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The State of Fiscal Autonomy in India: A Sub-National Level Analysis

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The National Democratic Alliance government in India initiated structural adjustment in the transfer system to ensure cooperative federalism after assuming power for the second term at the Centre. Bringing the issue of cooperative federalism to the forefront of economic discourse may be viewed as a well-thought strategy to prepare the ground to gather the support of states for a future political move. Co-operative federalism protects the autonomy of sub-national (state) governments and enables them to perform their functions effectively. The status of fiscal autonomy of states is re-examined through empirical analysis of resources and responsibilities shared between centre and states and the impact of federal transfers on state's expenditures and theoretical analysis. Evident shows synchronising fiscal autonomy of the state due to political interference in the evolution, structure and functions of mediating institutions of federal transfer. Shrinking state autonomy lurches the federal structure towards competitive federalism which in turn may lead to a conflicting situation. An introduction of a single, permanent, independent, impartial and semi-judicial body to mediate transfer may resolve the issue.

Keywords: Fiscal Autonomy, Federal Transfers, Union Finance Commission, Cooperative Federalism.

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The State of Fiscal Autonomy in India: A Sub-national Level Analysis

Introduction

One of the contemporary debates in fiscal federalism literature is fiscal autonomy at the sub-national (state) level. State autonomy is often influenced by the degree of control exercised by the central government on taxation and expenditure responsibilities assigned to the state across the countries of the globe (Groenendijk 2011). A progressive revenue transfer system from centre to state based on appropriate principles ensures autonomy to the state. The issue of state autonomy in India is recently in academic discourse deliberated from two different perspectives: (i) the changing structure (Thimmaiah, 2002) and functioning of mediating institutions of resource transfers (Srivastava, 2010: 64-70; Dholakia, A., 2015; Patnaik, 2015; Mahamallik and Sahu, 2015), and (ii) the relationship between the levels of government (Sarma, 1997; Chakraborty, 1998; Gurumurthi, 1998) even though both are interrelated. Mediation is necessary to maintain a coherent and cooperative relationship between the levels of government. The constitutional mandate of mediating institutions ensures fair mediating responsibility provided the mediating institution is a single, impartial, independent and semi-judicial permanent body. Historically, the Union Finance Commission (UFC), Planning Commission (PC) and Central Ministries (CM) have been serving the purpose of mediation in India. Mediating institutional arrangement was criticised on the ground of declining state autonomy (Patnaik, 2015: 10-12, Mahamallik and Sahu, 2015). Realising the importance of the issue, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the Centre attempts to reinforce the concept of cooperative federalism by introducing the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog in place of PC, giving an avenue to the UFC to consider (look into) plan revenue account, non-plan revenue account and Goods and Service Tax (GST).[1] The act of (i) assignment of fund disbursement power to CM, which was earlier under PC, (ii) increased tax devolution with implicit conditions as suggested by 14th and 15th UFC, and (iii) acts as per the directives listed in the terms of reference of 15th UFC may act against the ethos of the co-operative federalism (Reddy, 2018; Issac et al., 2019). In such a dichotomous situation, the issue of cooperative federalism, of course, emerges as a major debatable issue before the academia and policymakers. With this background, this study attempts to examine the issue of 'state fiscal autonomy' in India.

The available literature on state's fiscal autonomy examined vertical imbalance, the impact of Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act (FRBMA) on fiscal space of states (Issac et al., 2019) and implications of the

terms of reference of 15th UFC (Reddy, 2018; Issac et al., 2019), the role of cooperative federalism in states governed by political party/ies other than the ruling party/collation in centre and the structure of GST Council (Prasanna, 2016) to prove or disprove declining fiscal autonomy of states in India. The present study however, examines the state's fiscal autonomy through (i) analysis of the evolution, structure and functions of the mediating institutions, and (ii) empirical examination of resources and responsibilities shared between centre and states and centre, and the impact of federal transfers on expenditure of states. Declining state's fiscal autonomy due to political affiliation in the evolution, structure and function of mediating institutions of transfer is observed. Cooperative federalism can be strengthened with a permanent, impartial, independent, and semi-judicial mediating body of transfer.

The Context

The seventh schedule of the Indian constitution allocates power between the centre and the State. Fiscal autonomy is important for the smooth functioning of the central and state government and the maintenance of cooperation between the above political institutions. The autonomy of the state is questioned with any degree of encroachment (implicitly or explicitly) of the power of states by the centre. The intrusion of the centre into the fiscal affairs of states discourages states from maintaining cooperative federalism.

To foster cooperative federalism and protect the fiscal autonomy of the state, the mediating task of federal transfers is constitutionally assigned to the UFC. However, besides the UFC, the PC and CM were also entrusted with this task as stated earlier. The element of 'central supremacy' is inbuilt in their structure. Further, the unlawful incorporation of these channels of federal transfer is not only unfair but also considered a deliberate act toward central supremacy. In other words, biased-ness is structurally built in the formation and functioning of channels of fiscal transfer. The President is empowered by the Indian Constitution to constitute the UFC every five years or earlier if necessary, under Article 280. Commissions are set up by the President on the aid and advice of the council of ministers headed by the Prime Minister under Article 74(1). Often it was observed that the chairman and members of Commissions had political affiliations (Thimmaiah, 2002). The PC and CM were brought into the system by a central direction under Article 282 meant for public assistance during an emergency. Loopholes in the methods of devolution prescribed by members of the channels resulted in fiscal imbalances. The structure and functioning of these channels (UFC,

PC and CM) were criticised on the ground of increasing central control over states (Srivastava, 2010; Dholakia, A. 2015). The political affiliation of these channels is recognised as one of the important reasons ('nature of transfers', the methodology used for horizontal distribution and 'the capabilities of the members of the channels') behind central biasedness (Singh and Vasistha, 2004; Khemani, 2007) due to its influence on the cited reasons.

A series of measures were undertaken by mediating institutions to protect the autonomy of states.[2] In the first three decades after independence, in principle, states followed the central directives to carry out their economic activities without any hesitation because of the presence of the same political party in power both at the centre and in states. The demand for state autonomy sparked with the withering of a single political party dominance regime at different levels of government. With the initiation of a coalition government regime, the voice of state autonomy started echoing (Sahu and Mahamallik, 2019). The gradual rise in the strength of coalition politics expedites the demand for state autonomy. Bringing the issue of cooperative federalism to the forefront of economic discourse, the NDA government during its 2nd term viewed it as a well-thought political move to prepare the ground to gather support of states for future political action.

Accordingly, the NDA government restructured the framework of the transfer system to promote the state's autonomy. Two important steps in this direction were: (i) abolition of the PC (Sinha and Ganguli, 2019) and transfer of its fund disbursement power to CM (Patnaik, 2015) and (ii) modification in the structure of the UFC (Mahamallik and Sahu 2023). The outcome of both steps resulted in the squeezing of the state's autonomy as it was before. With the transfer of PC's fund disbursement power to CM, the size of CM's conditional grants increased. Even though the abolition of the PC, as desired, to some extent restricted the political affiliation of the channels (BM, 1995), the shift of fund disbursement power from the PC to the CM reiterated the apprehension of increasing political affiliation. The reform carried out in the structure of the UFC helped to increase the share of general-purpose transfer (GPT/shared tax).[3] However, the characteristic of GPT was conditional in disguise. The states were asked to use the increased shared taxes to meet the revenue expenditure of 'delinked schemes' and also '24 centrally sponsored schemes' (GoI, 2015-16; Reddy, 2015). The structural change since the 13th UFC (through the incorporation of experts as members) is not free from association and affiliation of members with ruling political parties at the centre. The continuing political affiliation of channels negates the idea of state autonomy.

Theoretical Framework

Under cooperative federalism, the government works in a complex framework. Theoretically, the framework ensures not only structural integrity but also autonomy of different levels of government.[4] Any deviation from mutual respect, trust and autonomy by levels of government weaken the idea of cooperative federalism (Sharma, 2015). 'Functional Theory', which advocates co-existence, joint functioning and mutual respect for the autonomy of levels of government to achieve the larger goal,[5] is the widely accepted theory in fiscal federalism literature. In the absence of mutual respect and autonomy, the provision of public services by state would be unnecessary, economically inefficient and inequity (Roderick 1998). This study develops an argument in line with 'Functional Theory' and attempts to re-establish the importance of cooperative federalism. The autonomy of state government, if protected, strengthens the delivery of public goods in accordance with the preference of the people, in the framework of decentralisation theorem. The decentralisation theorem results in fiscal imbalances. Reduction in imbalances through federal transfers with minimum restrictions on the fiscal decision of the state may enhance the autonomy.

Theoretical Examination

Resources and responsibilities distributed across levels of government as per the decentralisation theorem result in fiscal imbalances in India. In order to reduce the imbalances and protect the autonomy of the state, the provision of revenue transfer from centre to state[6] is being made. Even though the concept of cooperative federalism and protection of state autonomy is built in the 7th Schedule and Article 280 of the Constitution,[7] a few adorable steps were undertaken in the transfer system to foster cooperative federalism by the NDA government as stated earlier.

Examination of evolution, structure and functions of channels of federal transfer is crucial as devolution is often influenced by channels, which in turn, affects state autonomy. Literature available on the evolution, structure (Thimmaiah, 2002) and functions (Srivastava and Aggarwal, 1994; Dholakia, 2015) of channels raised concerns regarding declining state autonomy.

Thimmaiah (2002) observed manipulation in the structure of UFCs in the form of inappropriate appointments and arbitrary slashing of the tenure of authorities. He further argued that structural manipulation disturbs the legitimacy of federal transfer and violates the principle of state autonomy.

Functions of channels were examined in the literature in terms of equity and efficiency point of view of transfers. However, in addition to the manipulation of qualification, as argued by Thimmaiah (2002), and the equity and efficiency aspect of transfers, the federal transfer is also influenced by the political affiliation and residential origin of the chairperson and member of UFCs. The degree of state autonomy is examined in this paper using a set of variables as used in the literature along with 'the impact of political affiliation'. Theoretical observation shows that political affiliation in the structure and functioning of channels at different points in time is found to be the root cause of demeaning and shrinking state autonomy (Singh and Vasistha, 2004).

Evolution

The influence of the Central cabinet on presidential decisions regarding the constitution of UFCs and assignment of the federal transfer task to PC and CM is discussed earlier. Such type of interference of the Central Government creates every possibility to restrict the autonomy of the state.

Structure

While the structure of the UFC is inscribed in the Indian constitution, the qualification of the chairperson and members of the UFC is prescribed in the Finance Commission Miscellaneous Act (FCMA) 1951. The loosely drafted Act favoured the party in power at the centre to appoint personals of its choice by misinterpreting the guideline prescribed for the qualification.[8] As a result, chairpersons and members are often among those who are directly or indirectly affiliated with the party in power. Over a period, UFCs have been a hub of retired bureaucrats rather than experts. Even though this trend is rectified to some extent from the 13th UFC, the successive commissions are not free from the criticism of political affiliation.[9] The affiliation of experts to the ruling political party restricts and questions the autonomy of the UFCs (Mahamallik and Sahu, 2023). When the time limit to implement the recommendations of the UFC is constitutionally fixed, the Constitution and FCMA 1951 are silent about the tenure of the Chairperson and members of the UFC. In addition to it, there is evidence of members being displaced, leaving for better assignments, and resigning even in between the limited tenure. Even if the replacement of members is made in case of vacancy, it is difficult for new members to understand the fiscal situation in a short period. Evidence shows that on average the UFC

functions for one and half years, a short tenure, that creates uncertainties in the examination of the fiscal position of the centre and states and the determination of appropriate methods for devolution. The short affiliation of the chairperson and members with the UFC created a space for the government to decide in its favour. The faulty prescription of qualifications and political interference in the appointment of chairperson and members, and short tenure of UFC distorts the very fundamental principle of fiscal devolution.

Further, the political affiliation of the chairperson and members as recommended by central cabinets has strong possibilities to disturb the ethics of federal transfer and destabilise the state autonomy. It is also silly to anticipate an impartial treatment in the process of fiscal transfer from CMs. The composition of channels of federal transfer is often manipulated by the party in power to make the decision in its favour, which deteriorates the degree of state autonomy.

Function

The parties in power at the centre control the functioning by manipulating the compositions of channels of federal transfer. The claim of the increasing importance of state autonomy is not reflected in the function of channels. However, the political and economic needs of the day picture the concept of cooperative federalism in a titanic manner. The increasing importance of cooperative federalism may be treated more as a political negotiation rather than an economic compulsion. The creation of new narratives of cooperative federalism is rather a political gimmick (Mahamallik and Sahu, 2023).

The determination of the shares of the centre and states in sharable central taxes by the UFC has been discretionary. Literature offered a conflicting set of arguments on the determination of the share. The determination of the state's share is to some extent, on the basis of value judgment (Rangarajan, 2005), trial and error (Sarma, 1997) and gamble of five persons or majority members of the UFC (Mukhopadhyay, 2003). This creates uncertainty in the share of 'shared taxes' of the state. A proper constitutional guideline relating to the determination of the share may reduce the degree of uncertainty. The share of the state government in shared taxes is increased to rectify the fiscal health over successive Commissions. A sharp increase noticed in the share since the 14th UFC is being publicised as the rising degree of state autonomy. Even though shared taxes are unconditional in nature, the increase in the state share in shared

taxes since the 14th UFC is conditional. Further, not only the share is linked to some condition, but also there is an increase in the proportion of conditional grants in the total transfer. The increase in the proportion of conditional grants restricts the degree of state autonomy. The conditional transfer (share tax and grant) is guided by the political affiliation of the chairperson and members of UFC. The increasing proportion of conditional transfer increases the inequality across states in central transfer, which has an iniquitous effect on state autonomy.

Criteria with their weights used for horizontal devolution of central shared taxes are influenced by the political interest of party/ies in power at the centre. The share of the state in shared taxes is distributed across states on the basis of a political equation. States ruled by the same political party at the centre or in coalition with the centre receive a comparatively greater share than states ruled by a political party or coalition government different from the centre (Singh and Vasistha, 2004). The influence of political interest gives rise to frequent changes in the methods and their weights used for the horizontal distribution of shared taxes, which in turn leads to uncertainty in the share of states. Further, the selection of criteria and their weight is a gamble in the decision of members (Mukhopadhyay, 2003). Therefore, the methods and weights are not impartial. It is observed that methods and weights are not in a position to fulfil the objectives for which these are meant and are still in a stage of trial and error (Mahamallik and Sahu, 2015). Both uncertainty and undue share, due to frequent changes and the use of inappropriate methods along with their weights, demean the strength of state autonomy.

The use of the Gap Filling Approach (GFA) by the UFC in the distribution of grants under Article 275 incentivises the well-off state to create large revenue gaps through wasteful expenditure and fiscal laxity (Rao and Chelliah, 1996). Because of the small size of the budget, poorer states could not avail the benefit of the GFA. Even though the grant under GFA is criticised on the grounds of favouring the rich states, the same method of distribution continues over successive commissions, which has an adverse impact on state autonomy. Further, the difference observed in the estimation of the revenue gap by the UFC and states' government (Bhaskar, 2015) gives rise to a conflicting situation in providing due share to the state government.

The PC initially distributed state plan grants on a schematic basis, which are discretionary in nature. Subsequently, the Gadgil Formula (GF), approved by the National Development Council was introduced to

distribute a part of the state plan grant called 'normal central assistance grant' across states since the 4th Five Years Plan, which relatively promoted state autonomy (Rao and Sen, 1996). However, the criteria based on GF are biased towards populous and rich states.[10] Although initially, the adoption of the formula (GF) promoted the autonomy of populous states,[11] to some extent, in the later period autonomy started shrinking with the decline in the size of normal central assistance. Further, the designs of GF also adversely affect the autonomy of the state.[12] Even though the interference in state autonomy by the PC is discontinued with its abolition, the degree of state autonomy is continuously reduced with the shift of responsibility from PC to CM.

The state autonomy further deteriorated with the distribution of specific purpose grants 'on a matching basis and at a uniform rate' across states by CM. The distribution of specific purpose grants is iniquitous. The conditional concept of 'matching basis' debars the poorer state to avail its proportionate share. The state must arrange a fixed percentage of the total expenditure of the schemes to avail of the grant. Often poorer states are not able to avail the full amount of grant, as they are unable to arrange the required proportion of expenditure. Arrangement of the proportion to avail of the fully sanctioned grant diverts the priority of the state. The uniform rate of distribution even though uniform in terms of capacity to arrange, it is proportionally unequal in terms of per capita income. Further, the CM frequently encroaches upon the functioning area of states by making provisions to spend specific purpose grants.[13] States are forced by the CM to implement certain central schemes. This enforcement hampers the performance of the state's activities.

Empirical Analysis

A state's fiscal autonomy is of utmost importance to ensure cooperative federalism as stated earlier. This study generally explores the status of the state's fiscal autonomy by examining the impact of federal transfers on expenditure responsibility and the deficiency in capacity to meet the responsibility of the state. The impact is analysed using the influence of constitutional and non-constitutional transfer on revenue expenditure, capital expenditure and total expenditure of the state from 2000-01 to 2021-22 using Prais-Winsten Feasible Generalised Least Square regression. The deficiency in capacity is examined using (i) revenue and expenditure share of state in the combined revenue and expenditures of Centre and state; (ii) proportion of grants and central shared tax in total revenue of the state;

(iii) capacity to meet revenue expenditures and total expenditures of state, and (iv) specific and general purpose transfers from the centre to state across different UFCs (8th to 15th UFC). The summary statistics of the above analysis are provided in Table 1. Declining state's fiscal autonomy is observed over successive Commissions.

As stated earlier, state fiscal autonomy depends on the control exercised by the central government through federal transfers. The impact of constitutional (UFC), non-constitutional (PC and CM) transfers and own revenue of the state on revenue expenditure, capital expenditure and total expenditures of the state is analysed using a linear regression model. Expenditures are a function of constitutional and non-constitutional transfers and own revenue. The presence of auto-correlation was observed from the Durbin-Watson test.[14] As a remedial measure, Prais-Winsten Feasible Generalised Least Square (PWGFLS) regression[15] was used to examine the impact of revenues on expenditures. PWGFLS is one of the efficient methods available for the rectification of auto-correlation in the case of a small sample (Park and Bridger, 1985). The impact of constitutional and non-constitutional body transfers and own revenue of the state on revenue expenditures, capital expenditures and total expenditure were examined separately with the help of three regression equations. The results showed a significant influence of both constitutional and non-constitutional body transfers on the expenditures of the state. With every one rupee increase in the devolution of constitutional transfer, the state has to bear a burden of 1.61, 0.66 and 2.25 rupees in the revenue expenditure, capital expenditure and total expenditure respectively. Even if the constitutional transfer is more or less defined as unconditional, an element of conditionality is built into the transfer as discussed earlier. Similarly, for every one rupee increase in the devolution of non-constitutional transfer, the state has to incur an expenditure of 2.37, 0.92 and 3.09 rupees in the revenue expenditure, capital expenditure and total expenditure respectively. This indicates that the degree of influence of non-constitutional transfers is relatively greater than that of the constitutional transfer in all three equations. Further, out of the three dependent variables (expenditures), revenue and total expenditures are influenced to a greater extent than capital expenditure by both constitutional and non-constitutional transfer (Refer to Table 2). Every unit increase in revenue of the state through transfer may not be interpreted as a rise in fiscal strength of the state but rather may be interpreted as a compulsion to spend to avail of the transfer.

Table 1
Summary Statistics

Name of the Variable	Observations (In Years)	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Revenue Expenditure	22	1337204	1026806	287825	3572319
Capital Expenditure	22	357670	278921.3	52010	1050773
Total Expenditure	22	1694874	1303703	339835	4623092
Constitutional Body Transfers	22	410013.7	348216.3	63540	1123652
Non-Constitutional Body Transfers	22	151241.7	117892.2	24480	449480.8
Own Revenue	22	730946.5	524313.3	144486	1881407

Sources: Reserve Bank of India

Table 2
Impact of Federal Transfers on Expenditures of all States (in Elasticity)

Variable	Revenue Expenditure	Capital Expenditure	Total Expenditure
Constitutional Body Transfers	1.614887* (0.2592878)	0.6663745* (0.1188946)	2.256857* (0.2610156)
Non-Constitutional Body Transfers	2.376045* (0.4081675)	0.9213046* (0.206473)	3.099681* (0.3982511)
Own Revenue	0.3565184** (0.2009594)	-0.1122324 (0.0959242)	0.3108052 (0.1993931)
Constant	54754.68	27256.41	74883.13
Rho	0.3527691	0.0492882	0.4557171
	N=22 R^2=0.9933 d=1.345459 (original) d=1.645393 (transformed)	N=22 R^2=0.9887 d=1.639757 (original) d=1.634517 (transformed)	N=22 R^2=0.9945 d=1.146858 (original) d= 1.6711441 (transformed)

Note: Prais-Winsten AR(1) Regression is used to examine the impact of transfers on expenditures of all States, N = Number of Observations, d = Durbin Watson Value, value in the parentheses are standard errors, *indicates significant at 1 per cent level and **indicates significant at 10 per cent level.
Source: Same as Table 1.

The state has higher expenditure responsibilities with a lower share of revenue as compared to the union government of India. Over time, the responsibility shares of the state registered an upward trend, and the resource share registered a downward trend (Refer to Tables 3 and 4). On average (between the 8th to 15th UFC period) when the resource share of the state is 33.57 per cent, revenue expenditure and total expenditure responsibilities shares are 60 per cent and 62 per cent respectively. The revenue expenditures and total expenditures of the state per unit (rupee) of its revenue are 1.78 and 2.26 units respectively, indicating a deficiency of revenue to meet revenue expenditures (0.78 units) and total expenditures

(1.26 units). Although the state receives 0.38 and 0.30 units of total federal transfers against each unit of revenue expenditure and total expenditures respectively, a deficiency of 0.40 units in revenue expenditure and 0.96 units in total expenditures need to be arranged by states (see Table 4). With the increase in the revenue share of states (from 32 per cent to 36 per cent), revenue expenditures and total expenditure shares have increased (from 57 per cent to 64 per cent and 61 per cent to 66 per cent respectively) between the 8th and 15th UFC (Refer to Table 3). Similarly, revenue expenditures and total expenditures per unit of revenue increased from 1.69 to 1.88 units and from 2.29 to 2.39 units respectively during the same period. It is observed that when the total federal transfers per unit of revenue expenditures remains more or less the same (0.4 unit), per unit of total expenditures registered a marginal (0.29 to 0.32 units) during this period (refer to Table 4). This leads to revenue deficiency to meet revenue expenditures and total expenditures. Uncertainty in federal transfers due to lack of constitutional fixity in its proportion and methodologies used may further widen the deficiency in resources of the state.

Table 3
Finances of all States and Union Territories of India (in per cent)

UFC	% in Total of Centre and State			% of Total Revenue of State		
	ORS	REXS	TEXS	Grant	ST	Total
8th	32.29	57.31		18.50	21.65	40.15
9th-1	32.10	55.38		15.04	23.17	38.21
9th-2	33.47	60.07	60.71	18.83	21.39	40.22
10th	33.91	59.32	61.15	14.71	22.75	37.46
1th	33.98	61.04	63.11	16.31	21.35	37.66
12th	32.76	58.40	60.64	18.28	22.69	40.96
13th	34.69	58.22	59.64	17.07	22.90	39.97
14th	33.62	66.92	67.90	18.60	26.81	45.40
15th	36.18	63.91	65.68	22.49	17.73	40.23
Average	33.57	60.14	62.29	17.52	22.64	40.16

Note: ORS = Own Revenue of State, REXS =Revenue Expenditure of State, TEXS = Total Expenditure of State and ST = Shared Taxes
Source: Same as Table 1.

Table 4
Resources and Responsibility States and Union Territories of India
(in per unit)

UFC	Per unit (in Rs) of Revenue		Total Federal Transfers to State	
	REXS	TEXS	PREX	PTEX
8th	1.69	2.29	0.40	0.29
9th-1	1.72	2.20	0.36	0.28
9th-2	1.77	2.22	0.38	0.30
10th	1.86	2.24	0.32	0.27
11th	1.93	2.45	0.31	0.25
12th	1.67	2.15	0.42	0.32
13th	1.67	2.07	0.40	0.32
14th	1.87	2.38	0.45	0.35
15th	1.88	2.38	0.40	0.32
Average	1.78	2.26	0.38	0.30

Note: PREXS = Per unit of Revenue Expenditure of State, PTEXS = Per unit of Total Expenditure of State and the other acronyms are the same as Table 3.
Source: Same as Table 1.

GPT is indispensable to maintaining state autonomy since it does not impose any condition on its utilisation and allows the state to enjoy its autonomy. As discussed earlier, there are contradictory views on increasing state autonomy during the 14th UFC. Literature argued for an increase in state autonomy as a result of the increase in the 'proportion of central shared taxes in gross central taxes'. However, multiple views are floating against this argument. State autonomy can not be ensured with, (i) implicit conditionality in the utilisation of central shared taxes, and (ii) shifting of the responsibility from the PC to the CM[16] (Amarnath and Singh, 2019). The examination of the 'proportion of GPT and specific purpose transfer (SPT)' of 14 major states from the 11th to 15th UFC period showed an increasing proportion of SPT over successive Commissions, implying a narrowing down of the degree of state autonomy (Refer to Figure 1).

