gets even more challenging. Thus, the idea of "the wedding day" being so elaborative and exaggerated, being one of the biggest days in an individual's life, doesn't hold truth for everyone.

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## The West Asia Conflict and India: Strategic and Economic Challenges

Sanchayeeta Rajkhowa

### Abstract

*The wars and geopolitical tensions in West Asia carry major implications for India's national interest, economic growth, and its position as a maritime power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Being one of the largest purchasers of crude oil and natural gas, India faces vulnerabilities in case of any tensions in West Asia. This article analyses how the existing conflicts in West Asia impacts India's energy security, sea routes, as well as its economic activities. Apart from this, the article also explores how the existing geopolitics in relation to maritime choke points such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea disrupts shipping in the IOR, thus negatively impacting India's strategic interests. Considering the above factors, the article therefore examines India's strategic responses towards crisis in West Asia.*

**Keywords:** West Asia, Geopolitics, IOR, Maritime trade, Energy Security

### Introduction

The shifting dynamics of the volatile West Asian region create ripple effects across the international political landscape (Kumari 2025, 280-299). The current situation in West Asia should be a matter of very deep concern for India because the policies of Saudi Arabia and Iran have enormous potential for impacting positively or negatively on India's future well-being and security (Gupta 2016). West Asia has emerged as a critical theatre in India's evolving foreign policy, reflecting a shift from ideological engagement to pragmatic strategic recalibration (Amini 2026). The escalating conflict in West Asia is emerging as a major risk for India's economy, threatening trade flows, increasing import costs, and putting pressure on growth (The Economic Times 2026). Historically, India's West Asia policy has been multidirectional, however adoption of the Look West policy in 2005 reflects India's desire for engagement with its West Asian neighbours (Stanly 2016). The growing military presence at crucial maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Red

Sea present a serious concern. As a nation reliant on foreign oil and sea trade, these issues pose challenges for India.

Considering the above factors, the article addresses these critical questions. First, why West Asia is important for India? Second, how do wars and geopolitical conflicts in West Asia affects India's energy security, economic stability, and domestic growth? Third, what strategic measures has India adopted against crises emerging from West Asia? Furthermore, to address these questions, the article adopts a qualitative study based on reports, newspapers and articles in order to understand the impact of instability in West Asia on India. Over the last few years, India's outreach to West Asia has evolved from bilateral engagements to sub-regional and regional engagements with new mechanisms coming into play (Trigunayat 2024).

### **Importance of West Asia for India**

India has enjoyed exceptionally close, historic and civilisational ties with West Asia (Trigunayat 2018). India has a long-standing historical connection with the West Asian region, dating back to ancient times (Chinoy and Pradhan 2024, 1-13). Its relations with West Asia have evolved through various phases; it began with a solidarity cause with the Arab World, but with time various challenges and opportunities set the trajectory of India's West Asia policy (Shah 2021, 60-77). India's engagement with West Asia now extends beyond energy, trade, and people-to-people contacts (Katoch 2024, 3-5). As India aspires to emerge as a rising global power, it can only be realised if it would be able to build a conducive environment in its neighbourhood (Kumar and Mohan 2021, 182-193).

First, energy security remains the most visible and critical aspect of India-West Asia relations (CPPR 2026). India's heavy dependence on the West Asian countries for crude oil and LNG imports makes it particularly vulnerable (ICRA 2026). India ranks as one of the largest energy consumers globally and relies heavily on imports for a significant portion of its crude oil and natural gas needs from West Asian nations, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar. Second beyond imports, West Asian countries have emerged as India's largest trade partner (Alam 2017). The top 10 trading partners of India also include the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia which play a prominent role in India's economic landscape (Export Import Data 2025). The importance of Gulf Countries for India lies in its

energy security, the volume of trade, and the large presence of Indian expatriates (Solanki 2024). Third, West Asia serves as a crucial land bridge for India to access Central Asia, Afghanistan, and potentially Europe including important choke points which are important for India (Palavalsa 2026). For India, over 90 per cent of trade by volume and more than 85 per cent of crude oil imports move by sea; moreover, India's exposure is particularly acute across four maritime corridors: the Strait of Hormuz, the Red Sea-Suez Canal system, the Strait of Malacca, and the Bab el-Mandeb (Gupta and Soni 2026). Among these, the Strait of Hormuz represents the single most critical node in India's energy supply chain, with around 80-85 per cent of India's crude oil imports transiting this narrow passage (Gupta and Soni 2026). Furthermore, the Indian diaspora is a very crucial part of India's engagement with the region in West Asia (Iqbal 2024, 1-19). Indians form the largest expatriate group across the GCC, with around 9.1 million people living and working in the region, the highest among all nationalities (TOI 2026). Despite these engagements, the ongoing social and political flux in the region have adverse consequences for India and requires a serious rethink of its foreign policy priorities (Shidore 2021).

### **Implications of the West Asia Conflict for India**

The ongoing geopolitical tensions in West Asia pose profound challenges for India (Dey n.d.). First, the disruption of global energy supply is one of the most immediate and critical consequences of war for India (Anandan et al. 2022, 800–810). West Asia conflict disrupts LNG supplies and energy flows, raising risks for India's fuel imports and regional economies (Mukherjee 2026). Another significant consequence of West Asia conflict is the interruption of maritime trade and global supply chains. India's commerce with Europe, Africa, and the Gulf region is heavily dependent on maritime routes that traverse the Arabian Sea, the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Suez Canal (Chauhan 2026). The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints, the ongoing military escalation in the region has disrupted shipping flows through this narrow passage affecting energy markets, maritime transport and global supply chains (UNCTAD 2026).

Rising tensions in Iran are sending shockwaves through energy and financial markets; global oil flows, inflation expectations, and market sentiment are all under pressure (Monchau

2026). In India, the inflationary effect of rising fuel prices is amplified. With the increase in oil prices, the cost of almost all manufactured and transported goods increases since petroleum products are essential in all sectors of the economy, including manufacturing, agriculture, and power generation (More 2026). This leads to an increase in the prices of all which are basic necessities of day-to-day lives. The Gulf War, the Iraq invasion, the crises with Iran, and the latest Red Sea crises have shown how rapidly rising inflation and the uncertain economic situation in India are directly linked to the events in West Asia. As a result, several Indian industries are being forced to scale down production due to shortages of gas and energy inputs, affecting overall industrial output (Roopalatha n.d.).

West Asia conflict impacts the Indian diaspora, remittances, and economy, highlighting safety concerns (Singh 2026). A notable share of the Indian diaspora is employed in sectors sensitive to regional instability, including hospitality, construction, and other service-sector roles; also waning opportunities, slower work cycles, delayed wages, and contract uncertainty are among the major issues faced by Indian workers (Singh 2026). If there is any military tension in times to come, the citizens of India who are in foreign lands may face hazards that include violent attacks and economic instability. Gradualism and risk avoidance remain deeply embedded features of India's conduct of external relations, including its relations with West Asia (Alam 2017).

Therefore, the West Asian conflict has created unexpected challenges for India as well as economic, national security related, and humanitarian (PMO 2026). For India, this persistent instability underscores the need for strategic balancing to protect its economic and geopolitical interests in the extended maritime neighbourhood (Kumar 2025).

### **India's Strategic Response to West Asian Crisis**

India is engaging with multiple countries to ensure uninterrupted energy supplies as tensions continue to escalate in West Asia (Business World 2026). Given the recent instability, India has felt the need to reduce tensions and enhance its capacity to respond effectively to these vulnerabilities. Faced with severe disruptions to its oil imports, India has four alternative options: return to purchasing Russian oil; diversify beyond the Strait of Hormuz; strengthen domestic strategic reserves; and introduce a long-term oil security strategy, including ways for

energy transition (Sahai 2026). India has expanded its energy imports from 20 to 41 countries, reducing reliance on West Asia amid global tensions (Money Control 2026). India has greatly increased its share of crude oil — and to an extent diversified natural gas sourcing — from global markets, particularly Russia (Firstpost 2026). In recent years, Indian refiners have significantly expanded sourcing from Russia, the United States and West Africa; the country has also diversified its LPG supply chain, bringing in cargoes from suppliers such as the United States, Norway, Canada and Russia (Chakraborty 2026). Recently, India has also adopted a two-track approach to reduce immediate geopolitical tensions by increasing its sources of import for fossil fuel, and accelerating a long-term domestic transition towards renewable energy (Manish and Rathore 2026, 64-85). Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPRs) are the emergency stock of crude oil, stored by governments including India to meet the needs in case of supply disruptions like war, natural disasters, or pandemics (The Impact Project 2025). Through initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and ambitious domestic renewable energy targets, India seeks to mitigate the economic risks associated with fluctuations in global oil markets caused by instability in West Asia (Manish and Rathore 2026).

One of the primary concerns for India has been the safety of its large diaspora residing in West Asia (Upadhyay 2026). The government has been closely coordinating through embassies and diplomatic missions; and emergency response mechanisms, helplines, and advisories have been put in place to ensure the well-being of Indian nationals (Upadhyay 2026). Protecting diaspora interests has encouraged India to deepen political trust and institutional cooperation with regional governments (Dissanayake 2026). With changing power dynamics in the region, India has balanced its foreign policy to safeguard its interests and promote stability (Rather and Bukhari 2025, 7-18). The cooperation between Ministry of External Affairs, the military, civil aviation bodies, and shipping organisations has improved substantially, enabling India to respond quickly to situations that pose any threat to Indians living abroad.

Furthermore, India has opted for a balanced engagement rooted in strategic autonomy (Chandra and Mishra 2025, 176–182). While some geopolitical relationships have been tested by the Iran war, others have been strengthened; however emerging alignments between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and India are creating new opportunities for cooperation among three countries increasingly bound by shared defence and economic interests (Shea 2026). India and the UAE have signed landmark agreements on energy reserves and defence collaboration,

aiming to enhance India's energy security and advance strategic industrial ties amid shifting regional dynamics (The Economic Times 2026). The India- Gulf cooperation extends beyond traditional counterterrorism efforts and encompasses diverse strategic interests, exploring opportunities and challenges amidst changing circumstances (Bukhari 2026, 189-204). Thus, these measures are crucial since the instability in West Asia has been a contributing factor in the proliferation of extremism and terrorist groups, which could create security threats for India.

The problems in West Asia have made it clear why the SAGAR policy is so important for India. The future of the Indian Ocean region looks much more unstable (Shaughnessy 2025). SAGAR focuses on maritime security, economic development, capacity building, and humanitarian assistance, positioning India as a stabilising actor in the IOR (Kaur 2026). Also, India launches the IOS SAGAR initiative, enhancing maritime security with 16 nations amid West Asia tensions and regional challenges (The Hindu 2026). Through strategic alliances, humanitarian outreach, and cooperative security initiatives, India's Navy has transformed into an anchor of stability from the IOR to West Asia (Banerjee 2024).

However, in recent years, India's engagement with West Asia has expanded into various sectors; initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is introduced which will bolster India's economic integration with the Gulf countries (Rathod 2026, 1-16). The IMEC project for India is a search for an alternative route for economic and infrastructural connectivity with West Asia and Europe (Kamalkar and Kamala 2024, 130-145). Similarly, new minilateral frameworks such as I2U2 including India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States was initiated in 2023, which enables New Delhi to reinforce its image as a responsible stakeholder while expanding partnerships beyond its traditional alignments (Kumari and Kumar 2025, 7-12).

## **Conclusion**

Prolonged West Asian war could harm remittances, the rupee and growth, affecting India beyond the global oil shock and trade disruptions (Pande 2026). Fluctuating oil prices, maritime insecurity, security vulnerability of the diaspora community, and regional instability are directly related to India's interests and growth prospects. Globalisation has made the countries

of the world more connected and interdependent (National Geographic n.d.) such that any instability in West Asia impacts India's internal and external environments. West Asia is home to some of the largest oil and natural gas reserves, and India is one of the largest importers of energy from the region; with India's rapidly growing energy needs, securing reliable and affordable energy sources is a key priority for its foreign policy (The Hindu 2026). So, this war has created unexpected challenges for India as well as economic, national security related, and humanitarian (PMO 2026).

Furthermore, India maintained a 'non-aligned' presence in West Asia, balancing between the three poles of power—i.e. Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia; at the same time, Modi's outreach to strengthen these pre-existing but limited engagements has garnered immediate benefits, both in the security and economic arenas (Taneja 2019). As its global profile rises, sustained engagement with the West Asia will remain central to India's broader geopolitical strategy and its vision of a stable multipolar order (Amini 2026). As tensions rise among the regional powers, maintaining strategic balance is both necessity and challenge for India (Singhal 2026). Therefore, India must continue to build up its economic stability, maritime readiness, diplomatic flexibility, strategic partnerships, and energy diversification options in order to deal with the uncertainties associated with wars and conflict in the region.

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## The Last Mile Problem: Women's Safety and Night-Time Urban Mobility in Indian Cities

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### Abstract

*The increasing participation of women in India's urban workforce has resulted in their greater presence in public spaces at night. Nonetheless, cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata, and Hyderabad continue to experience significant rates of harassment and sexual violence during women's late-night commutes. This paper investigates the "last mile problem" concerning gendered urban vulnerability, using government data and NGO reports to examine the risks women face. Through a sociological lens, it explores theories of feminist urbanism and spatial exclusion to highlight persistent safety issues. The study critiques existing safety measures and recommends gender-responsive urban planning and policy reforms for safer, more inclusive urban environments.*

**Keywords:** Women's Safety, Night-Time Mobility, Last Mile Problem, Urban India, Sexual Harassment, Public Transport, Safe City Projects, and Nirbhaya Fund

### Introduction

Crimes against women in the streets of Indian cities remain widespread. The issue of women's safety during night-time mobility has been the subject of ongoing debate, particularly following the 2012 Nirbhaya case, yet structural inadequacies persist. Urban India has experienced significant socio-economic transformation, such as fast urban growth, economic reforms, and the rise of the service and technology sectors, which have brought more women into public spaces and the workforce. Today, women work in fields like healthcare, hospitality, retail, IT, education, and customer support, and many of these jobs require them to travel late at night. Despite this increased economic participation, urban infrastructure and public safety mechanisms have not sufficiently addressed the need for women's mobility after dark. The "last mile problem" is the final part of a commuter's journey, usually from work to home. In Indian cities, this last-mile commute often puts women at greater risk because of poor lighting, unsafe sidewalks, empty public areas, unreliable transport, and not enough police presence. Women's fear is not just about being victims of violence, but also about always expecting harassment, stalking, assault, or sexual violence in public places. In this study, the last mile problem means the journey to home from the work at night.

The 2012 Delhi gang rape case was a turning point in how India talks about women's safety and their ability to move freely in cities. Even after legal reforms, stricter laws, and more public focus on gender-based violence, women still face fear and insecurity in urban areas. NCRB data shows that crimes against women remain high in major cities, with sexual harassment, molestation, stalking, and assault often happening in transit spaces and during commuting hours. A recent gang rape of a 30-year-old woman on a bus while she was returning from work has brought back memories of the 2012 case and renewed concerns about women's safety at night. This paper argues that women's insecurity during nighttime travel is not just a law-and-order problem but a deeper sociological issue rooted in patriarchal city planning, exclusion, and gendered control of public spaces. By examining the intersection of mobility, gender, urban governance, and public safety, the paper seeks to understand why Indian cities continue to remain unsafe for women despite technological and policy interventions.

### **Theoretical Framework: Understanding the Last Mile Problem and Feminist Urban Geography**

In urban planning, the concept of the first and last mile problem is often understood as the poor connection between the origin or destination and the public transport stations (Ying et al. 2021). However, for women, the concept extends beyond convenience and efficiency (Roy et al. 2024, 1) to encompass safety, bodily autonomy, dignity, and freedom of movement. In her study, Roy, S (2024) has delved into the understanding of the gendered nature of commute in the first- and last-mile stretches. Women's commuting experiences are fundamentally different from men's due to the gendered nature of urban spaces. In many cases, the absence of proper cycling lanes, safe pedestrian pathways, and organised transport zones increases their vulnerability and makes night-time travel stressful and risky (Nikore and Singhal 2025, 5). Feminist urban scholars highlight that cities are designed based on masculine assumptions regarding mobility and public presence. Henri Lefebvre's "Right to the City" underscores urban citizenship as equal access to urban spaces, participation, and mobility. Nonetheless, women face conditional access to these spaces, influenced by patriarchal norms, surveillance, and fear. Their commuting experiences reflect "gendered spatiality," with public spaces often perceived as unsafe or morally suspect, especially at night (Tariro and Naidu 2025, 442). As the woman's mobility safety at night has increasingly become a major discussion due to the growing number of crimes against women, the term "the last mile" has been used in this study.

The last mile becomes particularly dangerous because it often involves transitional spaces such as isolated streets, dark alleys, poorly monitored neighbourhood roads, bus stops, metro exits, parking lots, and ride-

share drop points. These spaces lack social visibility and institutional protection. Women travelling alone during late-night hours frequently alter their routes, clothing choices, travel timings, and social behaviour in order to minimise risk (Tariro and Naidu 2025, 443). Geographers call this the "geography of fear," which means women mentally map out dangerous areas, limiting their movement far beyond where violence actually happens. Feminist geographers argue that Safety is often linked with ideas of "respectable" behaviour and patriarchal forms of protection, which frequently end up limiting women's freedom of movement (Gqola et al. 2024, 3). Their right to make their own choices and take personal risks is often denied. Feminist scholars argue that restrictions on women's movement act as a form of patriarchal control, sending the message that public spaces, especially at night, mainly belong to men (Parikh 2018, 696). Phadke, Khan, and Ranade (2011) show how women's right to be in public is controlled not just by the state, but also by families and communities.

### **Gendered Mobility, Public Transport, and the Fear of Crime**

Public transportation is crucial for women's mobility in Indian cities, yet it frequently exposes them to harassment and intimidation. Women report incidents of verbal abuse, unwanted touching, stalking, sexual remarks, and physical assault. A study indicates that 35% of young women in Chennai's public transport experienced harassment over six months, with many incidents unreported due to social stigma, inadequate police support, or victim-blaming (Valan 2020, 1). As a result, women tend to avoid empty bus stops, crowded buses, and poorly lit areas, especially at night. Swati Arora's study on midnight walks in Delhi shows how women coming together in public spaces challenge patriarchal control (Arora 2019, 171).

The ITDP and Safetipin policy report explains that women's travel patterns rely on public transport and walking (Shah et al. 2017). The report points out that transport planning in Indian cities usually overlooks women's daily experiences and instead focuses on men's work-to-home commutes. For many women, mobility in the city is an emotional experience. Women often have to stay alert in ways that men usually do not, which creates extra emotional stress. Besides this, fear of crime plays a big role. In their study, Avendano et al. (2022, 3) explain that fear of crime is the most common way women experience sexual objectification, such as harassment by strangers on the street. One study in the city of Kolkata (Roy et al 2024, 125-126) revealed that feelings of anxiety, fear, and frustration form an important part of women's daily commuting experiences in Kolkata, highlighting how urban mobility is deeply shaped by emotional experiences and concerns about safety.

### **Night-time Mobility and Crime against Women in the Mega Cities**

Night-time mobility in India's megacities is closely linked to women's experiences of insecurity, harassment, and restricted access to public spaces. According to a study by Jagori (2012, 7), nine out of ten female respondents have experienced sexual violence in Delhi's public spaces. The proportion of women in the IT sector, particularly in call centers, has risen. However, these night-shift employees, especially in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), frequently feel unsafe while commuting, citing public transport and employer-provided taxis as unreliable and insecure (Bajpai and Pal 2021, 4). Night-time mobility requires women to constantly negotiate trust, respectability, and safety (Tara and Ilavarasan 2011, 1). Many women fear the possibility of sexual harassment or assault while travelling alone in a cab (Annavarapu 2022, 765). Sneha Annavarapu (2022) found that women's fear during night cab use in Hyderabad is influenced by "taxi tactics" like sharing locations, talking on calls, and mistrusting drivers, which contribute to their perception of crime fear.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2024 report found 50,584 cases of crimes against women in 19 metro cities. Delhi recorded the highest with 13,396 cases and a crime rate of 176.8 per lakh women, making it the most dangerous metro for women. Assault on Women with Intent to Outrage her Modesty accounted for 4,671 cases, highlighting issues of street harassment and public space violations. Delhi recorded 1,058 rape cases in 2024, which remains the highest among the 19 metropolitan cities. According to the NCRB (2004) report, Hyderabad recorded the highest rate of sexual harassment in the public transport system, while Bengaluru and Hyderabad recorded the highest rate of sexual harassment against women in public pathways (NCRB 2024). These statistics show that this is a crime that happens in public spaces, and the fact that it occurs in metropolitan cities highlights the very nighttime transit vulnerabilities examined in this paper. However, different studies provide different statistics. The survey of Jagori and UN Women (2011, 36) found 95% of women in Delhi felt unsafe in public spaces. The ActionAid (2016) survey found 79% had experienced harassment, yet formal registration barely scratches the surface. This gap between the NCRB figure and lived reality is itself one of the most important data points to examine.

The survey conducted by Hindustan Times and Akshara Centre in 2011 found that 95 per cent of women had been sexually harassed in the public places of Mumbai City (Akshara Centre 2016, 14). A survey by Bangalore Bus Prayanikara Vedike in 2013 found that two out of every three women travelling on BMTC buses regularly experience harassment from fellow passengers, conductors, or drivers (Deccan Herald, 2013). A 2019 survey conducted in collaboration with the Hyderabad City Police (HCP) found that over 30 per cent of 8,264 women surveyed across Hyderabad had experienced street harassment within a month,

particularly after 4:00 p.m. (Amara et al. 2025, 9). One study found that 64 per cent of women in Bangalore had experienced inappropriate touch in public spaces (Bose 2022, 385). Another report states that nearly 90 per cent of women feel public places are unsafe because of the fear of sexual harassment (Bajwa 2018). Gayathri (2022, 171) found that while women can face harassment at any time, those working late at night have extra difficulty finding safe transportation.

The 2022 World Bank Report highlighted significant sexual harassment issues in major Indian cities. In Delhi, 88% of surveyed women experienced harassment on public transport, yet only 1% reported it to the police. Chennai saw over half of female commuters reporting harassment, with just 6% contacting authorities. In Pune, 63% faced harassment on buses, but 12% reached out to the police. Additionally, 75% of women railway commuters in Mumbai were unaware of women's helpline numbers (The World Bank 2022, 4). Similarly, in a survey in the city of Kolkata, the researcher (Sur 2014, 225) has found out that women often avoided spending time alone in public spaces. As a result, many women either limited their participation in late-night leisure activities. The Annual Report of the National Commission of Women (NCW), 2024, reveals that 2,217 complaints were filed under “Outraging Modesty of Women / Molestation”, 1,616 complaints were received under “Police Apathy Against Women”, and 559 complaints were filed under " Stalking " (NCW 2024, 8). These statistics show the harassment of women in the streets and on public transit in India.

### **Urban Infrastructure and Safe Mobility Measures**

Following the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, Indian cities began adopting a range of institutional, technological, infrastructural, and policing interventions aimed at improving women's safety in public spaces and night-time mobility. A major national framework guiding these interventions is the Government of India's Safe City Project under the Nirbhaya Fund, implemented by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). The programme specifically targets women's safety in public spaces. Eight cities were initially selected: Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai, Ahmedabad, and Lucknow. The initiative focuses on identifying areas with high incidents of crimes against women and implementing multiple measures.