Although the absolute amount of both total transfer (TT) (from Rs. 530090 crores in 11th UFC to Rs. 5179201 Crores in 14th UFC) and SPT (from Rs. 115925 crores in 11th UFC to Rs. 1633760 Crores in 14th UFC) has increased over the time period, the rate of increase of SPT is higher than that of the TT. The proportion of total SPT has increased from 28.24 per cent during the 11th UFC to 42.14 per cent during the 15th UFC period. Although the GPT of the UFC has increased by 5 per cent between the 11th and 14th UFC periods, the CMSPT has registered an increase of 18.42 per cent during the same period. As stated earlier SPT is conditional in nature, the higher rate of increase in the SPT adversely affects the degree of state autonomy (Sen and Trebesch, 2004).

Figure 1
Trend of Federal Transfer in India
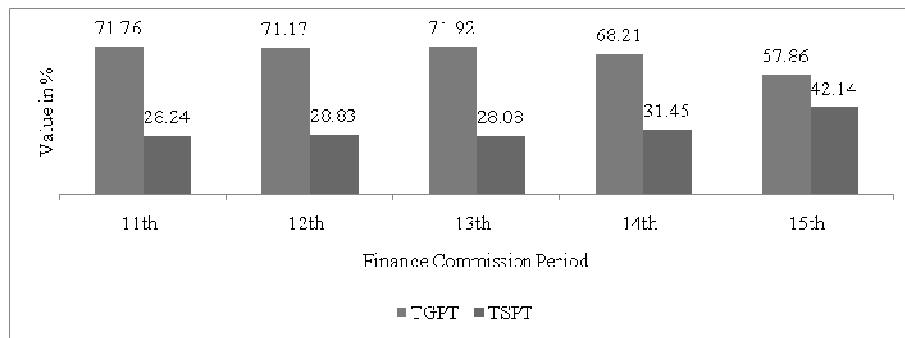
Note: TGPT = Total General-Purpose Transfers and TSPT = Total Specific Purpose Transfers
Source: Same as Table 1.

Conclusion

The NDA government initiated structural adjustment in the federal transfer system to ensure co-operative federalism in India after assuming power for the second term at the centre to gather support from states for economic growth and a future political move. The existing structure, which is based on the devolution process, goes against the fundamental ethics of cooperative federalism. Cooperative federalism protects the autonomy of state governments and enables them to perform their functions effectively. Despite the efforts of the central government, the state's fiscal autonomy is shrunk due to political interference in the evolution, structure and functions of mediating institutions of federal transfer. States are not in a position to meet the increased responsibilities due to rapid contractions in resource share. The vertical share of states in central shared taxes declines over successive Commissions. Further expenditures autonomy of states is arrested due to the increasing conditional transfers over time. Shrinking state autonomy lurches the federal structure towards competitive federalism, which in turn may lead to a conflicting situation in future. An introduction of a single, permanent, independent, impartial and semi-judicial body in place of CM and UFC to mediate federal transfer may raise fiscal autonomy of states.

End Notes

1. The replacement of PC by NITI Aayog reduces the problem of multiple channels in the transfer system since the latter is not assigned with the revenue transfer task. The removal of the distinction between plan and non-plan expenditures gives full freedom to fifteenth UFC to study the entire revenue expenditures while disbursement of

grants to states. The introduction of GST provides a common tax base for both centre and state.

2. The scope of the UFC was restricted to non-plan account only and the task of plan account assigned to PC and CM. Subsequently the distinction abolished since 14th the UFC. Initially, different methods with different weights were used for inter-se distribution of shared taxes up to 9th UFC. Later on, the same methods with same weights were used to distribute shared taxes. Over time, the tax devolutions through the UFC declined due to the negligence on mobilisation of shared tax. In response to that, the 80th Constitutional Amendment Act 2000 brought all central taxes under share tax category. Similarly, during the 11th and 12th UFC, incentives linked restructuring programmes namely the Medium-Term Fiscal Restructuring Programme (MTFRP) during 2000-01 to 2004-05 and Fiscal Responsibility Budget Management Act (FRBMA) during 2004-05 to 2009-10 were introduced to reduce (fiscal, primary and revenue) deficits of states.

3. In order to promote the state autonomy, 14th and 15th UFC shifted its priority from 'grant to tax'. The tax devolution increased from 32 per cent during 13th to 42 per cent of gross central taxes during 14th and 15th UFC.

4. Competitive federalism invites uncertainties in achieving national welfare objective and may serve as a blow to the federal structure in toto.

5. According to the Nationalistic Dual Federalism, powers are exclusively divided between the levels of government who exercise their full autonomy with respect to their corresponding powers. The federal government does not delegate it's responsibility to sub-national government considering state officials as parochial, deceitful and unequal policymakers (Roderick, 1998:812-944). Nowadays state and federal governments have overlapping areas of functions and they implement state-federal regulatory services cooperatively.

6. When the power of resources of the central and state government in India is listed in union and state list respectively, the expenditure responsibilities are enumerated in the union, state and concurrent list of the seventh schedule of the constitution. The central government has exclusive power over taxation and expenditure responsibilities assigned under the union list. state supremacy is observed in the case of subjects listed in the state list.

7. Article 263 enables to constitute Inter-State Council to discuss issues relating to the common area of Centre and state. The central government can make laws on state subject if a resolution is passed with two-third majority in inter-state council as per article 249 of the constitution. Further, there has been 'All India Services' under article 312 and establishment of five zonal councils under 'State Re-organisation Act, 1956' to coordinate states.

8. As per the clause III of the 1951 Act, the qualification of the chairperson should be wide experience in public affairs and that of members should be equivalent to the qualifications of the judge of high court or special knowledge of finance and accounts of government or experience in financial matters and public administration or special knowledge of economics (Thimmaiah 2002: 4664).

9. All chairpersons and members are directly or indirectly affiliated to the ruling political party at the centre (Mahamallik and Sahu, 2023: 17).

10. The significant weights assigned to population provide more transfers to populated state. As a result, rich state with more population gets more shares compared to the poor state with a low population. It is observed that rich states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, AP, Tamil Nadu and WB have on an average higher population than poorer states like Odisha and Rajasthan. The inverse income method gives more shares to a richer state compared to poorer state (Srivastava and Aggarwal, 1994:458).

Similarly, fiscal discipline can be maintained easily by a non-poor state than a poor state. In total, all criteria used in the GF are in favour of rich state.

11. The grant through the GF decline over the period. Initially the share of normal central assistance was 74 per cent, which was observed a decline over the time.

12. The fixation of grants-loan ratio to 30:70 in the GF persuades states to go for loans to avail the benefits of grant. In order to avail 0.4 units of grants, states have to go for one unit of loan. The fixation of grants at 30 per cent based on a wrong assumption of plan revenue expenditures of states increases revenue deficits due to excess of revenue account plan expenditures on social sectors (55 per cent) over grant (Kannan et al, 2004:477). When the increasing revenue deficit is met out of the loan, it is difficult for any state to come out of the debt trap because the investment of the loan amount on revenue expenditure is not able to generate income to recover the debt. Further, without considering the repayment capacity of the state, making it mandatory to avail 70 per cent loans, which is against the will of the state, deteriorates the fiscal health.

13. For example, the schemes like cattle development, Krishi Vikash Yojana etc. for which the CM give grants belong to the area of state list.

14. The standard assumption of absence of auto-correlation in Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression may not be applicable in time series data.

15. Further, the standardisation of variable is already inbuilt in this method.

16. Shifting of responsibility from a less to a more political body, instead of promoting state autonomy, creates possibilities for more central control.

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Consumers at the Crossroads: Global Pesticide Regulation and Trends

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As consumers, we must be aware of a product's fitness before purchasing, but sometimes we lack knowledge of its suitability despite all the due diligence. That is where legislations step in, requiring manufacturers to disclose essential information. Historically, consumers were viewed as passive recipients, targeted with products based on their behavioural patterns. This notion has changed significantly, and now the consumers are self-informed and discerning, with a responsibility on manufacturers to prioritise the greater good. A pressing issue in the context of pesticides and their usage impacting the environment, consumers face challenges balancing health protection with environmental concerns, amidst exploitative market practices. A complex regulatory framework compels consumers to make an informed decision to drive change. Through doctrinal research, this article highlights the need for a paradigm shift in consumer choices to mitigate environmental degradation. Highlighting such issues enables consumers to demand better and drive manufacturers towards sustainability protecting their health, existence and environment as a whole. It's time to recognise consumers as game-changers, capable of influencing market practices and promoting eco-friendly products majorly pesticides and to promote a new dimension of solution-focused thinking to address environmental degradation and consumer exploitation.

Keywords: Consumers, Environment, Public Health, Chemical Pesticides, Organic Farming.

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Introduction

In today's scenario, the moment a baby is born and takes its first breath, it becomes a consumer. In fact, in most cases, a consumer is born even before birth, from the formation of the zygote. Simply by being alive, humans enter a pre-existing market and become an integral part of it, remaining associated throughout their lives as per their needs.

Consumers and End-Users

The term 'consumer' denotes an individual or entity that buys or uses goods, services, or resources for personal or commercial purposes. In economics and business, consumers play a vital role as key marketplace participants, as their demand for products and services fuels production, distribution and economic activity (Cohen, 2016) The use of pesticides in agriculture has sparked global consumer concerns about human health and environmental risks. As awareness grows about chemicals in food production and their ecological impact, consumers are reevaluating their preferences. Focus on risk perception, knowledge, and organic options has driven sustainable development, prompting a key question: Do consumers trust manufacturers' claims, or are there undisclosed factors? (Yi, 1990)

Every human being is a consumer, making them the ultimate end-users who utilise products for their basic needs (Azevedo, 2014). The term 'end-users' refers to individuals or communities targeted by products sold in the market. These products are designed specifically for their consumption (Kumar and Raheja, 2012). It's essential to distinguish end-consumers from business buyers who purchase goods for commercial purposes, known as Business-to-Business (B2B) purchasing. The end consumers are, however, the individuals who comprise the target market buying products and services directly from businesses.

FSSAI Act 2006

From a broader perspective, the FSSAI Act 2006 governs food products, each with varying permissible maximum residue limits. However, FSSAI regulations do not directly apply to farm produce; instead, they focus on registered items governed by specific rules and regulations. For instance, pesticides are something that the end users do not purchase, but as a residue, it is associated with the product upon which it was applied. An end-user does not demand an ideal world but has the right to know about potential harm, especially when the effects of harm are multi-dimensional.

Thus, it becomes crucial to re-evaluate the existing legal framework regarding pesticide usage. Understanding how developed and developing countries regulate chemical pesticides can provide valuable insights.

Country-based Regulatory Framework

Pesticide regulations vary across jurisdictions worldwide, but common elements exist in almost every country (Pelaez, 2013). These elements establish regulatory frameworks for monitoring agencies responsible for creating, implementing, updating, and enforcing rules, as well as assessing the safety and efficacy of pesticide use and Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs). Here is a detailed examination of the regulatory framework:

Domestic Framework

In India, the rules associated with pesticides are primarily governed by the Insecticides Act, 1968, along with the Insecticides Rules, 1971.

The Insecticides Act of 1968 (Tambe, 2022) was enacted under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare in India. The concerned ministry looks after the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes related to agriculture, including regulations governing the use of insecticides and pesticides to ensure agricultural productivity while safeguarding human health and the environment. The act was enacted to regulate the import, manufacture, sale, transport, distribution, and use of insecticides with the objective of preventing risk to human beings and animals. However, The Pesticide Management Bill 2020 was introduced in Rajya Sabha which is pending and the same will be the new law, replacing the Insecticides Act 1968 after its implementation. At present The Insecticides Act 1968 is used to regulate pesticides.

The Insecticides Act requires all insecticides to be registered with the Central Insecticides Board (CIB) and the Registration Committee (RC) before they can be imported, manufactured, or sold (Priyanka et al., 2024). The CIB is responsible for advising the central government on technical matters related to insecticides. It also registers insecticides after evaluating their safety, efficacy, and quality. The act lays down the following guidelines:

i. *Registration of Insecticides:* Before the sale or use of a pesticide, it must undergo a registration process with the CIB and the RC (Murali et al., 2023). This involves submitting data on the chemical composition, toxicity, effectiveness, and other characteristics of the pesticide. Thus, in India the registration procedure is mandatory.

ii.   *Labelling and Packaging:* There is a requirement for insecticide labels to provide specific information such as the name and address of the manufacturer, directions for use, precautions, and warnings. Proper packaging is mandatory to ensure safe handling and storage.

iii.   *Pesticide Testing and Quality Control:* The Act empowers the government to establish laboratories for testing and analysis of pesticides to ensure their quality and adherence to standards. It keeps an eye on the registered items of chemical pesticides from time to time and the government through official notification bans the pesticides. In 2023, the Government of India banned three chemical pesticides after prohibiting 27 pesticides.

Pesticide Control Officers and Penalties: The act designates Pesticide Control Officers responsible for enforcing the provisions of the law, conducting inspections, and taking legal action against violators (Abhilash and Singh, 2009). The act prescribes penalties in the form of fines and imprisonment for offences such as selling unregistered pesticides and violating labelling requirements. However, along with the FSSAI Act which has provisions for a penalty for adulteration, The Indian Penal Code 1860 sections 273 and 272 also have the penalties for adulterations. In addition to the Insecticides Act, statutes and rules such as the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, and the Hazardous Chemicals Rules, 1989, also play a role in regulating pesticides.

International Framework
The United States of America

In the USA, The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) deals with the registration and regulation of pesticides under the law laid down in the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA). The rules concerning the sale or distribution of pesticides are strict and every pesticide has to undergo a rigorous registration process with the EPA. The registration process involves the submission of scientific data along with studies demonstrating the pesticide's safety and efficacy. The law puts an essential mandate that the pesticides must have approved labelling including instructions for proper and safe use of the pesticides along with the precautionary statements, directions for disposal, and information on potential hazards and risks (United States, 2004).

The EPA also establishes tolerance for pesticide residues in food commodities under the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (FFDCA). These tolerances represent the maximum allowed levels of pesticide residues

that are considered safe for human consumption. The USA has safe guidelines for worker protection to protect agricultural workers and handlers who may be exposed to pesticides during their work. Thus, The Worker Protection Standard (WPS) sets requirements for training, personal protective equipment, restricted entry intervals, and other measures to minimise exposure and protect worker health (Laurie H., 2017). There are provisions for Endangered Species Protection, ascertaining potential risks of pesticides to endangered and threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) which empowers the EPA to impose restrictions on pesticide use to protect listed species and their habitats.

The EPA and state agencies enforce pesticide regulations through inspections, investigations, and enforcement actions. Here violations of pesticide laws can result in civil penalties, fines, product seizures, and other regulatory measures (Anderson and Vaughan, 2023). In a nutshell, USA pesticide regulations under FIFRA aim to balance the need for effective pest control with the protection of human health and the environment through science-based risk assessment, registration, labelling, and enforcement measures.

European Union (EU)

In the European Union, governance is overlooked by several pieces of legislation which aim at ensuring the safety of food and protecting human health and the environment. The main regulation concerning pesticides is Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009 (EFSA E. C., 2024). The concerned regulation establishes a legal framework for the approval process of any pesticide before the same can be placed on the market. The process of registration is rigorous including a comprehensive evaluation of the active substance and the plant protection product (pesticide formulation) to assess their safety, efficacy, and potential risks to human health and the environment, moreover, the authorisation is regulated from time to time and granted for a specified period, after which products have to undergo a renewal process to ensure continued compliance with safety standards.

The Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs) in the EU are established for pesticides in food and feed through Regulation (EC) No 396/2005 (EFSA, 2023). These MRLs represent the maximum concentration of pesticide residues that are legally permitted in or on food products. EU member states regularly monitor and enforce compliance with pesticide regulations which includes conducting inspections, sampling food products for pesticide residue analysis, and taking regulatory action for the exceeded MRLs. The

European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) (Kearney, 2024) plays a central role in conducting scientific risk assessments of pesticides. It evaluates data on pesticide residues, exposure levels, and toxicological effects to assess potential risks to consumers. The EU promotes the use of integrated pest management practices to minimise reliance on chemical pesticides and reduce environmental impacts. IPM emphasises the use of multiple pest control methods, such as biological control, crop rotation, and cultural practices, to manage pests effectively while minimising pesticide use. Thus, EU pesticide regulation is comprehensive and science-based, with the primary goal of protecting human health and the environment while ensuring the availability of safe and sustainable food supplies.

Japan

The regulation of pesticides is governed primarily by the Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Act (ACRA) and its associated regulations (Watanabe, 2014). The Act is the primary legislation regulating the registration, distribution, sale, and use of agricultural chemicals, including pesticides, in Japan. The Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Act (ACRA) aims to ensure the safety and efficacy of agricultural chemicals while protecting human health, the environment, and agricultural products. Key Provisions of the Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Act (ACRA) is the process of registration and approval of any pesticides. Thus, before a pesticide can be manufactured, imported, distributed, or sold in Japan, it has to go through a scientific process of registration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) (Yongxiang et al., 2023).

In Japan, the MAFF evaluates the safety, efficacy, and quality of pesticides based on scientific data submitted by manufacturers or importers. Here only registered pesticides can be legally distributed, sold, or used. The law with respect to the labelling and packaging of the pesticide is clear and puts a mandate on the manufacturer and distributors to label the product and the same must comply with specific requirements outlined in the Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Act (ACRA) and associated regulations. The regulation related to labelling includes information such as the name and concentration of active ingredients, directions for use, safety precautions, and storage instructions.

Similarly, the packaging of pesticides must also meet certain standards to prevent leakage, contamination, or damage during transportation and storage. In Japan, the Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) are also for the pesticide residues in food and feed through the Food

Sanitation Act. MRLs specify the maximum allowable concentration of pesticide residues in food products to ensure consumer safety. Here the Restrictions and Safety Measures play an important role under the Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Act (ACRA). Restrictions can be imposed on the use of certain pesticides to protect human health, the environment, and non-target organisms.

MAFF conducts regular monitoring and inspections to ensure compliance with pesticide regulations. Violations of the Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Act (ACRA) or associated regulations may result in enforcement actions, including fines, product recalls, and suspension of pesticide registrations.

Comparative Analysis Chart of Legal Framework

Tabular Chart of the Legal Framework of Different Countries

S.No.	Basis	USA	European Union	India	Japan
1	Regulatory Authority	Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)	Central Insecticides Board and Registration Committee (CIBRC) and Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF)	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)
2	Primary Legislation	Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA)	Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009 (Placing of Plant Protection Products on the Market)	Insecticides Act, 1968	Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Law
3	Approval Process	Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA)	Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009	Insecticides Rules, 1971	Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Law
4	Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs)	Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (FFDCA)	Regulation (EC) No 396/2005 (Setting Maximum Residue Levels for Pesticide Residues)	Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)	Food Sanitation Act
5	Risk Assessment	FIFRA	Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009	Insecticides Act, 1968	Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Law

S.No.	Basis	USA	European Union	India	Japan
6	Labelling Requirements	FIFRA, 40 CFR Part 156	Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009	Insecticides Rules, 1971	Agricultural Chemicals Regulation Law
7	Worker Protection	Worker Protection Standard (WPS), 40 CFR Part 170	Directive 2009/128/EC (Sustainable Use of Pesticides)	Insecticides Rules, 1971	Industrial Safety and Health Law
8	Environmental Protection	Endangered Species Act (ESA),	Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009, Directive 2009/128/EC (Sustainable Use of Pesticides)	Insecticides Act, 1968	Environment Laws

Internationally Recognised Code - The Codex Alimentarius

Though the regulatory framework with respect the food law in different countries is different, there is one internationally recognised code that has the standard guidelines as the primary international codes that many countries follow regarding food law called The Codex Alimentarius.

About the Code

The Codex Alimentarius is managed by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, a joint body of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) for setting internationally recognised standards, and guidelines relating to food safety, quality, and trade (Masson-Matthee, 2007). These guidelines cover a wide range of topics such as food hygiene, food additives, pesticide residues, veterinary drug residues, food labelling, and food inspection and certification systems. However, the Codex Alimentarius standards are not legally binding on countries and are mostly used as the reference point for international food trade by many countries around the world (Veggeland and Borgen, 2005).

Thus, the Codex standards help mainly in facilitating international food trade by promoting harmonisation and ensuring that food safety and quality standards, are consistent across different countries. In addition to this, the Codex standards guide governments, food producers, and consumers on best practices for ensuring the safety and quality of food products.

Historical Background and Development of the Code

The Codex Alimentarius is a Latin word that means 'Food Code', the development (Wehr, 2007) of its origin can be traced to the early 1960s as a

response to concerns about the safety and quality of food products in international trade. Some of the key historical stages are as follows:

A. Post-World War II Concerns: After World War II, there was a growing recognition of the need for international cooperation in addressing food safety and quality issues. The rapid expansion of international trade in food products highlighted the importance of establishing common standards to facilitate trade while ensuring consumer protection.

B. Formation of the Codex Alimentarius Commission: In the year 1961, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations and the World Health Organisation (WHO) came together and jointly established the Codex Alimentarius Commission. The commission's mandate was to develop international standards, guidelines, and codes of practice related to food safety, quality, and trade.

C. Early Developments: In its early years soon after its establishment, the Codex focused primarily on addressing specific concerns such as food additives, pesticide residues, and food labelling. The commission worked to develop standards based on scientific principles and risk assessment to ensure the safety and quality of food products.

D. Expansion of Scope: With the development of time, the scope of the Codex Alimentarius also expanded to include and cover a wide range of topics relevant to food safety and trade. Which included standards for food hygiene, contaminants, food inspection and certification systems, and guidelines for risk analysis.

E. Adoption of Standards: The importance of Codex standards is that it is developed through a transparent and consensus-based process involving member countries and observer organisations. Once adopted by the commission, these standards serve as a reference for international food trade and are intended to harmonise regulatory requirements across different countries.

F. Global Recognition and Influence: The Codex Alimentarius has gained widespread recognition as the international reference point for food standards. Many countries use Codex standards (Schonrock, 2023) as a basis for their national food regulations, and adherence to these standards helps facilitate international food trade by promoting consistency and mutual recognition of standards. 189 member countries individually, some of the prominent ones include:

the United States, European Union, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Japan, China, India, Brazil, Australia, South Africa, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Argentina, these are few countries which along with many others, are following the Codex Alimentarius Commission's standard (Commission, 2025).

Persisting Environment Degradation and Water Crisis

Food, Air, and Water are something that does not have any jurisdiction and can travel from one place to another. Thus, there should be a sense of duty in the minds of those who are directly associated in terms of dealing with it and affecting all the above essentials (Syafrudin et al., 2021). Thus, in the following instances:

i.   when the food is grown, prepared or distributed in the market for a consumer base; or

ii.   for any economic activity; or

iii.   when the biomass is burned in the form of waste in the open; or

iv.   for vacating the space of farmland for land irrigation; or

v.   when the abundance of industrial waste with heavy toxins is dumped in the water; or

vi.   for the production of more units to be sold in the market.

The need for self-introspection along with the cumulative effect of the human approach is required. One centralised idea is based upon the philosophy that what has been taken from nature is been returned to nature in multiples.

Impact of Environmental Degradation

The effect of environmental degradation is very dangerous. Recently Bengaluru has been in the news of facing a water crisis (Mohan, 2024). Reports are coming that the underground water has gone down and people have started shifting from the concerned area. It is not the first time that due to environmental degradation; people have shifted from one place to another. Many incidents have been recorded in history where people have forced themselves to migrate to safer places in want of food, water, and a better environment.

We have forgotten that the rule of law cannot be made applicable in the absence of essential elements like Air, Water and Food (Asopa, 2025). We have also forgotten that agriculture is the founding stone of every law in the world. Without agriculture, man was once just a hunter who never used to stay in one place. It was agriculture that forced him to stay in one place and

even allowed him to make rules and regulations. These rules and regulations were later identified to be customs for that place which gave birth to different laws in different places of the world. We must understand that the cause of environmental degradation has its deep roots in modernisation and industrialisation.

Deteriorating State of Agriculture and Widespread Water Crisis

The same is not only limited to industrialisation but also because of the modern practices of Agriculture the environment is at stake. Today 75 per cent of the world's freshwater (Govind and Jaiwal, 2025) which is the highest in all dimensions is been used for agricultural purposes and most farming is being done by utilising underground water throughout the world. If the past few decade's records are seen it will be found that the underground as well as the surface water has been reduced.

Unfortunately, no government in the world has the formula to create water as per the abundance of needs and practically the same is not possible thus most schemes and messages of every government in the world are to save the existing water. But do we ever introspect the science behind the decreasing water level found on the earth is the question of concern?