Delhi expanded large-scale CCTV surveillance networks, smart LED street lighting, women marshals in buses to improve safe mobility for women during night travel. Delhi already has over 2.5 lakh CCTV cameras installed and maintained by the PWD (The Indian Express, 2026). As part of the Bengaluru Safe

City Project initiative, Bengaluru City Police introduced an AI-based CCTV surveillance framework consisting of approximately 7,000 cameras, two drones and 160 body-mounted cameras (Boro U et al. 2026, 135). Mumbai strengthened transit-oriented safety through CCTV-enabled buses, panic buttons, enhanced railway surveillance, and integrated transport monitoring systems. Hyderabad introduced the internationally recognised “SHE Teams,” specialised police units that use hotspot mapping, surveillance, and rapid-response policing to address harassment and violence against women in public spaces. Kolkata introduced women-only buses, Pink Booths, and SHINING all-women patrol units to make public transport corridors safer. In Bengaluru, authorities promoted app-based safety systems, women-driven 'Pink Autos,' GPS-enabled transport services, and special night safety protocols for women at the airport. After the 2005 Bangalore incident, new steps were taken to improve employee safety, especially for women working night shifts in the BPO sector (Parikh 2018, 703). These steps included placing security staff in company cabs, using GPS to track vehicles, and requiring police checks for cab drivers, security staff, and other lower-level BPO employees.

### **Structural Failures in Urban Governance**

Gender-sensitive urban planning in India is insufficient, with transportation systems prioritizing efficiency over inclusivity and safety. Women's mobility needs are often undervalued, exacerbating their vulnerability, particularly at night. A Delhi survey found that 40% of respondents felt very uncomfortable due to inadequate lighting at bus stops, while 16% reported disorientation from a lack of proper signage. Additionally, 6% noted challenges boarding buses at stops without shelters, leading to panic during peak hours. Nearly 40% expressed fear of victimization due to the absence of police presence and CCTV cameras (Nayak and Nenazeer 2017, 400). Ayona Datta points out that technology-based safety models often focus on surveillance but do not address deeper structural inequalities (Datta 2021, 269). Many smart-city projects highlight CCTV cameras and digital monitoring; their real impact is limited by problems in how they are put into practice and by deeper structural issues (Bajpai and Pal 2021, 1). Even with many legal and technological steps, failures in enforcement still weaken women's safety in transit spaces.

Surveillance technologies like CCTV can monitor violence but fail to prevent harassment or enhance women's safety. Many cities have implemented women-only transport options as temporary measures, but these initiatives are often fragmented and lack systematic planning. Safetipin evaluated safety and accessibility near Delhi Metro's Yellow Line stations by surveying areas within 500 metres during evening hours. The study revealed poor visibility, few pedestrians, inadequate security, and limited gender diversity,

contributing to perceptions of unsafety. While public transport options were generally available, last-mile connectivity remained problematic due to insufficient options such as autos and cycle-rickshaws (Safetipin 2017, 39). Several initiatives, such as women's safety helplines started by the Delhi Transport Corporation and the Delhi Women and Child Department, did not get much public response because of poor implementation and low awareness. Some safety apps have been launched to help women in emergencies, but these do not work for women without smartphones (Soni 2016, 3). The study of Yadav and Karna (2025, 2886) found that while these apps are useful in areas where they are used often, they have problems like unstable network connections, GPS issues, low awareness about how to use them, slow response times, and frequent updates.

Unsafe mobility of women in cities is often the result of several governance failures, such as poor coordination between transport authorities and police, weak enforcement of safety policies, lack of gender audits in urban planning, poor street lighting, and inadequate pedestrian infrastructure. Delays in police response to the survivors or victims, victims blaming by the authorities, lack of funds in one-stop centres, delays in justice at the court- that's how the institutions in India have failed to provide safety to women (Shashikala, V. P.). Multiple cases of sexual harassment and sexual violence against women at night have increased in Bangalore even after the launch of safe city projects. In April 2025, CCTV footage went viral in Bengaluru. At 1:52 AM, one of the two women walking faced harassment by a man, who spoke about the data from many media outlets that Bengaluru city recorded 1,247 cases of sexual harassment in 2024 (The Telegraph 2025). In February, 2025, an 18-year-old teen was abducted in Chennai and sexually assaulted by two auto drivers in a movie auto rickshaw (Stalin 2025). There are many cases of sexual harassment of women in the streets of Kolkata at night. The recent incident of a female cop of Hyderabad who went undercover and stood alone in a bus stand from 12:30 AM to 3:30 AM as an experiment to see the safety of women revealed that she was approached by nearly 40 men (Pandey 2026). This experiment shows how unsafe women are at night mobility.

## **Conclusion**

The last-mile problem significantly impacts women's safety in Indian cities. Despite efforts to enhance urban mobility, issues such as poor street lighting, unsafe sidewalks, and inadequate last-mile connections persist, particularly at night. This indicates that women's safety demands more than policing; it requires a structural transformation of urban environments. Gender-responsive urban planning is essential, with mobility seen as a critical component of citizenship. The Safetipin report (2017) emphasises the need for

transport systems that prioritise women's safety. Recommendations include improved lighting, clearer signage, secure walking areas, and enhanced last-mile connections. Additionally, making public transport accessible, involving women in planning, and ensuring accountability among governing bodies are vital for improving safety and nighttime mobility. Adopting global best practices can facilitate gender-responsive urban governance, with a focus on increasing women's participation in relevant institutions.

After analysing urban infrastructure gaps and women's safety measures in cities like Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata, the paper advocates for a top-down government approach. Key recommendations include implementing real-time street monitoring devices, increasing police patrols, ensuring effective policing without victim blaming, utilizing technology to alert authorities in case of women's panic, improving police response times, surveying women in crime hotspots, increasing female representation in police and transportation sectors, enhancing infrastructure with adequate street lighting, training women to use safety apps, conducting regular audits of women's safety projects, strengthening surveillance on public transport at night, and raising awareness among men to challenge patriarchy.

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**Negotiating Identity and Autonomy in Assam:  
Ethnicity, Recognition and the Gendered Dimension of Ethnic Mobilisation**

**Sushmita Sonowal**

**ABSTRACT**

*The paper critically examines how ethnic identity politics operates beyond identity formation and mobilisation, but also a gendered space where women navigate and negotiate ethnic belonging and alienation in distinct ways. The paper further explores how plain tribal women of Assam encounter multiple layers of identity crisis, which place them at the margins of mainstream regional identity, marginalised ethnic identity, and an intra-community power dynamics that intersects with their gender, class, and spatial location. The study argues that autonomous arrangements, although envisioned as a mechanism for safeguarding collective identity and ensuring political recognition, frequently prioritise community preservation over internal democratic inclusion, resulting in the silencing of tribal women's voices within ethno-political discourse. Thus, by interrogating the contradictions between ethnic aspirations and intra-community power dynamics, the study contributes to broader debates on identity politics, autonomy, and the gendered dimension of ethnic mobilisation in Assam.*

**Keywords-** Ethnic Identity Crisis, Recognition, Autonomy, Intra-Community Power Dynamics, Intersectionality

**INTRODUCTION**

Assam, geographically located on the northeastern frontier of the Indian nation-state, has historically experienced long-standing structural and spatial marginalisation, reflecting relatively fragile linkages to historical pathways and its geographic adjacency to mainland India (Dutta 2012, XV). The multicultural fabric of Assam is rooted in its vibrant cultural uniqueness, diverse ethnic and linguistic heritage, where each community preserves its own distinct identity and adopts a unique mode of expression through their culture, religion, language, and ancestry lineage through the process of belongingness and differences. The political climate of Assam is witnessing an intensifying assertion of ethnic identity-based politics, where diverse ethnic groups support, organise, and mobilise politically to preserve their unique cultures and ethnic identities. The ethnic identity crisis in Assam emerges as a nuanced socio-political phenomenon with multiple

historical layers, political marginalisation, demographic transformation, and cultural negotiations. In a broader scholarly interpretation, ethnic identity refers to a psychological sense of collective solidarity rooted in common ancestry, common language, common culture, and shared historical narratives (Hutchinson et al. 1996, 6-7; Borah 2020, 1337-1343; Zagefka 2009, 228-241). However, Chandra defines descent- related markers as the main attributes of ethnic identity formation (Chandra 2006, 397-424). During the postcolonial nation-building era, the formation of a unified national and regional identity- rooted in hegemonic majoritarian principles- often marginalised ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity, which in turn fueled instability, violence, ethno-political unrest, and identity-driven contestation. On that account, marginalised ethnic groups sought remedies to safeguard their unique cultural identities due to perceived cultural homogenisation pressures exerted by more dominant groups (Pait 2024, 397-403). In the subsequent period, multiple ethnic communities in the region mobilised for ethno-political movements demanding institutional autonomy through statutory councils, greater constitutional or territorial protection, or separate statehood aspirations. Consequently, inter- and intra-ethnic tensions, intermittent synergy, as well as episodes of discord with the state, grew more prominent within the political landscape of Assam.

The exploration of ethnic identity and gender identity in this paper is grounded in constructivist theories of ethnicity and feminist theoretical frameworks on gender. From a constructivist standpoint, ethnic identities are constructed through social and historical processes rather than biological given or primordial. (Jackson et al. 1993, 216-224) argues that ethnicity is socially constructed that are closely linked to human actions, interactions, and different choices. Scholars such as Fredrik Barth highlight that the persistence of ethnic identity lies in the boundaries that delineate one community from another (Barth 1969, 9-10). In this view, ethnicity is constantly redefined through political interactions, institutional dynamics, and shared historical narratives. As argued by Benedict Anderson, collective identities are constructed through collective narratives and symbolic practices that foster a sense of belonging to a larger political and cultural entity (Anderson 2006, 6-7). The politics of recognition, as articulated by Charles Taylor, argues that the quest for political recognition lies at the core of identity assertions of minority and marginalised communities and often engages in political mobilisation to secure their cultural uniqueness, rights, and representation within the state (Taylor 1994, 37-43).

Complementing this approach, feminist theorists such as Judith Butler argues that gender identity is socially constructed phenomenon that is shaped and per formatively constituted through repeated social practices, norms and social expectations (Butler 1990, 34-43). However, the identity based mobilisation is not homogeneous in nature which draws attention on the concept of Intersectionality, conceptualised by Kimberle Crenshaw, which illustrates how overlapping

identities- such as ethnicity, gender, class, place of living, and social status- interact and resulting in differentiated experiences of power relation and social marginalisation (Crenshaw 1989, 139-16). Structural Intersectionality highlights how overlapping social, political, and economic institutions, together produce unique and compounded forms of disadvantages for individuals located at intersecting axes of marginalised positions. Political Intersectionality, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which political and social movements focus on single- axis identities, such as only ethnicity, only gender, only race - often sideline intersecting identities (Crenshaw 1991, 1241-1299). Through the “Matrix of domination” and interlocking systems of oppression, Collins argues that race, class, and gender constitute interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 1990, 221). In India, Rege developed a Dalit feminist standpoint theory by emphasising the structural caste-patriarchy nexus (Rege 2006, 20-21). Guru argues that Dalit women encounter a unique form of marginalisation shaped by the intersection of caste and patriarchy, exposing them to double discrimination, differentiating their struggles from those of both Dalit men and upper-caste women (Guru 1995, 2549). In the same way, tribal women’s experiences in Assam cannot be understood using a single-axis framework (gender alone, or ethnicity alone). Through the synthesis of these perspectives, the paper articulates how ethnic and gender identities interact and are co-constructed within political and social contexts. Ethnic identity politics thus becomes a domain where identity claims are articulated, contested and negotiated, while simultaneously revealing the gendered dynamics of power relations and representation. The study also examines how ethnic identity politics operates beyond identity formation and mobilisation, but also a gendered space where women navigate and negotiate ethnic belonging and alienation in distinct ways.

## **THE POLITICS OF MISRECOGNITION: CULTURAL HEGEMONY THROUGH LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY NARRATIVES**

Antonio Gramsci argues that cultural hegemony occurs when the dominant class secures consent by presenting its culture and interests as universal and legitimate (Gramsci 1971, 12-13 57-58, 181-182). The tribal politics of Assam can be interpreted through a Gramscian framework of cultural hegemony, where dominant linguistic and political groups historically shaped state identity, governance structures, cultural legitimacy, often marginalise tribal aspirations. In response, ethnic identity consciousness emerged as counter- hegemonic struggles seeking recognition, self- governance, and cultural preservation.

### **Language Politics and Linguistic Nationalism**

Language is not just a symbol of regional identity and cultural consolidation, but it also operates as a force of cultural hegemony. The language movement of 1960 and the medium of instruction movement in 1972 entrenched linguistic

polarisation in Assam, intensifying frictions among the Assamese speakers, Bengali speakers and tribal communities. First, the imposition of the Bengali language was interpreted as a threat, reinforcing concerns over its hegemonic move and the potential marginalisation of the Assamese language and culture. Later, through the passage of the Assam Official Language Act, 1960- institutionalised Assamese as the sole official language of the state, representing a form of linguistic nationalism, aiming to consolidate a unified Assamese nationality encompassing diverse ethnic communities under a common regional identity. In this process, the positioning of tribal languages as “other” within linguistic nationalism has turned linguistic identity into a visible site of political tensions that arose from fragmented identities. The dominance of the Assamese language is interpreted through the prism of cultural hegemony, wherein its dominance in governance, education, and discourse sidelines tribal languages and limits their scope of use. Such dynamics have intensified identity contestations, ultimately fueling ethnic assertion movements for autonomy, for separate statehood, as witnessed in the formation of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. From this juncture, growing fears of alienation and cultural assimilation into a hegemonic, caste Hindus mainstream political confrontation gained traction, catalysing stronger movements for autonomy among other minority tribal communities of Assam.

The tribal communities inhabiting in the Brahmaputra valley have made substantial influence to the evolution of the unified Assamese, Asamiya or Oxomiya identity (Hussain 1992, 16-23). The role they have played in shaping the Assamese identity is noteworthy; a large section has experienced a process of assimilation into dominant regional narratives that has entailed the erosion and relinquishing of their native ancestral linguistic heritage (Hussain 1992, 16-23). The articulation of a unified Assamese identity has involved the assimilation of heterogeneous population within a broader, homogenising narrative- the Brihattar Asomiya Jati (the Greater Assamese Community). Thus, this dynamic illustrates a broader pattern of cultural hegemony, where dominant regional narratives dictate the boundaries of linguistic and cultural legitimacy. However, this process also places tribal communities in a contradictory position where they are celebrated as a symbol of regional identity, while continuing to mark them as ‘others’ and subjecting them to the processes of alienation, thereby reinforcing symbolic marginalisation and limited visibility within the aspirations of Assamese-speaking caste-Hindu middle-class culture (Baruah 1999, 92-101).

### **The Influx of Migration, Immigration and Demographic Transitions:**

‘Indigenous (khilonjia)’ vs. ‘Immigrant’ or

‘The Assamese’ vs. ‘Outsider’ Narratives

‘Who are the Assamese?’ is a question that has repeatedly surfaced as a subject of debate within the socio- cultural and political discourse of Assam (Dutta 2012, 189). The influx of migration encouraged during the colonial era for cultivation and labour, the Partition of India (1947), and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971), brought significant demographic transformation in Assam. This changing demographic shift gave rise to an ‘Indigenous versus Immigrant’ or ‘The Assamese versus Outsider’ narratives, reflecting anxieties over citizenship, identity, belonging, land and resources and political representation in the state. The Assamese identity consciousness became more intensified or consolidated during the Assam Movement, articulated through the slogan ‘Detect, Delete, Deport,’ illegal immigrants, especially from Bangladesh, reflecting socio-political concerns surrounding demographic shifts, threats to language, cultural survival, political marginalisation, and contestation over land and resources. Sanjib Baruah highlights the internal contradictory nature of Assamese nationalism, as the coexistence of multiple ‘nested nationalities’ perceived the dominant caste- Hindu Assamese middle-class culture as hegemonic, which often contributed to the alienation of tribal and minority groups and competing ethnic claims within a fragile political structure (Baruah 1999, 95- 112). Beteille argues that the incorporation of the tribal population into the broader Hinduism shaped the contours of tribal politics and identity-based political articulation (Beteille 1998; Baruah 2019, 90- 100). However, the persistence of immigration- related issues remains unresolved till today and thus affects the contemporary debates on citizenship, rights, land and resources, and indigenous identity within the political climate of Assam.

### **Autonomy as Recognition: Hill Tribes and Plains Tribes, Constitutional Protection vs. Statutory Status**

Demands for autonomous arrangements and territorial recognition among tribal communities may be viewed as counter-hegemonic struggles aimed at reclaiming political representation, cultural identity, and control over land and resources. The concept of autonomy is deeply rooted in the historical evolution of North East India and has been a focal point of discussion in the region’s political discourse, largely driven by the principles of minority and indigenous rights which promotes self administration, self governance, self legislation, and self determination rules in order to safeguard their unique ethnic identities and aspirations of indigenous communities (Sarmah 2011, 23-25). Under the Government of India Act of 1935, the regions inhabited by the tribes of North-East India were classified as ‘Excluded Areas’ or ‘Partially Excluded Areas’ and subjected to the British colonial policy of isolation. Following independence, the Constitution of India acknowledged these areas as the Sixth Schedule through Article 244(2) by promoting the concept of autonomous governance. However, Baruah describes autonomy arrangements in Northeast India is rooted in colonial exceptionalism,



used as a conflict-management tool, not fully based on the principles of democratic decentralisation, which often reflects central government priorities rather than grassroots aspirations (Baruah 2020, .44-46).

The early assertion of ethnic sentiments was first witnessed among the 'Hill-Tribes' of the Northeastern region during the postcolonial nation-building era. The process of territorial reorganisation and the bifurcation of 'Undivided Assam' into smaller states like Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh left a lasting imprint on tribal politics and the emergence of ethnic nationalism within the larger Assamese nationalism. Subsequently, the hill tribes of Assam are also protected under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which gave birth to the territorial councils -

1. Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council
2. Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council

### **THE BODO ASSERTION: PLAIN TRIBES' IDENTITY CRISIS**

A new manifestation of tribal identity crisis emerges from asymmetrical constitutional and territorial arrangements that differentiate hill tribes from plains tribes, particularly differentiated experiences of communities governed under Sixth Schedule autonomy and those excluded from such arrangements. The Scheduled Tribe (Plains) as a sub-category established a formal identity for major plains tribal communities of Assam, which include the Bodos, Misings, Rabhas, Sonowal Kacharis, Tiwas, Deoris, Thengal Kacharis and others. Historically, these communities have been rooted along the banks of the Brahmaputra Valley, while sustaining their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, language, and distinct socio-political expressions. However, the colonial legacy, land revenue act, hegemonic cultural pressure, relative deprivation, political exclusion, and migration disrupted traditional structures, consolidating stronger identity-based consciousness among the plain tribal groups as well. The formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003 under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, prompted by ethnic unrest, marked a critical milestone in evolving ethnic identity consciousness among the plain tribal communities of Assam. After BTC's creation, other minority tribal groups living in the plain areas demanded similar autonomy arrangements protected under the Constitution of India. However, by instituting the concept of decentralised governance, the government of Assam undertook additional unique measures to promote the development of other indigenous tribal communities in the plains, which gave birth to six other autonomous councils that fall under the category of 'Statutory Autonomous Councils ' constituted under State Act as follows-

1. Mising Autonomous Council
2. Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council
3. Tiwa Autonomous Council
4. Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council
5. Deori Autonomous Council
6. Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council

This scenario illustrates the intricate processes of identity formation and the evolution of identity crisis over time. This ongoing struggle reflects broader negotiations between modernity and marginalisation, the pursuit of autonomy, regional integration, and ethnic revivalism within Assam's diverse, multilingual, and multicultural context.

### **RECONSIDERING HOMOGENEITY: ETHNIC IDENTITY IN ASSAM IS POLITICALLY NEGOTIATED**

The notion of 'reconsidering homogeneity' challenges the assumption that tribal and indigenous communities are monolithic social and political entities. Fredrik Barth argues that ethnic identities are politically negotiated and maintained through social boundaries rather than cultural sameness (Barth 1969, 9-15). Thus, the contours of tribal identity in Assam are shaped by constitutional asymmetries and survive because communities continuously distinguish themselves from 'others.' Barua argues that autonomy-based arrangements in Northeast India have facilitated uneven forms of ethnic accommodation, though conceived as a mechanism for managing ethnic aspirations, but have paradoxically produced fresh arenas of struggles over territory, political recognition, belonging and indignity (Baruah 2020, 44-46).

### **MARGINS WITHIN MARGINS: DYNAMICS OF GENDERED POWER RELATION- INTERSECTIONALITY AS A RESEARCH PARADIGM**

While counter-hegemonic tribal politics seek recognition and autonomy, patriarchal cultural norms within these ethno-political discourses frequently perpetuate gendered exclusions, marginalising women from socio-political decision-making processes. Tribal customary laws, generalised to be rooted in egalitarian principles, function as mechanisms for maintaining collective identity, protection of land and resources and indigenous autonomy. However, with the gradual influence of modernisation, market forces, and individualism have shifted toward privatisation, reinforcing patriarchal power relations that also persisted within tribal customary laws and autonomy institutions. The creation of autonomous governance may secure collective identity, but such recognition frequently fails to translate into substantive inclusion of women, who remain structurally marginalised. Menon challenges the assumption that legal reform alone can serve as the

primary vehicle for social change by arguing that rights- based legal frameworks often fail to address the deeper socio-political structures of patriarchy and power. (Menon 2004, 2-107, 204-207). Through the lens of intersectionality, plain tribal women of Assam experience exclusion not merely as women but through the intersection of gender, marginalised ethnic identity, patriarchal customary laws, class, educational disadvantages and spatial location. Their position within broader patriarchal society, combined with their socio-political positioning as members of marginalised tribal communities, deepens structural inequalities and reinforces differentiated experiences of vulnerabilities and exclusion.

Agarwal argues land is not only economic capital but also tied to identity and power (Agarwal 1994, 3-8, 51-57). Customary land relations within the Mising society, the second largest Scheduled Tribe Plains (henceforth STP) community in Assam, follows monogamous marriage practices with patrilocal residence and reinforces gendered pattern of land ownership, wherein women are often positioned as users rather than owners, with access and control largely negotiated through patrilineal descent and inheritance (Taye 2017, 148- 155). Within the Tiwa society, another (STP) community in Assam follows a patrilineal system, and daughters are excluded from inheriting parental property, but certain matrilineal traces remain evident in specific conditions, where they are unmarried or those whose husbands live with them as 'Ghor Juwai' (Das 2022, 460-469). In such cases, children inherit the mother's surname. However, these matrilineal practices are gradually disappearing in the contemporary period (Das 2022, 460-469). The persistence of patrilineal descent and inheritance arrangements illustrates Bina Agarwal's argument that de jure rights (legal entitlement) often fail to translate into de facto rights (actual control) within broader patriarchal property regimes (Agarwal 1994, 249-291).

Davis also highlights that women are often positioned as cultural carriers of ethnic identity, biological reproducers of the community and the boundary markers of the group (Davis 1997, 26-45). Dress, customs and language have served as arenas facilitating the process of assimilation. Within this framework, tribal women encounter multiple layers of identity crisis, which place them at the margins of mainstream regional identity, marginalised ethnic identity, and an intra-community structure that intersects with their gender, class, and location. Ethnic movements often mobilise women symbolically as custodians of culture, but when it came to forming the decision-making bodies, women were forgotten and pushed back to kitchens (Sharma 2014). Within the Mishing Autonomous Council, Tiwa Autonomous Council, and Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, the political representation of women is very low (Sharma 2014). However, the overall political participation of women is also influenced by literacy disparities in tribal areas and the burden of unpaid household responsibilities.