The same was explained by Sir Howard the father of organic farming in his book, The Agriculture Testament (Brown, 2025) which he wrote on a study done on the Indian farmers. Sir Howard wrote about the presence of a micro-organism on the roots of certain plants, keeping the water moist. Thus, the soil can hold water in the presence of the micro-organism however due to the conventional method of farming which is done with the help of chemicals these important micro-organism gets affected and the soil turns dry gradually.

We have also forgotten that almost 50 to 80 per cent of oxygen comes from the ocean with the help of aquatic life present in the water to consume carbon dioxide and release the oxygen also gets affected by the harmful toxic effect of chemical pesticides which reach the large water sources in form of residue from the farms or form of waste from the industries concerned.

Environmental degradation is happening throughout the world in the presence of the rule of law. That rule was made for the development of the existing and coming life on the earth. Thus, the time has come to understand what major developments are required to be made in the laws throughout the world as the existing laws are ineffective to be able to provide a root-level solution.

Suggestions and Conclusion

Every product in the market is designed to keep the demand of the consumer, however the aim in doing so by the companies or the manufacturers is primarily to boost their sales. In many cases after the sale, the companies tend to ignore their customers. Fortunately, some reputable companies and manufacturers do care and address the concerns of the consumers even after the sales. In such situations mostly, they have to offer a replacement of the product or in rare cases provide the cost for the product. But the point here is what if the product is of such a nature which can cause some major problem to the environment and has the potential to affect the life or if the product when applied to some other product meant for eating and cause some serious problem is a question of concern.

In such a situation neither the replacement nor any award or cost is adequate for the effect. We know that farm products are important, but their importance lies in their nutritious value and the very purpose of the same is to keep the individual i.e., consumer healthy and alive. Thus, what is important in life is health and habitat which are the essential elements in the environment and in simple words the environment in its true sense is important thus, things in the name of economic businesses or trade disturb the environment at large and affect its living creatures. This needs to be corrected by the implementation of the rule of law into the society.

Today the consumers neither have a knowledge of the chemicals used in the farm nor do they have any knowledge as to in what proportion he is consuming these chemicals by paying the price.

Thus, a new addressing legislation is a need of hour which could impose essential requirements upon the manufacturer to put a mandate to train the farmers about the application in the guidance of an expert. Moreover, all the shops dealing in the business of chemicals used in farms should be shifted to the agriculture university and the same may be sold under the strict direction of an expert only upon his advice. Most importantly every consumer of the world should have the right to know about the product that he is buying. Moreover, the people dealing in the business of making fake chemicals for the farms should be held strictly liable.

In the end, it is also suggested that the geographical area of every place is not the same and thus, the states that can adopt natural farming which may slowly try to make some laws like Sikkim's organic mission policy and try to implement the same in small blocks. It is important to mention that the health of the consumer is important for any business and

the overall development of any country's economy. Thus, people who are involved in the business of organic farming should be encouraged and motivated by providing them subsidies so that many others also join them. This will not only help the world to grow more organic farm produce but also lead to a decrease in the prices thereby, causing a reduction of the highly chemical toxins.

Most importantly this will also increase the underground water level putting less economic burden on the farmers. Purchasing chemicals and seeds will become possible at a zero-input cost. India is the originator of organic farming, and its teaching method has proven to be the best for the world at large. Thus, if possible, the world should adopt the method of farming that has been documented far back by Sir Howard the father of organic farming as it not only improves the quality of food but also helps to regain the land its fertility. This will in return purify the quality of air and reduce the continuous rising of temperature of the earth globally and this generation will also be able to donate to a healthy planet for the coming generation.

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Future of Work: Digital Payments, Empowerment and the Women Workforce

Aditi Narayani Paswan*

In today's era of increasing economic interconnectivity, digital payment platforms have become an integral part of facilitating financial transactions. Digitalisation of payment systems is one of the key elements of the digital revolution that has significantly impacted socio-economic patterns in society in the 21st century. While it has impacted all spheres of society, its impact has been particularly significant for the women workforces in India and across the world. Women across India have adopted technological innovations and have effectively resorted to relying on platforms such as Paytm and BHIM UPI for their financial exchanges. This has undoubtedly influenced women's workforce by not only financially empowering them but also promoting financial inclusion, enhancing entrepreneurial opportunities, and challenging traditional gender roles. There is therefore a need to supplement technological advancements with parallel policy interventions for infrastructure and skill development. This would facilitate improved access to digital platforms to promote an inclusive workforce. In this context, this paper analyses the effect that digitalisation of payment systems has had on the women workforce in India. In doing so, the author undertakes a qualitative approach to gain insights into the industrial changes that have taken place with the advent of digital payment platforms.

Keywords: Digital literacy; Digital Payments; Financial Inclusion, Future of Work, Women Labour Force, Women Empowerment.

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Introduction

In recent times, there are few things that have impacted socio-economic patterns in society more than digitalisation. Briefly stated digitalisation may be defined as the use of digital technologies to generate value in society through transformation of business processes and the way social and economic interactions take place in society (Gorensek, 2019).

Digitalisation leverages the growing digitisation of data, which includes converting physical data into digital formats, such that it can be efficiently and conveniently stored, accessed, and exchanged using digital devices. While digitalisation has impacted all spheres of life, its impact on the economy and work patterns in society has been the most significant. Through the integration of digitised data across the economy and society, digitalisation has led to significant changes in business models and led to various value and revenue-generating opportunities (Hellsten and Paunu (2020). As a result of digitalisation, organisations, work designs as well as regulations are undergoing transformation. Digitalisation holds significant potential to empower businesses and individuals and enhance sustainability, opulence, and harmony in society. In particular, digitisation is a strong tool to empower workforces and socio-economic groups that have traditionally seen limited financial and social inclusion in society. This is evident from the various job opportunities that have arisen on account of the digitalisation of various work streams and industries. The foremost example is the rise of the gig economy across the globe, which has created job opportunities for independent freelancers, experts, and consultants across sectors. To optimise benefits, digitalisation must be accompanied by security, effective regulation as well as digital awareness and literacy.

One industry which has seen an undeniable transformation in the wake of digitalisation is the payments industry. With the advent of digital payment platforms, which is also catalysed for the rise of the gig economy, workforces across jurisdictions are seeing significant changes in socio-economic dimensions. The digitalisation of payment systems has paved the route for the digital empowerment of women and the women's workforce, acting as an agent for their financial and digital inclusion. Digital empowerment of women is the process of giving them access to digital technologies and the skills to use them effectively. This can have a significant impact on the women's workforce, opening new opportunities for education, employment, and entrepreneurship (Klapper and Singer, 2017). Given the dynamic nature of digitisation and interconnectivity across societies, the author came across the story of Shalini, who is a 10th-grade dropout and is a

promising example of this. She has successfully started her own cloud kitchen in Hyderabad with digital assistance. Without a restaurant set up, leveraging the ease of digital ordering and payment, the kitchen continues to expand selling homemade Telegu cuisine across the city.

Digital empowerment can also help to break down gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in the workplace. The reason is that when women have access to digital technologies, they may be able to participate more fully in the economy and society. This would in turn trigger a more prosperous and equitable world for everyone. State support plays a crucial role in ensuring the digital empowerment of women. The digitalisation of payment systems adds a new dimension to digital empowerment. Digital platforms promote financial inclusion for the women workforce. Across the globe, women have historically faced barriers to accessing traditional banking services due to cultural norms, gender prejudices, limited mobility, and lack of financial literacy (Janssens, 2011). Traditionally, in many societies, gender prejudices and discrimination have restricted women from gaining financial independence. In most unorganised sectors, male members of the family would control and manage the cash payments or daily wages received by women for their work. Many women workers did not have bank accounts and were involved in financial planning or decisions. However, with the proliferation of mobile wallets, and the ease of using digital payment platforms such as Paytm, Google Pay and BHIM UPI, women now have increasing access to digital financial services. Women can open accounts, make payments, and conveniently conduct financial transactions. This newfound financial independence empowers women to manage their finances more efficiently and independently participate actively in economic activities. The change is also evident in India as several women workers can be found running small shops, and directly purchasing and selling goods through digital payment platforms, without the involvement of male members. Not engaging in cash transactions permits the women workforce to have ownership and control over their finances.

Digitalisation of payment systems also opens the door for women to access a broader range of financial services, such as credit and digital lending, which are crucial tools for achieving financial inclusion (Bureau, 2021). Digital payment systems (such as Paytm, GPay, PayPal etc.) and their use in accommodating and accessing credit scores is seen as a major way to ensure that digital lending proves to be a fruitful venture. As digital payment platforms continue to evolve and be accepted in place of conventional payment models, there is significant scope to use such

platforms to empower women and promote gender equality. In this context, the paper analyses the effect that digital payment platforms have had on the women workforce, and how barriers such as access to such platforms may be overcome. In doing so, the author discusses the relationship between digital literacy and financial literacy, and how promoting both in tandem can help realise the potential of the women workforce in society.

Interwoven Effects of Digital Literacy and Financial Literacy

Digital literacy and financial literacy are two crucial skills in today's rapidly evolving technological landscape. With the increase in digital financing, the interdependence between digital literacy and financial literacy is becoming increasingly evident. Digital literacy refers to the ability to navigate, comprehend, and effectively utilise digital technologies, while financial literacy pertains to the understanding of financial concepts and the ability to make informed decisions regarding money management (Suzman, 2016).

The link between the two is inseparable. First, availability and access to financial services allow individuals to understand their consumption, expenditure, and investment requirements (Ranade, 2017). In this regard, digital literacy plays a pivotal role in accessing and understanding financial information. Individuals ought to be able to navigate online banking platforms, digital payment platforms, investment applications, as well as budgeting tools to manage their finances effectively. There is no gainsaying that a collective increase in digital literacy and financial literacy would increase financial inclusion, which in turn would reduce poverty and enhance shared prosperity. In the age of digitalisation, financial inclusion would particularly bring affordable and easily accessible digital financial solutions for the underprivileged and marginalised sections of society.

Second, digitalisation permits direct cash transfers to beneficiary bank accounts. Most vendors, both online and offline, have built-in wallet systems or accept payments through digital platforms (such as BB Wallet on Big Basket or Amazon Wallet on Amazon). Direct transactions through digital platforms ensure that the funds reach the intended recipients instead of being siphoned off along the way (Mohan, 2016). In the absence of digital literacy, people may struggle to access such critical financial resources, which may lead to potential financial exclusion. Third, digital literacy enables individuals to discern the reliability and credibility of financial information available online. This protects them from falling victim to scams and misinformation that can have dire consequences for their financial well-

being (Maqableh, n.d.). Digital literacy empowers individuals to leverage online resources for financial education and self-improvement. This opens doors to various webinars, courses, and financial blogs that promote better financial decision-making. Fourth, financial literacy is equally instrumental in making the most of digital financing tools. Understanding financial concepts allows individuals to make wise choices when comparing digital banking services, investment opportunities, and various online transactions (Nilekani, 2019). A financially literate person can evaluate the risks and benefits of using digital payment platforms, comprehend complex financial products, and develop a sustainable savings and investment strategy tailored to their needs. Financial literacy is also essential in safeguarding personal and financial data while engaging in online transactions. This ensures that individuals can protect themselves from cyber threats and fraud (VISA, 2016).

Beyond personal finance, the link between digital and financial literacy extends to entrepreneurship and career development as well. Entrepreneurs with a strong understanding of both literacies can capitalise on the vast array of digital marketing and e-commerce tools available. This enhances their business growth and success in the digital age. Additionally, digital literacy facilitates access to online job opportunities, freelancing platforms, and remote work, enabling individuals to expand their income streams and improve their financial stability (Agarwal, 2006). As technology continues to reshape the global economy, the synergy between digital literacy and financial literacy becomes indispensable for economic empowerment and financial inclusion. Governments, educational institutions, and financial organisations must recognise this link and invest in comprehensive programmes that foster both literacies from an early age (Bielski, 1973). By equipping individuals with these complementary skills, society would include people who are not only financially savvy but also adept at navigating the digital world responsibly and confidently. Ultimately, this integration of digital and financial literacy will lead to better-informed financial decisions, increased economic participation, and reduced disparities in the digital era. For the women workforce, digital and financial literacy provides them with an unprecedented opportunity to gain financial independence and inclusion in society. Enabling women to utilise digital platforms to avail financial services would eliminate the traditional hurdles which limited women's participation in the economy and challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Digital transactions as opposed to cash transactions would give the women workforce greater control over their

finances and allow them to engage in financial relationships effectively and conveniently. On the contrary, a lack of digital and financial literacy significantly limits the benefits of digital payment platforms as despite having access to such platforms, the women workforce is unable to effectively utilise them to gain financial independence.

Empowering the Women Workforce through Digital Payment Platforms

Limited participation of women in the global workforce remains a pressing concern, particularly in developing countries. Such exclusion hinders development and stifles the growth of the women workforce. These limitations have prompted the sustainable development goals to call for governments to enact reforms that grant women equal rights to economic resources (Ebrahimi-far, 2007). Data from the Global Findex database reveals the existence of persistent challenges in eradicating gender discrimination in financial access. The gender gap between men's and women's bank account ownership remains stagnant (Assaad et al., 2020). Financial services, encompassing accounts, payments, savings, and credit, are essential tools that women require to thrive in the formal economy. Without access to these services, women encounter difficulties in gaining financial independence, starting businesses, investing in their future, and providing for their families. The primary obstacles that restrict women from availing of financial services include limited access to the essentials for financial inclusion, the absence of powerful digital financial infrastructure, as well as unfavourable rules and regulations (Mabrouk et. al, 2023). Several reports and studies, such as those initiated by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Women's World Banking, have focused on ways to expand women's access to financial services and the formal economy (Klapper and Singer, 2017).

It is becoming increasingly clear that digital financial and payment platforms carry the potential to eliminate these traditional barriers to the financial inclusion of women and the empowerment of the women workforce. Digital payment platforms empower women by allowing them to take ownership and control over their financial interactions and transactions. This leads to financial independence and inclusion, which encourages the women workforce to indulge in financial planning and availing financial services. The proliferation and growth of mobile wallets, fintech and other digital services such as UPI can be particularly helpful for women from low-income groups. With greater access and control over finances, such as savings and credit, women are better placed to better participate in economic decision-making. This in turn will act as a catalyst for the personal welfare of

women and gender equality in society. Financial empowerment of women will also lead to greater employment opportunities for women as well as promote female entrepreneurship (Hasler and Lusardi, 2017). Another significant catalyst for enhancing the financial inclusion of women in India is the emergence of Digital Public Infrastructure ("DPI"). Recognising the potential of DPI to foster gender equality, India's G-20 presidency has prioritised it as a key initiative to boost women's economic participation through digital mediums. By championing "women-led development," India's presidency sets the stage for a transformative journey that presents myriad opportunities. The adoption of gender-transformative DPI holds the potential to accelerate an inclusive digital transformation, empowering women to manage their resources and make independent financial decisions (Naidu, 2016). In fact, India has made remarkable progress in promoting digital inclusion over the years. Since 2011, the country has taken significant strides by creating bank accounts for millions of Indians, such that they have affordable access to financial services, such as remittances, credit, insurance and pensions. A pivotal effort in this endeavour has been the Digital India campaign, which has played a vital role in creating DPI that benefits marginalised groups.

The foundation of India's Digital Stack is built upon key pillars, including Aadhaar, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and DigiLocker. Complemented by transformative initiatives such as PMGDISHA and Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana ("PMJDY"), these advancements have resulted in a remarkable increase in adult transaction account ownership, rising from a mere quarter in 2008 to an impressive 80 per cent today. Notably, more than 90 per cent of the Indian population now possess an Aadhaar ID, while 140 million individuals utilise DigiLocker, positioning India favourably for further applications. The statistics speak volumes, with monthly UPI transactions surpassing 5 billion, and PMJDY facilitating the opening of a staggering 400.5 million bank accounts (Arora et al., 2023).

India's G20 presidency's emphasis on gender-transformative DPI paves the way for empowering women to take charge of their financial resources and make independent financial decisions. The emphasis on gender-transformative DPI during India's G20 presidency signifies a commitment to leveraging technology to bridge gender gaps and foster women's economic empowerment. By embracing "women-led development," the country recognises that empowering women through digital means can lead to broader societal benefits. The transformative potential of DPI lies in its ability to create an inclusive digital ecosystem that empowers women to

take charge of their financial resources and make informed decisions independently (Alam, 2017). Digital public infrastructure in India presents an array of opportunities for empowering women in trade and business. As women gain access to digital payment platforms and formal banking systems, barriers hindering their financial inclusion are dismantled. With secure and convenient access to financial services, women entrepreneurs can thrive in diverse sectors and challenge traditional gender roles. Moreover, digital payment platforms facilitate greater financial autonomy, enabling women to invest in and grow their businesses confidently.

The significance of DPI extends beyond financial services. By embracing technology and innovative solutions, women can tap into e-commerce and digital marketplaces, expanding their businesses' reach beyond local boundaries (Elias, 2007). Additionally, the formalisation of the informal sector through digital payments brings credibility to women-owned enterprises, unlocking access to credit facilities and financial support. India's progressive approach to gender-transformative DPI exemplifies its commitment to advancing women's economic participation and fostering gender equality. The success of Digital India and the robust digital infrastructure laid down by the Aadhaar system, UPI, DigiLocker, PMGDISHA, along with the PMJDY, demonstrate India's readiness to embark on a transformative journey towards inclusive digital empowerment (Klasen and Pieters, (2015). With a strong foundation in digital infrastructure and a commitment to women-led development, India stands poised to accelerate an inclusive digital transformation that propels women's economic participation to new heights, fostering a more equitable and empowered society for all.

Having said that, the women workforce in India is yet to witness the full positive impact of the above technological developments. Limited women workforce continues to pose a significant challenge to both economic growth and women's autonomy. Gender norms and traditional beliefs, which are deeply embedded in certain sections of Indian society, hinder women from participating in paid work. Despite experiencing strong economic growth, and increased female educational attainment, India's female labour force participation dropped from 32 to 21 per cent between 2005 and 2018 (Radhakrishnan, 2022). Gender norms, where husbands often dominate decisions about women's employment, contribute to the declining women's workforce and hinder women's economic activity. One tool to address the above crisis in India is to provide poor women with direct deposit of wages into their own bank accounts along with basic account

orientation. This can be conveniently and effectively done through digital payment platforms. This would lead to increased female labour force participation and more liberal beliefs about women's ability to work (Bardhan, 1985).

Another crucial step to allow the women workforce to avail the benefits of digital payments is to ensure a conducive regulatory framework for digital payment platforms. This would permit women to engage with such platforms safely and securely. In the absence of legal and regulatory safeguards, a broad proliferation of digital payment platforms would remain a challenge. The regulatory framework should integrate mobile payment clearinghouses into the national banking systems, such that the fees charged by these platforms are low for the users. When digital payments become more affordable and accessible for women, the financial sector can develop alternative credit-scoring models to accommodate the lack of formal financial transaction history for many women (Ramirez-Reyes et al., 2018). This also allows for the design of products and services that cater specifically to women's needs and preferences.

Role of Digital Payment Platforms (UPI, PayTM Wallet, etc.)

The advent of digital payment platforms, such as Paytm, Google Pay, and BHIM UPI, has had a significant impact on various aspects of society, including the participation of women in the workforce. In this era of digitalisation and cashless transactions, these platforms have emerged as popular choices for conducting financial transactions, offering convenience and efficiency. While these payment solutions have brought several benefits to the overall economy, their impact on women in the workforce has been both positive and negative, shaping the dynamics of their participation and financial inclusion.

One of the most notable ways these platforms have affected women in the workforce is by promoting financial inclusion. In many parts of the world, women have historically faced barriers to accessing traditional banking services due to cultural norms, limited mobility, and lack of financial literacy (Janssens, 2011). However, with the proliferation of mobile phones and the ease of using Paytm and BHIM UPI, women now have increased access to digital financial services. They can open accounts, make payments, and conduct transactions from the comfort and safety of their homes. This newfound financial independence empowers women to manage their finances more efficiently and participate more actively in economic activities.

Paytm and BHIM UPI have undoubtedly influenced the women's workforce by promoting financial inclusion, enhancing entrepreneurial opportunities, and challenging traditional gender roles. The convenience and accessibility of these digital payment platforms have enabled women to participate more actively in the economy and gain greater control over their finances (Niranjan and Vasudevan, 2016). Additionally, digital payment platforms have enabled more women to engage in entrepreneurship and the gig economy. These platforms provide a secure and convenient way for women to receive payments for their products or services, eliminating the need for cash transactions that may be fraught with risks, especially for women operating in informal sectors (Sedai et al., 2020). As a result, women entrepreneurs, freelancers, and gig workers can expand their customer base and income streams, enhancing their economic opportunities. Another area of impact is the transformation of traditional gender roles in households. With digital payment platforms offering convenience and efficiency, more women are gaining control over household finances. They can independently manage transactions and expenses, reducing their dependence on male family members for financial matters (Lal, 2021). This shift in dynamics can contribute to greater gender equality within households and empower women to have a say in financial decisions. On the other hand, the digital divide continues to be a challenge, particularly for women in rural or economically disadvantaged areas. Access to smartphones, reliable internet connectivity, and digital literacy are critical prerequisites for using Paytm and BHIM UPI (Blau and Kahn, 2017). Unfortunately, women, especially in marginalised communities, may face hurdles in accessing these technologies, limiting their ability to reap the benefits of these platforms. Bridging the digital divide and providing adequate digital literacy training to women is essential to ensure that they can leverage these digital payment tools effectively.

Lack of digital literacy also limits women from fully availing the benefits of digital payment platforms. For instance, the author has witnessed on several occasions that, when asked, women only mechanically collect money from such digital payment platforms, without understanding how they work, or which account the money is being deposited into. Moreover, there are concerns about data privacy and security, which can disproportionately affect women. Women may be more vulnerable to cyber threats and online fraud due to factors like limited digital literacy and exposure to technology (O'Donnel et al., 2021). Ensuring robust data protection measures and promoting cybersecurity awareness is crucial to

safeguard women's financial interests and personal information. Despite the progress, there is therefore still room for improvement. Both Paytm and BHIM UPI, like many other digital payment platforms, need to be more inclusive and sensitive to the specific needs and challenges faced by women. The user interface and customer support should be designed with diverse users in mind, taking into account potential language barriers and cultural considerations. Addressing the digital divide, ensuring data security, and tailoring services to the unique needs of women are essential steps to maximise the positive impact of these platforms on women in the workforce. Through targeted efforts and collaborations, society can harness the potential of digital payment solutions to create a more inclusive and equitable workforce for women.

Granular Look at the Impact of Digital Payment Platforms

To understand the impact of digital payment platforms on Indian women, particularly in low-income groups, it is essential to understand the problems faced by the women workforce on the ground level. This would enable policymakers to ascertain how the digital ecosystem can be strengthened to ensure that the benefits of the development of digital platforms trickle down to all stakeholders of society. To gauge the industrial changes that have taken place with the advent of digital payment platforms, and how the women workforce has accepted these changes, the author undertook a qualitative study. In doing so, the author interacted with several members of the women's workforce through a questionnaire and analysed their responses. A total of 480 responses were collected and were analysed. The women interviewed by the author hailed from different sectors of the workforce. The questions asked of the sample were as follows:

Sector Wise Distribution

38.9 per cent of the responses were from the primary sector (agriculture, fishing, mining etc), 17.6 per cent were from the secondary sector (construction, manufacturing etc), and 43.5 per cent were from the tertiary sector (teaching, hospitality etc). While the primary sector is pre-dominant in its contribution to trade and commerce, the tertiary sector is most adept at employing digital payment platforms. Majorly professions such as hospitality and vegetable vendors have fully embraced the shift in the payment sector.

The second question addressed to the sample was concerned with the timing of their first usage of these digital platforms.

The research notably revealed a wide proliferation of digital payment platforms, such as UPI and Paytm wallet, in India. 88.4 per cent of the responses stated that they did use digital payment platforms to accept payments for their goods and services. This demonstrates that the acceptance of digital payment systems is at an all-time high in India, and most of the Indian population is comfortable using them. While access to technological equipment is still a prevalent issue, particularly in rural India, the large-scale acceptance of digital payment platforms indicates a surge in the democratisation of technology, thereby making it easier to access as well.

The responses received when asked which are the digital payment platforms that most users prefer using. Paytm and Google Pay were clear favourites. 82.7 per cent of users selected Google Pay, followed by 78.8 per cent selecting PayTM, and 74.2 per cent selecting PhonePe. 3.8 per cent of the users selected Paypal and 8.1 per cent selected Amazon Pay. Google Pay and Paytm are therefore the latest players in the market and have established themselves as the most indispensable platforms, even recurring as a colloquial term to refer to these platform systems. The brand name of Google seems to have credibility for the users, thereby contributing to its widespread popularity. Paytm's usage is largely due to the coupons that the platform offers as well as the prevalence of Paytm Marketplace, a space for users to buy things from the application itself. PayPal was used by tertiary sector workers especially for foreign transactions, while PhonePe also has similar reasons as that of Paytm wallet, i.e., the collection of points to avail additional discounts and striking branding. A key focus of the qualitative research was to understand whether the women workforce is comfortable using the digital platforms and what are the problems faced by them.

82 per cent of the participants responded that they were comfortable using the platforms, and they found it very simple and efficient. They have QR code scanners, which are linked to their own bank accounts, and the payments are directly received by them either through the QR code or their mobile numbers itself. 16 per cent of the participants indicated that while they are comfortable using the platform, they do so only mechanically and are not fully aware of the process of the transaction. Some of the participants, mainly from the primary and secondary sectors, elaborated that their husbands or sons would get a notification on their mobile phones when the payment was received. The remaining 2 per cent of the users responded that they were still not comfortable with using digital platforms and preferred to rely on more conventional transaction tools such as cash transactions. The primary reasons indicated were a lack of confidence in digital platforms,

network/connectivity issues as payments often did not end up coming through such platforms, and problems in navigating the platforms, demonstrating their limited technological savviness. The above reveals that while most users are slowly but surely becoming comfortable with the use of digital payment platforms, there is still room for improvement.

Future of Women in the Workforce

Financial inclusion, triggered by digital financial services and payment platforms, is empowering women, especially ones belonging to low-income groups and lower castes. Digital platforms have offered women more flexibility and the capacity to balance work and the household (Ghosh and Vinod, 2016). However, for more manifest results, it is essential that digital innovations are supplemented with an increase in financial awareness among the women workforce. This will provide them with exposure to multiple affordable savings instruments as well as various forms of credit available in the market. This may serve as a catalyst for female entrepreneurship or greater job opportunities, which will eventually lead to financial independence and growth (Chen et al., 1982). Continuing financial inclusion coupled with awareness programmes will also gradually improve financial literacy, as with greater access to financial services, the women workforce would be motivated to understand the nuances of financial services and money management. With the proliferation of digital developments, particularly post-COVID-19 pandemic, traditional employment structures and networks are being influenced and challenged by technology. Public policy has a big role to play in regulating digital labour platforms and ensuring that women are given equal opportunities and protection (Gibson et al., 2015). Tailored policies and schemes may optimise digital innovation for women while ensuring that barriers for women are being removed and that social protection systems are put in place for workers employed by digital platforms (Zulfiqar et al., 2016). This would encourage women's employment and bridge the disproportionate gender ratio which is prevalent in many industries. With increasing technological advancements, policymakers ought to be careful while orchestrating an economic and digital ecosystem which does not disadvantage the women workforce (Arora et al., 2023).

It is also essential to ensure that women are not adversely affected by the advent of artificial intelligence and automation. With the advances in artificial intelligence, automation is expected to expand. Several jobs, which employ both men and women, such as cashiers and secretaries are at the risk

of becoming automated. While certain jobs commonly dominated by women, such as childcare or elder care may be considered relatively safe from automation, there are several jobs which are at high risk of being replaced by artificial intelligence in future. In the absence of digital literacy and policy interventions, women will be disproportionately affected by such technological advancements. Risks of the adverse impact of technological change on women can be minimised by improving skill development, expanding access to post-secondary education and training, and ensuring digital and financial literacy.

The future of women in the modern workforce can be secured by expanding opportunities for equal representation in high-tech occupations, promoting women's advancement to leadership positions, and supporting women's digital entrepreneurship. While the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digitalisation, it also brought to light worsened inequalities based on geography, gender, race, caste, and class (Hegewisch, et al., 2019). Digitalisation is seen as a way to boost productivity, generate jobs, and promote economic growth, however; questions still remain as to the limited beneficiaries of digitalisation and lack of regulation (Roy and Chatterji, 2021). Unless checked at a policy level, and supplemented with literacy and awareness programmes, new technologies may cause job losses for disadvantaged sections of the society, including the women workforce.

Conclusion

Digital payment platforms, when utilised effectively, prove to be a major tool to ensure social integration and economic emancipation for the women workforce, particularly in developing countries such as India. It leads to financial inclusions and provides the women workforce with greater autonomy over their financial resources. This reduces their financial dependence on male members of the family, which allows them to occupy decision-making positions. With reduced interaction with biased agents, digital payment platforms also promote job opportunities for women and encourage them to embark on entrepreneurial endeavours. Apart from being effective, convenient, and empowering, digital payment platforms trigger a chain reaction which causes positive socio-economic changes in society and eliminates gender biases and discrimination. One of the major impacts of the digitalisation of the payment industry has been the rise of the gig economy in general, and the increasing involvement of women in the gig economy in particular. Business entities and corporations are increasingly onboarding and outsourcing their work to independent gig workers, freelancers, and

consultants. The gig economy provides flexible engagement and suitable remuneration models to workers and allows organisations to opt for on-demand service providers. Prime examples in our daily life include food delivery business (such as Zomato and Swiggy), transportation business (such as Uber and Ola), Online education business (such as Unacademy), and digital freelance services (such as Fiver). The gig economy almost entirely functions through digital payment platforms, which allows maximum benefits to be reaped by the corporations, gig workers as well as consumers being served. The gig economy holds massive potential for the empowerment of women's workforce not only in India but also across the globe. It allows women to take up part-time work, which provides flexible working and thus permits women to balance between their work commitments and traditional roles such as homemakers and caregivers. Being driven by technology, the gig economy is suitable for work-from-home arrangements, which provides a convenient work environment to women and allows women in rural areas or tier 2 or 3 cities to take up work opportunities. The gig economy complemented by the digitalisation of the payment industry has enabled more women to engage in entrepreneurship and gig work. Digital payment platforms provide a secure and convenient way for women to receive payments for their products or services, eliminating the need for cash transactions that may be fraught with risks, especially for women operating in informal sectors (Sedai et al., 2020). As a result, women entrepreneurs, freelancers, and gig workers can expand their customer base and income streams, enhancing their economic opportunities.

Having said that, digital payment systems by themselves would not automatically correlate to these social and economic changes. Digital advancements, such as digital payment systems, must be supplemented with policy interventions, conducive legal and regulatory frameworks, literacy, and awareness programmes, among others. This would ensure a better interaction between digital advancements and the socio-economic systems prevailing in communities, such as in India. In the absence of financial and digital literacy, supportive policies, and equal access, digitalisation may act as a double-edged sword for the women workforce as it may be used to their disadvantage by those in powerful positions, such as employers. It is thus essential that governmental initiatives are tailored to provide women equal access to technology along with the required digital and financial literacy to make effective use of such technology. Only when there is an equitable framework for the utilisation of technological advancements, such as digital

payment platforms, would it lead to an increase in financial equity of women, especially for those at the grassroots?

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Indian Federalism and Sub-National Diplomacy: Emerging Issues and Challenges

Sunila Datta*

Although in federations such as Canada, the US, and Australia, sub-national diplomacy has been attracting scholarly attention since the early 1970s, it gained traction in India only in the 1990s following the end of one-party dominance in Indian politics and the progressive liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian economy. As Gujarat chief minister, Narendra Modi was at the forefront of sub-national diplomatic overtures to other countries and as prime minister, he set up a States Division in the Ministry of External Affairs in 2014 to help states pursue their commercial and cultural diplomacy abroad more effectively. Political and ideological differences between the ruling parties at the centre and the states, however, often create misalignments between the centre and some state governments in matters of foreign policy where a unified Indian stand is more in the national interest. With the establishment of a special unit in the US State Department headed by the first-ever US Special Representative for sub-national diplomacy in October 2022, the role of sub-national diplomacy has gathered greater significance both in foreign policy discourses and in studies on federalism. This article looks at the meaning and evolution of the concept of sub-national diplomacy and then explores the growing role of the states in India's external affairs and its implications for Indian federalism and India's national security and foreign policy.

Keywords: Sub-National Diplomacy, Para-diplomacy, Federalism, Foreign Policy, National Security, Regionalism.

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In international relations, the main actors have long been sovereign states that engage diplomatically with similar such states in pursuit of their respective national interests. In the last few decades, however, globalisation has enabled sub-national units such as provinces, autonomous regions, cantons, oblasts, and cities to undertake a great deal of diplomatic activity that has come to be called 'sub-national diplomacy' or 'para-diplomacy'. In matters such as foreign direct investment, trade, tourism, education, cultural exchanges, climate change mitigation, civic infrastructure etc., sub-national diplomacy has increasingly become highly impactful across the globe. Even so, such endeavours by provinces in federations are particularly significant as they unsettle the constitutional division of powers between the federal government and the constituent states by which the former has exclusive jurisdiction over matters relating to foreign policy. Although sub-national diplomacy has attracted scholarly attention in federations such as Canada, the US, and Australia since the early 1970s, it has gained recognition in Indian foreign policy discourse and studies on centre-state relations only recently. This article looks at the meaning and evolution of the concept of sub-national diplomacy and then explores the growing role of the states in India's external affairs and its implications for Indian federalism and India's national security and foreign policy.

Sub-National Diplomacy: Meaning and Evolution of the Concept

Variously referred to as 'para-diplomacy', 'parallel diplomacy', 'regional diplomacy', 'micro-diplomacy' or 'constituent diplomacy', sub-national diplomacy can be defined as the involvement of sub-national government in international relations. These diplomatic activities of the constituent states are 'parallel to, often coordinated with, complementary to, and sometimes in conflict with centre-to-centre macro diplomacy' (Duchacek, 1990, p. 32). According to Hocking (1993), constituent states have come to play their part in a complex web of multilayered diplomacy in which they 'may become opponents of national objectives, but equally, they can serve as allies and agents in pursuit of these objectives' (p. 3). He calls sub-national governments 'hybrid actors' as they are both governmental actors domestically and non-sovereign and non-state actors when they act transnationally (Setzer & Anderton, 2019).

It was in the 1970s that researchers began to take note of the growing international activity of regional governments in federal states. According to Kuznetsov (2015), many objective factors coalesced to influence this development such as a shift in the theory of international politics from state-

centrism to a growing recognition of the role of many other transnational actors as well as contacts and interactions not entirely controlled by national governments; the collapse of the earlier rigid distinction between 'domestic policy' and 'foreign policy' as issues of 'low politics' that are generally under the jurisdiction of regional or local authorities began to attain vital traction in international relations; increased assertion by the francophone Canadian province Quebec in the 1960s of its right to enter into international agreements on issues under its exclusive jurisdiction; and the advent of 'new federalism' in the USA under President Nixon that shifted significant amount of *de facto* power to state governments. The studies in the period, however, were mainly case studies dealing with provincial governments in Canada, the US, and Australia and no significant attempt was made to theoretically conceptualise this phenomenon (Kuznetsov, 2015).

In the 1980s, Duchacek (1986) coined a new term 'para-diplomacy' to refer to the phenomenon and also put forward a typology to better analyse the international actions of sub-national units by differentiating between 'transregional micro-diplomacy', 'transborder regional micro-diplomacy', 'global para-diplomacy' and 'proto-diplomacy'. Special conferences were organised, journal issues dedicated to this topic were published and the research was also widened to incorporate cases from Europe and Latin America. Scholars such as Ivo Duchacek, Panayotis Soldatos, John Kincaid, Hans Michelmann, etc played a very significant role in developing the concept of sub-national diplomacy and the theoretical frameworks they developed, with minor changes, are still widely used today (Kuznetsov, 2015, p. 38).

In the 1990s, the formation of the European Union and the disintegration of the USSR sparked great interest among European and Russian scholars in the international activities of sub-national governments of many culturally distinctive regions in Europe and Russia. In recent decades, many case studies have also been undertaken on sub-national diplomatic engagement of Chinese provinces although the non-democratic character of the Chinese political system puts a question mark on their relevance to the further evolution of sub-national diplomacy as an academic subdiscipline (Kuznetsov, 2015).

In international relations, sub-national diplomacy is viewed differently by scholars depending upon how they approach it. The liberals see it as a positive and logical consequence of moving beyond seeing the states as the only 'significant actors' in international politics as a result of globalisation, democratisation and modernisation which have made multiple loyalties acceptable. The realists, on the other hand, adhere to the state-

centric approach to international relations and see sub-national diplomacy as an instrument in the hands of sovereign states to pursue their national interests. The social constructivists see it as part of the 'identity building' efforts of the regional elites as they try to generate a certain kind of self-image of the region as a political unit through external recognition.

Sub-national diplomacy has been receiving a renewed interest in recent years for a number of reasons. During the early phase of Covid19 pandemic, the US government let the state and local administrations take the initiative in negotiating on their own with international companies and governments for medicines, test kits, personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical workers, etc. Such frantic efforts included the Maryland governor contacting directly the South Korean president to secure test kits and the Illinois governor secretly chartering a plane to bring PPE from Shanghai, China, to circumvent the Trump administration's ban on such shipments from abroad (Lieu, 2022). In matters related to environment and climate change, too, many states in the US committed themselves to meeting the goals outlined in the Paris Climate Agreement despite the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from it. It was argued that the states' international activism in the face of Trump's more inward-looking policies demonstrated 'the value of having *de facto* diplomats at the sub-national level to counter the narrative that the United States had abandoned the international stage' (Lieu, 2022).

Another reason has been greater awareness about the potential of sub-national diplomacy to be exploited by hostile foreign countries for their own purposes. In 2021, the Australian government stepped in to cancel two Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreements signed between China and the Australian state of Victoria for contradicting its foreign policy, highlighting the intricate linkages between the economic interests of the sub-national units and national security and diplomatic interests (Galloway et al., 2021). The US National Counterintelligence and Security Centre warned in its July 2022 report that China was using sub-national agreements with US states to 'influence US policies and advance' the Chinese geopolitical interests and, therefore, advocated greater vigilance, due diligence and transparency in these relationships (Abbott, 2023). Significantly, over the last decade, China has overtaken Canada as the foreign country with whom the largest number of sub-national agreements have been signed by the US states. Most such agreements, according to Scoville (2022), involved cooperation and collaboration including tech transfer in strategic areas such as aerospace, nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, and

semiconductors. Many analysts argue that these could potentially upset the US government's efforts to maintain the country's leadership in critical technology sectors. Some have called for federal legislation that would make it mandatory for the states to notify Congress about such agreements and defer its implementation till such notification is made. As a result of such concerns, the US government in October 2022, appointed the first ever Special Representative of Sub-national Diplomacy at the State Department to help coordinate and harmonise national diplomatic outreach with the federal foreign policy objectives.

Indian States' Role in External Relations

Since the 1990s, under coalition governments at the centre that were dependent on regional parties for survival, many states came to play a significant role in India's foreign policy by pressurising the central government. As Jha (2014) puts it, the centre remained 'constitutionally strong' but increasingly became 'politically weak' (p. 237). Especially the border states that have a conflictual relationship with neighbouring countries due to an artificial partitioning of ethnic communities, water resources, and traditional trade routes see their role in diplomatic negotiations with such neighbours as legitimate and crucial to their interests. Consequently, they have demanded 'a voice if not a veto' on all policies that affect their resources, borders, and people (Maitra and Chatterjee, 2021, p. 267). A case in point is the role of the West Bengal government in complicating the negotiations with Bangladesh over the sharing of Teesta River water and the operationalisation of the 1974 India-Bangladesh Land Border Agreement. Another is the political pressure exerted by the Tamil Nadu government and regional parties on the centre to influence its policy towards Sri Lanka and its ethnic Tamil population. Under pressure from the DMK, the Indian government in 2012 voted in favour of a US-sponsored resolution against Sri Lanka in the United Nations going against its normal practice of not voting for country-specific resolutions. The then prime minister, Manmohan Singh, was even forced to pull out of the Colombo Commonwealth Summit in 2013. Tamil fishermen attacked or apprehended by the Sri Lankan navy for straying into its waters also often inflame passions in the state leading to tensions with Sri Lanka.

Artificial and porous borders have also contributed to the problem of illegal immigration, smuggling of arms and drugs, cross-border terrorism, secessionist movements, etc. that have seriously impacted some states, especially in the Northeast. Consequently, states like Mizoram, Nagaland,

and Manipur have come to have a say in India's Myanmar policy (Vinod et al., 2024).

Many analysts view states' role in external affairs as a transgression of constitutional boundaries and also inimical to national interests. States are considered to be illegitimately encroaching upon the federal government's jurisdiction, motivated primarily by 'regionalist' or parochial concerns to the detriment of the interests of the country as a whole (Bhambhri, 2012). With the emergence of powerful 'regional satraps', according to Shankar (2017), 'the limbs have become more important than the body. Others, however, have hailed this federalisation of foreign policy as a positive development since, given India's size and diversity, states may have a better understanding of key issues involved in negotiations with neighbouring countries.

Nevertheless, in matters other than national security and specifically the economic sphere, para-diplomacy by states has increasingly become acceptable. In the 1990s, the liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian economy loosened states from centralised economic planning and opened up space for greater activism in economic matters both domestically and internationally. The states began to compete with each other in attracting foreign investors and companies by formulating more business-friendly policies and incentives. Maharashtra's power purchase negotiations with the US energy giant Enron in 1993 are generally acknowledged as the first major milestone in the evolution of sub-national diplomacy in India. As economic planning became less 'directed' and more 'indicative' (Chhibber, 2022), states were encouraged to negotiate directly with multilateral institutions such as the World Bank although the centre remained responsible for providing sovereign guarantees for the loans. In WTO negotiations, too, the states' inputs began to carry more weight. For example, the then prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had to convene a meeting of chief ministers in 2001 to discuss the WTO agreements on agriculture which is a state subject in India. As a result of the meeting, a Chief Ministers Committee on Food Management and Agricultural Exports was set up consisting of 10 chief ministers and union ministers dealing with agriculture, finance, commerce, food and rural development (PIB, May 21, 2001). Also, following the Rajkot-Leicester twinning agreement in 1996, many such associations have been formed by Indian cities with various foreign cities to forge linkages in matters of trade, investment, education, cultural exchanges, tourism, youth and women's issues, pollution and waste management, transportation and civic infrastructure, etc. From 2003 onwards, Narendra Modi, as Gujarat's

chief minister, led economic sub-national diplomacy in India through 'Vibrant Gujarat' conclaves that showcased the state's infrastructure and pro-business initiatives to foreign governments and investors. He also undertook foreign visits, especially to China and Japan and was accorded reception generally reserved for heads of state or national governments. For instance, in China, he was received by top Chinese officials at the Great Hall of People where normally only presidents or prime ministers are welcomed. Many other chief ministers followed Modi's example in hosting investment meets and travelling abroad to promote their states.

Before becoming prime minister, Modi often criticised what he called India's 'Delhi-centric' foreign policy that was made exclusively by a small Delhi-based elite with no involvement of state leaders, governments and people at large (Jacob, 2016). For this reason, as prime minister, he showed greater openness to the involvement of states in diplomatic outreach to various countries as part of the 'cooperative-competitive federalism' and 'Team India' approach (BJP, 2014, p.7). A new States Division, headed by a joint secretary-level official was created in 2014 to help states identify target countries for better trade, investment, tourism, academic and diasporic outreach and to design more effective strategies to leverage these international connections. All foreign service officers were asked to specialise in two states even as initiatives like 'Meet the States' helped familiarise foreign ambassadors and diplomats with state governments. The Division also coordinated with the states and Indian embassies and consulates abroad in cases of emergency evacuations, rescue, or negotiated release of Indians in foreign countries. In 2015, it launched the India-China Provincial Leaders Forum to facilitate sub-national diplomatic overtures between the regional officials of the two countries. In 2022, it facilitated three twin cities agreements, one sister states agreement, a number of international economic and investment conclaves in UP, Odisha, and Telangana, and also processed and approved many externally aided projects including 26 in Northeastern States (MEA, 2022, pp. 233-234).

Greater involvement of state governments could also be seen in the inclusion of chief ministers in crucial delegations to foreign countries and some have even been asked to head such delegations. For instance, the then Andhra chief minister Chandrababu Naidu was chosen by the MEA to lead the Indian delegation to China in 2015 on a six-day tour as a prelude to the prime minister's visit to improve bilateral relations. In 2011, PM Manmohan Singh had also taken with him chief ministers of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland to Bangladesh. Similarly, Vajpayee was

accompanied by the Punjab chief minister when he undertook the bus journey to Pakistan in 1999.

Some Indian states have a particular interest in certain countries or regions where expats belonging to these states are concentrated such as Punjabis in Canada, Keralites in the Gulf, Gujaratis in the USA and UK, etc (Kapur, 2010). These states have special NRI cells or outreach programmes to leverage these contacts economically and politically. Engagement with the Indian diaspora abroad has become an important plank of Indian soft power projection since the 1990s. Under PM Modi, high-profile rock star-like diasporic outreach events on visits abroad became a norm and helped him build his 'brand' internationally as well as enhanced his party's political acceptability in new regions back home (Thakkar, 2021). Foreign heads of governments, too, make it a point to visit these states and maintain independent links with these state leaders and governments. Such links can, at times, create tensions with the centre as happened during the Kerala floods of 2018 over foreign aid from UAE for rehabilitation and reconstruction. The Kerala chief minister claimed to have received a personal assurance of a generous aid package although it was not officially announced by the UAE, given India's stated policy of not accepting disaster relief (Roy and Mathew, 2018; Taneja, 2024).

Implications of Sub-national Diplomacy/Para-diplomacy for Indian Federalism and National Security

The kind of para-diplomacy adopted by a sub-national unit, according to Duchacek (1986), depends upon the nature of the federal system (centralising/non-centralising), the mechanisms present for coordination, the extent of ethnic/linguistic heterogeneity, the competence of regional leaders, and the nature of the political climate ('radical, revolutionary or moderate'). Indian federal system constitutionally has a strong centrist bias although, in practice, the decline of one-party dominance and the emergence of strong regional parties and leaders have moved it towards greater federalisation. Although the state's role in a field exclusively reserved for the centre by the constitution has been growing since the 1990s, there is no one homogeneous model of para-diplomacy in India (Bywalec, 2018).

Applying Duchacek's typology of diplomatic efforts of sub-national units, one can analyse the diplomatic engagement of some border states in India such as West Bengal, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Mizoram, Nagaland, etc. as 'border micro-diplomacy'. These border states share historical, geographical, cultural, and ethnic ties with neighbouring countries, and therefore, have a

crucial stake in these relations and a legitimate role in shaping these relationships. Transborder regionalism can be cooperative as in the establishment of cross-border haats, infrastructure and connectivity projects such as the Kaladan multimodal project in the Northeast, etc. It can also be conflictual such as over the sharing of Teesta River water, illegal immigration from Bangladesh to Northeastern states, the attacks on fishermen from Tamil Nadu and Gujarat by neighbouring countries in the high seas, etc.

Duchacek (1986) defines 'non-regional micro-diplomacy' as connections and negotiations between non-central governments that are not contiguous and are separated by other provinces or countries. One can use the term for engagement of states like Gujarat with Guangdong, the most populous province in China; Maharashtra with Zenzou province of China and New South Wales of Australia; Andhra Pradesh with California (USA) and Zurich (Switzerland); Tamil Nadu with Fujian province of China, etc. Such diplomatic overtures are much more formal than regional micro-diplomacy and generally involve matters such as commerce, trade, investment, environment, education, tourism, and cultural exchanges.

'Global para-diplomacy', according to Duchacek (1986), brings sub-national governments in contact with national governments of foreign countries. The then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's outreach to the then Tamil Nadu chief minister, Jayalalitha, in 2011 and the West Bengal chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, in 2012 could be seen as instances of this kind of sub-national diplomacy. Jayalalitha and Clinton reportedly discussed the plight of Sri Lankan refugees in the state as also other 'social, political and economic issues of common interest' (PTI, 2021). Another example is the then Gujarat chief minister, Narendra Modi's visit to China in 2011 during which not only was he received as a head of a national government but also met high-level officials of the Chinese government and discussed with them issues of 'national importance' to India such as the Chinese maps that show Arunachal Pradesh as part of China, Chinese presence in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, etc. (Modi, 2011). The Indian government, too, has been recently hosting and providing high-level access in New Delhi to heads of foreign regional governments such as the premier of the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, and the governor of the US state of Texas. Crucially, these sub-national engagements took place at a time when India's relations with both the US and Canada were under strain and these regional heads, too, were having serious political differences with their respective federal governments (Verma, 2024).

All Indian states are, however, not equally proactive in their foreign engagements and it is mainly the financially more powerful states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, etc. that have been able to leverage foreign connections to accelerate their economic growth. In the process, they have also become politically more assertive and have gained more clout in foreign policy decision-making of the central government (Maitra and Chatterjee, 2021). Increased clout, however, does not mean autonomous foreign or economic policy making as states' role is largely confined to influencing the central government's decisions and that, too, within certain limits (Vinod et al., 2024). Coalition governments at the centre are more vulnerable to such influences than when the ruling party has an absolute majority on its own.

Duchacek (1986) defines 'global proto-diplomacy' as those foreign engagements of sub-national units that are meant to convey overtly or covertly a separatist message to other countries who also may respond in a manner that encourages such messages. The state government of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir sometimes engaged in such diplomacy abroad, especially with Pakistan.