In Assam, around 94.4 per cent of the tribal population is concentrated in rural areas (Tribal Development Plan 2016). A significant proportion of the tribal population resides in geographically remote areas near the banks of the Brahmaputra River, contributing to poor connectivity and infrastructure deficits. These structural constraints often intersect with entrenched gender norms and restrict meaningful participation in governance, access to welfare, and political forums. In a district like Dhemaji, where the ST population is more than 25 per cent, natural disasters like floods and soil erosion affect women disproportionately and differently. Development discourses treat tribal women as beneficiaries not decision-makers and objects of welfare schemes rather than political actors, which results in limited agency in shaping policies affecting their lives differently.

Tribal autonomy movements are mostly focused on collective identity, preservation of culture, political recognition, protection of land and resources, but it has also tended to overlook internal power dynamics such as customs related to inheritance, marriage, domestic violence, health, education and women's low political representation within their own autonomous councils despite their active participation in the autonomy movement. Despite the existence of both constitutionally codified and uncoded customary laws, community authority and collective identity tend to outweigh women's rights and are frequently negotiated, diluted, or denied. This can sterilise the complex, contextual realities of plain tribal women's lives in Assam.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, the study argues that autonomous arrangements, although envisioned as a mechanism for safeguarding collective identity and ensuring political recognition, frequently prioritise community preservation over internal democratic inclusion, resulting in the silencing of women's voices within ethno-political discourse. However, following feminist critiques, these movements often reproduce internal patriarchal exclusions, limiting women's substantive participation despite their active role in the process of ethnic mobilisation. Thus, by interrogating the contradictions between ethnic aspirations and intra-community power dynamics, the study contributes to broader debates on identity politics, autonomy, and the gendered dimension of ethnic mobilisation in Assam.

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## **(RE)TURNING OF THE INTERNAL MIGRANTS:**

### **Emergence as a Political Category during Pandemic Politics in India**

Taniya Banerjee & Shefali Roy

#### **Abstract**

*This article sheds light on how to delve into the method of expanding the meaning and scope of the word 'migrant'. It entails what it means to be a migrant in the changing times in the realm of the economy and the pandemic. It summarises the challenges and the conditions, which the migrants experienced while going back to their home location along with the predicaments of returning to the host location post lifting up of the lockdown. With the changing nature of the economy, it is imperative to map the resistance and resilience showcased by the migrants in the process of negotiation with the state, society, and the economy, which has been peripheral in mainstream literature. It also brings out the dichotomous nature of the relationship between migrant workers and labour. It extracts the structural ramifications of the post-pandemic nature of the relationship between the two.*

Keywords: *Return Migration, Pandemic, Precarity, Resistance, Unemployment, Invisibilisation,*

#### **Introduction**

While the city brings with itself limitless possibilities, the migrants are situated at the periphery of the ambit of the city as one comes across their everyday living, which revolves around economic hardships, juggling between making the city, livelihood, and aspirations. The depictions of migrants through the media had not been taken much into cognizance until the pandemic occurred. The announcement of the most stringent lockdown was implemented on 24th March for 21 days in India. The country, according to the Census 2011 inhabited around 450 million internal migrants. The most recent official migration statistics available in India come from the 2011 Census. However, subsequent estimates indicate a much larger scale of population movement. The *Economic Survey of India 2016–17* estimated that approximately 60 million people were living as interstate migrants. In addition, research by Srivastava (2020, 12–13) suggests that between 60 and 65 million individuals engage in short-term migration, primarily finding employment within India's informal sector.

### **The pandemic and the migrant: Unveiling the causes and challenges**

COVID-19 left an impact in every realm of life but it affected mostly the lives the migrants in India. The internal migrants were left at the periphery of the policies of the state. By March 2020, the workforce was almost oblivious to the catapulted walk back to their homes in the devastating conditions. The migrants had been intervening within the informal structure and aloof from the policies for quite some time. The government took cognizance of the penetration of the virus throughout the country and hence imposed a lockdown without the structural and systematic return of the migrants. The panic was created even after the announcement on 24th March 2020 at 8 p.m. Throngs of migrants assembled at bus stops, and railway stations with the uncertainty which hovered over their lives regarding food, employment, and survival. The illimitable journey to the destination sources soon became the bounded choice to make the coerced and unwilling moves back to their homeland. The idea and the emotions in which temporary, circular, seasonal migration takes place has various meanings and inertias attached to it which was not so in this case of reverse migration. The pandemic revealed the fractured relationship between the Centre and the states. Different states responded differently in handling the exodus of the migrants. The precarious condition of the migrants was reflected in reports by various NGOs and civil society which volunteered extensively to accelerate the return of the migrants to their source; meanwhile providing them with adequate needs and amenities. The migrants who are employed in mostly the informal sector had to face the consequences of the lockdown where they knew about the loss of income which would mean that the only resource to stay alive was not met and hence a decision to go back. The reasons, which led to the return of the migrants, were the sense of security to be with the community and family, the inability to pay the rent in the host city, and the lack of trust in the state machinery.

The reports of the SWAN (Stranded Workers Action Network) organization indicated that the predicaments of the migrants had resurfaced in 2021 as well. The reports were initially launched for policy recommendation and documentation of the migrant workers (Adhikari et al. 2021, 1–3). It revealed the desperation to go back home but uncertainty and empty hands had turned the migrants to seek out help from the state machinery. The concerns of migrant workers received substantial policy attention only after the Supreme Court highlighted the inadequacies in the measures adopted by the central and state governments. On 26 May 2020, the Court instructed authorities to provide stranded migrants with free access to food, accommodation, and transport services. This directive subsequently prompted state governments to arrange



bus services for migrants seeking to return home. After much hullabaloo, the government made arrangements by issuing directives, setting up relief camps, relief measures, labour laws, quarantine measures, and transport measures (buses and *Shramik* trains). As a consequence of the rigorous lockdown restrictions, the vast majority of circular migrants experienced an abrupt loss of work and earnings, while only a few employed in essential services continued to have access to income-generating opportunities. In many cases, the contractors refused to settle dues or offer help in any manner to the wagedworkers who had lost the income arrears.

Circular migrants, including a large proportion of short-term migrant workers, faced severe hardships during the lockdown as many lost not only their employment but also their accommodation, which was often tied directly to their workplaces. Those residing in overcrowded rented housing found themselves unable to meet rental payments and soon encountered pressure from landlords. At the same time, overcrowded living conditions became increasingly untenable as physical distancing measures were introduced. Access to government welfare and relief programs remained limited because many migrants lacked the necessary registration documents in their destination locations, making assistance both insufficient and difficult to obtain. Concerns about health risks, combined with separation from family networks, intensified migrants' desire to return home. For interstate migrants in particular, restrictions on inter-state travel heightened the urgency of their return. Despite these challenges, many workers had to bear the financial costs of transportation and cope with the emotional and economic consequences of losing family members during the crisis.

The pandemic has unveiled the deplorable state of the health and basic rights of the migrants who till now were only the subjects of necessity and not want. The vitality of the institutions have appeared with such crises coming up. The initiatives have been marked with underlying lacunas of mapping and implementation of the migrants and their nature. It was the daily usage of common washrooms, informal housing, etc. which were also the factors considered for traveling back. The taxi drivers, security guards, garbage collectors, vegetable sellers or domestic helps consist mostly of migrants whose chances of being infected from others could be high and what was even more dangerous for them was the inability to maintain the distance due to the informal housing where they live. With a poor health infrastructure, the government could only quarantine the migrants that too in conditions where the infection would exacerbate which even in some cases led to the death of the migrants.

The actual data on the death of the migrants had been invisibilised in the similar manner of the invisibilisation of their labour. The underreported and unreported death of the migrants while walking back home was not paid much attention to. There is hardly any single database, which has captured the precarity of the lives during the pandemic. The Save Life Foundation came up with the data of the death during the three phases of the lockdown. Among the states affected, Uttar Pradesh accounted for the largest number of migrant worker deaths (94), while Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Telangana reported 38, 16, and 11 deaths respectively. Road accidents, especially collisions involving vehicles, emerged as a leading cause of mortality, causing 70 deaths. The phase 3 of the lockdown saw sixty percent of the all migrants' workers death while one, two and four had the numbers limited to 25, 17 and 38 respectively (SaveLIFE Foundation 2020, 4–5). Data from the Indian Railways indicate that approximately 5.5 million migrant workers traveled through special train services during the lockdown period. A significant proportion of the Shramik Special trains originated in major migrant-receiving states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Punjab, which together accounted for nearly half of all services operated. The overwhelming majority of these trains were directed toward Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which served as destinations for about 90 percent of the total services (Ministry of Railways 2020). Additional destination states included Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and West Bengal. According to Kundu (2020, 32), return migration was particularly concentrated in 116 districts spread across six major states. Bihar received the largest number of returning migrants, followed by Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Jharkhand, reflecting the substantial out-migration of workers from these regions to metropolitan centres prior to the pandemic. Various scholars have estimated the approximate reverse migrants such as Chinmay Tumbhe has estimated around three crores in consideration of the rail and road. Kundu and his colleagues estimated that the pandemic disrupted the lives of roughly 22 million migrants, including 16 million long-term internal migrants and 6 million short-duration migrants. Their findings indicate that a majority of these individuals continued to stay in their places of work, whereas approximately 12 million undertook return migration to their home regions. (Dastidar 2020).

The reverse migration meant a surplus of labour in the rural economy wherein the agricultural and non-farm sectors were also declining in terms of employment. An immediate policy priority during the pandemic was the identification and documentation of migrants' skills, followed by their integration into employment opportunities that matched their capabilities across both rural and urban labour markets. Efforts to facilitate the re-entry of migrant workers into the workforce were considered essential for mitigating the economic consequences of reverse migration (Singh et al. 2020, 25–29). Furthermore, governments in both sending and receiving states needed to establish robust institutional frameworks capable of extending social

protection and welfare benefits to migrant workers, particularly during periods of economic disruption, public health crises, or other emergencies. The concept of social distancing was completely absent in the conveyance arrangements made for them along with it higher fares were being imposed on availing the services (Singh, Mishra, and Chaudhary 2020, 168-170).

### **Migrant Narratives of Resistance and Resilience**

On the 14th of April, the lockdown was extended and the Prime Minister had announced that economic sacrifices were to be made since cases went above 10000. The extension raged the migrant workers who had been waiting for the promises to be fulfilled by the government which it had made initially of transporting them back to their source locations. The migrants were an integral part and the pandemic strikingly revealed the precarious condition they were in. Two of the instruments on which the government's administrative-police response to the crisis relied was the Plague Act (Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897) and the National Disaster Management Act (2005) which went silent in the political narrative. Protests took place across the country on various scales and methods (Samaddar 2020).

The Migrant Workers Solidarity Network(MWSN) has attempted to document the resistance by the migrant migrants since the beginning of the lockdown by multiple news sources including the vernacular media. While the agitation was mostly against the lack of arrangements by the state in providing the migrants to go home. The either of the issues were food, wage, shelter facilities and almost 158 protests being staged by large approximately one lakh workers took place during the first few initial months of the lockdown. In many instances, the migrants were not made aware of the arrangements, denied wages, shelter, and the buses which were to be arranged by the migrants were charged exorbitant prices. Gujarat followed by Andhra Pradesh and Kerala witnessed the most number of protests by the migrant workers as mapped by the Migrant Workers Solidarity Network(MSWN) (Migrant Workers Solidarity Network 2020, 6–12).

The definition used for resistance was “in which they expressed dissent by holding public protests or demonstrations” (Migrant Workers Solidarity Network 2020, 31). The migrants faced *lathi* charges, shelter homes burning, bordering of the states, and lack of food. The bodies were thus represented and communicated as carrying the virus and the ‘purification’ was required where the officials denied using sodium hydrochloride and just soap water. The migrants were thus in a dilemma wherein the state governments neither had support in the host city nor the provisions to make them reach the source. The visibility of the invisible was seen as a sign of terror without acknowledging the helplessness to have

avenues to sanitizers, masks etc. and the inability to socially distance themselves in times of desperation. Though looking at the condition, *Shramik* trains were made available but with the charges and cramped compartments which questions the security of the women and children. With the lack of alternative left the migrants turned violent in the need to make the necessary and rapid provisions. The body of the migrant workers have been treated as the outsider. The migrant workers who escaped Delhi to reach Bareilly were forced to be disinfected with the solution of sodium hypochlorite and water while the officials snubbed the fact and rather said that a plain solution of chlorine and water was used. The former solution is generally used by the municipal corporations in cleaning the buses, metallic surfaces like doors, knobs etc. (BBC News 2020). The undocumented everyday lives of the migrants suddenly became the headlines when they poured out on the streets to assert their rights. The resistance was the tool for empowerment and the appeal to treat them as citizens of the sovereign land (Migrant Workers Solidarity Network 2020, 31–35).

The uncoordinated response of the Central and the state government unmasked the deep structural inefficiencies of the administration. The distress and forced migration, which was due to not only the pathological reasons but also one, which was human, induced. In the process, many were detained for violating the COVID norms as per the officials and the activities of the migrants were under surveillance through drones and CCTVs. The resistance of such nature and scale certainly brought out what it reflected of the protestors and the state. The protest was the only political expression, which they sought to exercise in that particular moment. Though there were many reservations and qualms from the different sections of society who were witnessing the plight of the migrant workers through the windows and the mobile and TV screens that kept flashing off the everyday struggle to reach their homes (Bhushan 2022, 45–47). The resistance not just reflected the deplorable socio-economic conditions, delayed services of arranging transportation as well as unscheduled stop for hours by the trains, angst against the government, desperation to go back but the quashing away the pride and honour which they had garnered for themselves in their community back home. Going back was also at the helm of the host governments wherein they had to register themselves with the government of the host states who would coordinate with the home states and the exorbitantly high prices of tickets were charged for trains, which in few cases never arrived. The government has failed to look into the matters of the migrants and has put a garb through announcing the array of schemes. In the destination location such as Karnataka, the CM requested and made pleas for arrangements. Punjab too faced a similar dilemma when eight lakh migrants registered themselves to go back home. Punjab and Haryana equally felt the brunt of the shortage of labour on agricultural lands. The image of the footwear of the migrant labourer who were chased away by the Mumbai Police at the

Bandra station, the state borders being tightened and the states blaming other states for ferrying back the infected migrant workers were incidents that question the citizenship, rights and the dignity of the insiders who are considered as outsiders.

The ‘pandemic politics’ revolves around the analysis of how far the state will intervene in the pandemic control strategies will depend on the electoral tests along with it the accountability to the citizens and the resistance by them. The electoral concerns have affected the response to COVID-19, a study reveals (Tumbe 2020). Srinivasan interprets the mass movement of migrant workers back to their villages during the lockdown as a form of political resistance. According to this perspective, the decision to leave their places of employment and undertake the journey home represented an assertion of agency rather than passive dependence on state support. The act of walking is understood as a claim to the right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, symbolizing a collective effort to safeguard a fundamental constitutional entitlement. In this sense, the solidarity displayed by migrant workers during their arduous return journeys, despite inadequate state assistance and widespread neglect, demonstrated their capacity to challenge governmental authority and assert their own rights and dignity (Srinivasan 2020, 19).

The reverse migration phenomenon witnessed during the COVID-19 lockdown was particularly significant in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha, where many returning workers originated. Based on available evidence from government sources, media reports, and field studies, it is estimated that the lockdown may have led to between 35 and 40 million instances of return migration, including circular and intra-state migration flows (Thakur 2020, 19). The evocation of the concepts of nationalism by the leaders at the juncture, while people were stumbling upon the streets and in life, was insensitive. The vocabulary was often coterminous with nationalism and economic sacrifices, which hinted at the responsibility of the migrants to cope with the given situation. An attempt of instilling guilt among the migrant workers due to their demand for their return, their right to food and shelter was constantly made. Ravi Srivastava identified a category of workers he terms “vulnerable circular migrants,” referring to individuals who occupy insecure positions within the labour market while maintaining economic and social ties to both urban and rural areas. Although, these migrants are employed in urban occupations such as construction work, small-scale manufacturing, and informal transport services, their livelihoods remain unstable. As employment opportunities in cities decline, they often return to their villages, reflecting the cyclical nature of their migration. These workers constitute a significant segment of India’s non-agricultural informal workforce,

which accounts for nearly three-quarters of employment outside the agricultural sector (Srivastava 2020, 2).

The resistance had embodied the struggle with which they grappled along their identity as migrants. It was not just not a call for objection and a challenge but the very purpose and personality of the subjects who resist. The subjects were the matter of subordination, rejection, and domination who are unable to become a part of decision making that would cater to themselves. The everyday practices represent the idea of how the migrants desire the state and the society to act which eventually leads to the motivation of the very act of resistance. The resistance was from the other corner as well as the people in the source too subscribed to their unwanted presence and the panorama of labelling the migrants returning home as carriers of the virus instilled fear psychosis among both parties.

The resistance was not just narrowed down during the pandemic but there are subtle instances of resistance, which the migrants take up in their everyday lives. It is not that all of these forms aim to transform the power structure; some work with the modest aim of making life liveable. The practices of everyday resistance manifest in many ways, such as taking the advance and running away to a different place of work, making less number of bricks, gossiping behind the back of the kiln supervisor, and running away from the kiln at opportune moments. The migrant bonded labourers in the Bolangir district of Odisha, which is located in one of the poorest regions in Western Odisha take up the various tools of resistance. The presence of phones in migrant workers' hands has changed the situation somewhat, but technology only works under the constraints imposed by existing social relations. Labourers make videos, take photographs of their kilns, and send them to their friends or any organization they are aware of which helps in carrying out rescue operations (Mishra 2020, 15–17). What lies at the core is the (im)mobility as a tool of resilience in coping with the lack of bargaining power and political representation and inclusion. The inclusivity of migrants from different parts of the country though espouses to generate a class solidarity across the workers but various strategies of the management keep re-establishing the cultural and linguistic divide among the workers. The living spaces regenerate the spaces of reproduction but the incessant surveillance tries to subdue the generation of resistance by the migrants. Often, the migrants are faced with the dilemma of becoming a part of the union, which is dependent on the assurance of permanent employment and wage rise. Charvaak Pati argues through her work of the workers of the Maruti Suzuki India Limited situated in Gurgaon and Manesar in Haryana, that the migrants' issues were bereft in the resistance against the bargaining for wage rise, making contractual workers permanent etc. since the locals did not take their demand and needs into consideration (Pati 2019, 112–15). Therefore, resistance becomes a tool in taking

the maiden steps in asserting themselves as the political subject in the host city which treats them as unknown.

## Conclusion

The question thus arises that what are the conditions which should now be taken by the state government to assuring an environment that is shock therapy. The government though had sketchy data on internal migrants but it took note of it only when the migrants were glaringly seen in large numbers at bus stands, streets, etc. The government had assumed the immobility of the population and the freedom of movement for the migrants seemed to be a curse once the lockdown was imposed. The reverse migration dawns upon itself the sense of uncertainty, failure, and a myriad of emotion. In this state, panic and anxiety enveloped the migrants who were desperate to find even an inch on the train and bus, similar to how they wanted to make a space for themselves in the city. The question is of viability and the rationale for the future discourse on migrants is how does the state identify and what role will it play in enhancing and improving the lives of the migrants? How initially corona was thought of to be a disease which would be attached to the working class and the stigma wherein the notion of virtual discrimination against the migrants? Later after some days passed, by it got the character where it could affect people across all social cleavages and hence someone would not be immune just at the behest of her/ his privileged identity. The epicentre of emanation of such injustices begin from the lack of recognition of the migrants that is rooted in their cognisance in the social structure, which they exist, and practice their everyday lives.

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## **The Paradox of Political Presence: Socio-Cultural and Institutional Barriers to Women's Political Representation**

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### **Abstract**

*Women's political representation continues to shape debates on democracy and equality. It is indicative of wider struggles toward gender equality and proper governance. Although the right to vote marked progress toward equal citizenship, it did not guarantee women a proportionate role in political leadership. Globally, more women now hold leadership posts, yet their numbers remain low in local, regional and national decision-making bodies. Without fair representation for women, a democracy sidelines half of its population. This gap shows the persistent institutional and cultural barriers that limit women's access to political power, despite progress in many areas. Women participate actively in elections as voters and have the right to run for office, yet their presence in representative institutions is still very low. In this context, the paper looks at the factors that continue to hinder women's political representation. It emphasizes the importance of improving women's representation to achieve real gender equality, fair governance, and democratic growth.*

**Keywords:** Political representation of women, inclusive democracy, role-model effect, socio-cultural obstacles, institutional challenges

### **Introduction**

Gender equality in political representation is essential for strengthening democracy and ensuring inclusive decision-making. Democracy is based on equal representation, so the involvement of women in political institutions is vital to reflect the needs and ambitions of the entire population. Women make up nearly half of the world's population, so their underrepresentation in decision-making raises significant concerns about the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic governance (Phillips 2000, 8). According to the Women in Politics 2025 Map, women hold just 27.2 per cent of parliamentary seats worldwide, even though they represent nearly half of the global population (IPU 2025). The Beijing Platform for Action states that women's equal participation is not just about justice or democracy but it is necessary for addressing women's interests (United Nations 1995, 109). It also argues that women in decision-making roles help change political priorities and

highlight issues that matter to women (United Nations 1995, 110). The need for meaningful representation of women in national, local, or community leadership roles is crucial for effective development policies. This representation positively impacts society in various ways. For example, it improves women's representation in policy, boosts the perception of a parliament's legitimacy (Gilardi 2015, 957), and increases the overall political involvement of women (Alexander 2012, 441). There is evidence of better policy-making and a decrease in corruption with more women in governance (Dubey 2017, 104). Moreover, having women in leadership roles inspires other women, motivating more women to engage in politics.

Achieving gender equality goes beyond simply increasing the number of women in politics. It requires creating an environment where qualified women have equal chances to enter political competitions, secure party nominations, and participate in governance. Boosting the number of women represents a crucial first step toward addressing existing power imbalances and increasing gender inclusivity in political institutions (Schwindt-Bayer 2010, 233).

Women's underrepresentation results from social, economic, cultural, political, and ideological factors (Paxton and Kunovich 2003, 88). Women often face patriarchal norms, unequal access to resources, and institutional barriers that limit their political participation and leadership chances (UN Women 2024; Nussbaum 2005, 167–183). Scholars argue that strong legislatures support effective governance and democratic stability, whereas weak representative institutions can lead to democratic insecurity (Morgenstern and Nacif 2002, 1–3).

### **The Implication of Women's Political Representation**

Women in leadership roles often bring varied experiences and perspectives that enhance policy discussions and decision-making. Increasing the representation of women leads to greater focus on issues like education, healthcare, social welfare, gender equality, and community development (Asiedu et al. 2018, 2). Their presence in legislatures improves representation by ensuring that policies address the needs of women and other marginalized groups (Kittilson 2008, 22). People are more likely to see legislatures and governments as representative when they reflect the diversity of the communities they serve (Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas 2011, 5). Higher levels of women's political representation correlate with better governance outcomes, including greater transparency and accountability. Some research indicates a

connection between women's involvement in governance and lower corruption levels, although this depends on broader institutional contexts (Dubey 2017, 104).

When women are elected, it can help people see them in a new light and realize that they are just as capable as men in leadership positions (Gilardi 2015, 957–970). This is often called the "legacy effect" and it helps break down old stereotypes about what women can and can't do. It's a powerful way to promote gender equality and get more women interested in pursuing careers in politics (Alexander 2012, 441). By seeing women in power, girls and women can start to imagine themselves in those roles too, and that can have a big impact on their ambitions and aspirations.

Gender parity in political representation is not only about fairness or achieving a numerical balance; it is crucial for inclusive democracy and sustainable development. Ensuring women's equal participation strengthens democracy, promotes gender equality, and allows women to contribute meaningfully to decision-making (Rahayu and Ikayanti 2014, 9). As countries try to make their governments more representative gender parity in representation is crucial. We need women in leadership positions to build political systems that are fair and work for everyone, it is essential for building fair and democratic political systems (IPU 2022).

### **Barriers to Women's Political Representation**

Despite tremendous progress being made in women's education, employment and empowerment, they are still underrepresented in most political institutions across the world. Such an imbalance shows a series of obstacles standing in the way of women entering the political arena. Nadezhda Shvedova explains that politics has always been considered as man's domain that creates the rules of political behaviour (Shvedova 2005, 34). The underrepresentation of women in politics cannot be attributed to just one reason since there are combinations of social, cultural, economic, political, and institutional barriers that reinforce one another (Bari 2005, 5). These barriers are multi dimensional in nature that effect women more than men.

The patriarchal character of political institutions and culture is among the major obstacles preventing women from participating in political decision making bodies. Political systems have often been built around masculine values and leadership styles, marginalizing women (Cockburn 1991, 220). Political parties, which are the main gatekeepers to elected office, tend to favor male candidates in recruitment and nomination (Norris and

Lovenduski 1989, 533–562). Thus, female candidates lack support from parties necessary to succeed in electoral campaigns. The challenge becomes even greater when women have to compete against experienced incumbents, who are usually men and already hold strong positions within the political system. This makes it more difficult for women to enter politics and gain representation in elected offices.

Socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes also limit women's political involvement. In many cultures, politics is still seen as a male field, whereas women are expected to focus on home and caregiving roles. Traditional gender roles usually assign women the primary duty of childcare and household management, leaving them with less time and resources to engage in political activities (Shvedova 2005, 48). These societal expectations restrict both participation and perceptions of women's leadership suitability. Women running for office often face doubts about their competence and authority, despite being as qualified as their male peers.

The unequal distribution of housework duties is a critical challenge in women's quest for political advancement. Despite fulfilling the requirements of seeking political office, balancing career, political, and domestic roles is difficult for women (Bari 2005, 5). Financial challenges are also a crucial barrier for women seeking political careers. Political campaigns require financial backing for activities such as lobbying and mobilization. Women have access to lesser resources in terms of finance, land, campaign financing, and political influence compared to men. Financial dependence and disparities make it difficult for women to participate in politics (Rahayu and Ikayanti 2014, 9).

Apart from these cultural and economic barriers, women also experience difficulties within the institution itself. The process of recruiting candidates is biased against women. For instance, women are encouraged less than men to join politics, and their recruitment rate is low (Lawless and Fox 2010, 316). Also, they lack mentoring and leadership programs, making it difficult for them to gain political experience. The media and public discourse also pose difficulties for female politicians. They are more scrutinized on the matter of how they look and how they act compared to their male counterparts. During political debate, politics is also reduced to the issue of gender (Shames 2015, 3). This reinforces the stereotypes and prevents women from joining.

There exist many obstacles to women in relation to issues of insecurity both publicly and privately. In many cases, security is associated with their role in the family, economic insecurity, and the need to survive. These problems limit their engagement in politics (Khattak 2005, 132). The combination of other social inequalities

pushes them farther from power and control. Gender stereotypes, lack of resources, patriarchy, lack of networks, and unpaid care work hinder their political opportunities.

### **Institutional Barriers to Women's Political Representation**

Institutional factors are key in shaping women's access to political office and their representation in decision-making roles. The most important hurdle women face in getting elected is the need for nominations by political parties (Matland 1998, 109-125). Political parties serve as the primary gatekeepers for political recruitment, candidate selection, and electoral competition. They have a significant role in the inclusion of various groups as they recruit and select candidates (Norris & Lovenduski 1995, 1). Political parties are often seen as the main organizations that can address gender gaps in political participation and representation (Ballington et al, 2012, 1-2). The process starts with the recruitment of potential political candidates. However, parties tend to favor men over women for engagement and endorsement (Fox & Lawless, 2010, 310-312). This practice acts as a barrier to equal representation for women (Rittberger, Jessica & Rittberger, 2015, 767-769). Candidate selection often reflects masculine norms and ideals of leadership that favor male candidates, even if women are equally qualified (Shvedova 2005, 34). Political parties also control vital resources needed for electoral success, such as campaign funding, organizational support, political networks, and outreach to voters. Women often struggle to access these resources, limiting their competitiveness in elections (Thanikodi and Sugirtha 2007, 589-606). The uneven distribution of party resources reinforces political exclusion and maintains gender gaps in representation.

Political parties remain central to candidate recruitment and political growth. Their willingness to nominate and support women candidates significantly affects the makeup of legislative bodies. Political parties that adopt inclusive recruitment practices, promote women's leadership, and provide organizational support can significantly diversify political elites and foster gender equality in governance (Norris 2006, 89–109).

### **Socio-Cultural Factors**

Socio-cultural elements represent some of the most stubborn barriers to women's political representation. Deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, traditional gender roles, and biased social attitudes shape perceptions of women's roles in society and affect their participation in politics. Women's involvement as voters and leaders is often restricted by societal expectations that prioritize domestic and caregiving roles over public life (Shvedova, Nadezhda. 2005, 40–42). In many cultures, decision-making power in families and communities

is still largely male-oriented, limiting women's autonomy and chances for political participation (Sadie 2005, 6).

The traditional role of women in domestic chores and responsibilities at home makes it difficult for them to participate in public affairs or hold leadership positions (Kangas et al. 2015, 6-8). Such role expectations make it clear that politics is meant to be dominated by males with females being passive and caring (Campus 2010, 173). This socialization process, starting from childhood and even adulthood, has prevented many women from entering the sphere of politics and becoming leaders in society (Clark 1991, 47-66). Thus, women tend to feel that they are less capable than men in the political arena.

In light of continuing impact of the patriarchal society and gender stereotypes, women tend to be systematically discriminated against in terms of being allowed to participate in political decision-making. It is difficult for them to gain access to all the resources and opportunities that are required for political development, especially where cultural tradition and norms still have strong roots (Cockburn 1991, 220). Socio-cultural factors can often diminish the self-confidence of women and hinder their willingness to become politically active (Thanikodi and Sugirtha 2007, 597-600).

Although political and economic conditions might be relatively favorable for women's participation in politics, their cultural attitudes towards gender remain significant (Kunovich and Paxton 2005, 507-510). Women are generally scrutinized much more thoroughly than men by voters and might encounter strong opposition if they try to break away from the traditional division of labor at home (Okimoto and Brescoll 2010, 923). Conflict between private and political spheres might cause "role conflict" which leads women to doubt their political suitability (Fox and Lawless 2005, 648-651).

Furthermore, sociocultural institutions continue to reinforce gender imbalances both in the public and private domains, which results in excluding women from occupying powerful positions, whereas political power continues to be held by men (Rahayu and Ikayanti 2014, 9). It becomes clear that sociocultural factors continue to stand in the way of overcoming gender imbalance in political life. Overcoming these challenges involves not only institution-based solutions but also broader sociocultural changes to break down patriarchal thinking, fight against stereotypes about gender roles, and accept women's leadership.

## Conclusion

Political representation of women plays an important role in defining whether the democracy is inclusive in regard to women's participation or not and how much inequality exists between men and women. Although there has been progress on the issue of access to education and legal protection, there are increasingly more obstacles to women becoming politically represented due to socio-cultural and institutional obstacles associated with political power. The political field is governed by patriarchal principles, gender stereotypes, social and economic inequalities, and political institutions that exclude women from participating fully in decision-making. More political representation of women is an indication of gender equality and creates a more representative bureaucracy.

Women leadership raises strong role models that defy conventional concepts of leadership and show that political power is a reachable goal for women. The presence of women in positions of elected power can fortify the political ambitions and interest of other women. This can inspire them to engage in public life and to aspire for leaders. This "role-model effect" can lead to a cycle of political involvement and representation.

It is essential to increase the representation of women in politics in order to create a better reflection of citizen's interests and hopes in democracies as well as providing a pathway for future generations of female leaders.

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## Plain Karbis of Assam: Identity, Territory and Marginality

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### Abstract

*This paper analyses identity assertion among the Karbis living in the Plain areas of Assam and examines their relatively peripheral position within administrative policy discussions. Existing institutional frameworks have largely viewed the hill-dwelling Karbi population as the core of Karbi identity, leaving the Karbis residing in the plains and outside Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao, excluded from scheduled status recognition and underrepresented in the state apparatus.*

*The paper argues that this uneven visibility is not incidental but a result of colonial systems of classificatory practices that associated and categorised ethnic identity with fixed, territorially demarcated areas, creating identity dilemmas for the population that fell outside their legal ambit. Through colonial ethnography and historical accounts, the paper reconstructs the patterns of Karbi habitation that complicate the rigid distinction of the now-widely-used nomenclature of hills and plains. It challenges the assumption of a fixed identity based on territoriality by highlighting mobility and dispersed settlements.*

*It further traces how the continuation of the colonial practices in the post-independence period solidified a hill-centric identity of the Karbis, producing differential recognition of the Plain Karbis within the same community.*

Keywords: territoriality, marginality, identity, ethnicity, Plain Karbi, Karbi

### Introduction

In Assam, ethnic identity is often organised around a spatial differentiation between the Hills and the Plains. This distinction functions not only as a geographical marker but also operates as a system through which identities are represented and administered (Baruah 1999, 52-57). The Karbis, a prominent ethnic group that is conventionally seen residing in the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, have in place institutional safeguards and constitutional recognition as a Schedule Tribe.

However, a sizeable portion of the Karbi population resides outside these territorially demarcated hill districts, in areas of Nagaon, Morigaon, Sonapur, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Cachar and Dhemaji (Assam Population Census 2011). This extensive spatial presence that goes beyond the boundaries of the hill areas

complicates the existing presumption that identity is inherently tied to a single, protected territory. Policy narratives continue to treat the hill-based Karbi population as representative of the community, producing unequal recognition for the plain counterpart.

This raises the question of why certain locations are viewed as more representative of a particular ethnic identity than others. This paper argues that, as administrative and political frameworks started relying on territorially defined categories for ease of governance, it began situating identity to fixed, territorially demarcated regions. Such alignments had important consequences as recognition came to be unevenly distributed (Fischer et al. 2015).

The paper takes into account colonial writings, censuses, and linguistic surveys data and post-colonial legislations to revisit earlier patterns of Karbi migration and habitation.

Situating the plain Karbis within this framework, the paper examines how the intersectionality of classification, territory, and institutional recognition has led to their relative marginalisation of identity. The discussion proceeds in three themes. The first section deals with the production of the hills- plains distinction through colonial infrastructures. The second explores the earlier patterns of mobility and dispersed habitation through oral traditions and colonial records. The third is the resultant implications in the post-independence period and the contemporary positioning of Karbis of the Plains.

## **2. The Institutionalisation of the Hills–Plains Divide**

The emergence of the hill-plain distinction was a result of colonial processes of classification and not a natural reflection of social reality. Colonial knowledge production in undivided Assam categorised populations into fixed, identifiable groups through censuses and ethnographic reports. Reports of Edward Stack, Charles Lyall, Edward Gait, William Robinson, BC Allen, etc., are among the many records that enumerated ethnic groups, including the Karbis, listed as Mikirs, according to their language, customs, habits and settlements (Stack and Lyall 1908). While mobility was recorded in the descriptive accounts, it didn't translate into classification, as classification required and prioritised stable, countable identities.

After the Treaty of Yandaboo, the British administration in Assam had to govern a region marked by mobile populations, ecological variations, and fluid social boundaries. The separation of territories, classification of the population, and differentiation of one community from another became imperative. It also helped in separating ethnic groups spatially into administrative units, into tribal and non-tribal, reinforcing

differences that were earlier more fluid. Such classifications enabled a system of revenue extraction and taxation, without which colonial rule would have been inefficient. Differentiating between hills and plains areas helped codify land as a measurable, taxable and transferable resource. Such measures facilitated in expanding enterprises such as tea plantations, oil extraction, and control over reserved forests and confined the practices of ethnic groups such as jhum cultivations. In the 19th and the early 20th century, the planned migration of cultivators and labourers, especially from Bengal into the Brahmaputra valley, required demarcated land for settlement as well as for revenue purposes. This created newer forms of competition over land, remnants of which can still be seen. Additionally, undivided Assam bordered Bhutan, Burma and other tribal hill areas that were not completely integrated into British rule. By separating the hills and plains, a military presence was justified in the hill areas to prevent raids and resistance movements.

The colonial demarcation in Assam was, therefore, not a mere technical exercise to make boundaries, but to expedite governance that rearranged spatial, social and political relations, having an everlasting effect on identity, resource access and patterns of marginality.

The question now arises, how were these demarcations of hills and plains institutionalised? The demarcation of boundaries was not just limited to the drawing of maps or for administrative intent; it was institutionalised through the intersection of legal rules, administrative practices, surveys, and everyday governance systems that made boundaries enforceable.

The primary mechanism for establishing this divide was the law. The 1873 Inner Line Regulation introduced a formal separation between hill and plain districts by restricting movement into certain areas. Outsiders could not enter protected areas or extend their stay or movement without prior permission. Likewise, the Assam Frontier Tracts regulation of the 1880s gave the chief commissioner powers to exempt tribal-inhabited hill areas from the application of general laws, viewing it as unsuitable for British rule and isolating them to minimise interference and preserve tradition. Territories such as the Mikir hills were demarcated as distinct units, separating them from surrounding plain districts. In the later Government of India Act of 1919, 'backward tracts' were created, which were mostly tribal dominated regions deemed too backward for colonial reforms and required distinct administration to insulate them from outside interference and political movements. The Government of India Act of 1935 further categorised and labelled certain hill regions as 'excluded' and 'partially excluded areas', which also included the Mikir Hills. These frameworks increased the association of hill areas with tribal identities, while the population

in the plains was seen as more ‘diluted’ and assimilated into non-tribal groups. Such divisions turned abstract lines into lived realities of the ethnic communities.

Moreover, Mechanisms for differentiated administration were enforced, with the plain areas under regular district administration, the hill tracts under special frontier officers, and the excluded areas under the direct rule of the governor. This ensured that boundaries also functioned as divisions of jurisdiction (Thakur 2016, 47-55).

These regulations can be seen as an attempt to gain control over specific hill regions through partial integration without extensive governance. By restricting movement and interaction between hills and plains, it effectively limited social exchange and created territorial isolation and at the same time excluded them from representative politics. This reduced costs and effort significantly by limiting the reach of colonial administration in difficult regions. These regulations, even though brought into effect as a protective measure, were actually more about managing risk, cost reduction, furthering economic interests, and sustaining control within the colonial state.

The colonial legacy of institutionalising this hill and plains dichotomy was carried forward even after India gained independence in 1947. New legislation was enacted that led to further segregation of populations into distinct administrative units.

The colonial processes discussed above not only reorganised space for administration, but they also rearranged the relationship between identity and territory. However, this raises questions such as whether these fixed, territorially based ideas of identity reflect how Karbis lived before. Where they historically organised this way, or there was a different pattern of habitation. The following section explores these questions.

### **Mobility and Dispersed Habitation**

The institutionalisation of the hills-plains divide, as discussed in the previous section, rests on the assumption that ethnic groups and communities were associated with clearly defined territories. However, oral traditions, historical accounts, and administrative reports, when read together, suggest that Karbi identity was not organised through rigid and fixed territorial boundaries but through a pattern of movement, dispersed habitation and overlapping spatial presence across regions (Gait 1906).



Karbi oral traditions, known as Moshera, provide an internal account of these movements. They trace routes of migration, from Burma, to the present-day settlements in the state of Assam. Such narratives emphasise mobility rather than territorial anchoring. They do not associate themselves with a single home, but recount a series of movements across both plains and hills. Their habitation is seen as shifting and adaptive to the social, political and ecological events. Other instances of oral history talk about the names of places like Kaziranga, which got its name from a Karbi legend, Kajir Ronghangpi, suggesting an earlier presence in the region (Teron 2020, 101). Such associations indicate that mobility was a recurring feature of the Karbi social life and was not tied to a bounded territory.

Early colonial accounts reiterate the pattern of territorial mobility of Karbis. The Mikirs, written by Edward Stack and Charles Lyall, record the Karbi population scattered across multiple regions that extended beyond the Mikir Hills to the south bank of Lower Assam and the Gauhati Hills (Lyall 1908; Stack 1908). It notes that they remain in one place for three to four years to practice jhum cultivation, before moving to different locations when land loses its fertility. This required constant movement, making permanent settlement difficult.

Similarly, A Descriptive Account of Assam by William Robinson (1841) refers to 'Mikir Mehal', which further illustrates the extent of the spatial spread of the Karbi tribe. Today, this area falls within Sonapur, Jagiroad, and Morigaon, which indicates a continuity between the historical presence of the Karbi population and their existence in these plains. But these areas do not come under the institutional framework of hill districts today, underlining the break between historical existence and present administrative boundaries.

Censuses of 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, and 1921 provide further accounts of the dispersed presence of the Karbi. The 1871 and 1881 censuses note the frequent migrations among the Karbis and trace their populations across Kamrup, Darrang, Cachar, Nowgong, and Sibsagar. It also noted increases in some regions, new emergence in some, and a total disappearance of figures in others, clearly indicating the mobile nature of the Mikir population.

The 1891 census also states that the demographic changes in the Naga Hills and Nowgong districts happened due to the movements of the Mikirs. Edward Gait, in 1908, drawing from the 1891 census, wrote that the group is 'notoriously migratory'. The population speaking the Mikir language was also traced across various administrative regions in the Linguistic Survey of 1891, indicating that language and identity were not confined to a single territorial unit.

The 1901 and 1921 censuses also note the distribution of Karbi-speaking populations across the Brahmaputra valley, suggesting a pattern of movement rather than a settled population. Migration, in the context of ethnic groups in general and the Karbis in particular, appears as an adaptive strategy, conditioned by considerations of ecology, availability of cultivable land, relations with other tribes and other socio-cultural nuances. Understandably, it was not an isolated incident but a recurring phenomenon of changing habitation (Census of India 1871; 1881; 1891; 1901; 1921).

Further evidence of the dispersed Karbi population can be found in the material remnants. The existence of monoliths, which were a part of the Karbi funeral practice known as ‘Chongmakan’, shows earlier settlements in the plains. These burial sites and the adjacent stone structure, erected in memory of the dead, are found in Kamrup and Morigaon, apart from Karbi Anglong. The scattered distribution of these monoliths suggests that Karbi habitation historically extended across a wider territory (Teron 2025).

Together, these sources point to a Karbi population characterised by mobility, temporary habitation and spatial overlap. Undoubtedly, Karbis resided across both hills and plains, without being confined to a single, strict territory. This contrasts with the later administrative structures that made the Hills the primary locus of Karbi identity. It shows that while colonial officials were aware of the fluidity of the Karbi population, populations were ultimately counted within fixed territorial boundaries, and identities began to be associated with those territories. Thus, mobility found a place in the description but was not sufficient to be incorporated into the classification.

This gap between such recorded patterns of movements and fixed, territorially classified identity highlights that the distinction between hills and plains was not a result of lived patterns of habitation but was created and imposed over time through processes of governance.

Understanding these earlier patterns of mobility is thus imperative, as it shows that associating Karbi identity only with the hills is neither historically accurate nor inherent. It is an outcome of later institutional structures. The marginal position and limited representation of the Karbis living in the plains can hence be traced to the reorganisation of identity through territorial frameworks that gave the hills more attention than others, and not to their absence in the hill areas.

#### **4. Post-Independence Continuities and Present Implications**

As discussed earlier, Karbis had a flexible pattern of habitation. But over time, due to colonial processes, identity became tied to fixed territories. This phenomenon created long-lasting implications that are evident

even today. While the Karbi population is seen to be present in both hills and plains, constitutional recognition is only accorded to specific regions, which has resulted in an uneven visibility within the same community.

After independence, colonial frameworks were largely retained, but they were reworked and adapted to newer post-colonial arrangements. The Government of India Act of 1935 served as a blueprint to convert the excluded and partially excluded areas into Autonomous districts under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Borooah 2020).

The Bordoloi sub-committee, led by Gopinath Bordoloi, sought tribal self-governance to protect them and their land from sophisticated outsiders. But there were arguments against the creation of autonomous districts with the fear that it would further divide the hills from the plains, leading to tribal separatism. Critiques advocated for the assimilation of the Mikir hills into the standard laws of Assam.

Finally, a United Mikir and North Cachar Hills was created on 17 November 1951, by combining areas from the Nowgong district, Sibsagar, North Cachar, and the Jaintia Hills, formally severing them from the plains. This reorganisation intensified the divide between the plains and the hills in Assam. Hills increasingly came to be associated with core Karbi identity, while Karbis in the plains were positioned outside the institutional framework. (Bhattacharjee 2017, 359-376) On October 14, 1976, the Mikir Hills were renamed Karbi Anglong, further emphasising the hills as central to Karbi identity.

The 6<sup>th</sup> schedule meant to protect tribal rights, structurally isolated the district from the rest, changing earlier fluid interactions across the region and between groups into sharp administrative and political barriers (Hussain 2023). The 6th schedule and its related laws ensured that the identity became increasingly tied to territory. It placed greater emphasis on the spatial basis of recognition, which made specific regions legitimate sites of identity.

It also created new forms of friction. Laws increasingly began preventing plain dwellers, both tribal and non-tribal, from buying land or settling in the hill districts permanently. As a result, Karbis inhabiting the plains found themselves categorised as outsiders with limited and restricted rights. They could no longer buy land or settle in the hills. A situation arose in which shared cultural and historical affiliation did not lead to equal recognition.

The 1950 Scheduled Tribes Act created two different categories, ST (Hills) and ST (Plains). Such a classification deepened the territorial division. Constitutional safeguards and their immediate access

became dependent on geographical location. While the Karbis of the hill areas of Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao are recognised as ST(Hills), those in the plains fall outside this framework, despite having evident linguistic, cultural and kinship continuities. This has led to fragmented recognition, in which identity is acknowledged but not legally represented. After many attempts at recognition, the Karbis of the plains, through the 1982 notification, got ST (H) status but in a limited form, as its applicability was restricted to educational, economic and employment benefits. This does not extend to political representation, electoral rights and land ownership within protected areas. This partial recognition keeps the plain Karbis excluded from legal and political participation, reinforcing their marginal positioning within the community (Wahi and Bhatia 2018).

The situation also created a category dilemma. While demanding full ST recognition, the Karbis of the Plains remain uncertain about which category they belong to. This creates dual problems. First, their demands for ST (Hills) status cannot be substantiated, as they don't have permanent residence in the hills; similarly, they cannot claim ST (Plains) status, as the same group already has ST Hills status, and a single group cannot be given two separate categories of scheduled status within a single state. As a result, plain Karbis occupy an ambiguous position in the legal framework.

Moreover, the census categorises and classifies the plain Karbis, due to the lack of a definite Scheduled Tribe status, as non-tribals and places them in the general category. It reduces their effective numerical presence, which weakens their claims of recognition and representation. The tendency of states to simplify complex social identities into rigid categories often comes at a cost of accuracy.