Sub-national diplomacy that does not have any separatist element has been viewed by many analysts as a force multiplier in supplementing the efforts of the national governments in pursuit of national interests. It, however, requires coordination and cooperation between the two levels of government to ensure greater effectiveness and to avoid policy fragmentation. As Bywalec (2018) notes, para-diplomatic processes in India are 'often chaotic and incidental', lack coordination by central authorities and, in the states that engaged in it, were driven by the regional leaders' own 'political interests, ambitions and personal characteristics' (pp. 61-62). Provincial leaders and officials often lack the proper training and expertise needed for diplomatic engagement and may at times allow 'provincial egoism' to overwhelm the national interests. The establishment of the States Division in the MEA and the specialisation in two states required of all foreign service officers are major initiatives in this direction. Nevertheless, consultations and exchange of views at higher or political levels do not take place regularly and are increasingly felt as necessary since centre-state differences on matters of foreign policy are often political and ideological rather than questions involving federal principles.

As the sub-national diplomacy of states in Australia and the US with China and its provinces shows, there are many ways that foreign governments, both friendly and hostile, can weaponise these sub-national

connections as instruments of influence to undermine national security and foreign policy. These contacts can yield crucial political intelligence to foreign governments and can enable them to influence national policies and politics. Often, these regional actors with whose special relationships are established go on to acquire important positions in the centre giving such connections a long-term strategic value. As S. Jaishankar (2024) puts it, in international politics, 'projects, activities and interactions all represent avenues to promote and exercise influence' (p. 168) and this is true of all sectors from trade, investment, and markets to education, tourism, media and entertainment. Sub-national diplomacy of Indian states has become an important card in this influence game and, due to lack of coordination and proper training of officials involved, risks sending mixed signals abroad and undermining the centre's policies. A survey of regional officials engaged in negotiations with foreign sub-national and national governments found that most such officials were not even aware of the term 'para-diplomacy' or theoretical studies on it and they could 'by no means associate their work with the foreign policy of the country or diplomacy' (Bywalec, 2018, p. 61). As such, they are often not in a position to fully comprehend the intentions of the foreign actors they engage with or the implications of their actions on the national security of the country. For instance, the US special representative of sub-national diplomacy, Nina Hachigian, has described her job as not just connecting the US state and local leaders to 'tangible benefits of foreign policy' such as trade, foreign investment, job creation, etc but also to encourage the US State Department to engage more with sub-national actors abroad especially where the 'national leadership might be resistant' to US objectives (as quoted in Michael, 2023). Similarly, an American think tank advised the US administration to 'leverage the diversity' of India by identifying and partnering directly with crucial states that have the political clout to influence foreign and other federal policies (Jain, 2021).

Conclusion

In recent years, both in theory and practice, the diplomatic activity of the sub-national units has become increasingly 'normalised'. Diplomatic engagements between countries today involve a number of actors–state, regional, and non-state –and a complex web of multifaceted interactions that resists conformity with legal divisions of authority and hierarchy. Federal theory and working need to come to terms with it by formally recognising this reality and institutionalising new consultative and cooperative mechanisms. In India, the establishment of the States Division is a step in

this direction but much more needs to be done to legally and politically federalise foreign policy and to ensure that regional and political fault lines in India are not exploited by foreign adversaries.

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Digital Inclusion and Democratic Participation in Rural Governance: Examining the Role of WhatsApp in Strengthening Transparency and Equity in Panchayati Raj Institutions of Madhya Pradesh[1]

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The impact of digital inclusion on promoting participatory democracy and enhancing institutional transparency within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the state of Madhya Pradesh is undeniably highly significant. With the growing penetration of mobile technology in rural India, platforms such as WhatsApp have emerged as significant tools for governance communication. Using primary data from four regions of Madhya Pradesh - Chambal (Gwalior), Mahakoshal (Jabalpur), Vindhya (Satna), and Malwa (Shajapur) — the research examines how membership in Panchayat-level WhatsApp groups influences participation in Gram Sabhas and shapes perceptions of Panchayat transparency. Employing a mixed-methods approach with cross-tabulation and chi-square analysis, the study finds a strong positive correlation between digital inclusion and democratic engagement. Participants who were digitally connected demonstrated higher rates of regular attendance in Gram Sabha meetings and were more likely to perceive their Panchayats as transparent and accountable. However, the data also reveal entrenched disparities in digital access along lines of caste and education, with Scheduled Castes (SCs),

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Scheduled Tribes (STs), and the less educated disproportionately excluded from WhatsApp groups. This exclusion corresponds with lower civic participation and limited trust in governance. The paper argues that digital inclusion is not merely a matter of technological infrastructure but a fundamental democratic imperative. Realising the transformative promise of Gram Swaraj in the digital age necessitates closing the digital divide and embedding inclusive digital practices into rural governance frameworks.

Keywords: Digital Inclusion, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Gram Sabha, WhatsApp, Governance, Democratic Participation, Digital Literacy.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, India has made notable strides in decentralising governance through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which institutionalised Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as the third tier of democratic governance. These institutions were conceived to foster participatory development, responsive administration, and inclusive decision-making at the grassroots level. Despite the establishment of this progressive framework, persistent challenges remain in achieving equitable participation, transparency, and access to benefits, particularly among socially and economically marginalised groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women.

In recent years, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has introduced new opportunities for strengthening local governance. Among these, mobile-based platforms like WhatsApp have emerged as widely used, low-cost tools for internal communication, information dissemination, and civic mobilisation within Panchayats (Isaac, 2020). These platforms hold the potential to bridge information asymmetries, enhance community engagement, and promote institutional transparency. However, this potential is constrained by India's enduring digital divide, which is shaped by intersecting inequalities based on caste, gender, education, and geography, affecting access to mobile devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy (Isaac, 2020; Rathod, 2018).

This paper critically examines the role of digital inclusion in shaping democratic outcomes, specifically participation and transparency within PRIs in Madhya Pradesh, a state recognised for its long-standing commitment to decentralisation. Drawing on empirical data from four regions, Chambal (Gwalior), Mahakoshal (Jabalpur), Vindhya (Satna), and Malwa (Shajapur), the research investigates how membership in Panchayat-level WhatsApp groups influences regular participation in Gram Sabha meetings and shapes perceptions of Panchayat transparency. It also explores

how digital access interacts with social identity, especially caste, to produce differentiated governance experiences at the grassroots.

The central inquiry explores whether digital tools like WhatsApp act as enablers of participatory democracy or risk reinforcing entrenched socio-political exclusions. While existing scholarship has addressed the institutional and structural constraints of decentralised rural governance, there remains a critical gap in understanding the role of digital communication in mediating participation and accountability.

Digital communication platforms like WhatsApp are not only functional tools for information sharing but also powerful instruments of persuasion and political engagement. Research shows that social media facilitates deliberation, introduces users to diverse perspectives, and gives a platform to traditionally unheard voices (Diehl, 2015; Isaac, 2020). In the agricultural context, WhatsApp groups have been shown to foster peer-to-peer learning among farmers, facilitate knowledge exchange, and create digitally mediated social capital (Nain, Singh and Mishra, 2019).

Moreover, social media provides novel mechanisms for engaging large and diverse populations, especially those who are otherwise difficult to reach. Unlike face-to-face meetings, social media enables asynchronous participation, allowing users to reflect and contribute at their own pace. It also offers the ability to evolve discussion threads, reframe questions, and archive conversations, features that are particularly valuable for building institutional memory and evaluating community engagement (Rathod, 2018).

By situating digital inclusion within the broader political economy of rural governance, this paper is expected to contribute to ongoing debates on the digitalisation of democracy in India. It offers timely insights for policy interventions aimed at promoting inclusive governance, deepening civic participation, and leveraging technology to realise the transformative promise of democratic decentralisation.

Despite more than three decades of institutional decentralisation enabled by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India continue to experience uneven outcomes in transparency, inclusivity, and citizen participation. While these democratic institutions were envisioned as transformative tools for local self-governance, their full potential remains constrained, particularly for socially and economically marginalised communities. Recent technological advancements, most notably the rise of low-cost digital platforms like WhatsApp, have introduced promising opportunities for improving communication, facilitating governance, and enhancing community engagement at the grassroots level.

However, the transformative promise of these tools is tempered by entrenched social inequalities that persist along lines of caste, gender, geography, and education. In rural contexts, digital inclusion is not universally accessible, and access to platforms such as WhatsApp often mirrors broader socio-political exclusions. The so-called digital divide, defined not only by technological access but also by literacy, infrastructure, and social embeddedness, threatens to reproduce rather than dismantle existing hierarchies (Pirolli, Preece and Shneiderman, 2010).

Methodology and Context

Empirical evidence from Madhya Pradesh, one of India's pioneering states in decentralisation reforms, underscores the magnitude of this challenge. Field data from four different regions, Chambal (Gwalior), Mahakoshal (Jabalpur), Satna (Vindhya), and Malwa (Shajapur), reveal significant disparities in participation in Gram Sabha meetings, particularly for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women. Although WhatsApp-based Panchayat communication correlates with improved participation and transparency, these same groups remain disproportionately excluded from digital governance channels. Infrastructural limitations and knowledge asymmetries further hinder their ability to engage fully in decentralised governance processes.

In light of these dynamics, this study aimed to investigate the intersection between digital inclusion and social equity within PRIs, focusing on how access to WhatsApp-based communication platforms influenced governance outcomes such as Gram Sabha participation and perceived institutional transparency. Furthermore, as Pirolli, Preece, and Shneiderman (2010) emphasise, there is an urgent need for scientific research that explores the individual and collective effects of social media on participation and civic motivation. The development and refinement of social media tools that enhance the capacity and willingness of users to engage in social change must be rooted in a deeper understanding of the structural barriers that shape access and participation.

To address this gap, the paper is guided by three key research questions: (1) To what extent does digital access, particularly WhatsApp group inclusion, influence regular participation in Gram Sabha meetings? (2) Are SC and ST Gram Sabha members systematically excluded from Panchayat-level digital communication platforms in comparison to their General and OBC counterparts? and (3) Does digital inclusion correlate with higher levels of perceived Panchayat transparency? The study adopts a

mixed-methods approach, combining cross-tabulation and chi-square analysis with a conceptual framework that links digital access to social equity and participatory governance.

Evidence from the Field

Together, these questions frame the analytical focus of the study and provide the basis for testing the association between digital connectivity and key democratic outcomes such as participation and transparency within the institutional framework of PRIs.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework of Digital Inclusion in Panchayati Raj Institutions
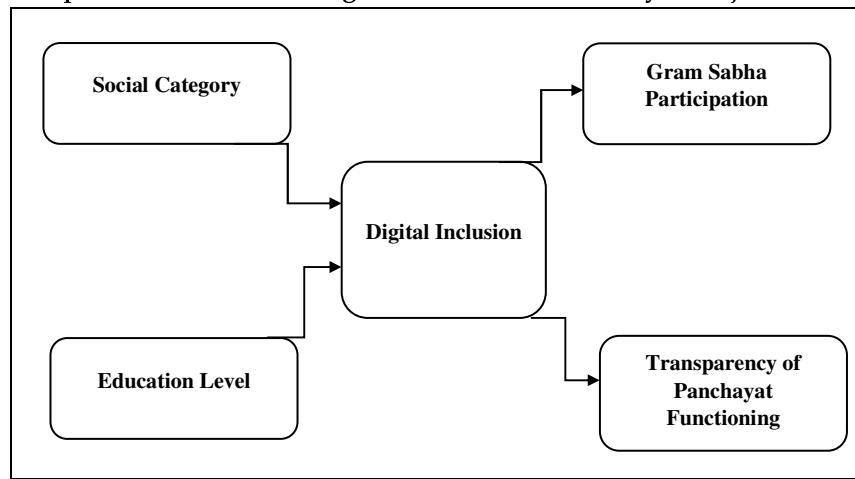
The Conceptual Framework Model in Figure 1 captures the complex interplay between social structures, technological access, and democratic outcomes within the context of rural governance in Madhya Pradesh. At the heart of the model lies the concept of digital inclusion, operationalised through the inclusion of Panchayat members and Gram Sabha Members in WhatsApp-based communication groups. This central construct serves both as a product of pre-existing social and educational conditions and as a mechanism influencing participatory and institutional outcomes. Social category, particularly caste affiliation, significantly affects one's likelihood of digital inclusion, with Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) disproportionately excluded from digital platforms due to systemic socio-political marginalisation. Similarly, the level of formal education plays a crucial enabling role; those with higher educational attainment are more

likely to possess the digital literacy and access required to participate in WhatsApp-based governance networks.

Digital inclusion, in turn, is positively correlated with two critical indicators of democratic governance: Gram Sabha participation and the perceived transparency of Panchayat functioning. Individuals who are digitally connected are more likely to receive timely information, engage in village-level decision-making, and perceive local institutions as accountable and responsive. The model thus positions digital inclusion as both a dependent and an independent variable, shaped by social and educational inequalities, yet also instrumental in shaping participatory outcomes. By highlighting this duality, the framework underscores the need to address digital exclusion not merely as a technological gap but as a deeply embedded socio-political issue. This context offers a valuable lens for analysing the transformative yet uneven effects of digital technologies on rural democratic processes and serves as a guide for both researchers and policymakers aiming to strengthen inclusive and transparent governance through digital means.

Overall, the context provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how digital technologies intersect with social structures and democratic processes in rural India. It highlights digital access as both a facilitator of democratic deepening and a potential site of social exclusion, offering valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to enhance transparency, participation, and equity within Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Table 1
Social Category-wise Gram Sabha Participation by
Inclusion in WhatsApp Groups

Category	Participation in Gram Sabha	Added to WhatsApp Group	Not Added	Total
General	Yes	26 (52.0%)	06 (12.0%)	32 (64.0%)
	No	02 (04.0%)	03 (06.0%)	05 (10.0%)
	Sometimes	08 (16.0%)	05 (10.0%)	13 (26.0%)
	Total	36 (72.0%)	14 (28.0%)	50 (100.0%)
SC	Yes	11 (22.4%)	03 (06.1%)	14 (28.6%)
	No	01 (02.0%)	19 (38.8%)	20 (40.8%)
	Sometimes	04 (08.2%)	11 (22.4%)	15 (30.6%)
	Total	16 (32.7%)	33 (67.3%)	49 (100.0%)
OBC	Yes	27 (25.0%)	14 (13.0%)	41 (38.0%)
	No	04 (03.7%)	25 (23.1%)	29 (26.9%)
	Sometimes	15 (13.9%)	23 (21.3%)	38 (35.2%)
	Total	46 (42.6%)	62 (57.4%)	108 (100.0%)

Category	Participation in Gram Sabha	Added to WhatsApp Group	Not Added	Total
ST	Yes	06 (18.2%)	01 (03.0%)	07 (21.2%)
	No	01 (03.0%)	09 (27.3%)	10 (30.3%)
	Sometimes	10 (30.3%)	06 (18.2%)	16 (48.5%)
	Total	17 (51.5%)	16 (48.5%)	33 (100.0%)
Total	Yes	70 (29.2%)	24 (10.0%)	94 (39.2%)
	No	08 (03.3%)	56 (23.3%)	64 (26.7%)
	Sometimes	37 (15.4%)	45 (18.8%)	82 (34.2%)
	Grand Total	115 (47.9%)	125 (52.1%)	240 (100.0%)

Source: Primary Data

Table 1 presents a three-way cross-tabulation analysing the association between social categories, inclusion in Panchayat-level WhatsApp groups, and levels of participation in Gram Sabha meetings among 240 respondents across rural Madhya Pradesh. The data reveals a clear and consistent trend: digital inclusion, measured by being added to WhatsApp groups, is strongly associated with higher levels of regular participation in Gram Sabha meetings, while digital exclusion correlates with either irregular or no participation.

Among the General category respondents, the highest degree of digital inclusion is observed, i.e., 72% who were added to WhatsApp groups. Within this group, a substantial 52% participated regularly in Gram Sabha meetings. Only 10% of General category respondents reported not participating, and an additional 26% participated occasionally. This indicates that General category members not only enjoy better access to digital platforms but are also more actively engaged in village-level democratic processes.

In sharp contrast, the Scheduled Castes (SC) category reflects a pattern of both digital and institutional exclusion. Only 32.7% of SC respondents were added to WhatsApp groups, while a staggering 67.3% were not. Notably, among the 20 SC respondents who reported no participation in Gram Sabha meetings, 19 (or 95%) were not included in WhatsApp groups, suggesting a strong association between digital exclusion and civic disengagement. Moreover, regular participation among SCs is limited to only 28.6%, despite comprising a sizeable rural population in the state.

The Other Backward Classes (OBC) category shows a mixed pattern. While a relatively higher proportion (42.6%) of OBC respondents were digitally included, they still face considerable digital exclusion (57.4% not added to WhatsApp groups). Among those who participated regularly in Gram Sabha, 25% were digitally included, while a notable 23.1% of those who did not participate lacked digital access. These figures suggest that

although OBCs are numerically dominant in many Panchayats, they do not enjoy proportional access to digital governance platforms.

The situation is even more concerning for Scheduled Tribes (STs). Digital inclusion stands at 51.5%, but regular Gram Sabha participation is limited to 21.2%, with only 6 of the 7 regular participants being digitally included. More than 30% of ST respondents did not participate at all, and 27.3% of them were digitally excluded. A further 48.5% only attended meetings sporadically, indicating a lack of consistent engagement likely stemming from both geographical isolation and systemic digital marginalisation.

When aggregated across all social groups, the data underscores a strong and statistically significant relationship between digital inclusion and civic engagement. Of the 94 respondents who reported regular participation in Gram Sabha meetings, 70 (or 74.5%) were added to WhatsApp groups. In contrast, among the 64 non-participants, 56 (or 87.5%) were digitally excluded. This finding reinforces the argument that access to digital platforms like WhatsApp plays a crucial role in enhancing participatory governance by facilitating timely information sharing, encouraging community mobilisation, and reducing gaps in awareness among citizens.

In summary, the analysis highlights a deep intersection between digital access, social identity, and political participation. While WhatsApp-based communication has demonstrably facilitated greater engagement for digitally included groups, marginalised communities, particularly SCs and STs, remain underserved by such digital initiatives. The findings call for urgent policy attention to bridge the digital divide through targeted inclusion strategies, digital literacy training, and caste-sensitive outreach in Panchayats. Without these measures, digital tools risk reproducing traditional exclusions rather than empowering marginalised rural populations.

Table 2
Education-wise Participation in Gram Sabha by
WhatsApp Group Inclusion

Education Level	Gram Sabha Participation	Added in WhatsApp Group (Yes)	Not Added in WhatsApp Group (No)	Total (n)	% within Education
Illiterate	Yes	7	3	10	25.6%
	No	1	12	13	33.3%
	Sometimes	2	14	16	41.0%
	Total	10	29	39	100.0%
Literate (no formal)	Yes	7	5	12	25.5%
	No	3	15	18	38.3%
	Sometimes	6	11	17	36.2%
	Total	16	31	47	100.0%

Education Level	Gram Sabha Participation	Added in WhatsApp Group (Yes)	Not Added in WhatsApp Group (No)	Total (n)	% within Education
Primary	Yes	26	10	36	40.9%
	No	2	21	23	26.1%
	Sometimes	17	12	29	33.0%
	Total	45	43	88	100.0%
Middle	Yes	16	4	20	54.1%
	No	0	3	3	08.1%
	Sometimes	8	6	14	37.8%
	Total	24	13	37	100.0%
High School	Yes	10	2	12	50.0%
	No	2	5	7	29.2%
	Sometimes	4	1	5	20.8%
	Total	16	8	24	100.0%
Higher Secondary	Yes	4	0	4	80.0%
	Sometimes	0	1	1	20.0%
	Total	4	1	5	100.0%
Overall Total	Yes	70	24	94	39.2%
	No	8	56	64	26.7%
	Sometimes	37	45	82	34.2%
	Grand Total	115	125	240	100.0%

Source: Primary Data

Table 2 explores the association between Gram Sabha members' educational levels, their participation in Gram Sabha meetings, and their inclusion in WhatsApp-based Panchayat communication platforms. The analysis reveals a distinct pattern: as the level of education increases, both digital inclusion and active participation in Gram Sabha also tend to rise. This suggests that education plays a pivotal role in enhancing civic engagement, particularly when supported by access to digital communication tools.

Among illiterate respondents, the majority were digitally excluded and participated irregularly. Out of 39 individuals in this category, only 10 reported being part of Panchayats where all Gram Sabha members were included in WhatsApp groups. Just 25.6% of illiterate individuals regularly participated in Gram Sabha meetings, while 33.3% did not participate at all. A significant 41% reported only occasional attendance, suggesting that low literacy is closely associated with both digital and institutional exclusion.

A similar trend persists among those who are literate without formal schooling. Of the 47 respondents in this group, just 25.5% participated regularly, while a greater proportion (38.3%) did not participate. Notably, more than two-thirds (66%) were not part of fully integrated WhatsApp communication systems. This indicates that literacy alone—without formal education—may not be sufficient to promote consistent democratic participation, particularly when digital inclusion is lacking.

In contrast, the data from respondents with primary and middle school education reveal a more balanced and participatory trend. Among the 88 individuals with a primary education, 40.9% participated regularly in Gram Sabha meetings, and more than half (51.1%) were included in fully functional WhatsApp groups. Those with middle school education reported even higher levels of engagement. 54.1% attended Gram Sabha meetings regularly, and nearly two-thirds (64.9%) were part of digitally inclusive Panchayats. These figures suggest that basic formal education, when combined with digital access, significantly increases civic participation and local governance awareness.

The trend becomes more pronounced among those with higher levels of education. Among high school-educated respondents, half were regular participants, and two-thirds were included in WhatsApp groups. This relationship is strongest among those with higher secondary education, where 80% regularly attended Gram Sabha meetings, and all were digitally connected. This highlights the strong correlation between higher educational attainment and both digital and institutional inclusion.

The aggregate data underscores this trend: of the 94 respondents who regularly participated in Gram Sabha meetings, 70 (74.5%) were added to WhatsApp groups, whereas digital exclusion was highly concentrated among non-participants—56 out of 64 (87.5%). Furthermore, as education levels rose, the proportion of digitally excluded individuals decreased sharply, while regular civic engagement increased.

These findings suggest that education enhances not only political awareness and interest in local governance but also one's ability to access and engage with digital tools that facilitate such participation. Conversely, those with low or no formal education are disproportionately excluded both from digital platforms and from active civic roles—leading to systemic underrepresentation in grassroots decision-making processes.

In conclusion, education and digital inclusion emerge as reinforcing factors in rural democratic participation. Panchayati Raj Institutions must therefore invest in targeted interventions such as adult education, digital literacy training, and inclusive communication strategies to ensure that Gram Sabha participation becomes truly universal and representative. The integration of educational policy with local governance reform could play a crucial role in deepening democracy and empowering marginalised sections of rural society.

Table 3
Region-wise Responses of Gram Sabha Members on Transparency at
Panchayat level for Inclusion in WhatsApp Group

Region	WhatsApp Group Inclusion	High Transparency	Medium Transparency	Low Transparency	Total (n)	% of Region Total
Chambal (Gwalior)	Yes	3	1	1	05	08.3%
	No	4	48	3	55	91.7%
	Total	7	49	4	60	100.0%
Mahakoshal (Jabalpur)	Yes	1	35	17	53	88.3%
	No	0	1	6	07	11.7%
	Total	1	36	23	60	100.0%
Vindhya (Satna)	Yes	0	2	0	02	03.3%
	No	2	36	20	58	96.7%
	Total	2	38	20	60	100.0%
Malwa (Shajapur)	Yes	35	20	0	55	91.7%
	No	3	2	0	05	08.3%
	Total	38	22	0	60	100.0%
All Regions	Yes	39	58	18	115	47.9%
	No	9	87	29	125	52.1%
	Grand Total	48	145	47	240	100.0%

Source: Primary Data

The table highlights how the use of Panchayat WhatsApp groups is linked to Gram Sabha members' views on transparency across the four regions of Madhya Pradesh. Overall, just under half of the respondents (47.9%) were included in these groups, while slightly more than half (52.1%) were excluded. The results suggest that inclusion in WhatsApp groups tends to be associated with more positive perceptions of transparency. Among those who were included, a higher share reported strong confidence in Panchayat transparency compared with those who were excluded. In contrast, those outside the groups were more likely to believe that transparency was either low or only at a medium level.

The regional picture shows some interesting differences. In Chambal (Gwalior), only a small proportion of respondents (8.3%) were part of WhatsApp groups. The majority who were excluded tended to view transparency at a medium level, while the small digitally included group showed more varied opinions, suggesting that digital engagement is still emerging in this area. In Mahakoshal (Jabalpur), a large majority of respondents (88.3%) were part of WhatsApp groups, but most of them reported only mediun or low levels of transparency. This shows that simply being included in digital platforms does not automatically lead to trust in governance, as other factors, such as the quality of information shared or the responsiveness of the Panchayat, may play a role. Vindhya (Satna) presered

the lowest level of inclusion, with just 3.3% of Gram sabhamember respondents in WhatsApp groups. Here, the vast majority were excluded, and most of them believed that transparency was low or medium, reflecting how the digital divide continues to limit participation and confidence. Malwa (Shajapur) provides a sharp contrast, with 91.7 % of respondents digitally included. Most of them believed that transparency was high, making Malwa the strongest example of how WhatsApp can successfully support open and accountable governance.