Additionally, Plain Karbis often find it difficult to obtain Scheduled Tribe certificates and other official documents. A lack of a clear ST status often leaves decisions about their status to officials. Moreover, unlike the hill districts, the Plain Karbis do not have a clearly demarcated territorial area, as their population is scattered across the districts of Sonapur, Jagiroad, Morigaon, Nagaon, Cachar, Lakhimpur, and Dhemaji. The scattered population makes it harder for them to organise collectively and make political demands. Administrative delay, along with political ambivalence, has stalled the addressal of the long-standing demands of the plain Karbis for recognition. This has resulted in a state of ambiguity, where identity, although being acknowledged in cultural terms, gets only partially recognised within institutional structures.

The hill counterparts also benefit from the formation of autonomous districts, but the Plain Karbis remain outside such facilities. Furthermore, the Autonomous districts with separate administrations do not allow

participation by the Plain Karbis, as they fall outside their territorial jurisdiction. Demands have been made for a similar political apparatus because of which a development council was formed for them with limited authority, but it lacked substantive administrative power. The passing of a bill for the creation of a Welfare Council in 2025 has given new vigour to the demands of the Plain Karbis; however, its incomplete implementation highlights the gap between actual power and mere acknowledgement.

The sense of relative marginality of Plain Karbis is not limited to just legal and institutional exclusion. They often face it in their everyday situations. Since Karbi identity is usually associated with the hill regions, those living outside these territories are seen as less authentic, having acculturated with the Plains population, such as Assamese, Bodos, Rabhas, etc. There is a sense of disjuncture within the community itself, since the hill Karbis receive greater institutional recognition, they often see the Karbis of the plains as culturally diluted. At the same time, there are concerns that the inclusion of the plain Karbis within the same category will intensify the competition for the limited state resources. This echoes that marginality is not only created by the state but can also develop within the community itself.

### **Conclusion: Territoriality and the Production of Marginality**

The discussions above highlight a shift in the relationship between identity and territory. While patterns of earlier Karbi habitation were marked by mobility, dispersion, and temporary settlements, they were replaced by colonial and post-colonial structures. These linked identity to a territorial unit and made the hills the locus of Karbi identity, and viewed the Plain Karbis as secondary, making recognition dependent on spatial layout rather than shared ties (Kapai 2020).

Identity being linked to territory produced a system wherein groups were included differently into institutional structures. On the one hand, Karbis living in the hill districts were integrated into the legal framework through the creation of autonomous districts and subsequent ST status. On the other hand, Plain Karbis, an offshoot of the same community living in the plains and sharing cultural, linguistic, historical, and kinship ties, remained outside these defined regions. Plain Karbis, while being culturally recognised as part of the Karbi group, find themselves with only partial recognition when it comes to institutional safeguards, political representation and administrative visibility. Their exclusion, therefore, was not a result of absence or difference, but a result of their location being beyond the spatial boundaries defined by the state.

The resulting marginal position of the Plain Karbis can be seen as a product of misalignment between lived patterns of habitation and the fixed spatial logic of governance. This is hence not incidental but historically created. Territoriality not only organises space but also reorganises identity and recognition that creates unequal forms of belonging.

The case of the Plain Karbis highlights the limitations of territorially fixing identity and in capturing historically mobile and dispersed identities. It calls for a reconsideration of how recognition is organised, suggesting the importance of taking historical patterns of movements, settlement and affiliation into account and moving beyond rigid spatial criteria. It will serve as a crucial step in addressing not only the concerns of plain Karbis but also those of other communities, such as the Bodos of the hills, who find themselves on a similar trajectory, by rethinking the relationship between identity, territory and governance.

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## Political Ambition and the question of Women's Political Representation

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### Abstract

*Men have more formal control over political representation since they possess a majority or a sizable majority of seats. The women's representation in legislatures significantly impacts a political system, indicating gender equality and societal inclusion; however, their absence implies prevalent gender bias and discrimination. Women encounter difficulties in the recruitment phase, in the selection phase, and in the election phase. Much of the reasons for women's low representation are because fewer women choose to run and the decision to run for office is driven by political ambition. Therefore, understanding political ambition of women may constitute one step in resolving women's under representation because having political ambition becomes a strong stimulus to contest election and hopefully becoming an elected representative. The objective of the study is to examine the impact of institutional characteristics, individual factors and cultural factors which may have an impact in shaping political ambition of women. Factors that determine political ambition of women are long-standing and deeply rooted. They include the way women are socialized into politics, potential bias of political party and personal factors.*

Keywords: Political representation, political ambition, women legislatures, socio-cultural factors, individual factors and institutional barriers

### Introduction

Men currently have a majority or a sizable majority of seats in the majority of seats in the majority of parliaments, giving them more legal control over political representation. According to IPU only 6 countries have achieved 50 per cent or more women in the national parliament - Rwanda with 63.8 per cent, Cuba with 55.7 per cent followed by Nicaragua with 55.0 per cent, Mexico with 50.2 per cent, Andorra with 50.0 per cent and United Arab Emirates with 50.0 per cent. India stands at 152nd position with 13.8 per cent which is lower than its neighboring countries like Nepal which stands at 56th position with 33.5 per cent and Pakistan at 137th position with 17.0 per cent and. Female representation stands at 14 per cent in India's national parliament and close to 9 per cent in state legislative bodies (International Parliamentary Union January 2025).



What is equally puzzling is the contrast in the share of women in positions of political authority observed between countries, with developed nations like the United States, Great Britain and Japan having women legislators below the world average and lesser developed countries like Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Mozambique and Cameroon having relatively large proportion of women in positions of political power (International Parliamentary Union 1999). Across regions as well the pattern of women's political authority is confounding. Asia has on average, a higher proportion of women legislatures in the lower house of parliament than Europe (excluding the Scandinavian Countries). Sub-Saharan Africa, which lags behind in most socio-economic indicators, performs better than the Pacific Rim countries in this regard and is only a few percentage points behind Europe and the Americas in the percentage of women parliamentarians (International Parliamentary Union 2001).

Rule by the many cannot be attained if women, constituting more than half of 'the many', are excluded from leadership positions. As such, a deficit of women in political decision-making constitutes a deficit of democracy (Tremblay 2007, 535). The representation of women in legislatures has significant implications for a political system as it shows that women are equal and included in society, while their absence suggests pervasive gendered prejudice and discrimination (Sawer 2002, 5).

While many factors contribute to depressing the number of women representatives, question of political ambition play a significant role. A recent contribution to this literature comes from Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox. In their work, *It Takes a Candidate* and the follow-up, *It Still Takes a Candidate*, the authors identify the gap in political ambition between women and men as one key reason for the tremendous disparity between the number of women and men who hold elected office (Lawless and Fox 2005, 3). If we hope to fully understand the pervasive lack of gender parity in descriptive representation, then it is essential to address the question of gender parity in political ambition as well, and what experiences do and do not engender this ambition (Mo, Conn and Anderson-Nilsson 2019, 865). Therefore, understanding political ambition of women constitutes one step in resolving women's underrepresentation because having political ambition becomes a strong stimulus to contest election.

### **Importance of Women's Political Representation**

The representation of women in legislatures has significant implications for a political system as it shows that women are equal and included in society, while their absence suggests pervasive gendered prejudice and discrimination. There are several arguments as to why women's political representation should increase women's—and often men's—levels of political engagement (Atkeson 2003, 1049–1051), knowledge (Fridkin and Kenney 2014, 1017-1031), activism

(Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006, 238–241), willingness to discuss politics Hansen 1997, 73-103) and positivity about the political process (Karp and Banducci 2008, 109–111). As the representation of women in politics expands, their psychological engagement in political matters grows stronger, their participation in political discourse becomes more frequent, and the perception of political effectiveness increases.

The visibility of women in politics may also encourage other women, especially young women, to pursue political and leadership roles, indicating a role model effect. Prior research has shown the benefits of political role models for girls and young women. Campbell and Wolbrecht find that when female political leaders attain greater national visibility through the media, girls engage in political discussions more frequently and, therefore, are more likely to report increased levels of anticipated political involvement (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2017, 419-422).

Women's presence in parliament therefore has ripple effects far beyond the legislature itself. A study in West Bengal shows that mandated representation of 20 women as leaders of village councils has significant effect on policy decisions. The rural women are provided with more resources related to public goods such as fuel for cooking, road construction and accessible drinking water with women elected under the reservation or quota policy. The same study also shows that women are more likely to participate in the policy-making process if the leader of their village council is a woman (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2001, 1415-1424).

Rule by the many cannot be attained if women, constituting more than half of 'the many', are excluded from leadership positions. As such, a deficit of women in political decision-making constitutes a deficit of democracy (Tremblay 2007, 535). A political system that more completely reflects the diversity of individuals may be seen as more genuine and engagement and with that, the system might prove more desirable as a result. When women candidates descriptively and substantively represent women, they remind citizens that they are able to govern (Mansbridge 1999, 628-657).

The participation of women in politics improves democratic government. Enhancing the range of perspectives inside political institutions strengthens the legitimacy and credibility of democratic regimes. The process of decision-making that include women reflect the principles and the values of equal representation and participation, hence cultivating trust and confidence in democratic institutions. The presence of women enhances accountability and transparency, reduces corruption which results in better government and increased public trust. (Goswami et al. 2023, 1989)

The prospects for increasing the proportion of women representatives are highly dependent on the political ambitions of women who seek election or are occupants of elective office. It is from among the ranks of these women that many future

female candidates are likely to come. To what extent the elected women will exercise influence in the governing bodies (state/local) may depend upon their level of political ambition. If they want to be influential they have to remain in office for a longer time.

### **Barriers to Political Ambition**

Although there are a variety of explanations for why the descriptive representation of women in politics remains relatively low, a major factor that has been empirically observed is that women are simply less likely than men to run for office (Lawless, Fox, and Baitinger 2014, 28-35). To truly explain the pervasive absence of gender equality in descriptive representation, we must also ask questions about gender parity in political aspiration and what experiences do and do not generate such desire. Hence, recognizing the political desire of women is one step towards fixing women's underrepresentation, since having political ambition is a major stimulant to fight election

Even in the early stages, prior to the recruitment and selection process, an important bottleneck for the representation of women occurs (Kjaer and Kosiara-Pedersen 2019, 299-304). And this bottleneck comes in the shape of political ambition. It is well-established that women have lower levels of political ambition than men (Coffé et al. 2022, 191-194). This gap is particularly noticeable at the early “nascent” stage of ambition – that is an initial interest in running for office that is crucial for developing concrete political aspirations (Bernhard, Shames, and Langan Teele 2021, 379-382). This discrepancy between men's and women's levels of nascent political ambition may negatively affect women's recruitment, selection and eventual election.

Systemic barriers embedded in political recruitment practices and party cultures play a pivotal role in limiting women's pathways to political leadership (Collignon 2024, 363-67). These barriers create uneven playing fields, reinforcing the perception that women lack sufficient ambition, when in fact, structural constraints are at play throughout the political recruitment process. Individual factors may play a role, such as the evaluation of one's own capacities (Dahl and Nyrup 2021, 199-205), personal economic circumstances, personality traits (Allen and Cutts 2020, 11-18), or perceptions about politics (Pate and Fox 2018, 166-171).

Research has identified various internal and external factors that affect political ambition. They cannot be understood in isolation because they are part of the comprehensive reality women face when they decide to participate in politics (Akirav 2025, 81-99). The internal factors include self-perceptions, family life and aversion to competition (Preece, Bogach Stoddard, and Fisher 2016, 561-577). The external factors include candidates' recruitment methods and education (Crowder-Meyer 2013, 390-394). Women tend to be significantly less confident in their political abilities and qualifications (Niven, Straka, and Mhajne 2020, 396-398). Women have

more concerns about how engaging in politics would affect the lives of their close family and friends. The competitive political environment is more likely to affect women negatively than men. Aggression and competition associated with politics can dampen women's political ambition. For example, women are turned off of political careers because of their perceptions about what it means to be a politician (Schneider et al. 2016, 515-523).

Men and women differ in their perceptions about their qualifications (Fox and Lawless 2014, 398-401). The encouragement to contest for office by a political figure is considered the most crucial factor in considering candidacy. Thus, such encouragement is crucial for augmenting the quantity of women in the applicant (Fox and Lawless 2010, 310-313). Parties are very active in candidate recruitment. The role of political parties is quite clear: without more women being recruited to contest a party nomination, voters will not have the opportunity to cast their ballot for a woman in the general election, and as a result the underrepresentation of women will continue. Therefore, it is not surprising that political recruitment at the candidate selection stage has become a focal point for scholars (Cross and Young 2013, 24-28).

Women and men have distinct reasons for running for office in numerous respects. A research focusing on individual-level issues, emphasizing innate disparities in political ambition by gender. Some research documents that women are more likely than men to "lack the key ingredients" (e.g., self-perceived qualifications, political interest, family socialization, and having run for office while in school) that foster the initial consideration to run for office (Fox and Lawless 2014, 499-503). Even where women provide strong, positive assessments of their own competence and qualifications, they are less likely than men to express political ambition (Sidorsky 2015, 802-806) perhaps because women are more averse to elections (Kanthak and Woon 2015, 595-598) or because of the lack of female role models in political office (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006, 233-236).

Another strand of political ambition research models candidate emergence within a rational choice framework: a cost-benefit calculation in which potential candidates weigh both the probability and benefits of obtaining office against the costs of campaigning (Black 1972, 144-152). Women face greater costs of running for office along a variety of dimensions. Thus, even if women were just as predisposed to be political ambitious as men, many studies on gender and politics have found that there are structural obstacles that women face that men do not in pursuing political office (Lawless and Fox 2005, 55).

Society socializes women in such a way that they do not consider themselves viable political candidates. One source of this is their upbringing: Women, compared to men, report that they engage less in political discussions as children and were less likely to discuss politics with their fathers (Lawless and Fox 2005, 70). Lawless and Fox argue that this

contributes to a pattern of socialization that communicates to women that politics is a “man's game.” Moreover, as adults, women are less likely to experience encouragement to run for office by their family and friends. The absence of personal support and encouragement is highly consequential to women's potential candidacies. Receiving encouragement to run for office greatly increases an individual's likelihood of running for office (about 45 percentage points); this means that the absence of such support significantly depresses the likelihood of women running for office (Lawless and Fox 2005, 70). These two important factors—the absence of political engagement in childhood and the lower levels of personal support in adulthood—contribute to women's reticence to consider themselves as candidates.

The story of women's underrepresentation in political office is a story of reluctance. Women do not win because women do not run, and women do not run because they have a confidence gap, which leads them to doubt their qualifications for office (Carroll 1994, 124). The “confidence gap” perspective that is currently dominant in the gender and politics literature suggests that women tend to be reluctant to run for office because they are less confident about their qualifications for office holding than their male counterparts (Frederick 2013, 113-116). The low level of women representation is due to the fact that very few women contest election and the few women who decide to contest encounter difficulties in the recruitment phase (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015, 748-753), in the selection phase (Gauja and Cross 2015, 287-298), and in the election phase (Kjaer and Krook 2019, 444-455). These barriers create uneven playing fields, reinforcing the perception that women lack sufficient ambition, when in fact, structural constraints are at play throughout the political recruitment process (Wauters et al. 2025, 262-278).

## **Conclusion**

Given the persistent and widespread nature of women's underrepresentation, question of political ambition is becoming increasingly important. This should be of concern for scholars of political participation and gender for many reasons. Given that representative democracy requires individuals to come forward and seek political candidacy, low levels of political ambition among women is problematic. Political ambition is the first step toward a political mandate. Low levels of political ambition among women may negatively affect women's recruitment, selection and eventual election.

Research has identified various internal and external factors that affect political ambition. They cannot be understood in isolation because they are part of the comprehensive reality women face when they decide to participate in politics. Women's political ambition can indeed be caused by various factors, including structural characteristics such as the political culture, gendered political socialization and the rules of the political game, which may make women retain

from engaging in politics (Piscopo 2019, 817-824), individual factors may play a role, such as the evaluation of one's own capacities, personal economic circumstances, personality traits or perceptions about politics.

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## Identity and Identity Politics in the Context of Minority Rights: A Conceptual Framework

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### Abstract

*The paper explores the relationship between identity, identity politics, and minority rights in the backdrop of democratic and plural societies. It examines the formation and politicisation of identities in response to marginalisation and exclusion of particular communities or individuals. The paper develops a conceptual framework of identity politics, highlighting the role of recognition, accommodation, and inclusion in shaping a tolerant and democratic culture. The mobilisation of particular identities and the seeking of state response to address grievances are strategies adopted by specific groups to contest exclusion, claim recognition, and seek political rights. The study does not adopt an empirical case study but follows a conceptual approach to clarify key debates surrounding identity politics, including recognition versus redistribution, universalism versus particularism, and empowerment versus fragmentation. It argues that a thorough understanding of identity politics as a dynamic and fluid process is essential for addressing minority rights in multicultural societies. The study concludes that the reconciliation of identity-based claims within a democratic framework is a hallmark of inclusive governance and democratic institutions.*

### Introduction

In contemporary political theory, the questions of identity, identity politics, and minority rights within plural and diverse societies have assumed increasing significance (Coulmas 2019, 1–2; Hall 1990, 222–237). Identity shapes individual and group understandings of belonging, difference, and power. While identity was once interpreted as primordial and given, it is now increasingly understood as a socially constructed and relational phenomenon (Coulmas 2019, 34–36). Marginalised communities often organise themselves around shared ethnic, religious, cultural, or social identities to seek rights, contest marginalisation, and claim recognition. Such mobilisation has enabled historically disadvantaged groups to articulate their grievances, while also generating intense debate regarding its impact on democratic governance, social cohesion, and formal equality (Bernstein 2005, 47–74; Fraser 2000, 107–120).

The classical liberal framework prioritised individual rights and formal equality and often overlooked group-based rights. However, formal equality alone is not sufficient to address the structural inequalities that hinder the free exercise of rights by minority groups (Fraser 2000, 107–

120; Kymlicka 1995, 5–8; Modood 2007, 2–5). Minority rights require recognition of cultural distinctiveness and meaningful political participation from both majority communities and state structures (Fraser 2000, 110–112). These debates became particularly salient in Canada and other Western societies, where recognition of group rights in multicultural societies achieved significance. In India, constitutional recognition of group rights coexists with deep social diversity and region-specific political challenges. Articles 25 to 30 of the Indian Constitution guarantee freedom of religion, cultural rights, and group-specific educational rights, reflecting a commitment to pluralism and tolerance within a democratic framework (Constitution of India 1950, arts. 25–30). While the assertion of identity helps minorities claim dignity and visibility, critics warn that it can also produce rigid boundaries, fragmented solidarities, and obscure material inequalities (Appiah 2006, 20–22; Fraser 2000, 110–112).

This paper develops a conceptual framework of identity, identity politics, and minority rights to examine identity formation, political mobilisation, and state responses in plural societies. The study locates identity politics within conditions of marginalisation and democratic rights. It illustrates that minority identities are shaped by historical, social, and political forces, and that constitutional protections may be diluted by broader structural and institutional dynamics. The objective of the study is to contribute to ongoing debates on identity politics and minority rights by proposing an integrated framework of identity without reducing it to a single marker. When identity politics is understood within an inclusive and democratic framework, it can serve as a critical mechanism for advancing minority rights.

### **Meaning and Dimensions of Identity**

The issue of identity has become one of the major concerns in political theory, influencing people's perceptions of themselves as individuals and as members of groups. Identity debates began to gain ground in the middle of the twentieth century, partly due to the phenomenon of cultural Americanisation, which made identity an important issue in society, politics, and culture (Coulmas 2019, 1–2). Contemporary social, scientific, and technological advances have made it harder to distinguish between the self and the outside world, thereby challenging the assumption that identity can be defined or established in a fixed manner. Identity is now perceived as flexible and dependent upon the situation (Coulmas 2019, 34–36). Nevertheless, through social processes that organise similarity and difference, identities acquire forms of durability. These processes rely on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, which lead to the formation of group identities and also contribute to the isolation of some groups. Thus, identity is not simply a characteristic of a person but a social classification formed through interaction and recognition.

The knowledge of the self is always shaped in relation to others and cannot be detached from the desire to be understood in a particular way by society. Distinctions such as 'self' and 'other' or 'we' and 'they' are rooted in culture and language and highlight the interdependence of identity

formation. Theoretical approaches to identity have thrown more light on the multidimensional nature of the concept. Social Identity Theory shifts the focus from individual psychology to group membership and shows how people build self-esteem through identification with social groups (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 56–65). The theory explains that people categorise themselves and others into 'us' and 'them', often making comparisons that favour their own group and devalue the other (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 59–62). In-group preference and out-group discrimination demonstrate that identity is a social mechanism with strong influence on attitudes, perceptions, and behaviour. Fearon explains identity as both a social category determining group membership and a set of socially valued characteristics that individuals consider lasting (Fearon 1999, 11–26). In this sense, identity becomes a contemporary way of expressing dignity, pride, and honour, connecting personal self-understanding to larger social classifications.

Brewer and Gardner add to this discussion by identifying three levels of identity: personal, social, and collective (Brewer and Gardner 1996, 83–93). These levels demonstrate how identity is formed through individual characteristics, social contacts, and community belonging. Identity is therefore not singular but layered and contextually determined. The viewpoints discussed above depict identity as a multidimensional, evolving, and relational process influenced by social interaction, historical context, and structural forces rather than as a fixed or inherent nature.

### **Identity in Political Contexts**

Identity gets its political significance when it becomes the basis for people's claims to acknowledgement, rights, and representation within social and institutional structures. Identities arise through processes of inclusion and exclusion and are therefore tied to power relations that determine which identities are approved and which are pushed to the margins (Coulmas 2019, 34–36). In political situations, identity is not only a sign of belonging but also a means through which individuals and groups negotiate their position in broader social hierarchies. The political aspect of identity is clearly seen in group-based identifications. Tajfel and Turner's theory of intergroup relations illustrates that identity becomes politicised through categorisation and comparison, which govern relations between groups and their opponents (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 56–65). Such interactions often create a climate of exclusionary attitudes and strengthen boundaries that divide civic identity, particularly when differences among groups are perceived as lasting or beyond change (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 59–62). Identity thus becomes a tool used for both exercising and contesting power. Fearon's understanding of identity makes its political consequences clearer by associating identity with socially appreciated traits such as dignity and honour (Fearon 1999, 11–26). When political systems fail to acknowledge identities or treat them as inferior, groups unite around identity-based claims.

Historical accounts and cultural conversations give meaning to different identities, often supporting existing social stratifications while dismissing others. Mead's interactionist viewpoint

illustrates how people's self-images are shaped by social expectations and institutional standards through daily interaction (Mead 1972, 153–186). Bourdieu's idea of habitus further shows how political and economic systems indirectly shape identity through internalised practices and dispositions (Bourdieu 1984, 1–7). Modernity intensifies the political aspect of identity by making it unstable and reflective. Bauman's idea of liquid modernity explains that the weakening of formerly solid social structures prompts individuals and groups to continuously negotiate identities in relation to changing political and economic conditions (Bauman 2000, 4–14). Appadurai's idea of deterritorialisation complicates political identity further by showing that global flows of people and things move identity beyond fixed physical boundaries, allowing new forms of belonging that challenge older notions of citizenship and national identity (Appadurai 1996, 3–54). In such a situation, identity politics emerges as a reaction to discrimination against specific groups. Bernstein argues that identity-based movements often face the dilemma of presenting identity either as given or constructed, a tension that may also affect coalition-building among marginalised groups (Bernstein 2005, 47–74). Collectively, these viewpoints indicate that identity in politics is not simply revealed but produced, regulated, and changed through power relations, institutional structures, and historical conditions.

### **Identity Politics: Theoretical Perspectives**

The study of identity politics has received increasing attention in social and political thought because of the growing interest in the role of group identities in political activity and behaviour. These group identities may stem from race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or other social locations. The term identity politics is primarily used to describe political action in which individuals and groups unite around such identities to fight for rights and recognition (Appiah 2006, 15–17). The unfolding of identity politics occurs alongside experiences of marginalisation and inequality, especially where established political systems lack sufficient means to address the claims of oppressed groups. When people use the term 'identity politics', they often use it derogatorily to describe the political programmes of others while presenting their own political positions as neutral or universal (Appiah 2006, 15). Appiah shows that even opposition to identity-based claims can itself operate as a form of identity politics when it excludes a category of people based on identity (Appiah 2006, 20–22). This observation highlights that identity politics is not an exceptional phenomenon but a persistent feature of political life across ideologies.

Identity politics operates through multiple dimensions, including the admission of various groups, the use of identities by political leaders, unequal treatment by the government, demands for acknowledgement, and collective mobilisation against identity-based injustice (Appiah 2006, 20–22). However, Appiah also warns that identity politics can become limiting when individuals are viewed only through one dimension of identity, thereby obscuring other aspects of political struggle such as material and legal rights (Appiah 2006, 20–21). Identity politics also signals the

limitations of traditional liberal paradigms that emphasise individual rights while overlooking the conditions of whole groups. Modood views identity politics as a form of resistance against models of citizenship based on a single norm that neglect culturally or religiously different groups (Modood 2007, 2–5). From this viewpoint, identity politics challenges the liberal model that equates equality with uniformity and ignores the structural disadvantages of minorities. Multiculturalism becomes a political answer to the question of how to reconcile identity-based claims with liberal democracy by emphasising both recognition and civic inclusion.

Nancy Fraser similarly criticises liberal solutions that equate justice only with cultural acknowledgement while ignoring economic redistribution. She argues that identity politics became prominent partly because liberal democratic models could not adequately address structural inequalities, leading oppressed groups to articulate their concerns in the language of recognition rather than redistribution (Fraser 2000, 107–114). Frances Fox Piven analyses the emergence of identity politics in relation to global capitalism, pointing to the decline of class-based politics as a contributor to the rise of identity-based mobilisation (Piven 1995, 103). These viewpoints show that identity politics emerges not solely from cultural marginalisation but also from the incapacity of existing political frameworks to deal with economic and social inequalities.

### **Key Debates in Identity Politics**

The central debates in identity politics concern whether it functions as a source of power and empowerment for marginalised groups or as a facilitator of fragmentation. Critics point to the negative side of identity politics, arguing that it may lead to fragmentation and indirectly produce exclusionary forms of belonging. Appiah argues that identity politics can become oppressive when individuals are pressured to make a particular identity group the central focus of their entire social life (Appiah 2006, 20–21).

The second debate concerns recognition versus redistribution. Fraser argues that excessive focus on recognition may reify group identities and divert attention from material inequalities and economic injustice (Fraser 2000, 110–112). Her status model redefines misrecognition as institutionalised subordination rather than as a distortion of identity. She therefore recommends a mixed approach that combines cultural recognition with economic redistribution. This argument brings to the surface the conflict between symbolic inclusion and material justice in identity-based movements.

The conflict between universalism and particularism further complicates identity politics. Liberal universalism asserts equal rights for all, whereas identity politics presents group-specific claims based on historical and cultural differences. Kymlicka rejects the view that these approaches are necessarily incompatible, arguing that group-differentiated rights are often necessary to guarantee equal treatment for minorities within liberal democracies (Kymlicka 1995,

5–8). By distinguishing between national minorities and ethnic groups, Kymlicka shows how particular claims can be aligned with universal liberal principles when their aim is to support minority cultures without infringing upon individual liberties. Conversely, critics such as Rutherford and Clifford warn that essentialising identity can reduce complex identities into rigid categories and thereby enable exclusion and conflict (Rutherford 1990, 11–12; Clifford 2000, 95–98). However, they also caution against completely rejecting identity politics, since such rejection may marginalise the lived realities and political power produced by identity-based movements.

Recent critiques open new ways of thinking about identity politics. Dalglish introduces 'agonistic freedom' as a concept under which identity is considered a site of conflict rather than a fixed acknowledgement (Dalglish 2013, 71–79). Giri suggests a dialogical view of self-formation that focuses on interaction and ethical openness instead of isolating communalism (Giri 2001, 267–275). Bernstein's analysis shows that identity can be a powerful tool for social movements because identity politics can simultaneously seek cultural acceptance and economic transformation (Bernstein 2005, 59–67). Taken together, these debates show that identity politics is neither always liberating nor always divisive. It is a political field of contestation shaped by recognition, redistribution, solidarity, and power.

### **Linking Identity Politics and Minority Rights**

The interplay of identity politics and minority rights can be illustrated through a framework that connects identity formation, politicisation of identity, and state response to minority claims in a democratic system. Minority rights in democracies operate as political tools that allow small or marginalised groups to be heard in the political arena. In multi-ethnic countries, recognition of minority rights is indispensable for the legitimacy of democracy and social harmony (Modood 2007, 56–59). The first component of the framework is identity formation, which is a product of historical, social, and political context. Minority identities are built on culture, religion, and social practices, and are often strengthened through processes of marginalisation and exclusion. These identities are not merely cultural; they are also part of broader power relations that determine access to political participation and economic resources.

The second element, politicisation of identity, occurs when identity is used as a collective rallying point, form of representation, and mode of defiance. With the emergence of identity politics, underprivileged groups come together on the basis of shared characteristics to fight exclusion and demand recognition and rights. Modood argues that elevating identity to a political level involves groups claiming a place in society where they can be acknowledged as culturally or socially distinct, especially when prevailing models of citizenship are based on uniformity (Modood 2007, 2–5). For minorities, politicisation of identity is both a method of resistance and a way to claim dignity and equal rights in society. State response is the next element of the framework and includes recognition, accommodation, or exclusion. State institutions in



democracies have significant influence on which identity categories are recognised and how identity-based claims are treated. In India, Articles 25 to 30 of the Constitution ensure religious freedom, cultural preservation, and educational rights for minorities (Constitution of India 1950, arts. 25–30). These provisions demonstrate an institutional attempt to coordinate national unity with cultural plurality. However, Kymlicka argues that legal protection alone is not enough; effective enforcement of minority rights also requires institutional arrangements that ensure political participation and access to resources (Kymlicka 1995, 113–116).

The third aspect concerns outcomes for minority groups, ranging from protection and inclusion to marginalisation and dissent. Eisenberg argues that public institutions should support equality and inclusion instead of dismissing identity claims as divisive or merely subjective (Eisenberg 2009, 93–96). The effectiveness of minority rights is therefore determined not only by formal recognition but also by the capacity and willingness of institutions to implement those rights. This framework highlights the necessity of treating identity politics as a major aspect of minority rights while also recognising the limitations of a purely conceptual approach.

### **Implications for Minority Studies and Policy**

This conceptual framework contributes to academic discussions on identity politics by linking theoretical debates with the discourse of minority rights. It strengthens the argument that identity politics should not be viewed only as cultural assertion but as a political process tied to democratic participation, institutional recognition, and economic justice. The framework reveals how identity-based claims interact with democratic structures rather than necessarily running contrary to them. For policymakers, it indicates the need for inclusive governance and sensitivity to context in discussions around minority rights in plural societies. Bayart argues that democratic states are obliged not only to acknowledge minority identities but also to provide equal access to political and economic resources necessary for meaningful participation (Bayart 2005, 92–95). In India, the National Commission for Minorities and related institutional arrangements play an important role in the protection of minority rights (National Commission for Minorities Act 1993, sec. 3). Moreover, the framework suggests that minority policies should move beyond symbolic recognition toward the tackling of structural inequalities. Fraser's distinction between recognition and redistribution explains the importance of combining cultural rights with economic justice in reducing persistent forms of marginalisation (Fraser 2000, 154–157). Democratic inclusion must therefore cover not only political representation but also economic opportunity and institutional accountability.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has provided a broad view of identity, identity politics, and minority rights while highlighting the interrelation between identity formation, political mobilisation, state response,

and democratic outcomes. Identity politics emerges as a reaction to marginalisation and exclusion, especially where liberal democratic arrangements do not adequately address group-specific inequalities. In democratic systems, minority rights act as primary methods for political involvement, cultural protection, and social justice when they are integrated into institutional structures. The Indian Constitution recognises minority rights through a strong legal base. The works of Modood, Kymlicka, Eisenberg, Bayart, and Fraser collectively suggest that a democratic society must uphold national unity without making minority inclusion meaningless. Recognition and protection of minority rights must therefore include the raising of social, economic, and political status. Ultimately, the coexistence of minority rights within democratic systems depends on inclusive governance, institutional responsiveness, and a comprehensive understanding of identity politics. Recognising identity as a matter of both culture and politics is central to democratic equality and the maintenance of pluralism in diverse societies.

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# **Perspective Section**

## **A New Dimension of India's Waterways: The Strategic Significance of the Jogighopa Inland Water Transport Terminal**

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### **Abstract**

*Inland Water Transport (IWT) has gained renewed attention in India as part of the government's strategy to strengthen multimodal connectivity and enhance regional trade, particularly in the North-Eastern region. This study examines the strategic significance of the Jogighopa Inland Water Transport Terminal in Assam as a key development in India's evolving waterway infrastructure. Located on National Waterway-2 along the Brahmaputra River, the terminal forms a crucial component of the Jogighopa Multi-Modal Logistics Park and integrates river transport with road, rail, and air networks. The study highlights the terminal's role as an important connectivity node facilitating trade between India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh through the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) route. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, primarily relies on secondary data, including government reports, policy documents, Press Information Bureau releases, and scholarly literature on inland waterways, multimodal logistics, and regional connectivity. Moreover, the study also tries to analyse the environmental and technical challenges such as river navigability, seasonal water fluctuations, dredging requirements, and try suggest some policy initiatives like Development of a Brahmaputra Economic Corridor, institutional Framework for Trilateral River Trade, Promotion of River-Based Industrial Clusters and Sustainable Waterway Management to meet the full potential of the terminal .*

**Keywords:** Inland Water Transport (IWT); Jogighopa Terminal; Brahmaputra River; Multimodal Logistics; India-Bhutan-Bangladesh Trade; Regional Connectivity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

India possesses one of the world's largest rivers and canal networks, with over 14,500 km of navigable waterways . Despite this vast potential, the inland waterway transport (IWT) remains underutilised, accounting for less than 0.4 per cent of India's freight movement, which is far below compared to countries such as China and the European Union countries (Gupta, Anand,

and Bansal 2017, 38-39) . The government has made significant policy moves to improve the share of water transport, notably the National Waterways Act of 2016, which expanded the number of designated National Waterways from 5 to 111 (Gupta, Anand, and Bansal 2017, 49-49). Research highlights that compared to rail and road, IWTs are more cost-effective, energy-efficient, and environmentally friendly (Calderón-Rivera, Bartusevičienė, and Ballini 2024, 15-15). However, major barriers like governance issues, high capital costs, lack of river interlinking, and environmental concerns persist (Calderón-Rivera, Bartusevičienė, and Ballini 2024, 18-18). To address these challenges and unlock the full potential of its extensive navigable waterways, India has been undergoing a "Blue Highway" transition through significant investments to enhance inland water transport infrastructure and integration.

The development of inland water transport infrastructure has emerged as a critical component of India's multi-modal connectivity strategy, particularly for enhancing trade links with neighbouring countries and improving access to the North-Eastern region (Nath & Saikia, 2025, 6-7). The declaration of National Waterway-2 along the Brahmaputra River and the development of multimodal terminals mark a significant shift in India's approach to river-based transportation. Among these initiatives, the Jogighopa Inland Water Transport Terminal in Assam has emerged as a strategically important node due to its location on the Brahmaputra and its proximity to international borders (Baruah, 2024, 3513-3514).

This study examines the strategic significance of the Jogighopa Inland Water Transport Terminal in Assam as a key development within India's evolving waterway infrastructure, strategically situated on National Waterway-2 along the Brahmaputra River. Furthermore, it analyse the terminal's instrumental function in strengthening India's inland waterway infrastructure and fostering multimodal connectivity through the integration of river, road, rail, and air transport networks, thereby enhancing regional and cross-border trade, particularly across India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Additionally, this analysis addresses the environmental and policy challenges, alongside the prospective development trajectory of India's inland water infrastructure.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

India's inland water transport sector, historically contributing just 0.4 per cent of total freight despite a 14,500 km navigable network, is undergoing a transformation through the National

Waterways Act of 2016 (Gupta, Anand, and Bansal 2017, 38-49; Singh and Pandey 2019, 58-78). The Jogighopa terminal on National Waterway-2 serves as a critical multi-modal hub, integrating road, rail, and water to reduce logistics costs that currently reach 14 per cent of GDP (Nath & Saikia, 2025, 6-7). By bypassing the Siliguri Corridor, the terminal facilitates trilateral trade with Bangladesh and Bhutan under the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol, aligning with India's Act East Policy (Ziipao, 2018, 477-487). While IWT is roughly 19 euros cheaper per 1000 ton-km than road transport, development faces challenges such as seasonal water fluctuations and the need to protect the endangered Ganges River Dolphin (Gupta, Khobragade, and Upadhyay 2024, 123-157; Calderón-Rivera et al., 2024, 15-18; Dutta & Sarma, 2020, 1010-1015; Ranjan et al., 2023,173-180). Ultimately, Jogighopa is a strategic gateway for regional connectivity, provided that dredging and environmental management remain sustainable (Balaji, 2024,182-182; Kumar, 2023,173-180).

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- To explore the strategic imperative of the Jogighopa Inland Water Transport (IWT) Terminal in strengthening the inland waterway infrastructure along the Brahmaputra River, and to ascertain its contribution to enhancing multimodal connectivity through the linkage of riverine transport with road, rail, and air networks across the Northeastern region.
- To assess the terminal's potential for augmenting regional and cross-border trade, particularly among India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh via the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) route.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Employing a qualitative case study methodology, this analysis investigates the strategic significance of the Jogighopa Inland Water Transport (IWT) Terminal in Assam. The research draws predominantly upon secondary data sources, encompassing government reports, policy documents, Press Information Bureau releases, and specialised scholarly literature pertaining to inland waterways, multimodal logistics, and regional connectivity. A descriptive and analytical method is used to examine the infrastructural features, connectivity potential, and economic implications of the terminal within the framework of National Waterway-2 and the Jogighopa Multi-Modal Logistics Park.

## **JOGIGHOPA INLAND WATER TRANSPORT TERMINAL: LOCATION AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Situated strategically on the Brahmaputra River in Assam, the Jogighopa terminal constitutes a pivotal development within this strategic framework, offering a cost-effective and environmentally sustainable alternative to traditional road and rail networks for the movement of cargo to Bangladesh and other international destinations. This infrastructure aligns with broader national initiatives, such as the development of National Waterway-2 from Dhubri to Sadiya and the expansion of ferry services across the Brahmaputra, which collectively aim to streamline commerce between key centres like Guwahati, Dibrugarh, and international markets (Gupta, Khobragade, and Upadhyay 2024, 123-157). Notwithstanding these inherent advantages, the sector has historically been characterised by systemic neglect; consequently, India's use of inland waters (as a measure of domestic cargo movements) is at 6 per cent, which is much lower than the global average, reflecting significant underutilization of the extensive river resources of the country, due to challenges such as non-navigable stretches, sedimentation, backhaul cargo limitations, and limited hinterland connectivity (Balaji, 2024, 182-182).

The Jogighopa Inland Water Transport Terminal is an integral part of India's first Multi-Modal Logistic Park (MMLP) project in Assam. The terminal was inaugurated in February 2025 by Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal. Its primary function is to serve as a port of call for international trade with Bhutan and Bangladesh, facilitating the movement of cargo such as stone chips, coal, and food grains. The terminal is designed to handle substantial cargo volumes, with an initial capacity of 1.1 million tonnes per annum (MTPA). With a construction cost of approximately 82.03 crore, its development was entrusted to the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL), operating under the purview of the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI). Encompassing an area of 15 acres, the terminal integrates state-of-the-art engineering solutions for the efficient handling of bulk and break-bulk commodities. (Gupta, Khobragade, and Upadhyay 2024, 123-157). The terminal is centred around a Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) jetty measuring 100m long and 21m wide, and is served by an RCC approach of 136m by 8m. The jetty is constructed to accommodate large freight barges and vessels that frequently use the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol route. Equipped with an Electric Level Luffing (ELL) crane, the jetty ensures high-precision



cargo handling, thereby optimising turnaround times. The terminal's storage facilities are strategically bifurcated to optimise throughput: an 11,000-square-meter open storage space for weather-resistant materials, such as stone chips and coal and a 1,100-square-meter covered transit shed for delicate goods, including food grains and fertilisers. The administrative efficiency is supported by specialised customs and immigration office complexes, allowing the terminal to function as a single border crossing (Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, 2025)

Strategically, Jogighopa is distinguished by its capacity for the synchronisation of four distinct transport modalities. Positioned adjacent to the terminal, the site is complemented by a 154 km four-lane road under construction, designed to connect it to Guwahati, alongside the immediate proximity of National Highway 17 (NH-17). Rail connectivity will be established through a proposed 3-km broad gauge (BG) siding, linking the Jogighopa railway station with the MMLP and the IWT terminal; furthermore, the MMLP's design anticipates the integration of air cargo transfer capabilities for high-value or time-sensitive items, thereby completing the envisioned multimodal network (Gupta, Khobragade, and Upadhyay 2024, 123-157).

### **JOGIGHOPA AS A CONNECTIVITY AND GOVERNANCE NODE**

This strategic imperative arises from the terminal's positioning as an epicentre of trilateral engagement among India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. This developmental trajectory serves as an economic multiplier, directly attributable to the national master plan of Gati Shakti, which prioritises the integrated development of infrastructure for the generation of economic growth.

### **STRATEGIC BYPASS TO THE SILIGURI CORRIDOR**

The Jogighopa Inland Water Transport Terminal provides a strategic logistical alternative to the Siliguri Corridor, which is the narrow land passage connecting Northeast India with the rest of the country, often referred to as the "Chicken's Neck". The development of the Brahmaputra waterway route through Bangladesh creates an additional transport channel; this route facilitates the movement of cargo to the major sea ports of Kolkata and Haldia, thereby circumventing the congested Siliguri Corridor and mitigating overdependence on this vulnerable geopolitical chokepoint. This diversification of connectivity strengthens India's strategic and economic resilience in the Northeast region (Saha, 2019, 45-56).

## **STRENGTHENING INDIA'S REGIONAL GEOECONOMIC INFLUENCE**

The terminal significantly enhances India's geoeconomic engagement with neighbouring countries, particularly Bhutan and Bangladesh. For the Kingdom of Bhutan, Jogighopa serves as the nearest riverine trading centre, a crucial enabler for the success of the Gelephu Mindfulness City, an urban and economic development initiative spearheaded by the Royal Government. Previously, the transboundary movement of boulders and stone chips from Bhutanese exporters to Bangladesh incurred substantial time and cost inefficiencies via road, primarily necessitating transshipment across the states of Assam and Meghalaya. The reduced distance of 91 km to the terminal, compared to the former primary route via Dhubri Port (133 km), significantly enhances logistical convenience. This infrastructure enables Bhutanese exporters to expedite Letters of Credit (LCs) processing and facilitates the daily dispatch of primary goods to Bangladesh, a significant improvement compared to the four-day delays previously experienced due to highway congestion and associated administrative impediments (Gupta, Khobragade, and Upadhyay 2024, 123-157). Consequently, the terminal fosters deeper economic interdependence among these nations. This infrastructure, therefore, functions as a potent instrument of economic diplomacy, actively reinforcing India's regional connectivity initiatives in South Asia.

## **SUPPORTING THE ACT EAST POLICY AND SUB-REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY**

As a vital node in the recalibration of India's Act East Policy, the Jogighopa terminal strengthens linkages between domestic markets and Southeast Asia. This integration is facilitated through ambitious connectivity projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. This project aims to provide an alternate route to the Northeast from the Kolkata Haldia ports via Myanmar's Sittwe Port and the Kaladan River boat route. Jogighopa acts as a northern anchor for goods entering this network from the Brahmaputra system. The India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway, which links Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand, enabling eventual land-based trade with ASEAN 2.0, positions the Jogighopa MMLP as a major aggregation point for Indian commodities destined for these international road networks. Dalu-Tura-GoaIpara Gelephu Trade Route, an economic corridor, formalised through an MoU between India and Bangladesh, establishes a dedicated path for trilateral trade with Bhutan, with Jogighopa as the primary trans-shipment centre (Ziipao, 2018, 477-487). By

connecting river transport routes with emerging land corridors leading to Southeast Asia, the Jogighopa terminal highlights the growing strategic role of the Brahmaputra basin in facilitating regional trade networks.

### **TRANSFORMATION OF NORTHEAST INDIA INTO A LOGISTICS HUB**

While historically characterised by geographical isolation, Northeast India's development planning, with the Jogighopa terminal at its forefront, marks a shift toward positioning the region as a logistics and connectivity hub. The Bongaigaon district is home to major industrial players like the Bongaigaon Refinery (IOCL), which has a crude processing capacity of 2.7 MM TPA and expansion plans up to 5 MMTPA. The Jogighopa terminal provides these industries with a cheaper exit route for refined products and petrochemicals, which were previously taxed heavily due to multiple trans-shipments across state lines. The merger of Bongaigaon Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited (BRPL) with IOC in 2009 has already improved operational efficiencies, and the MMLP is expected to further enhance profit margins by avoiding double taxation on product transfers. Furthermore, the regional focus on tea, handlooms (silk city Sualkuchi), and bamboo-based industries will benefit from the "hub-and-spoke" model of the MMLP. Specialised storage for agricultural commodities will reduce wastage, a major concern in the agriculture sector (Shekhar, Singh, and Khan 2023,2-6 ). This shift could contribute to long-term economic integration of the Northeast with national and international markets.

### **CHALLENGES: TECHNICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS**

The navigability of the Brahmaputra River, a critical determinant for the Jogighopa terminal's success, is fundamentally challenged by the waterway's dynamic and complex nature. National Waterway (NW-2) confronts challenges stemming from excessive (Dutta & Sarma, 2020, 1010-1010), variable course morphology (Schneider et al., 2017, 754-754), and pronounced seasonal fluctuations in water levels (Dutta & Sarma, 2020, 1010-1010). The Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) maintains a navigable depth (draft) of 2.5 meters in the section from the Bangladesh border to Neamati, including the Jogighopa region. Nevertheless, the water levels might decline dramatically when there is a lean season (winter), and due to high capital intensity, dredging will be required to guarantee that the barges with 1,500-2,000 tons can safely navigate the waters (Baten & Titumir, 2015, 13-27).

The Ganges River Dolphin (*Platanista gangetica gangetica*), which is the National Aquatic Animal in India, is critical to the Brahmaputra (Ranjan et al., 2023,173-180). The extensive scope of the Jogighopa waterway project has similarly generated ecological apprehension concerning the potential ramifications of waterway development, including dredging and heightened vessel traffic on sensitive species (Change, 2022, 749-749; Didukh, 2023, 735-735). The Assam Inland Water Transport Project (AIWTP) supported by the World Bank, has developed an Environmental Management Framework (EMF) to address these risks (Change, 2022, 749-749).