Taken together, the findings show two broad patterns. First, regions with low levels of digital inclusion, such as Vindhya and Chambal, are marked by weaker perceptions of transparency among excluded members. Second, in regions with high levels of inclusion, the outcomes differ: in Malwa, WhatsApp appears to strengthen trust and participation, while in Mahakoshal, digital access has not translated into higher confidence in governance. This underlines that while digital inclusion is an important step,. it needs to be supported by responsive institutions, meaningful sharing of information, and active participation for it to truly enhance transparency and equity in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Table 4
Transparency Level of Panchayat by WhatsApp Group Inclusion

WhatsApp Group Inclusion	High Transparency	Medium Transparency	Low Transparency	Total (n)	% of Total
Yes added	39	58	18	115	47.9%
Not added	9	87	29	125	52.1%
Total	48	145	47	240	100.0%

Source: Primary Data

Table 4 illustrates the relationship between the inclusion of Gram Sabha members in official WhatsApp groups and the perceived level of transparency in Panchayat functioning, based on responses from 240 participants.

The data reveals a notable association between digital inclusion and perceived transparency. Among those who reported that all Gram Sabha members were added to the WhatsApp group, a significant proportion, 39 respondents (33.9%), rated the Panchayat as having high transparency, compared to only nine respondents (7.2%) from the group where not all members were added (n = 125). Conversely, among those not added to WhatsApp groups, a much larger proportion, 87 respondents (69.6%) rated their Panchayat's transparency as medium, and 29 (23.2%) rated it low. This

contrasts sharply with the digital inclusion group, where only 58 (50.4%) perceived medium transparency and 18 (15.7%) reported low transparency.

This pattern reveals a clear connection between access to digital communication and positive perceptions of governance transparency. Panchayats where all Gram Sabha members are digitally included via WhatsApp appear to be seen as more open, responsive, and transparent in their functioning. The visual gap in the chart between the two groups at the 'Medium Transparency' level is especially striking, suggesting that digital exclusion correlates with more moderate or ambiguous perceptions of governance quality.

The findings align with the broader understanding that digital inclusion plays a vital role in fostering institutional trust and enhancing participatory oversight. The data strongly suggests that WhatsApp-based communication platforms play a vital role in shaping how transparency is perceived at the grassroots level. In digitally inclusive Panchayats, information flows more freely, decisions are likely to be better communicated, and citizen engagement appears more meaningful, all contributing to enhanced perceptions of institutional transparency.

These insights underscore the importance of mainstreaming digital tools like WhatsApp into the operational fabric of Panchayati Raj Institutions. For policymakers, this evidence highlights the need to prioritise universal digital access, especially among elected representatives and Gram Sabha participants, to deepen democratic governance and enhance accountability in rural India.

Association between WhatsApp Group Inclusion and Transparency of Panchayats

To assess the statistical relationship between the inclusion of all Gram Sabha members in WhatsApp groups and the perceived transparency level of Panchayats, a chi-square test of independence was conducted. The results are presented in the table below:

Table 5
Association between WhatsApp Group Inclusion and
Transparency of Panchayats

Test Type	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	26.754	2	0.000 ***
Likelihood Ratio	28.236	2	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	17.688	1	0.000
Number of Valid Cases (n)	240		

***$p < 0.001$ (highly significant) Source: Primary Data

The Pearson Chi-Square value of 26.754 with 2 degrees of freedom yields a p-value of 0.000, which is well below the conventional threshold of 0.05. This result concludes that there is a statistically significant association between WhatsApp group inclusion and perceived transparency of the Panchayat.

Moreover, the Likelihood Ratio test also confirms this association (χ^2 = 28.236, p = 0.000), supporting the robustness of the Pearson statistic. The Linear-by-Linear Association test, which tests for a trend or ordinal relationship, is also significant (χ^2 = 17.688, p = 0.000), indicating that as WhatsApp inclusion increases, there is a trend toward higher transparency ratings.

Importantly, the test met all statistical assumptions: no cells had expected counts less than 5, and the minimum expected count was 22.52, satisfying the requirements for valid inference using the Chi-Square distribution.

The statistical evidence strongly supports the conclusion that digital inclusion, operationalised as full WhatsApp group integration among Gram Sabha members, is significantly linked to improved transparency in local governance. Panchayats where all members were digitally connected via WhatsApp were much more likely to be perceived as transparent by their constituents. This reinforces the argument that institutionalising digital communication tools can lead to more open, accountable, and participatory governance at the grassroots level.

Considering the findings, policymakers and rural development practitioners must reconceptualise digital platforms such as WhatsApp, not merely as tools for communication, but as vital enablers of democratic decentralisation and institutional transparency within Panchayati Raj Institutions. The evidence strongly supports the need to expand digital infrastructure and enhance digital literacy across all social strata to ensure that the benefits of e-governance are equitably distributed. As Manoharan (2013) aptly argue, the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into governance processes can significantly strengthen democratic practices by facilitating greater citizen participation in decision-making. This, in turn, can enhance public trust in government institutions and deepen the legitimacy of decentralised governance.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the critical intersection of digital inclusion and participatory governance in the context of Panchayati Raj

Institutions (PRIs) in Madhya Pradesh, with a particular focus on the use of WhatsApp-based communication platforms. Through a detailed analysis of field data from four regions, Chambal (Gwalior), Mahakoshal (Jabalpur), Vindhya (Satna), and Malwa (Shajapur), the research explored how access to digital communication tools correlates with Gram Sabha participation, perceived transparency of Panchayat functioning, and inclusion across caste and educational lines.

The findings confirm that digital access, specifically the inclusion of Gram Sabha members in Panchayat-level WhatsApp groups, has a significant and positive association with key democratic outcomes, including regular attendance at Gram Sabha meetings and higher perceptions of institutional transparency. Respondents who were part of digital groups reported greater engagement in village-level decision-making processes and were more likely to rate their Panchayats as transparent and accountable. The Chi-square test further substantiated these associations, indicating a statistically significant relationship between WhatsApp group inclusion and transparency levels ($p < 0.001$).

However, the study also uncovered persistent inequities in digital access. Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and those with low or no formal education were disproportionately excluded from WhatsApp-based platforms. This digital exclusion is aligned with lower rates of participation and lower trust in Panchayat institutions. Such findings expose a digital divide that risks reproducing existing social hierarchies within emerging e-governance systems.

The conceptual model developed in the study illustrates how digital inclusion functions both as a mechanism of empowerment and as a reflection of deeper socio-economic inequalities. The relationship is neither linear nor uniform across demographic groups; rather, it is mediated by factors such as education, caste, and regional infrastructure.

In essence, while digital tools like WhatsApp offer a transformative opportunity to deepen democratic participation at the grassroots level, their benefits remain unevenly distributed. Without targeted interventions to ensure universal access and digital literacy, the potential of digital governance to foster equity and accountability may remain unrealised. As such, the study calls for comprehensive policy measures that integrate digital infrastructure development with inclusive governance strategies, particularly in historically marginalised communities.

In conclusion, digital inclusion is not just a technological issue—it is a democratic imperative. Strengthening participatory governance in India's

rural heartlands requires bridging the digital divide, integrating digital tools into Panchayat functioning, and ensuring that all citizens—regardless of caste, class, or education—have equal access to the channels that shape their lives. Only then can the vision of Gram Swaraj and the spirit of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment be fully realised in the digital age.

End Note

1.   This article is based on the Major Research Project 'Rural Transformation in Changing Socio-Political Dynamics through Decentralised Governance: A Study of PRIs in Villages of Madhya Pradesh' sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi.

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Implementation of the Forest Rights Act in Goa: Navigating Barriers to Justice

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The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 aims to address historical injustices faced by forest-dwelling communities in India. However, Goa has been slow to implement the Act, especially in the Western Ghats talukas. This paper explores challenges in FRA implementation in Goa, revealing issues like misinterpretation by officials, low community awareness, procedural delays, and a focus on individual over community rights. These barriers marginalise tribal communities and hinder their legal recognition. The article calls for a community-centred approach, improved documentation, and enhanced awareness to ensure the FRA promotes social justice and sustainable development in Goa.

Keywords: Community Rights, Tribals, Forest Dwellers, Forest Rights, Marginalisation.

Introduction

Goa, the smallest state in India, was under Portuguese rule for nearly 450 years. The democratisation process began in 1963 with the first democratic elections for Village Panchayats and the Legislative Assembly of the Union Territory. Post-liberation, Goa has seen various development

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phases, but the demand for land and resources has led to forest encroachments, adversely affecting the tribal population. Despite the introduction of the Forest Rights Act to support tribals, ineffective implementation has compromised their rights. With a population of 14.59 lakh, Scheduled Tribes constitute 10 per cent of Goa's population, facing unique legal challenges due to the mix of Portuguese and Indian laws. This makes Goa a compelling case study for understanding the implications of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, on its tribal population.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 popularly known as Forest Rights Act (FRA) is a landmark legislation in India's history, designed to rectify historical injustices faced by Scheduled Tribes and other forest-dwelling communities. However, Goa, a small yet unique state in the Union of India, has been slow to implement this Act, particularly in the six talukas of the Western Ghats where many of these communities reside. This paper examines the challenges and status of FRA implementation in Goa. Through qualitative research methods, including field visits and interviews with key stakeholders such as Forest Right Committee (FRC) members, government officials, and community members, the study reveals significant barriers to effective implementation. The article argues for a more integrated, community-focused approach to FRA implementation, highlighting the need for greater awareness, improved documentation processes, and the recognition of both individual and community rights.

Geographically, Goa is divided into three regions, namely, the upland terrain region, the midland region and the coastal region. The upland region covers all Western Ghats connected to talukas; the Midland region comprises somewhat plain areas, placed at the centres between two regions; and the Coastal region shares the natural border to the Arabian Sea. When the Portuguese came to Goa, they first conquered the coastal talukas, often called as Old Conquest. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the densely forested upland region, which comprised roughly two-thirds of the total area of Goa was brought under Portuguese control, known as New Conquests (Novas Conquistas in Portuguese) (Ferreira, 2019). Most of the forest is found in the terrain region of Western Ghats Talukas or new conquests. Of the total 3702 sq. km geographical area of Goa, over 33 per cent is government forest area (Economic Survey, 2023-24, p.144).

Forest, a natural resource, has been considered one of the important aspects of tribal livelihood. In fact, tribals and forests cannot be separated, and tribals cannot survive in isolation (Baviskar, 1994). Historically, tribals

share a symbiotic relationship with the forest. Customary practices are used to regulate and manage forest areas and resources (WGEEP, 2011). With the rise of Western colonial empires, strict regulations were imposed on forests through various forest legislations and policies, primarily aimed at controlling natural resources, generating revenue, and managing forests for economic and strategic interest. These legal provisions are mainly aimed at maximising economic benefits for the British Empire while establishing control over valuable natural resources and limiting local autonomy. These laws had lasting impacts, often alienating indigenous and tribal communities from their traditional lands.

In British India, colonial laws established a centralised bureaucracy in the form of the Forest Department to administer forest resources. This allowed colonial regimes to systematically exclude tribals, exploit forest resources, and bring forests under their control. Over time, forests became a major source of revenue for the colonial administration. In contrast, there was no separate forest department under Portuguese rule in Goa. Forest was part of the Agriculture Department under the Portuguese. During Portuguese rule in Goa, forest areas were subject to "Mata Nacional," meaning national forests identified based on topography, vegetation status, and utilisation (Official Gazette,2011). Forests were classified as Class A, B, and C forests, depending on their use by mankind (ibid.). Portuguese law, Regulamento of 1851 declared forests as an important source of wealth, which put strict restrictions on forest-based activities and introduced a system of licenses for kumeri cultivation (Porobo, 2024). In both British India and Portuguese Goa, forest resources were heavily regulated to serve the economic interests of the colonial powers. While the British established a dedicated Forest Department, the Portuguese integrated forest management into their Agriculture Department, using classifications and regulations to exert control over forest use, ultimately prioritising state revenue over traditional practices.

Forest Coverage in Goa

The forest is a natural gift; its biodiversity and resources have supported the lives of forest-dependent people, especially tribals/Adivasi in Goa, for centuries. The culture and traditions of Goan ecological communities reveal that they worshipped forests, various water bodies (rivers, lakes, and springs), mountains, animals, plants, etc., as their gods-many forest patches dedicated to deities as sacred groves- Devrai (Kerkar, 2024). The age-old rich tradition of nature conservation is recognised as one

of the best practices contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 15: Life on Land, which focuses on protecting, restoring, and promoting the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems.

Goa, Daman, and Diu were Portuguese colonies until Goa's liberation by Indian forces on 19th December 1961. They became a Union Territory in April 1962. After liberation, Portuguese laws were replaced with laws of the Union of India, especially in forest laws, however, some Portuguese laws were retained and continued. Portuguese codified the age-old indigenous peoples' village self-governance system "Gaonkari" codified as the code of Communidade, later Goa, Daman, and Diu Union Territory retained and continued even today. Goa continued to exercise Union Territory status from 1961 to 1987. On 30th May 1987, Goa was granted full statehood and became the 25th State of India.

The Goa is surrounded by the Sindhudurga district of Maharashtra in the North, Belgaum and Dharwad in the East, and North Kanara of Karnataka in the South, and the beautiful Arabian Sea in the West. The Western Ghat called Sahyadri stretches 105 km length from the North to the South and 60 km wide from East to West (Citizen Charter. n.d.). As per the state forest report of the Forest Survey of India, the total forest cover of Goa is 2219 km, of which 543 sq. km is very dense forest, 585 sq. km is moderate dense forest, 1091 sq. km is open forest, which is 59.94 per cent of the state geographical area (Sundar, 2017) of which 34 per cent is government forest (Economic Survey, 2016-17). In the North Goa district, the total forest area is 559 km, whereas South Goa is comprised of 1296 areas covered under forest (Citizen Charter, n.d.).

The total government forest area of Goa has spread over 1224 sq. km, which constitutes 33 per cent of the total geographical area, of which nearly 62 per cent (754.96 sq. km) of the area is covered under protected areas that are one National Park - Mollem National Park in Dharbandora Taluka spread over 107 sq. km and six wildlife sanctuaries.

Table 1
Wildlife Sanctuaries of Goa

Sr.No.	Taluka	Name of the Wildlife Sanctuary	Area in Sq.km.
1	Canacona	Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary	85.65 sq.km.
2	Sanguem	Netravali Wildlife Sanctuary	211.05 sq.km.
3	Dharbandora	Bhagawan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary	133 sq.km.
4	Sattari	Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary	208.48 sq. km
5	Ponda	Bondla Wildlife Sanctuary	8 sq.km.
6	Tiswadi	Dr. Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary	1.78 Sq.km.

Source: Citizen's Charter of Goa Forest Department. https://www.goa.gov.in/wpcontent/uploads/2017/04/forest-citizen-charter.pdf.

The Western Ghats span six states - Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu - across 44 districts and 142 talukas (WGEEP Report, 2011). Rich in iron, manganese, and bauxite, the region is home to a large tribal population that suffers from environmental degradation and limited development benefits. The evergreen forests of the Western Ghats are recognised as a biodiversity hotspot (Gadgil, 2014; Kasturirangan Report, 2013), supporting diverse species and traditional land uses like paddy and millet cultivation, crucial for the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities. Despite its natural beauty, settlements are small and scattered due to the rugged terrain. Forest land in the Western Ghats has been overexploited and degraded, accelerated by powerful earth-moving machinery (EIA Report, 2013). Urbanisation for hotels and resorts displaces local biological communities (WGEEP Report, 2011). The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) proposed Ecologically Sensitive Localities (ESL), but Goa has not designated any areas as ESL (Gadgil, 2014).

Most of the mining activities in Goa are located in and around wildlife sanctuaries and forest areas in the Western Ghats (EIA Report, 2013, Shah Commission Report, 2012). In Goa, iron ore mining is concentrated in lease areas, leading to forest and biodiversity loss, especially in Bicholim, Sattari, and Sanguem Talukas. Rampant mining has caused land use changes, groundwater depletion, and siltation, severely affecting agriculture and destroying the livelihoods of rural, tribal, and forest-dwelling communities (EIA Report, 2013). Villages in forest Talukas, rich in sacred groves, water bodies, and forests, are threatened by open mining activities. Illegal mining in Goa involves lacking clearances and fraudulent EIAs (Shah Commission report, 2012). State control over forest resources marginalises forest-dependent communities, leading to the enactment of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in India (Aggarwal. n.d.).

Advocating for Forest Rights

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, is a landmark flagship legislation in the tribal history of forest resource use and management in democratic India. At the national level, it came into force on 31st December 2007 and rules were finalised and published on 1st January 2008 (Rosencranz, 2008). The Act recognises 13 different rights that are essential to the lives of millions of forest dwellers and tribals in and around the forest. The legislations recognise the right to life as an inherent dignity of tribals and other forest dwellers. It includes both individual and community rights, such as the right

to land and access to natural resources, especially forest produce and water. For the first time, the legislation makes the state proactively intervene to give the rights related to Jal, Jangal (forest), and Jameen to the tribals and other forest dwellers. The Act provides the legislative basis for redressing historical injustice and assures forest rights on ancestral lands as a basis for forest people's livelihoods. The legislation provides an opportunity for forest dependents to place their grievance for the rights that they claim.

Most of the tribal population is concentrated in Western Ghats Talukas, especially Canacona, Quepem, Sanguem, Dharbandora, and Sattari, where agriculture cultivation is high compared to other Talukas of Goa. Gawda, Kunbi, and Velip are the Goa Scheduled Tribe communities comprising 12 per cent of the population as per the 2001 census and 10.23 per cent as per the 2011 census. The tribal communities have rich ecological traditions that are preserved and continued even today. In contemporary times, tribal communities are facing threats due to state-sponsored mega projects. Throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods, most of the tribals are missing from land records; most of their heritage land is either under feudal landlord control or government control. Due to illiteracy and limited contact with mainstream society during colonial rule and post-colonial period, these communities lost most of their rights and were subjugated and suppressed by the dominant class and caste. FRA serves as a ray of hope for restoring these essential rights that have been denied for centuries. The Act decentralises control over forest resources by recognising people's participation through land use and ownership rights, starting at the grassroots level through the Gram Sabha. Goa is a significant state in terms of both its tribal population and forest resources.

As per the land records, there are no forest villages in Goa. In survey records, all the forest settlements have recorded villages in the forested areas as revenue villages. The tribal populations are spread across almost all talukas, with a higher concentration in the Western Ghats talukas. The FRA within the federal polity assures essential rights to the Goan tribal communities. FRA, 2006 implementation process started in Goa after a major tribal movement in 2011. The movement was organised by various tribal organisations under the banner United Tribal Association Alliance (UTAA). The main objective of the movement was to fulfil long pending various demands/rights, which were summarised in 12 points, for immediate implementation. FRA, 2006 implementation was one of the important demands. The movement was organised on May 25, 2011, in Balli, Quepem Taluka, Goa. It compelled the government to provide a written assurance for

the implementation of the listed demands. The state committed to implementing the FRA (FRA) in mission mode by the targeted deadline of December 31, 2013; however, progress towards this target has been very slow.

Types of Rights under FRA

Section 3 of FRA legislation defines a comprehensive list of forest rights of tribals and other traditional forest dwellers. It includes various types of rights, such as:

Title Rights or Land Rights: As per the provision of the Act, eligible claimants can claim ownership of the land they have possessed and cultivated before 13th December 2005. They can claim up to a maximum of 4 hectares of forest land. Ownership is granted only on cultivated land and not on additional new lands. Also, those who have government leases but illegally taken by the forest departments or whose land is subject to dispute between forest and revenue departments can claim the title of such land under Section 3 (1) (f) and (g) of the Act. The land cannot be sold or transferred to anyone except by inheritance as per Section 4 (4). It provides equal treatment to both males and females.

Use Rights: The law provides the claimant to access (collect and use) essential forest resources such as:

a.   Access to minor forest produce, including all non-timber forest produce of plant origin, including bamboo, brushwood, stumps, cane, tussar, cocoons, honey, wax, lac, tendu or kendu leaves, medicinal plants and herb, roots, tuber etc. under Section 2 (i).

b.   Grazing areas and water bodies and

c.   Use of traditional and customary areas. These resources are considered common property resources essential for tribals and other forest habitats.

Right to Conserve and Protect: The law grants claimants rights with specific duties to protect the forest, wildlife, water resources, biodiversity, and other ecologically sensitive areas, etc. This provision empowers the right holders to fight against the mass commodification of their resources and homelands.

Security and Relief from Displacement: Before this legislation, the marginalised sections were frequently forcefully evacuated from their forest-based habitations. The legislation assures protection from forceful evictions and displacement. It rectifies the habitation of tribals and forest dwellers as an important part of their right to life and allows them to access basic public amenities even in dense forested areas.

Forest Management Rights: Forest management is part and parcel of their community life. The Act legitimises their rights to protect forests and wildlife.

Developmental Rights under Section 3(2): The legislation provides the right holder to avail the benefits of various governmental facilities such as education, health, fair price shops, electricity, water facilities, communications, roads etc.

Mechanism and Process of FRA, 2006 Implementation in Goa

Chapter IV, Section 6 of the FRA provides authorities and procedures for vesting forest rights. It prescribed detailed functions and responsibilities of each implementing agency for the implementation of the Act. The implementation process of FRA in Goa began in mid-2011. The government directed the nodal agency to develop an action plan for implementing FRA. As per the Act, four important departments - tribal welfare, revenue, forest, and Panchayat - are required to coordinate for common purposes – to give rights to eligible claimants. On 15th April 2012, the nodal agency directed both North Goa and South Goa collectors to form committees at the sub-district and Panchayat levels. A total of two districts, seven sub-divisions, and 158 villages have been identified for the implementation of the Act. Accordingly, one state-level monitoring committee (SLC), two district-level committees (DLC), and seven sub-divisional level committees were notified on 9th June 2011. Dharbandora, the 12th new Taluka formed in 2011, its SDLC carved out of Quepem SDLC in the first fortnight of December 2012. Training and awareness programmes were conducted at the state level; resource persons were brought from other states for the training of master trainers (Times of India, July 2012). At the grassroots level, awareness programmes were organised to sensitise the beneficiaries of the Act. The Directorate of Panchayat issued a notification to conduct Gram Sabah and constitute FRC at the respective village level. The implementation of the Act has been operationalised mainly through the bureaucrats. The Department of Tribal Welfare is the nodal agency that plays an important role in the Forest Rights Act.

According to the notification, the implementation process at the Village Panchayat level begins with the Gram Sabha meeting. The respective Village Panchayat has to call a special Gram Sabha meeting to elect the Forest Right Committee (FRC) and authorise the FRC members to create awareness of rights, distribute 'claims forms' and receive 'filled forms'. Once the FRC is formed and awareness is created, the next stage is for the village

people to make claims. There are two types of claims – Individual Claims (Form A) and Community Collective Claims (Form B); after the distribution of forms, FRC receives, acknowledges, and retains the claims. FRC is also responsible for preparing the record of claims on behalf of Gram Sabha for verifications. After due intimation to the concerned claimant and the forest department, FRC has to visit the site and physically verify the nature and extent of the claim. They also check evidence towards claims, prepare a map delineating the area of each claim, and record its findings.

During the study, interactions with the FRC Chairperson and Secretary in forest areas revealed that the FRC members faced several challenges in completing the FRA files submitted by claimants. FRC plays a key role in maintaining records of the claimants. Documentation and proof of evidence for the claims was one of the complex tasks that FRC had to do. As per the FRA norms, the claimants have to provide any two pieces of evidence, and verifying them is the primary responsibility of FRC. After receiving claim forms, the FRC had to get them approved by the Gram Sabhas. Once the documents are ready, the FRC briefs the Gram Sabha about the claims and supporting documents, facilitating discussion during the Gram Sabha meeting to pass a resolution for the next steps in processing the claims.

Attendance at Gram Sabha meetings varies based on the issues and agenda; not all Panchayats consistently achieve sufficient participation. In many FRA Village Panchayats, ensuring adequate attendance at Gram Sabha meetings has proven to be a practical challenge. According to the norms, a quorum of at least one-third of all Gram Sabha members is required. The FRC must persuade and encourage community members to attend these meetings. Only after the Gram Sabha's approval can the files be forwarded to the State Level District Committee (SLDC) through the Block Development Officers.