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATION**

The Jogighopa Inland Water Transport Terminal possesses substantial untapped potential necessitating realisation through comprehensive policy interventions. Firstly, the government must prioritise the establishment of a Brahmaputra Economic Corridor, designed to interconnect major river ports such as Jogighopa, Pandu, and Dhubri with industrial areas and border trade hubs, thereby augmenting the inland waterways' strategic role within the regional logistical framework. Secondly, India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh should establish a formal trilateral river transport coordination mechanism, strategically designed to streamline customs procedures, navigation protocols, and cargo management standards, thereby facilitating cross-border trade. Thirdly, the industrialisation of river clusters around Jogighopa, particularly in sectors such as tea processing, bamboo industries, cargo processing, and petrochemicals, is paramount for maximising the economic returns on logistics infrastructure and fostering regional employment generation. Finally, the imperative of sustainable waterway management must be inextricably integrated with the expansion of inland water transport; this entails strict environmental oversight, the deployment of eco-friendly vessels, and precisely controlled dredging operations to preserve the ecological equilibrium of the Brahmaputra River and ensure the enduring viability of riverine transport systems.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Jogighopa Inland Water Transport Terminal is a pivotal initiative for the enhancement of inland waterways infrastructure and the strategic development of connectivity within the Northeast region. Strategically positioned on National Waterway-2 along the Brahmaputra River, the terminal possesses the inherent potential to function as a crucial logistics hub,

thereby facilitating trade among India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh via the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol routes. The fact that it will be integrated with the Multi-Modal Logistics Park as well as connected to road, rail, and air transport systems in its immediate surroundings shows a wider trend in the Indian infrastructure strategy towards multimodal transport systems (Gupta et al., 2024). Furthermore, the project distinctly highlights the expanding role of the Brahmaputra basin in regional trade and connectivity networks, specifically by linking river transport routes to emerging terrestrial pathways towards Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the terminal's performance will depend upon the robust enhancement of last-mile infrastructure; synchronised cross-border coordination among neighbouring nations; and the sustainable management of the Brahmaputra River ecosystem. Addressing challenges such as seasonal navigability, sedimentation, and associated environmental impacts will be requisite for the long-term viability of inland water transport within the region. Ultimately, the Jogighopa terminal exemplifies how targeted infrastructure development can strategically catalyse economic growth, foster regional integration, and enhance inter-connectivity between South and Southeast Asia.

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## Navigating Shock: The Structural, Spatial, and Evolutionary Dynamics of Economic Resilience

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### Abstract

*With rising incidences of disturbances in nature, the ability of economic systems to endure, adjust, and adapt to such disturbances has become an issue of great academic interest. The present article explores the 'economics of resilience', analysing its development from ecology to macroeconomics and regional geography. In this way, the article provides the typology of resilience, including static absorption and dynamic adaptation, innate qualities and adaptive skills. Using hysteresis as a framework, the article explains how transient disturbances give rise to persistent changes in structure, thus making conventional equilibrium models irrelevant. Moving away from considering asset losses in the wake of disturbances, the article sheds light on the dichotomy between macroeconomic constraints on production and microeconomic weaknesses of households. Moreover, the evolutionary perspective of resilience theory is explored, emphasizing the importance of industrial interconnectedness and adaptability of technology for sustainable existence.*

### Keywords

Economic Resilience, Regional Geography, Hysteresis, Evolutionary Adaptation, Distributional Welfare.

### Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed an important reconceptualisation of the global economy characterised by the heightened vulnerability of the economy to system perturbations. The rising interdependence of global economic activities, together with the growing occurrence of natural hazards, economic crises, and localised industrial recessions, has revealed the fragility of economic systems optimised for efficiency. As such, the disciplines of macroeconomics, regional analysis, and public policy are now beginning to move away from a vulnerability paradigm to one of resilience.



The idea of resilience was first developed within the disciplines of ecological science and engineering as an analytical tool to explain how complex ecosystems withstand shocks without reverting to different states of being (Holling 1973, 14). Economists have since used this concept with extreme precision to study the complex behavioural and structural reactions of economies in response to exogenous shocks. While neoclassical economic models presuppose a smooth convergence back to a unique state of general equilibrium after a shock, the resilience approach argues that such a process is contingent upon the nature of economic behaviours and institutions as well as the rigidity of the market structures of specific regions (Sutton and Arku 2022, 497). The shock cannot simply be seen as a break in the existing growth path but as a stress test that evaluates the fundamental capabilities of the economy to restructure and evolve.

This paper offers a thorough and rigorous analysis of the economics of resilience, which is focused upon theoretical, spatial and distributional dynamics. The paper starts with an elaboration of the roots and taxonomy of resilience, particularly emphasising the difference between innate capacity and adaptive capacity. The paper proceeds to analyse the spatiality of resilience by looking at the subject through the prism of regional economic geography and the concept of hysteresis in defining economic paths. Subsequently, the analysis highlights the evolutionary dimension of resilience as an important element that prevents a collapse of the system.

### **Conceptual Origins: From Ecological Systems to Economic Adaptation**

In order to comprehend economic resilience, one has to appreciate its epistemological origin within the realm of natural science. The concept of resilience was originally brought into ecology by Crawford S. Holling as a metric of persistence and capacity to cope with disturbances while maintaining a similar relationship among populations or state variables (Holling 1973, 17). Within this framework, an ecosystem can be said to be resilient not because it will maintain stability per se, but because it avoids a point where its original structure will be changed permanently.

However, when this principle is applied in the field of economics, it initially encountered resistance. Classical neoclassical economics traditionally based its assumptions on Newtonian

physics concepts of “stability” where the assumption of an economy’s ability to return to its original equilibrium state was considered natural, similar to how a swinging pendulum always returns to the same spot after an exogenous impact occurs (Martin 2012, 4). Nevertheless, as regional economies consistently failed to return to their employment rates before the industrial recession in the late 20th century, economists understood that the principle of a pendulum was fundamentally incorrect. The application of an ecological approach to the matter provided a much better framework, as economies, like ecosystems, have numerous equilibriums. An impactful disturbance can shift the economic system to a new growth equilibrium path (Martin 2012, 14). It gave way to the emergence of economic resilience in the academic environment, as well as the study of ways to preserve it.

### **The Taxonomy of Economic Resilience: Foundational Definitions**

The development of the theory of economic resilience can be said to owe much to an existing branch of study in disaster economics. The purpose of the field was to answer a puzzle that kept reoccurring, which was why economic damages sustained (such as disruptions to business and GDP reductions) often differed greatly from the damage predicted solely through the value of physical capital loss. The capability of an economy to limit its aggregate damages resulting from a particular size of a disaster is what constitutes its economic resilience (Hallegatte 2014, 4). Such a framework is able to categorise economic resilience according to two key factors: origin and time horizon (Rose 2004, 308).

### **Inherent and Adaptive Capacities**

During the timeline of economic recovery, the genesis of the robust response arises. Inherently robust systems involve the natural tendency of the economic system to resist disruptions given its baseline, current configuration. These include normal market operations that allow for the quick adaptation of prices in response to scarcity, geographical diversification of supply chains by a multinational company, or routine stockpiling of inventories by producers. Essentially, inherent robustness is hardwired into the topology of the economy before the disaster strikes (Rose 2004, 309). Given that these systems are embedded within the regular workings of the

market, which are often automatic, and that they work according to the usual market operations, they represent a relatively cost-free way of shifting resources following a disruption.

Unlike adaptive resilience, on the other hand, this occurs purely in times of crisis. This is defined as the additional work, creativity, and unusual actions taken by economic agents in response to unexpected challenges. These may range from a factory's temporary use of its own production methods to substitute for a rare material to local people circumventing the breakdown of their country's banking system through alternative localized barter schemes. Adaptive resilience reinforces an important point regarding economic theory: that agents are not mere passive sufferers but actively creative agents whose actions prevent catastrophic outcomes (Rose 2004, 310).

### **Static and Dynamic Mechanisms of Recovery**

Temporal aspect of a systemic shock implies that economists must separate resilience into actions aimed at limiting the depth of a shock and actions regulating the speed of recovery. Economic static resilience relates to capability of an economic entity to function properly under the influence of a shock, using only available resources at that particular point in time (Rose 2004, 312). It involves an instantaneous redistribution of scarce resources.

On the other hand, economic dynamic resilience relates to the recovery period. Dynamic economic resilience can be described as the ability of an economy to recover quickly and effectively from a shock, being largely dependent on capital accumulation, repair, and resource reinvestment (Hallegatte 2014, 6). While static resilience is about reducing the depth of the contraction of an economy, dynamic resilience regulates its slope.

### **Spatial Dimensions: Regional Economic Resilience and Hysteresis**

Although disaster economics tends to define resilience in terms of sudden physical destruction, regional economic geography considers the application of this concept to wider economic recessions. In the case when the national or international economy experiences recession, its effects are never equal in different areas of geographic space. The geographical differences in

economic downturns have been well noted by researchers, and some cities have demonstrated high resilience, whereas adjacent spaces suffer from stagnation for decades (Di Caro 2015, 274).

### **The Rejection of Unique Equilibrium and the Role of Hysteresis**

The conventional approach to regional development is that of equilibrium growth. As per the neoclassical model, a recessionary shock would be considered a temporary disturbance to the status quo. But equilibrium-based resilience implies that the system returns to its previous state frictionlessly, without considering any structural damage that might have occurred during the process (Martin and Sunley 2015, 15).

Rather, regional economic resilience should take into consideration the idea of hysteresis, which is defined as the possibility that shocks that only temporarily disrupt equilibrium may leave permanent effects on the structure of the economy (Martin 2012, 4). During a period of depression, long periods of unemployment result in the degeneration of human capital specialisation, causing skilled labour to be lost forever. Simultaneously, capital is destroyed, and supply chains are irreversibly broken. Therefore, when the regional economy becomes stable once more, it will not revert to its initial position; rather, due to hysteresis, it will embark upon a new trajectory of sub-optimal growth (Martin 2012, 27).

### **Four Dimensions of Regional Reaction**

In order to put this framework into practice, regional resilience is typically broken down into four interconnected dimensions that influence the intensity of the shock experienced (Martin 2012, 16):

- Resistance – the extent of sensitivity to the recessionary shock. This involves the degree of contraction of regional economic activity, compared to the national average.
- Recovery – the rate at which recovery takes place from the absolute bottom of the recession.

- Re-orientation – the extent to which the regional economy is realigned in response to the shock, as for example in moving away from declining manufacturing activities towards specialized knowledge services.
- Renewal – the potential of the region to switch to a more desirable growth path.

Areas that depend on one particular industry, which is cyclically sensitive, will display low resistance but high susceptibility to hysteresis. Conversely, regions with diverse economies show more adaptability, indicating an elaborate systemic way of achieving resilience (Sutton and Arku 2022, 498).

### **The Evolutionary Turn: Adaptability, Technological Resilience, and Related Variety**

Resilience in regional research has been greatly enhanced by the incorporation of evolutionary economic geography. It is based on the assumption that the effects of shocks in the short run and the creation of disequilibrium forces are elements of an evolutionary process taking place in dynamically changing regions (Di Caro 2015, 6). Unlike the idea of resilience as the capacity to bounce back and recover from adversity, an evolutionary perspective considers how an economy evolves to ensure growth and prosperity in the long run (Boschma 2015, 735).

### **Resilience as Evolutionary Adaptation**

The evolutionary model does not support the idea of stability of the regional structure at all. The problem with regions is that they need to cope with external shocks, and their further development after such shocks depends on the existing structure of industries, networks, and institutions in the region (Boschma 2015, 736). In the long term, resilience takes the shape of adaptability, which means the ability to develop multiple evolutionary paths to increase the sensitivity to unexpected changes. Resilience in this sense requires diversity, that is, leaving the economic options open for the region so that it could experiment with innovation. Regional resilience itself changes through time (Martin and Sunley 2015, 28).

In addition, the survival of evolution is directly linked to technological resilience, which refers to the capacity of the knowledge system within a certain region to withstand decline and

produce patents and innovation even during economic downturns (Balland et al., 2015, 168). Those cities with intricate knowledge networks can innovate themselves through recessions such that they have different industrial compositions from the old post-shock era.

### **The Buffer of Related Variety**

An important factor noted in the geography discipline that ensures evolutionary resilience of an economy is "related variety" or industrial relatedness. Related variety in a regional economy can be defined as the extent of similarity in technology, skills, and capabilities among the different diversified industries within the region (Boschma 2015, 737). In a regional economy with a high level of related variety, the labour force skills and technology inputs of firms become readily available for different industries.

The empirical investigation of labour markets at the local level indicates that systems with high levels of related variety exhibit much better adaptability to shocks from outside; related variety is actually the "macroeconomic shock-absorber" for such a system (Cainelli et al. 2019, 658). In case there is a shock-induced breakdown of a specialized industry, it will be easier for workers who have become unemployed to shift to other industries that are somehow close to the failed one, preventing the occurrence of widespread unemployment within the region. In contrast, regions that are characterized by absolute specialization have no such mechanisms for lateral mobility, thus increasing the impact of the crisis (Cainelli et al. 2019, 659).

### **Macroeconomic Output Limits versus Microeconomic Welfare**

One notable improvement that was made within the field of economics of resilience theory involves the clear demarcation between the destruction of assets and welfare losses. One cannot equate directly asset destruction to economic misery because it is difficult to draw a one-to-one direct relationship between the two; hence, the need to split the analysis into macro and micro perspectives.

### **Macroeconomic Output and Resistance**

Macroeconomic resilience, on the other hand, refers to the aggregate ability of the economy to deal with a systemic shock, recover, and rebuild itself at the national or systemic levels (Hallegatte 2014, 30). What cannot be quantified in the economic impacts of systemic shocks is not in terms of the monetary worth of the physical assets destroyed but in terms of the aggregate consumption and output losses sustained during the process within the community. Macroeconomic resilience refers to how any particular asset loss results in a proportionate loss of GDP.

A high level of macroeconomic resilience is exemplified by having redundant capital capacity, high industrial substitutes, and flexible labour markets, which logically constrain the extent of production losses that would result from any disruption of productive operations. Also, the dynamic characteristic of macroeconomic resilience depends on whether macro-financing such as domestic saving, sovereign credit, and foreign insurance is available and whether the construction sector can accommodate a sudden rise in aggregate demand without spiralling hyperinflation (Hallegatte 2014, 15).

### **Microeconomic Resilience and Distributional Equity**

Although macroeconomic measures provide insights into production levels, they often fail to reveal the huge, tragic disparities existing at the microeconomic level. As such, microeconomic resilience measures only look at the distributive effects of a crisis. This is based on the simple concept that the marginal utility of income diminishes as income increases (Bangalore et al. 2016, 5). Losing any given resource would be far worse for a poor family than losing an equivalent amount for a rich family.

The microeconomic resilience itself hinges entirely upon the socio-economic vulnerability of households. This is determined by pre-disaster average household incomes, savings, access to formal credit when needed, and private insurance market coverage (Bangalore et al. 2016, 12). Given the differential impact of disasters, the global losses in physical capital led to an unequal decline in aggregate well-being. The country may have great macroeconomic resilience, meaning that its aggregate GDP recovers quickly with the help of capitalists. Nonetheless, if

during the same process vulnerable populations are made destitute as a result of having no way to even out their consumption, there is a crucial lack of socio-economic resilience in the economy.

### **Governance, Institutional Buffers, and Policy Implications**

The principles of economic resilience theory confront previous concepts of governance. Traditional physical resilience lowers the risk of failure of the infrastructure but is costly, localized, and susceptible to sudden changes in externalities. Real resilience entails reorientation of government efforts towards institutional flexibility and social security.

#### **The "Singapore Paradox" and Institutional Resilience**

Resilience in theory is highly dependent on the governance system. A critical example of this interplay from the theoretical perspective is the "Singapore paradox," whereby, despite having high physical and economic exposure to external shocks, due to its size as an island nation and lack of natural resources, Singapore always exhibits a remarkable level of macroeconomic resilience (Briguglio et al. 2009, 230). From a theoretical standpoint, this implies that a high level of economic security does not happen despite vulnerability but because of the deliberate development of policy-induced economic resilience. Economic capital, huge foreign exchange macroeconomic buffers, and market flexibility in microeconomics slow down diminishing marginal returns and buffer the economy from the rest of the world (Briguglio et al. 2009, 235).

### **Adaptive Social Protection**

To tackle the gap between asset destruction and welfare loss, it is crucial to improve the social safety net foundation prior to any shock occurrence. Theories of microeconomic resilience state that increased financial inclusion, creation of adaptive social protection systems, and pre-registration of emergency cash transfers help smooth out the consumption of the households. By concentrating on capital effectiveness and social justice, policymakers can stop asset loss from being transformed into an economic breakdown and keep intact the human capital needed for economic recovery (Bangalore et al. 2016, 18).



## **Conclusion**

The Economics of Resilience is a scientific and comprehensive study of how highly complex market systems endure, tolerate, and recover from severe economic disturbances. Through its explanation of processes of static absorption and dynamic recovery, consideration of the physical aspects of spatial hysteresis, and basic distinction between macro-level aggregation of production and micro-level distribution of household welfare, this branch of economics shows the adaptability and evolution of market systems as resilient evolving networks.

The evolutionary approach in resilience theory brings forward the importance of industrial relatedness, localised knowledge stockpiling, and long-term structural reconfiguration of systems, leaving any consideration of unique static equilibrium in the dark ages of economics forever. In light of ever-increasing interconnectedness of the world, as well as growing instability of its environment, promoting and managing resilience becomes essential for any country's survival. All in all, the capability of an economy to overcome shocks strongly depends on its market system adaptability, diversity of industrial activities, equitable welfare, and resourceful behaviour of economic agents.

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# **Commentary Section**

## Breaking the Silence: Women's Agency in Assam's Armed Movements

Manashi Hazarika & Chandana Bhattacharjya

### Abstract

*The role of women in Assam's armed movements has remained largely peripheral to mainstream conflict narratives despite their substantial participation in the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and various Bodo armed organisations since the late 1980s. This paper interrogates how women in Assam exercised political agency through their involvement in insurgency while simultaneously being constrained by the patriarchal structures of both militant organisations and society at large. Drawing on existing ethnographic scholarship, oral histories, and reports from women's organisations, this paper argues that female combatants and supporters in Assam should be understood neither as passive victims nor as wholly emancipated agents but as historically situated actors whose participation reconfigured—yet did not dismantle—gendered norms. The paper concludes by examining the silences that surround women's post-conflict lives and the everyday strategies through which former combatants have continued to assert agency in a society reluctant to recognise their political contributions.*

### Introduction

For nearly four decades, the northeastern Indian state of Assam has been shaped by armed movements demanding sovereignty, autonomy, and the protection of ethnic identity. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), founded on 7 April 1979 at the historic Rang Ghar in Sivasagar, sought to establish a 'sovereign, socialist Assam' through armed struggle (Deka 2019: 470). Almost simultaneously, the Bodo movement gathered momentum, culminating in the formation of armed outfits such as the Bodo Security Force, later renamed the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) (Saikia 2023:198). Conventional accounts of these insurgencies have foregrounded male leaders, ideological manifestos, and battlefield clashes, leaving the question of women's participation either unaddressed or relegated to the footnotes of conflict history (Deka 2020: 54).

However, women have never been absent from these movements. From sheltering cadres and ferrying messages to bearing arms in jungle camps along the Indo-Bhutan and Indo-Myanmar borders, women have been active participants throughout the trajectory of armed politics in Assam (Goswami 2015: 12; Kalita Moral 2018: 25). Their numbers, though contested, were not negligible: by some estimates, women constituted between 12 and 15 percent of ULFA's cadre at the height of its mobilisation in the early 1990s

(Kalita 2014: 148). This paper argues that the silence around their contributions is not accidental but is itself a product of the gendered economy of recognition that governs both insurgent organisations and the post-conflict Indian state.

This paper is organised into five substantive sections. The first situates the question of women's agency within the historical arc from the Assam Movement (1979–1985) to the militarisation of the 1990s. The second examines the motivations that drew women to ULFA and Bodo armed groups. The third turns to the lived realities of women cadres inside the camps, where revolutionary rhetoric coexisted with patriarchal practices. The fourth considers the disproportionate impact of counterinsurgency on women's bodies and lives. The final section addresses the difficult terrain of reintegration, where former combatants confront both societal disapproval and the state's reluctance to acknowledge their political subjectivities.

Methodologically, the paper synthesises existing ethnographic and oral-history scholarship rather than reporting fresh fieldwork, foregrounding the testimonies and analyses of researchers such as Roshmi Goswami, Dixita Deka, Rakhee Kalita Moral, Amrita Saikia and Nitish Gogoi who have, over the past two decades, painstakingly recovered women's narratives from the margins of conflict archives. Theoretically, the argument draws on a feminist conceptualisation of agency that does not equate it with autonomy or liberation, but rather with the capacity to act however ambivalently within structures of constraint (Manchanda 2001: 11). Such an approach is essential for moving beyond the binary of 'victim' and 'warrior', which has long shaped popular representations of women in conflict zones across South Asia.

### **From the Assam Movement to Armed Insurgency**

The Assam Movement of 1979–1985, led by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU), mobilised an entire generation against the perceived demographic and cultural threats posed by 'foreigners', primarily Bengali-speaking migrants from the eastern borderlands (Hussain 1993: 73). Women joined the movement in large numbers, picketing tea stalls and government offices, courting arrest, and forming the bedrock of street-level mobilisation. The Assam Accord of 1985 brought a formal end to the agitation, but for many of its participants, especially those disappointed by what they perceived as the betrayal of Assamese national aspirations, the path led directly to underground politics (Misra 2000: 154).

ULFA, formally established in 1979 but consolidated as an armed organisation in the mid-1980s, framed itself as the rightful heir to Assamese sovereignty (Dutta 2008: 40). The organisation's decision to formally induct female cadres in 1989 reflected both ideological commitments and pragmatic necessities. Drawing inspiration in part from women combatants in the Naga and Kachin movements across the eastern

Himalayas, ULFA's leadership recognised the strategic advantages of female recruits in intelligence gathering, communication, and combat-support roles, where male cadres faced increased surveillance (Deka 2019: 476).

Women's involvement in the Bodo movement followed a parallel but distinct trajectory. The All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) has long mobilised women in cultural and political work, and the All-Bodo Women's Welfare Federation has become a significant social force in the demand for a separate Bodoland, undertaking everything from grassroots welfare work to public demonstrations and peace marches (Saikia 2023: 202). When negotiations broke down and the movement militarised in the 1990s, women were recruited into the NDFB and the BLT, sometimes as combatants and more often as 'link persons' embedded in communities (Gogoi 2025: 30). The Bodo case is distinctive because women's organisations operated simultaneously within and against the armed movement, demanding ethnic recognition while frequently calling for an end to violence in the everyday lives of villagers.

### **Recruitment and Motivations: Why Women Took Up Arms**

Why did women in Assam take up arms? The answer cannot be reduced to a single motive, however. Roshmi Goswami's ethnographic study of former ULFA women combatants identifies a constellation of factors: ideological commitment to Assamese sovereignty, personal experiences of state violence, the search for autonomy from patriarchal households, romantic and familial links to existing cadres, and the simple desire for adventure and 'something more' than the constrained futures available to rural Assamese women (Goswami 2015: 18).

Many women cadres came from agrarian upper Assam districts such as Sivasagar, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, and Lakhimpur, where ULFA's social base was strongest (Deka 2020: 56). For them, the movement was less an abstract ideology than a lived part of village life, with cadres often being neighbours, classmates, or kin. As Dixita Deka has documented through her oral histories with former women combatants, the first woman cadre of ULFA was drawn to the underground through her brother's involvement and her own dissatisfaction with the limits placed on educated young women in her community (Deka 2019: 480).