The Sub-Divisional level committee comprises of Deputy Collector or equivalent officer of the respective block as the Chairperson, and other members of the Forest officer in charge or equivalent officer as members are authorised to verify the information and evidence in the FRA file submitted by the respective FRCs. SDLC is the most important authority at the intermediate level and plays important roles such as: i) to hear and adjudicate disputes that arise at Gram Sabha levels, ii) to ensure easy and free availability of performa and other information related to FRAs, iii) prepare the consolidated data on FRA cases, iv) forward the completed file to DLC for final decision. The last and final stage of claims settlement under FRA is at the district level. District Level Committee (DLC) is a sanctioning authority headed by the District Collector. It considers and approves the

claims and records of forest rights prepared by the sub-divisional level committee. It issues sanad to the eligible right holder. The act also provides a monitoring mechanism at the State level. The state-level monitoring committee is a high-powered committee, comprised of the Chief Secretary as Chairperson and Secretary of Revenue, Tribal Welfare, Forest, and Panchayat Raj, three ST members of the Tribal Advisory Council as its members, whose role is to continuously assess the status of implementation of FRA in a state.

Status of Implementation of FRA in Goa

The Act has been in effect for over 13 years, establishing a legal mechanism for recognising rights at both the individual and community levels for tribals and other traditional forest-dwelling communities, including forest workers who have lived in designated forest areas for 75 years or three generations. The 2012 rules under the FRA clearly define the rights which can be claimed at Gram Sabhas as Community Forest Rights (CFRs). These include rights for seasonal and continuous access and settlement for forest communities (including pastoral); ownership, management, use, and disposal of forest produce (including water bodies); the protection and management of forest resources; and rights to biodiversity and intellectual property (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2012).

Table 2
Details of Claims filed under FRA, 2006 up to June 2024

District	Taluka	Individual Claims	Community Claims	Total
South Goa	Canacona	2450	105	2555
	Quepem	1820	20	1840
	Sanguem	1067	155	1222
	Ponda	256	4	260
	Dharbandora	1704	73	1777
North Goa	Sattari	2461	21	2482
Total		9758	378	10136

Source: Information collected from Directorate of Tribal Welfare, Government of Goa.

The data presented in table 2 highlights a significant disparity in the filing of individual versus community claims under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in Goa, with individual claims overwhelmingly dominating the totals. The table also shows the total taluka-wise individual and community claims filed under the FRA in Goa. FRA is operationalised in six talukas of Goa. Canacona has the highest number of FRA claims, followed by Sattari. Ponda has the least number of FRA claims. Individual claims are more than community claims. There are 9758 individual claims, whereas only 378

community claims. In terms of the district, South Goa has more FRA claims covering five talukas (Table 1.2) compared to North Goa. In North Goa, FRA applies only in Sattari taluka, which has filed 2482 claims (2461 individual and 21 community claims). There are 12 Village Panchayats and one municipality in Sattari taluka. Out of these 12 Village Panchayats, the FRA is active in 10 Village Panchayats covering 33 villages, of which only four villages have applied for 21 community claims. North Goa has 2415 claims under Other Traditional Forest Dwellers individual claims and 21 community claims, which is higher than the claims by Scheduled Tribes (ST only 46 individual claims and no community claims) (Directorate of Tribal Welfare, 2023). The table also highlights the disparity in recognition of individual and community rights.

Table 3
Status of Progress on the Distribution Claims
under FRA, 2006 up to 30.06.2024 in Goa

Sr. No.	Particulars	Status		
		Total Claims	Individual Claims	Community Claims
1.	The number of claims filed at Gram Sabha level	10136	9758	378
2.	Number of claims recommended by Gram Sabha to SDLCs	4049	4009	40
3.	Number of claims recommended by SDLCs to DLCs	1755	1734	21
4.	Number of claims approved by DLCs for the title	1423	1407	16
5.	Number of titles distributed	871	856	15
6.	Extent of forestland for which titles have been distributed (in acres)	1525.45	1506.80	18.66
7.	Average amount of land distributed per title holder (in acres)	1.75	1.76	1.244
8.	Number of claims rejected	54	54	0
9.	Percentage of claims accepted by SDLC to total claims received by SDLCs	43.29	43.25	52.5

Source: Directorate of Tribal Welfare, Government of Goa, Data compiled by the author

Table 3 shows the status of the progress of the distribution of individual and community claims after FRC was formed in respective villages. Gram Sabha, through FRC, received a total of 10136 claims (9758 individual and 378 community claims). The Gram Sabha recommended only a total of 4049 claims (4009 individual and 40 community claims) to SDLCs after verification. The SDLCs, after spot verification of the claims and approval by the Gram Sabha, recommended 1755 (1734 individual and 21 community claims) to DLCs for final approval. The DLCs approved 1423

(1407 individuals and 16 communities) for titles. The total area involved in the case of individual claimants is 1506.80 acres, which is calculated as an average of 1.76 acres per family, while in the case of community claims, it is 1.244 acres per group. A total of 43.29 of the claims received at the SDLC level were finally approved. A total of 378 community claims had been filed at the FRC level in the State. Of these, only 15 titles on a forest area of 18.66 acres have been issued. Very few community rights have been recognised as compared to individual rights.

Major issues in the Implementation of FRA in Goa: An Experience from the Field

Delay in Processing and Implementation

The most important task of the implementing agency is to ensure the effective implementation of the statutory Act and to undo the historical injustice of the most marginalised citizens residing in forested areas. On various occasions since the operationalisation of the Act, the Directorate of Tribal Welfare, Government of Goa have issued guidelines and notifications and directed the bottom-level implementing agencies to speed up their task. Most of the files are pending with Gram Sabha. The interactions with members of multiple villages during the field visits revealed that whatever files they received from the claimant were submitted to the SDLC. The higher authorities raised issues and queries in various files and asked FRC to complete them for further processing. Thus, the files that are pending at the Gram Sabha level are the reverted files from the SDLC. The FRC could not speed up the work due to the requirement of documents and lack of cooperation from claimants. This slows down the progress in processing FRA files. Forest Report Goa 2016 pointed out the deliberate delay by revenue officers and forest officials in the mapping exercise. Procedural delay exists at all levels.

Misinterpretation of FRA Provisions

Since 2008, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has issued several notifications and orders to clarify FRA procedures. Despite that, the provisions of the FRA have been misinterpreted by various officials involved in the FRA process, which caused a major challenge. Each department interprets the provision of FRA, keeping in view its own objectives as a base. Tribals in FRA areas carry out kumeri cultivation; however, kumeri cultivations are not considered for FRA claims. There is a lack of clarity on certain meanings and concepts mentioned in the FRA.

Lack of Awareness

At the initial stage, there was a lack of proper knowledge among the implementing agencies on the various provisions of the Act. The lack of proper dissemination of information about the procedure and requirements led to confusion among various potential stakeholders for applying under the legislation. As far as filing claims are concerned, individual claims are more than community claims. Even during the awareness campaign, more stress was placed on individual claims. There are few community cases. Traditional institutions in villages have weakened; there is no awareness among the new generation to take up traditional community issues. Claimants in various villages are seen as restricted to their individual claims. Most of the people are unaware of community rights under FRA.

Importance to Individual Forest Rights (IFR) and Not CFR and Other Rights

As per the available data and field information, too much importance is given to filling individual claims. Community claims from Scheduled Tribes in South Goa have remained invisible in the implementation process. Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFD) have filed 43 Community Forest Rights (CFR) claims; during the fieldwork, many STs said that they were not made aware of the filing of CFR. In fact, most tribals with community ethos could not claim due to procedural negligence. Today most of the communities who live in protected forest areas do not have legal rights over the use of forest; in such cases, their defacto access right lies with the community as a whole.

Lack of Coordination

Coordination plays a vital role in fulfilling any task, but in the case of FRA, the lack of coordination among various line agencies created hurdles in filing or processing FRA claims. The claimant also mentioned that there are disputes and conflicts between FRC members. It was observed that a lack of proper communication between the Chairperson and Secretary hampers the FRA work at the village level. There are instances of removal or resignation of either the Chairperson or Secretary from FRC. In many places, it is observed that there is a lack of proper coordination between the claimant and FRC, FRC and Gram Sabha. There are no fixed dates for the meeting. Meetings are conveyed depending on FRA cases. The claimant also revealed that the delay in communication of decisions resulted in multiple visits by the claimant to check the status of the file at various levels. The presence of

Revenue and Forest Officials is mandatory at the time of identification and demarcation of the land, but there has been a deliberate attempt for non-cooperation between both parties, resulting in pending FRA files at the Gram Sabha level (Goa, CFR Report, 2016).

Loopholes in Institutional Support

FRA implementation is a time-bound task; various stakeholders have pointed out institutional issues such as the functioning of the Gram Sabha, Forest Right Committee, Sub-divisional Level Committee, and State Level Committee. Lack of proper monitoring and supervision at various levels results in delay and slow process. The government has hired an agency to measure the claim area. Getting them with proper survey equipment on the field is a real challenge many FRCs face. There is a shortage of dedicated and trained staff to carry out the complex tasks under FRA. The officials in charge of FRA-related matters and files, in various offices have been frequently transferred. Such cases are common at the SDLC level also.

Lack of Political Will

Since mining operates in forest areas, vested interests involved in illegal mining activities are scared that if FRA rights are granted to eligible claimants living in mining areas, they may harm their activities. Locals can use the FRA as a tool to protect forest resources from forest-based corporate ventures and mining lobbies. Delays and slowness in the FRA implementation process are not adequately addressed by either the beneficiaries or the political representatives for various reasons. Civil society mobilisation is not visible in the progress of the Act.

Objections and Interference of the Forest Department

For spot verification, the Forest Rights Committee (FRC) has to rely on other coordinating agencies. Since the FRA task is an additional task for them. Most of the time, officials in government departments due to their other work assignments could not attend to the requirements under the FRA. This results in no fixed dates and times for verifications. The visits are scheduled at the convenience of the agencies. Forest officials play an essential role in verification, but FRC members revealed that, whenever requested, forest officials remain absent for spot verification. On many occasions, the opinion of the forest authority appears to have more weightage in FRA cases. Reports are given based on tree ratio; only matured

trees are counted as reported by claimants. Sometimes forest officials stick to the particular type of documents from the claimant.

Conclusion

The FRA aims to correct historical injustices by legally recognising the rights of tribals and forest dwellers. In Goa, around 10,136 claims remain largely unaddressed due to delays, vested interests, and political polarisation. This undermines the Act's purpose, denying justice and rights to many. A shift from welfare to a rights-based approach is vital to empower forest-dependent communities. Strong civil society advocacy is key to enforcing FRA effectively and upholding Article 21 of the Constitution. Though its benefits remain limited in Goa, the Act holds significant potential for sustainable forest management and tribal empowerment.

The implementation of the FRA has faced significant challenges since its inception, primarily due to misinterpretations of its provisions and a lack of awareness among implementing agencies and tribal communities. While the Act aims to rectify historical injustices and empower marginalised communities, the emphasis on individual claims has overshadowed the recognition of community rights, undermining the collective identity and heritage of tribal groups. Efforts to raise awareness about both IFR and CFR are crucial for ensuring equitable access to forest resources. Additionally, enhancing the capacity of implementing agencies and fostering collaboration among stakeholders will be essential in realising the objectives of the FRA and securing the rights of tribal communities in Goa. By addressing these systemic issues and promoting a more inclusive approach to forest governance, it is possible to restore the rights of the most marginalised citizens and protect the ecological integrity of the forests they depend on.

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Conceptualising Gender Inequalities in India: A Kaleidoscopic View of Periyar and Amartya Sen

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The Sustainable Development Goal 5 and the Constitution of India mandate gender equality in Indian society. Although India is emerging as a major economic superpower at the international level, it faces gender inequalities at the national level due to socio-cultural reasons. Deeply grounded in the theoretical framework of Periyar and Amartya Sen, this article makes an attempt to conceptualise the gender inequalities in Indian society. Utilising secondary data from the various Government of India reports, this article asserts that gender inequalities exist in sex ratio, politics, health, employment and education. Cultural values contribute to gender inequalities but they are not the only sufficient factor. There are other social factors of capabilities that influence gender inequalities in Indian society.

Keywords: Gender Inequalities, Sex Ratio, Politics, Health, Education and Employment.

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Introduction

India emerged as the fifth world's largest economy in 2024 and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted that it may become the top three world economy in 2028 (Gupta, 2024). Despite its growth rate at the international level, gender inequalities are increasing day by day due to socio-cultural, economic and political factors. At the international level, Sustainable Development Goal 5 appeals to all nations, including India, to achieve gender equality by or before 2030, while at the national level, the Constitution of India mandates under articles 14 and 15 to achieve gender equality in Indian society (United Nations, 2015; Basu, Manohar, Banerjee, and Khan, 1964).

Needless to say, Indian women are worshipped as Durga, Kali and Saraswati[1], but they rarely get choices in their social life to fulfil their aspirations. In this regard, Periyar argues that culture, especially the institution of marriage, childbearing, childrearing and masculinity; enslave women in Indian society (Ramasamy, 2007). In contrast, Amartya Sen (1979 & 1990) argues that people should have capabilities, and many choices to not only fulfil their aspirations but also to overcome the social barriers posed to them. Eventually, people's freedom will enable them to achieve their goals in their social life. He asserts that one should have access to functioning, namely being healthy, being part of a community, being literate, working, resting and being respected to achieve their aspirations (Robeyns, 2003). Against this backdrop, this article seeks to investigate gender inequalities[2] under the theoretical debate of whether cultural values or lack of capabilities is responsible for the gender inequalities in Indian society.

Skewed Sex Ratio

Table 1
Sex Ratio in India

Year	Rural	Urban	Total
1951	965	860	946
1961	963	845	941
1971	949	858	930
1981	951	879	934
1991	938	893	926
2001	946	900	933
2011	949	929	943
2016P	951	930	944
2021P	958	930	945
2026P	958	930	948
2031P	964	929	951
2036P	969	926	952

Source: Compiled by the Authors from Women & Men in India, 2023.
P: Projected Figures

Table 1 reveals the overall declining sex ratio from 1951 to 2011 in India. However, the projected sex ratio highlights a recovery trend from 2016 to 2036. On the contrary, the urban sex ratio is declining compared to the overall projected sex ratio in India. Unprecedentedly, the rural sex ratio has not been improving compared to the urban sex ratio and overall Indian sex ratio respectively. According to the India Census (2011), states such as Bihar, Gujarat, Jammu & Kashmir and Union territories Dadra & Nagar Haveli, as well as Lakshadweep, have low sex ratios. Further, the low sex ratio during early childhood (0-6 years) was reported from Chandigarh (880), Delhi (871), Gujarat (890), Haryana (834), Jammu & Kashmir (862), Maharashtra (894), Punjab (846), Rajasthan (888) and Uttarakhand (890) respectively. When the comparison is made about economically active age groups (15-59), the union territory and states such as Daman & Diu (522), Dadra & Nagar Haveli (694), Chandigarh (800), Andaman & Nicobar Islands (856), Delhi (861), Sikkim (868), Haryana (888) and Jammu & Kashmir (891) reported low sex ratio. This is due to female infanticide and a strong preference for sonswhich led to the declining sex ratio in India (Varghese, Aruldas, & Jeemon, 2008). Culture and value systems pose challenges for the skewed sex ratio in Indian society (Sen, 1992).

Political Status

The political status of women is analysed with regard to the higher level of governance, State Assemblies, and Panchayati Raj Institutions respectively. Further, analysis has also been carried out on the proportion of women judges in the Supreme Court and Indian High Courts respectively.

Table 2
Gender Analysis of Central Council of Ministers

Year	Male	Female	Total
1998	38 (90.48%)	4 (9.52%)	42 (100%)
2002	65 (89%)	8 (11%)	73 (100%)
2004	61 (89.71%)	7 (10.29%)	68 (100%)
2009	71 (91.3%)	7 (8.97%)	78 (100%)
2011	68 (89.47%)	8 (10.53%)	76 (100%)
2012	66 (89.19%)	8 (10.81%)	74 (100%)
2013	66 (84.62%)	12 (15.38%)	78 (100%)
2014	38 (84.44%)	7 (15.56%)	45 (100%)
2015	37 (82.22)	8 (17.78%)	45 (100%)
2016	66 (88%)	9 (12%)	75 (100%)
2017	66 (88%)	9 (12%)	75 (100%)
2018	65 (87.4%)	9 (12.6%)	74 (100%)
2019	51 (89.47%)	6 (10.53%)	57 (100%)
2020	49 (90.74%)	5 (9.26%)	54 (100%)

Year	Male	Female	Total
2021	67 (85.9%)	11 (14.10%)	78 (100%)
2022	65 (85.53%)	11 (14.47%)	76 (100%)
2023	63 (86.3%)	10 (13.70%)	73 (100%)
2024	65 (90.28%)	7 (9.72%)	72 (100%)

Source: Compiled by the authors from Women & Men in India, 2023a

Table 2 shows that women have not been given due representation in the Central Council of Ministers from 1998 to 2024 due to various socio-cultural and political reasons. The women's representation in the Central Council of Ministers reveals neither a progressive trend nor a regressive trend. In 1998, only 9.52 per cent of women got access to the decision-making process at the higher level of governance, but even after 26 years of development, Indian society has not broken the glass ceiling for women to participate at the higher level of governance. In 2015, India witnessed 17.78 per cent of Women Cabinet Ministers and the lowest was found in 2009. A longitudinal analysis brings to light that a significant proportion of men have access to the decision-making process at the higher level of governance from 1998 to 2024. This shows that regional and national political parties are mostly controlled by men and they are reluctant to give equal representation to women in the higher levels of governance. The entry of women into politics is being resisted by male-dominated political leaders, political parties and political procedures respectively. Women in general and women belonging to marginalised sections lack reservation to the higher level of governance (Rai, 2017). Women should be allowed to participate in the decision-making process as it will enable them to achieve gender-friendly and gender-sensitive decisions (Kher, Aggarwal, & Punhani, 2017). Though the Government of India passed a 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament in 2023, the implementation will come into force in 2029 due to the delimitation of constituencies in India.

Table 3
Gender Analysis of Elected Representatives in the
State Assemblies in India

State	Year of Assembly Election	Male	Female	Total
Andhra Pradesh	2019	161 (92%)	14 (8%)	175 (100%)
Arunachal Pradesh	2019	57 (95%)	3 (5%)	60 (100%)
Assam	2021	120 (95%)	6 (5%)	126 (100%)
Bihar	2020	217 (89%)	26 (11%)	243 (100%)
Chhattisgarh	2023	71 (79%)	19 (21%)	90 (100%)
Delhi	2020	62 (89%)	8 (11%)	70 (100%)
Goa	2022	37 (92%)	3 (8%)	40 (100%)
Gujarat	2022	167 (92%)	15 (8%)	182 (100%)

State	Year of Assembly Election	Male	Female	Total
Haryana	2019	81 (90%)	9 (10%)	90 (100%)
Himachal Pradesh	2022	67 (99%)	1 (1%)	68 (100%)
Jammu & Kashmir	2014	85 (98%)	2 (2%)	87 (100%)
Jharkhand	2019	71 (88%)	10 (12%)	81 (100%)
Karnataka	2023	214 (96%)	10 (4%)	224 (100%)
Kerala	2021	129 (92%)	11 (8%)	140 (100%)
Madhya Pradesh	2023	203 (88%)	27 (12%)	230 (100%)
Maharashtra	2019	264 (92%)	24 (8%)	288 (100%)
Manipur	2022	55 (92%)	5 (8%)	60 (100%)
Meghalaya	2023	57 (95%)	3 (5%)	60 (100%)
Mizoram	2023	37 (92%)	3 (8%)	40 (100%)
Nagaland	2023	58 (97%)	2 (3%)	60 (100%)
Odisha	2019	133 (91%)	13 (9%)	146 (100%)
Punjab	2022	104 (89%)	13 (11%)	117 (100%)
Puducherry	2021	29 (97%)	1 (3%)	30 (100%)
Rajasthan	2023	179 (90%)	20 (10%)	199 (100%)
Sikkim	2019	29 (91%)	3 (9%)	32 (100%)
Tamil Nadu	2021	222 (95%)	12 (5%)	234 (100%)
Telangana	2023	109 (92%)	10 (8%)	119 (100%)
Tripura	2023	51 (85%)	9 (15%)	60 (100%)
Uttar Pradesh	2022	356 (88%)	47 (12%)	403 (100%)
Uttarakhand	2022	62 (89%)	8 (11%)	70 (100%)
West Bengal	2021	252 (86%)	40 (14%)	292 (100%)

Source: Compiled by the authors from the Ministry of Law and Justice, 2022

Table 3 reveals the gender inequality in decision-making at the state assemblies in Indian society. Most of the states are unwilling to give political space to women in India due to socio-cultural reasons. States such as Chhattisgarh, Tripura and West Bengal have given better representation of women compared to the other states such as Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Puducherry, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Jammu & Kashmir in India. However, on the whole, it is shocking to note that women are politically excluded from the respective state assemblies. This will have repercussions on the policy decision on women's issues in particular and social issues in general. These collective actions by the regional and national political parties reflect the existing power equations in society. Indian society is progressing on many parameters, namely poverty, health care, education and standard of living compared to the pre-independence period, but women's access to decision-making at the state assemblies is regressive. This is due to the patriarchal political structure inside the regional and national political parties that give significant political positions at state, district, town and village levels, mostly to men, not to women (Verma & Yadav, 1996). Therefore, political injustice is being committed to women in Indian society.

Table 4
Gender Analysis in Panchayati Raj Institutions in India

State	Male	Women	Total
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	552 (64.3%)	306 (35.7%)	858 (100%)
Andhra Pradesh	78025 (50%)	78025 (50%)	156050 (100%)
Arunachal Pradesh	5725 (61%)	3658 (39%)	9383 (100%)
Assam	12145 (45.4%)	14609 (54.6%)	26754 (100%)
Bihar	65527 (48%)	71046 (52%)	136573 (100%)
Chhattisgarh	77073 (45.2%)	93392 (54.8)	170465 (100%)
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	100 (68%)	47 (32%)	147 (100%)
Daman & Diu	100 (52.1%)	92 (47.9%)	192 (100%)
Goa	984 (63.3%)	571 (36.7%)	1555 (100%)
Gujarat	72090 (50%)	71988 (50%)	144080 (100%)
Haryana	40536 (57.9%)	29499 (42.1%)	70035 (100%)
Himachal Pradesh	14325 (49.9%)	14398 (50.1%)	28723 (100%)
Jammu & Kashmir	26626 (68%)	13224 (33.2%)	39850 (100%)
Jharkhand	28881 (48.4%)	30757 (51.6%)	59638 (100%)
Karnataka	50924 (50%)	51030 (50.1%)	101954 (100%)
Kerala	8742 (47.6%)	9630 (52.4%)	18372 (100%)
Ladakh	1146 (69%)	515 (31%)	1661 (100%)
Lakshadweep	69 (62.7%)	41 (37.3%)	110 (100%)
Madhya Pradesh	196491 (50%)	196490 (50%)	392981 (100%)
Maharashtra	111958 (46.5%)	128677 (53.5%)	240635 (100%)
Manipur	856 (49.3%)	880 (50.7%)	1736 (100%)
Odisha	50860 (47.3%)	56627 (52.7%)	107487 (100%)
Punjab	58390 (58.2%)	41922 (41.8%)	100312 (100%)
Rajasthan	61469 (48.7%)	64802 (51.3%)	126271 (100%)
Sikkim	573 (49.7%)	580 (50.3%)	1153 (100%)
TamilNadu	50043 (47%)	56407 (53%)	106450 (100%)
Telangana	51372 (49.7%)	52096 (50.3%)	103468 (100%)
Tripura	3640 (54.8%)	3006 (45.2%)	6646 (100%)
Uttar Pradesh	608879 (66.7%)	304538 (33.3%)	913417 (100%)
Uttarakhand	27619 (44%)	35177 (56%)	62796 (100%)
West Bengal	28771 (48.6%)	30458 (51.4%)	59229 (100%)
Total	1734493 (54.4%)	1454488 (45.6%)	3188981 (100%)

Source: Compiled by the authors from the Status of Reservation of Women in PRIs, 2022

Table 4 unfolds the democratic decentralisation for women in Indian society. The Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act (1992) gave opportunities for the marginalised sections of social groups, namely Women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, to participate in the decision-making process. Initially, the Government of India notified 33 per cent reservation to the disadvantaged social groups, however, State Governments such as Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Daman & Diu, Dadar & Nagar Haveli, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand and West Bengal have enhanced the reservation for women from 33 per cent to 50 per cent in Panchayati Raj

Institutions (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2021). This has indeed facilitated the hitherto marginalised women to mainstream Indian society. However, Kaul & Sahni (2009) argue that it has also led to proxy representation in PRIs where the male members of the family, viz., husband, father-in-law, son and son-in-law interfered in the functioning of women in PRIs. Despite these challenges, the elected women's representation contribution to good governance and rural development in village panchayats cannot be forgotten (Sathish, 2021 & 2024).

Table 5
Gender Analysis of Judges in Supreme Court

Judges	Male	Female	Total
Supreme Court	91%	9%	100%

Source: Compiled by the authors from Women & Men in India, 2023a

Table 5 brings to light that only 9 per cent of women judges made it to the Supreme Court of India while a large proportion (91 per cent) of male judges rule the highest judicial body in India. Therefore, gender inequality also exists at the Supreme Court of India. The highest judicial body in the country must set an example to other institutions by fulfilling the constitutional mandate of gender equality in decision-making at all levels of governance. Since the Supreme Court of India is also one of the highest governance dispute mechanisms, it is mandatory to maintain its gender diversity and by maintaining this, its legitimacy will also be reflected in Indian society (Chandrachud, 2020).