For Bodo women, the motivations were inflected by additional concerns about ethnic survival, land alienation, and cultural recognition. Gogoi's research on a former NDFB female combatant emphasises how love, kinship, and ethnonationalist solidarity intertwined in ways that defied standard models of insurgent recruitment (Gogoi 2025: 38). Women's entry into armed movements, in other words, was rarely a clean ideological choice; it was embedded in dense social relations and structures of feeling.

Notably, ULFA, like many other South Asian insurgencies, did not initially conceptualise itself as a feminist project. The 'kokaideu' (elder brother) framework through which male leaders related to female cadres reproduced familial patriarchal authority even within the revolutionary fold (Kalita 2014: 155). Yet, women joined nonetheless, and many remained committed even after experiencing the contradictions of the organisation.

### **Inside the Camps: Gendered Hierarchies and Lived Realities**

The lived realities of women cadres inside the jungle camps of ULFA and Bodo armed groups reveal what may be called the 'paradox of insurgent agency'. On the one hand, women bore arms, underwent military training, conducted reconnaissance, and transported weapons; in some instances, they participated in armed operations (Kalita Moral 2018: 33). They wore camouflage, learned to shoot, and shared the dangers of underground life with their male comrades. This was, by any reasonable measure, a radical departure from the gendered division of labour that prevailed in rural Assamese and Bodo households.

However, the camps reproduced many of the patriarchal norms that women had ostensibly escaped. Marriage was a recurring institution: ULFA leaders frequently solemnised the marriages of women cadres to male comrades, ostensibly to prevent 'complications' arising from sexual or romantic relationships (Kalita Moral 2018: 36). Cooking, caring, and emotional labour disproportionately fell on women cadres. Leadership remained largely male, and women rarely rose to senior command positions. As Goswami's records, women in ULFA frequently negotiated identities that were simultaneously revolutionary and domestic (Goswami 2015: 22).

Gogoi's recent intervention is instructive. Drawing on a former Bodo woman rebel's testimony, he argues that conventional Western frameworks of gender and rebellion fail to capture the textured, place-bound realities of women in the NDFB. Romance, longing, and the desire for belonging were neither incidental to nor in tension with militant commitment; they were constitutive of it (Gogoi 2025: 44). Such insights complicate any simple narrative of emancipation or victimhood. The institutional response of these organisations to questions of women's rights remained ambivalent: women were welcomed as comrades-in-arms but rarely as decision-makers in the party.

Crucially, however, the women cadres did not simply accept the gendered hierarchies of the camps. Oral histories collected by Deka document quiet acts of negotiation, challenging unequal task allocation, demanding training in weaponry that was initially withheld, and, in some cases, openly resisting the marital arrangements proposed by senior cadres (Deka 2019: 482; Deka 2020: 58). Thus, their agency was exercised

through participation in armed politics and everyday contestation of internal asymmetries. Recognising these micro-resistances is essential, for they unsettle any account that reads women's presence in insurgent organisations as merely instrumental.

### **Counter-Insurgency and the Female Body**

If the camps offered women a constrained form of agency, the counterinsurgency operations of the Indian state imposed forms of violence that targeted women regardless of their direct involvement with armed groups. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, in force across Assam since November 1990, granted security forces sweeping powers of search, arrest, and use of force, with effective immunity from prosecution (Choudhury 2016: 88). Women in insurgency-affected districts, wives, mothers, and sisters of suspected cadres, but also women with no demonstrable links to militancy, became objects of suspicion, surveillance, and abuse.

Documented cases of sexual violence by security forces during counterinsurgency operations are extensive but have rarely resulted in prosecution (Goswami 2015: 34). The 'secret killings' of 1998–2001, in which over 300 persons connected to ULFA cadres were extrajudicially killed by surrendered insurgents acting in concert with sections of the state police, disproportionately affected women through the loss of male family members and the trauma of witnessing violence (Deka 2024: 130). Widows of those killed were often left without compensation, social recognition, or legal redress.

The militarisation of everyday life in the Bodoland Territorial Areas District similarly produced gendered consequences. Cyclical ethnic violence between Bodo and non-Bodo communities, particularly Bengali-speaking Muslims and Adivasis, has repeatedly displaced women and children, with the 2012 Bodo–Muslim violence alone displacing nearly half a million people (Saikia 2023: 207). Internally displaced women face acute insecurity in relief camps, with limited access to healthcare, sanitation, and protection from sexual violence.

### **Post-Conflict Lives: Reintegration, Silence and Resistance**

The signing of a Suspension of Operations agreement between the pro-talk faction of ULFA and the Government of India in 2011, followed by the Memorandum of Settlement of December 2023, formally inaugurated a post-conflict phase for a substantial portion of the organisation's cadre. The 2020 BTR Accord with the principal NDFB factions performed a similar function in Bodo politics. However, for women former combatants and their families, 'post-conflict' has not meant closure (Deka 2020: 60).



Reintegration packages designed by the state have largely ignored gender issues. Surrender-and-rehabilitation schemes treated women cadres as ‘wives of insurgents’ rather than as combatants in their own right, channelling them into stitching, weaving, and self-help groups while failing to provide meaningful economic opportunities or political recognition (Choudhury 2016: 112). Initiatives such as the Milijuli Atma Sahayak Gut in Nalbari district, formed by former ULFA women who pooled resources to acquire looms, exemplify women’s grassroots agency in the absence of substantive state support (Kalita Moral 2018: 38).

Social reintegration is equally problematic. Former female combatants frequently face stigma, with their political pasts construed as moral lapses rather than ideological commitments (Kalita 2014: 158). Many marry within the former cadre community and remain in rural areas, raising children whose understanding of their mothers’ revolutionary past is often ambivalent. Some have turned to literature, memoir, and poetry as alternative archives of their experience, producing diary accounts and verses that, as Deka argues, must be read as ‘alternative spaces of resistance’ to the mainstream conflict discourse (Deka 2020: 59).

### **Conclusion**

The history of women in Assam’s armed movements is one of agency exercised under conditions of severe constraint. To celebrate these women uncritically as feminist revolutionaries’ risks erasing the patriarchal structures that shaped their political lives. To reduce them to victims of insurgent recruitment or state violence is to deny them the dignity of choice. The task for scholarship and any politics of recognition is to hold both insights together. Theoretically, this requires a more granular vocabulary of agency that registers degrees of choice, layers of constraint, and the cumulative force of structural violence in shaping what women in conflict zones can and cannot do.

Practically, breaking the silence around women’s participation in ULFA and Bodo armed movements demands a reorientation of peace and rehabilitation policy in northeastern India. Reintegration packages must move beyond the assumption that former women cadres are simply ‘wives of insurgents’ in need of skill training, and must instead recognise them as political actors deserving of a meaningful voice in post-conflict reconstruction. The systematic inclusion of women’s testimonies in transitional justice mechanisms, the documentation of sexual violence by state and non-state actors, and the formal acknowledgement of women combatants in peace agreements remain pressing institutional tasks (Manchanda 2001: 12; Choudhury 2016: 145). The women who took up arms in Assam, the women who suffered the worst of counter-insurgency, and the women who continue to navigate the long aftermath of war all have stories that have been told too quietly, too partially, and too late. As post-conflict Assam

attempts to imagine its future, the voices of these women cannot remain a footnote; they must become a central thread in the historical and political narrative through which the region understands itself.

### Notes

1. The term 'ULFA' is used here to refer to the original organisation founded in 1979 and, where appropriate, to its successor factions, including the pro-talk faction and ULFA (I). Distinctions are made wherever necessary.
2. 'BTAD' refers to the Bodoland Territorial Areas District established in 2003 under the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution; 'BTR' (Bodoland Territorial Region) was constituted under the 2020 Accord.
3. Names of individual former combatants drawn from cited research are pseudonyms used by the original researchers to protect respondents' identities.

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## Evaluating the Economic Value of Culture through Cultural Infrastructure Development

Praveena K

### ABSTRACT

*Culture and economics are closely interconnected, as cultural values and practices have a significant impact on economic behaviour, resource allocation, and the patterns of social development. Cultural economics has emerged as an interdisciplinary field which studies the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural goods and services while analysing their contribution to economic growth and societal well-being. This article explores the relationship between culture and economics by examining the dimensions of cultural wealth, including tangible and intangible cultural assets, human creative capital, social capital, and institutional frameworks. It highlights the growing significance of cultural infrastructure such as museums, libraries, theatres, heritage sites, and digital cultural spaces in promoting urban competitiveness, innovation, employment generation, and social inclusion. The discussion also addresses major policy challenges including difficulties in measuring cultural value, fragmented governance structures, funding uncertainties, and the risks of cultural commercialization and homogenization. Further, the article analyses policy lead-ins such as public-private partnerships, decentralised governance, digital integration, and cultural clustering as strategies for strengthening cultural infrastructure. The study concludes that culture is both a source of economic value and social identity, and sustainable investment in cultural infrastructure is essential for fostering inclusive growth, preserving heritage, and enhancing societal resilience in the modern world.*

Keywords: Cultural economics, cultural infrastructure, cultural wealth, creative industries, sustainable development, cultural policy, economic growth.

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## **Introduction**

Culture represents the crucial environment in which human beings grow and evolve into social individuals. It is a dominant concept in the social sciences, encompassing psychology, sociology, political science, and economics. As a comprehensive term, culture includes every dimension of human life—our behaviour, philosophies, ethics, morals, manners, customs, and traditions. It echoes the religious, political, economic, and social activities that define human civilization and expresses all that humanity has learned, created, and transmitted across generations.

Culture and economics are deeply interconnected dimensions of human society that shape patterns of production, consumption, and social development. In recent decades, cultural economics has emerged as an important interdisciplinary field that studies how cultural goods and services contribute to economic growth while conserving social identity and heritage. Cultural infrastructure—including museums, libraries, theatres, heritage sites, galleries, and digital cultural spaces—has gained increasing relevance as a strategic resource for sustainable development, urban competitiveness, and social cohesion. This article examines the relationship between culture and economics, analyses the aspects of cultural wealth, highlights the significance of cultural infrastructure in modern society, and discusses the policy challenges and opportunities associated with strengthening cultural infrastructure for long-term economic and cultural sustainability.

## **Culture and Economics**

Culture, economics and society are always interconnected. Economics deals with the economic activities of society regarding production, consumption and distribution. It also relates to the act of society where scarce resources are distributed among endless means. Culture in turn affects how these economic behaviour takes place. Let us see how culture affects the economic behaviour in various ways:

1. Spending on food, fashion, entertainment, spending patterns and their lifestyle choices are influenced by culture
2. Cultural norms influence the attitude toward work, saving and investments

3. Innovation is always fostered by cultural openness and creativity
4. Working of markets, firms and governments are influenced by the various cultural traits such as trust and cooperation.
5. There are creative and cultural industries which are rooted in culture also contributes to the economy.

### **Cultural Economics**

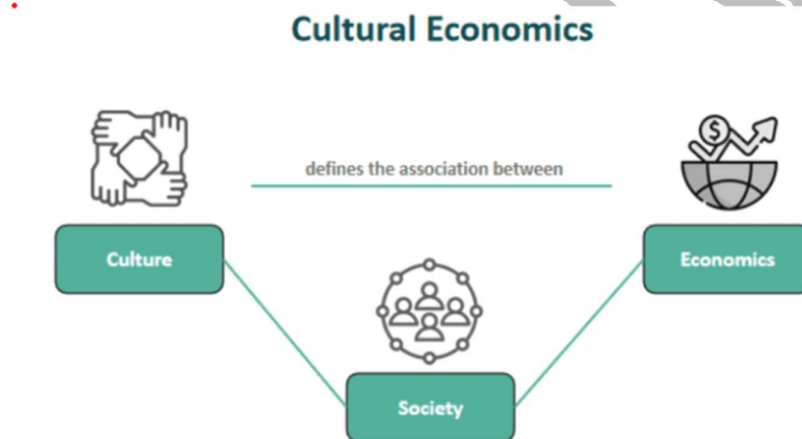
With a different view on viewing culture and arts of a regions, this new body of knowledge came in 1960s. It applies to the economic thinking in arts. Apart from the financial contribution arts makes it also focused on how the economic behaviour of human are affected and influenced. It is said that the books by John Kenneth Galbraith and Lionel Robbins paved the base on the subject. It was about the role of government in subsidising the cost of museums which was discussed.

According to Ruth Towse (2019,1), "Cultural economics is the application of economics to the production, distribution, and consumption of all goods and services that are widely considered to have cultural value." This perspective underscores the interdisciplinary nature of cultural economics, highlighting its focus on understanding how economic principles apply to cultural goods and services.

The wide scope of cultural economics uncovers its importance in the body of various knowledge. Firstly, it deals with cultural goods and services which includes production, distribution and consumption of cultural products such as music, literature, films, performing arts, museums and heritage visits (Throsby 2001,11-12). Secondly, it focuses on creative industries such as design, advertising, film, software and digital content (Towse 2019, 375-378). Thirdly it includes framing a cultural policy and its evaluation to balance commercial viability and cultural preservation (Thosby 2001,148-150). Fourthly economic valuation of culture describing methods to measure both market and non-market value of cultural goods (Baumol and Bowen1966,164-170). Fifthly, it focuses on sustainability and the balance between economic gain and cultural preservation. Here it studies the economic impact of heritage, festivals and cultural tourism (Throsby 2010,143-149). Lastly, it examines how

culture contributes to social cohesion, identity and human well-being, influencing education, creativity and innovation (UNESCO 2009, 8-12)

**Fig:1 Cultural Economics**



Source: <https://www.wallstreetmojo.com/cultural-economics/>

### **Dimensions of Cultural wealth**

Cultural wealth, as defined by UNESCO, represents the shared heritage, creativity and expressions that define a society and support its sustainable development (UNESCO 2009, 5-8). Thus, it goes beyond the material prosperity encompassing traditions, creativity, and collective identity. It can be classified as tangible and intangible. Tangible cultural wealth refers to the physical cultural assets such as monuments, heritage buildings, museums, artworks, crafts and traditional architecture. They generate both cultural value and

economic value (Throsby 2010, 15-18). Intangible cultural asset refers to the oral traditions, performing assets, festivals, rituals, languages, folklore and traditional knowledge systems. In economic point of view, they support industries like entertainment, media and cultural tourism (UNESCO 2003, 2-5).

There are other dimensions of cultural wealth as understood as follows:

- **Human Creative capital:** These are the skills, knowledge and creative abilities of individuals engaged in cultural and artistic production. The main players of the creative economy are artists, designers, writers, and performers (Towse 2019, 487-490).
- **Social and symbolic capital:** The social trust, shared values and symbolic meaning that enhances social networks and civic participation which in turn support economic development are mentioned here (Bourdieu 1986, 248-249).
- **Economic and Institutional Dimension:** This includes markets, cultural industries, and policies that support cultural production and consumption — from funding institutions and copyright protection to media and creative enterprises. These frameworks translate cultural wealth into measurable economic outcomes (UNCTAD 2018, 9-12).

#### Cultural Infrastructure – Significance in Modern Society

The significance of cultural infrastructure is becoming increasingly acknowledged in this era of rapid urbanization, globalization, and technological growth. Governments regularly give priority to physical infrastructure like roads, bridges, and digital networks. Cultural infrastructure, at its most basic, is the support system for a community's cultural life (Sustainability Directory 2025). These include museums, libraries, theatres, galleries, heritage sites, cultural centers, and public spaces that facilitate cultural participation and engagement (Sindhu and Reshmi 2025, 73-75). These places support social inclusion, endorse innovation, protect cultural heritage, and greatly advance economic growth. Investing in cultural infrastructure is not just advantageous but necessary in the modern world. This infrastructure has evolved from its traditional role of preserving heritage to an important contributor to economic development, urban competitiveness, social inclusion and sustainable growth (Throsby 2010, 83-90).



Cultural infrastructure has the ability to convert culture into an economic resource. These spaces paved the foundation for creative and cultural industries, aiding artistic production, cultural production and heritage-based tourism. The result is that investment in this infrastructure generates economic benefits while simultaneously preserving cultural identity (Dasgupta and Clini 2025, 341–343, 345). Hence, it should be regarded as a strategic asset which contributes to both cultural vitality and economic development.

In the context of present urban development cultural infrastructure acts an important factor in enhancing city competitiveness. According to the PwC-CII report, global cities such as Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Sydney have successfully integrated cultural assets into their development strategies to strengthen economic growth and urban attractiveness (PwC and CII 2024, 18-22). The assets such as museums, cultural districts, public art projects, and creative centers, thus facilitates city branding which directly contributes to economic productivity as it not only improves the quality of urban life but also attract tourists (PwC and CII 2024, 23-25).

Additionally, cultural infrastructure creates jobs and encourages entrepreneurship in the creative and cultural industries. A variety of professions, including artists, performers, designers, curators, event managers, and tourism professionals, are supported by the availability of performance venues, exhibition spaces, heritage centers, and cultural institutions. Approximately 6.2% of jobs worldwide are in the cultural and creative industries, demonstrating the increasing economic significance of culture in modern cultures. Thus, both direct and indirect employment opportunities are created by the growth of cultural infrastructure.

The economic potential of cultural infrastructure has enlarged due to the emergence of digital technology. New approaches for cultural production and consumption have been made possible by virtual museums, digital archives, online performances, and streaming platforms. However, because cultural experiences frequently rely on spatial interaction and community engagement, physical cultural infrastructure continues to be essential. Cultural infrastructure will continue to be an essential component of future cities, supporting technological development while preserving cultural life and economic significance (Sindhu

and Reshmi 2025, 78-81). Therefore, new avenues for cultural engagement and economic progress may be opened up by the merging of digital and physical cultural infrastructure.

Culture helps in moulding the shape of economic life of a nation. Cultural activities enrich social life and at the same time creates employment, stimulate tourism. Promote innovation and contribute to regional development. Thus, from the cultural point of view, culture is both a form of capital and source of value. It is assumed that cultural assets hold dual value- *economic value*, which can be measured in monetary terms, and *cultural value*, which reflects identity, meaning, and social cohesion (Throsby 2001, 45-52).

Consequently, culture became the driver of income and investment in many economies. Identifying the contribution of culture to the sustainable development through various policies and funding, government supports cultural industries, preserve heritage, and promote creative entrepreneurship. Thus, culture is not merely a social or symbolic phenomenon; it is an essential economic resource that enhances innovation, employment, and overall societal well-being.

### **Policy Challenges**

There are a number of difficulties while drafting policies because of the facts. In the Indian context, although the country possesses rich cultural capital, policy interventions have largely focused on the preservation and promotion of heritage rather than the creation of new cultural assets and spaces. The PwC-CII report observes that there is no comprehensive policy addressing the entire cultural ecosystem, including the development of museums, libraries, galleries, cultural centres, and supporting infrastructure (PwC and CII 2024, 26).

The measurement of cultural value is a significant problem in the field of cultural economics. The benefits of investments in cultural assets, like art, legacy, or customs, cannot always be quantified in monetary terms, unlike tangible items. But the benefits are accumulated gradually through tourism, local business activity, city branding, community identity, and social well-being. one of the biggest obstacles to advocating for cultural infrastructure is the perception that its returns are less visible and harder to measure than those of other forms of infrastructure (Santec 2025, 12-15).

Another challenge is posed by Government fragmentation. There is involvement of multiple stakeholders such as governments, developers, cultural institutions, artists, private investors and local communities for cultural infrastructure. This makes the coordination difficult as there are differences in interest, power and policy priorities (Gilmore and Burnill-Maier 2025, 7-10). This regulatory environment will act as a hindrance to the development of cultural infrastructure. Such complexity intensifies administrative burdens and operational costs for cultural organizations and event promoters, limiting the growth potential of the sector (EVENTFAQS Media 2025, 34-36). Additionally, it discourages private investment and innovation.

The relationship between GDP and cultural expenditure is complex and influenced by local policies, governance structures, historical factors, and community priorities rather than economic indicators alone. So, many regions struggle to secure stable financial support for cultural projects. Consequently, funding uncertainty emerges as a crucial challenge (Preda et al. 2025, 11–12).

The danger of cultural uniformity and commercialization is another issue. There is a risk that genuine regional customs and variety might disappear and be replaced by uniform worldwide trends if cultural activities are only viewed as commercial goods.

### **Policy Lead-ins**

Through innovative policy approaches strengthening of cultural infrastructure can be realized. First and foremost, approach is that of integrating culture into broader urban development strategies. For instance, the cultural infrastructure policy in Sydney crafted dedicated spaces for creative professionals which led to the establishment of creative hubs and it illustrates how targeted planning can support cultural production and participation (PwC and CII 2024, 26).

Project sustainability can be enhanced via the collaborative measures between governments, businesses, and cultural organizations as they can mobilize resources, share risks. So Public Private partnerships (PPPs) can offer a favourable space for the development of cultural infrastructure. Singapore Sports Hub and Dubai's Al Quoz Creative Zone demonstrate

how coordinated public and private investment can transform cultural spaces into vibrant economic and cultural assets (EVENTFAQS Media 2025, 32-33).

The development of cultural districts and creative clusters presents another policy lead-in. Clustering of cultural institutions within specific districts can generate positive spillover effects, including tourism growth, entrepreneurship, innovation, and local economic development (Preda et al. 2025, 18–19). Collaboration among artist, creative enterprises, educational institutions, and local communities are facilitated in these cultural districts which will strengthen the broader cultural ecosystem.

In the technology driven era digital technologies can enable wider public participation through which the cultural institutions are made it to the new audience, particularly younger generations and geographically distant communities. Smart technologies can improve access to museums, theatres, archives, and cultural activities while enhancing heritage preservation and cultural education (Preda et al. 2025, 16–18).

An inclusive cultural development can be materialised by decentralised governance model because local government are often better equipped to understand community priorities and to develop infrastructure projects that are culturally appropriate. The evidence from France and Romania indicates that decentralization can increase accessibility, local participation and make cultural policies more responsive to regional needs (Preda et al. 2025, 5, 11).

To address these issues, there is a growing need for strong cultural education, adequate funding, and sustainable management. Promoting public awareness and training cultural professionals can confirm the preservation and responsible use of cultural assets.

Effective policy directions should therefore balance preservation with innovation—protecting traditional and heritage values while supporting creativity, new technologies, and market potential in the cultural sector.

## **Conclusion**

Culture is both a moral and an economic asset that enriches society through shared values, creativity, identity, and social cohesion while simultaneously contributing to employment generation, innovation, entrepreneurship, and income creation. Identifying cultural wealth as an essential component of economic development aids societies to pursue inclusive and sustainable progress, where growth is measured not only in financial terms but also through social well-being and cultural vitality. Cultural infrastructure, therefore, must be viewed as a strategic investment that supports both material prosperity and human dignity.

To discourse existing challenges, there is a growing need for stronger cultural education, adequate funding mechanisms, and sustainable management practices. Fostering public awareness and professional training in cultural administration can guarantee the preservation, responsible use, and effective transmission of cultural assets across generations. Effective policy directions should therefore balance preservation with innovation—protecting traditional and heritage values while supporting creativity, new technologies, and market potential in the cultural sector.

Integrating cultural values into economic policy and development planning confirms that progress remains inclusive, honours cultural diversity, inspires creative expression, and strengthens community bonds. This study confirms the need for greater academic and policy attention to the field of cultural economics, particularly in understanding how cultural infrastructure can be systematically evaluated and effectively utilized within national development strategies. The scope for future research should include developing practical frameworks for quantifying cultural wealth and assessing its long-term economic contribution. By valuing culture not merely as inherited heritage but as a living and dynamic economic force, societies can build more balanced, humane, and resilient economies capable of sustaining both economic advancement and cultural continuity.

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