Table 6
Gender Analysis of Indian High Court Judges

High Courts	Male	Female	Total
Allahabad	93%	7%	100%
Andhra Pradesh	83%	17%	100%
Bombay	85%	15%	100%
Calcutta	84%	16%	100%
Chhattisgarh	94%	6%	100%
Delhi	79%	21%	100%
Gauhati	83%	17%	100%
Gujarat	73%	27%	100%
Himachal Pradesh	89%	11%	100%
Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh	87%	13%	100%
Jharkhand	95%	5%	100%
Karnataka	86%	14%	100%
Kerala	86%	14%	100%
Madhya Pradesh	95%	5%	100%
Madras	82%	18%	100%

High Courts	Male	Female	Total
Manipur	75%	25%	100%
Meghalaya	100%	0%	100%
Odisha	95%	5%	100%
Patna	97%	3%	100%
Punjab & Haryana	75%	25%	100%
Rajasthan	91%	9%	100%
Sikkim	67%	33%	100%
Telangana	73%	27%	100%
Tripura	100%	0%	100%
Uttarakhand	86%	14%	100%

Source: Compiled by the authors from Women & Men in India, 2023a

Table 6 reveals the existing gender inequality at the High Courts in India. Tripura and Meghalaya High Courts do not have even a single female judge, which amounts togender inequality. High Courts such as Patna, Chhattisgarh, Allahabad, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan compared to other High Courts, have a lesser number of women judges. High Courts in the states such as Delhi, Manipur, Punjab & Haryana, and Sikkim have more than 20 per cent of women judges. Only 13.4 per cent of women judges are in the Indian High Courts (Aditya, 2024). However, the district courts have accommodated nearly 36.3 per cent of women judges in India. This is due to the reservation policies for women in district-level judiciary by the state governments such as Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Odisha, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh for gender justice (Supreme Court of India, 2023). The Indian judiciary should have inclusivity and diversity but it is also reflected as a male-dominated profession. Women judges are under represented at the Supreme Court and in the High Courts in India. Most of the High Courts are headed by a male as the Chief Justice, while women judges rarely get an opportunity to such a position in Indian society (Sai Spandana, 2023). The social structure operates at various levels, such as social stigma, social norms, lack of transparent recruitment process and the absence of reservations enforce gender inequality in Indian high courts (UN Women, 2023).

Health Status

Table 7 brings to light that the states such as Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh female infant mortality rate is higher than the male infant mortality rate. States such as Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh have reported higher than the national female infant mortality rate of 28. This is

due to a lack of consistency by the respective states, which led to higher infant mortality rates in India (Chaurasia, 2020).

Table 7
State wise Gender Analysis of Infant Mortality Rate in India

States	Male	Female
Andhra Pradesh	24	24
Assam	35	37
Bihar	26	29
Chhattisgarh	35	41
Delhi	12	12
Gujarat	24	21
Haryana	29	27
Himachal Pradesh	23	12
Jammu & Kashmir	16	18
Jharkhand	24	26
Karnataka	18	20
Kerala	10	3
Madhya Pradesh	44	43
Maharashtra	15	15
Odisha	35	36
Punjab	18	19
Rajasthan	31	33
Tamil Nadu	13	12
Telangana	21	22
Uttarakhand	24	24
Uttar Pradesh	37	38
West Bengal	20	18

Source: Compiled by the authors from Women and Men in India (2023b)

Further, states such as Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have reported a male infant mortality rate higher than the female infant mortality rate. Only Kerala state reported less than 5 female infant mortality rates. Additionally, states such as Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have also reported less than the national female infant mortality rate of 15. This is due to the vaccination coverage, especially Bacillus Calmette-Guerin (BCG) and measles of state governments in rural areas, leading to a significant reduction in infant mortality rate (Parihar, 2021). Besides, the government healthcare system has also been strengthened through the National Health Mission, which played a significant role in reducing the infant mortality rate in India (Kumar, 2021).

Table 8
Gender Analysis of Under Five Mortality Rate in India

States	Male	Female
Andhra Pradesh	26	27
Assam	38	43
Bihar	28	33
Chhattisgarh	37	45
Delhi	16	13
Gujarat	25	23
Haryana	33	33
Himachal Pradesh	28	19
Jammu & Kashmir	16	19
Jharkhand	26	28
Karnataka	21	22
Kerala	12	4
Madhya Pradesh	51	50
Maharashtra	18	19
Odisha	38	40
Punjab	20	24
Rajasthan	37	43
Tamil Nadu	13	13
Telangana	23	24
Uttarakhand	25	26
Uttar Pradesh	43	44
West Bengal	22	22

Source: Compiled by the authors from Women and Men in India (2023b)

Table 8 unveils that states such as Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh have reported more than the national under-five female mortality rate of 33. Similarly, states such as Assam, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh have reported more than the National under-five male mortality rate of 31. Additionally, states such as Assam, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh have reported more than the national under-five mortality rates of male (31) and female (33) respectively. States namely Delhi, Kerala and Tamil Nadu have reported less than a 16 under-five mortality rate in India.

Table 9
State wise Maternal Mortality Ratio in India

State	Maternal Mortality Ratio
Andhra Pradesh	45
Assam	195
Bihar	118
Chhattisgarh	137
Gujarat	57
Haryana	110

State	Maternal Mortality Ratio
Jharkhand	56
Karnataka	69
Kerala	19
Madhya Pradesh	173
Maharashtra	33
Odisha	119
Punjab	105
Rajasthan	113
Tamil Nadu	54
Telangana	43
Uttarakhand	103
Uttar Pradesh	167
West Bengal	103

Source: Compiled by the authors from Women and Men in India (2023b)

Table 9 reveals that states such as Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal have reported higher than the national maternal mortality rate of 97. States such as Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Jharkhand and Karnataka have performed better comparatively in maternal mortality rate with regard to other states in India. The unmet health needs pose challenges for socially marginalised groups and social factors such as class, caste, education, media exposure and distance problems influence inequity for women as well as children in India (Kumar and Chowdhury, 2024). Marginalised groups such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes women face health care challenges for being poor (Jungari and Chauhan, 2017).

Table 10
Gender Analysis on States with Low Life Expectancy by birth 2016-20 in India

States	Male	Female
Assam	67.3	68.6
Bihar	69.7	69.2
Chhattisgarh	63.5	66.8
Madhya Pradesh	65.5	69.5
Jharkhand	70.5	68.9
Uttar Pradesh	65.3	66.7

Source: Compiled by the authors from women and men in India (2023b)

Table 10 unfolds the states with low life expectancy in India. States such as Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand have reported low life expectancy rates for women compared to the national average of 71.4. Unprecedentedly, except Jharkhand, the remaining states namely Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and

Uttar Pradesh have reported low life expectancy for male compared to their female counterparts. This is due to the social hardship they face in their day-to-day life to fulfil their socio-economic needs. This affects their health physically, socially and psychologically, which eventually takes their lives early compared to the other states in India.

Employment Status

Indian Employment Report (2024) revealed that the greater impact of unemployment was felt amongst the educated youth in India. The rate of unemployment is higher amongst the youth in urban areas compared to rural areas. Nearly two-third of women get access to unpaid family work and a substantial increase in self-employment.

Table 11
Gender Analysis of State-wise Labour Force Participation Rate for Persons aged 15 years & above

States	Male	Female
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	82.4	49.6
Andhra Pradesh	45.8	61.1
Arunachal Pradesh	77.2	58.7
Assam	90.1	20.3
Bihar	74.6	22.4
Chandigarh	72.3	21.4
Chhatttisgarh	83.5	59.8
Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu	89.2	37.6
Delhi	74.4	14.8
Goa	72.4	28.1
Gujarat	82	42.3
Haryana	72.9	20.7
Himachal Pradesh	83.1	71.4
Jammu & Kashmir	76.5	50.2
Jharkhand	78.6	45.8
Karnataka	75.4	38.1
Kerala	73.7	37.5
Ladakh	62.2	59.1
Lakshadweep	69.2	17.3
Madhya Pradesh	83.4	44.3
Manipur	70.6	31.3
Meghalaya	79.6	60.9
Mizoram	67.2	45.1
Nagaland	79.3	65.2
Odisha	78.1	44.7
Puducherry	74.8	33.6
Punjab	78.3	27.6
Rajasthan	74.8	47.9
Sikkim	82.1	68.6
Tamil Nadu	74.5	40.5

States	Male	Female
Telangana	75.6	44.8
Tripura	74.9	35.2
Uttarakhand	73.5	38.7
Uttar Pradesh	79.3	31.2
West Bengal	80.8	33.8

Source: Compiled by the authors from the Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023

Table 11 unveils the greater differences in the gender-wise labour force participation rate for persons aged 15 years and above. States such as Assam, Bihar, Chandigarh, Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Lakshadweep and Punjab reported extreme labour force participation rate inequality between male and female social groups respectively. Further, states namely Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chandigarh, Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Lakshadweep, Manipur, Mizoram, Puducherry, and Tripura reported lesser than the national labour force participation rate of 78.5 for males and 37 for females respectively. States such as Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Ladakh, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu and Telangana have reported better than the national female labour force participation rate of 40 and above. However, amongst these states, Himachal Pradesh has the highest female labour force participation rate of 71.4. The women's unemployment rate increased from 8.5 per cent to 9 per cent in urban areas during the first quarter. Women's self-employment rate has also declined from 41.3 per cent to 40 per cent during the first quarter. This shows that women's access to employment opportunities, especially in the informal sectors, is declining in India (Rajora, 2024).

Educational Status

Table 12
State Wise Gender Gap in Literacy Rate among
Persons of Age 7 Years and Above in Rural Areas

State	Male	Female	Gender Gap
Andhra Pradesh	67.5	53.4	14.1
Assam	89.4	79.9	9.5
Bihar	78.6	58.7	19.9
Chhattisgarh	84	65.6	18.4
Gujarat	85.7	68	17.7
Haryana	85.8	66.4	19.4
Himachal Pradesh	92.3	79.2	13.1
Jammu & Kashmir	84.9	66	18.9
Jharkhand	80.6	61.4	19.2
Karnataka	78.2	63.1	15.1

State	Male	Female	Gender Gap
Kerala	96.7	94.1	2.6
Madhya Pradesh	77.9	61	16.9
Maharashtra	87	71.4	15.6
Odisha	82	67.3	14.7
Punjab	85.5	74	11.5
Rajasthan	77.6	52.6	25
Tamil Nadu	84.2	70.8	13.4
Telangana	70.6	53.7	16.9
Uttarakhand	93.1	79	14.1
Uttar Pradesh	80.5	60.4	20.1
West Bengal	82	72.6	9.4
India	81.5	65	16.5

Source: Compiled by the authors from Women and Men in India, 2023c

Table 12 shows the gender gap in literacy rate among persons aged 7 years and above in rural areas in India. States namely Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh have reported a literacy gender gap more than the national average of 16.5 in rural areas. Further, the Rajasthan state has the highest gender gap literacy rate in Indian rural society. Moreover, the states such as Kerala and West Bengal have the lowest gender gap literacy rate in Indian rural society.

Table 13
State Wise Gender Gap in Literacy Rate among
Persons of age 7 years and above in Urban Areas

State	Male	Female	Gender Gap
Andhra Pradesh	86.5	73.1	13.2
Assam	86.3	91.4	-5.1
Bihar	96.1	75.9	20.2
Chhattisgarh	89.3	82.3	7
Delhi	91.8	83.4	8.4
Gujarat	94.1	86.3	7.8
Haryana	95.2	81.2	14
Himachal Pradesh	97.8	93	4.8
Jammu & Kashmir	88.5	75.7	12.8
Jharkhand	92.6	78.6	14
Karnataka	92.5	83.7	8.8
Kerala	98.2	96.4	1.8
Madhya Pradesh	91.4	79.5	11.9
Maharashtra	95.3	87.6	7.7
Odisha	94.4	85.9	8.5
Punjab	93.8	86.7	7.1
Rajasthan	91.1	74.6	16.5
Tamil Nadu	92.3	85.9	6.4
Telangana	91.7	79	12.7
Uttarakhand	97.4	85.9	11.5

State	Male	Female	Gender Gap
Uttar Pradesh	86.8	74.9	11.9
West Bengal	91.4	84.7	6.7
India	92.2	82.8	9.4

Source: Compiled by the authors from Women and Men in India, 2023c

Table 13 highlights the state wise gender gap in literacy rate among persons aged 7 years and above in Indian urban areas. States such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh have reported higher gender gaps in literacy rates among persons of 7 years and above in urban areas. In contrast, states such as Kerala and Himachal Pradesh have reported lesser gender gaps in literacy rates. Paradoxically, Assam has a higher female literacy rate compared to its male counterparts. Additionally, Bihar has the highest gender gap in literacy of 20.2 in Indian urban areas.

Conclusion

This article unveils that gender inequalities are found in sex ratio, politics, health, employment and education in Indian society. Periyar argues that cultural values, namely the institution of marriage, childbearing, child rearing, and masculinity enslave women in Indian society (Ramasamy, 2007). However, cultural values are not adequate social factors for gender inequalities but there are other social factors of capabilities, namely lack of choices, freedom, decision making, being healthy, being part of a community, being literate, working, resting and being respected to reach their aspirations also influence gender inequalities (Sen, 1979 & 1990, Robeyns, 2003). As a result, this study rejects the argument of Periyar that cultural values are alone responsible for gender inequalities, but there are other social factors of capabilities that also influence gender inequalities in Indian society (Sen, 1979 & 1990; Robeyns, 2003).

The skewed sex ratio is due to female infanticide and social stigma for male children. Despite the entry of women into rural and urban self-governance, they are excluded from the decision-making process in the higher levels of governance such as Parliament and State Assemblies due to the absence of political will from the regional and national political parties. The health status of women reveals that the female infant mortality rate is higher than the male infant mortality rate. The employment status reveals that the male labour force participation rate is higher than the female labour force participation rate. Further, the educational status shows that the male literacy rate is higher than the female literacy rate in India.

End Notes

1. Indian women are viewed as goddesses in the name of Durga, Kali and Saraswati respectively.

2. The secondary sources data were culled out from Government of India records namely, Women and Men in India, 2023; Ministry of Law and Justice, 2022; Status of Reservation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, 2022 and Periodic LabourForce Survey, 2023. Further, data were also taken from the relevant scholarly articles, books, newspaper reports and United Nations reports respectively.

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Disparity in Social Welfare Expenditure across Indian States: An Analysis of Recent Trends

Varinder Jain* and Ashish Dev†

Focused on examining state social welfare expenditure trends, the study has a two-fold objective. First, it examines key trends in magnitude, pace and composition of state social expenditure along with tracing relative significance of social welfare expenditure and secondly, it examines inter-state disparity in magnitude and composition of social welfare expenditure besides estimating trends in state-level social welfare effort and growth elasticity of social welfare. Analytical inquiry relies on secondary data on state finances, published annually by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). It finds that social sector expenditure during the post-1991 period grew but remained limited and social welfare expenditure received scant attention.

Keywords: Social Welfare, Social Sector Expenditure, Growth Elasticity of Social Welfare, India.

Introduction

Being guided by the Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the Indian Constitution, the Indian State has adopted, in general, a welfarist pro-poor approach. By way of enacting various legislations like the National Food Security Act, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, etc., it has provided a basic social safety net to the masses and thus, has been playing

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an instrumental role in protecting them from falling into the traps of poverty. Still, the effort has remained limited. The Indian State has faced large criticism due to its adherence to a neo-liberal policy framework especially during the post-1991 period when its economic policies have remained mostly in favour of capital and consequently, the labour received a residual treatment (Bagchi, 2004).

Available research indicates that social sector expenditure in India has remained limited (Dev and Mooij, 2002). In such a situation, social welfare efforts especially among Indian high-income states have remained fragile (Jain, 2009). Ranging from resource adequacy to interest group politics, several concerns influenced the formation of social sector (welfare) policies over time (Kannan, 2002; Sekhar, 2005). Nonetheless, a detailed inquiry into state social welfare efforts has remained somewhat missing. In such a situation, this study has a twin objective. First, it examines the key trends in magnitude, pace and composition of state social welfare expenditure along with tracing the relative significance of social welfare expenditure in overall social sector expenditure and secondly, it examines inter-state disparity in magnitude and composition of social welfare expenditure along with estimating trends in state-level social welfare effort and growth elasticity of social welfare.

A central contribution of this paper lies in bringing forth state-level disparity in the provision of social welfare in general and its various constituents in particular. It points out that state efforts besides providing social services remain confined to the welfare of SC, ST and OBCs and there has not been much emphasis on labour welfare. Similarly, states differ considerably in their social welfare effort and the growth elasticity of social welfare. It also points out that the provision of social welfare remains considerably influenced by various political regimes and their ideologies.

There are six sections. The next section provides a brief review of the literature. Section three discusses key trends in state social welfare expenditure in India during the 1972-2024 period by aligning it with various political regimes. Section four examines the disparity in social welfare expenditure across major Indian states during the 1991-2024 period. Section five addresses the question of affordability and examines social welfare efforts made by each state besides examining state-wise disparity in the growth elasticity of social welfare and the final section provides key conclusions.

State and Social Welfare

Guided by Keynesian economics, the contours of welfare states became more prominent, especially during the aftermath of World War – II. Nonetheless, it has been the social dynamics like bureaucratic structures, labour unionism, rent-seeking and corruption in central allocations that influenced the shape of social welfare programmes across the world (Quadagno, 1987). Meeting basic needs first emerged as a key agenda, especially during the late 1970s with Paul Streeten and others advocating for adopting a basic needs approach to development (Streeten, 1981; Streeten, 1984; Stewart, 1985). Human development also got its due significance and its role in boosting productivity was acknowledged with Amartya Sen and others suggesting for human development-led capabilities approach to development.[1]

Nonetheless, Rudra (2002) has observed that under globalisation, there has been a decline in welfare expenditure in the context of developing nations. Here, the policymakers have remained focused on expanding the size of the economic pie and social welfare took backstage due to limited economic resources to finance welfare schemes. The belief that the trickle-down effect of economic growth will happen eventually further conditioned such outcomes. Rudra (2007) has also classified the welfare efforts of developing nations as both productive and protective - the former aimed at promoting a market economy to reap the benefits of global competition and the latter targeted at protecting marginalised sections and domestic firms from market adversaries. Similarly, Yoon (2009) has advocated the efficiency thesis and compensation thesis to uphold the significance of social welfare policies in developing countries' global trade dynamism. In this context, labour unionism, political stability, democracy and agendas of political parties emerged as key determinants influencing budgetary allocations to promote social welfare.

In the Indian context, economic reforms in 1991 remained a watershed moment that shifted policymakers' stance towards free market forces. Panchamukhi (2000) has observed that the planned, developmental and capital expenditures received a setback during this period when revenue slippages on account of tax cuts constrained budgets and the social sector received a residual treatment. There has been a shrinkage of the state share in total planned outlay over different plan periods. It is observed that 'states had a 50 per cent share in Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Plans. It came down to 37.5 per cent in the Eighth Plan, 43 per cent in the Ninth Plan and 40 per cent during the first three years of the Tenth Plan' (Sarma, 2005: 1416). Rath (2013)

has also observed that incremental contributions made by central government interventions remained higher than those made by the states. Central share in total social sector expenditure increased from 15 per cent in 1990-91 to 20 per cent in 1998-99 and further to 29 per cent in 2007-08.

Within the social sector, not much is known about the dynamics of state social welfare. Secondary data on state social welfare is provided by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its data series on State Finances – these statistics are published annually by the RBI. It needs to be noted that in the annual accounts of state finances, the broad category of revenue expenditure contains data on social sector expenditure which is an amalgam of expenditure under various categories such as 1) education, sports, art and culture, 2) medical and public health, 3) family welfare, 4) water supply and sanitation, 5) housing, 6) urban development, 7) welfare of Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), 8) labour and labour welfare and 9) social security and welfare. These are the categories in sub-sets seven, eight and nine which constitute social welfare expenditure. The study focuses on the 1972-73 to 2023-24 period - till 2021-22, actual expenditure data is available and for 2022-23 and 2023-24, revised and budgetary estimates are considered. Besides examining trends at the all-India level, analysis is carried forward at the state level. State finances data for social sector expenditure has two components: revenue expenditure and capital expenditure. Capital expenditure on social services includes expenditure on (1) the welfare of SC, ST and OBCs, (2) social security and welfare. Unlike revenue expenditure, it does not include expenditure on labour and labour welfare.

Political Regimes and Trends in State Social Welfare in India

A glance at the trend of state social sector expenditure (SSE) and state social welfare expenditure (SWE) since 1972-73 reveals that Indian states, in aggregate, have shown an increasing trend in both the SSE and SWE. In initial years, the share of SWE in overall SSE has remained within 8 to 10 per cent. In 1977-78, it increased to 11.77 per cent and since then it has recorded a somewhat increasing trend till 1984-85. This share has declined till 1989-90 and it remained stagnant till 1999-2000. From 2000-01 onwards, there was a steep increase till 2013-14, post which there was a minor fall and it remained stagnant till 2021-22 (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Macro Trends in State Social Sector Expenditure, 1972-73 to 2023-24
(base year = 2011-12)
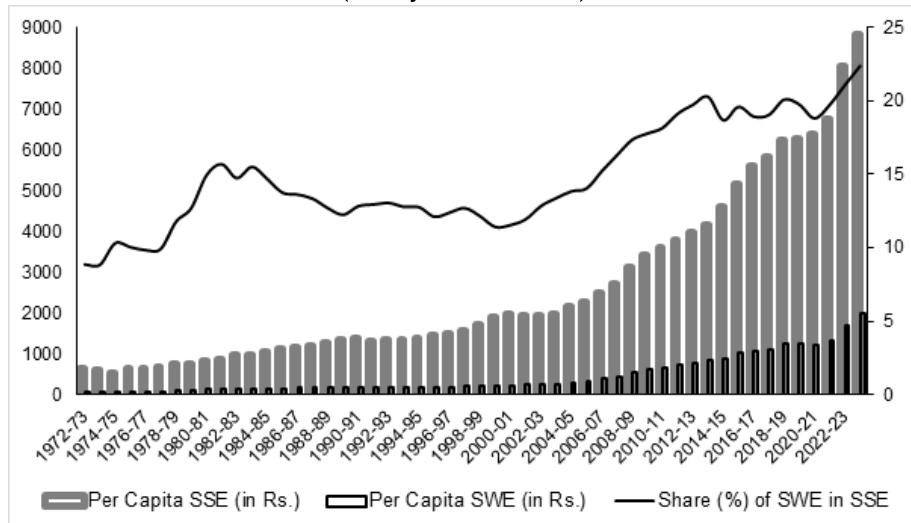
Source: Based on RBI Database on Finances of State Governments

Figure 2
Expenditure as Ratio of GDP (%)
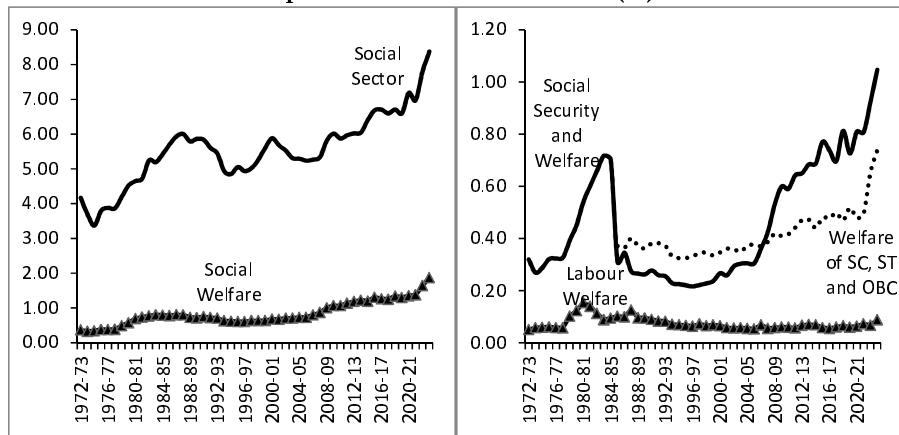
Source: Same as Figure 1

Table 1
Political Regimes and Social Sector (Welfare) Expenditure in India

		(Average) Per Capita Total SSE (in Rs.)	(Average) Per Capita Total SWE (in Rs.)	Share of Total SWE in Total SSE (%)	Trend Annual Growth Rate (%)	
					Per Capita SSE	Per Capita SWE
1972-77	INC	605.19	57.90	9.57	0.75	4.11
1977-80	JP	732.34	84.36	11.52	5.61	17.90
1980-84	INC	903.50	137.48	15.22	6.82	7.33
1984-89	INC	1157.90	157.13	13.57	5.03	1.80
1989-91	JD/SJP	1360.37	170.73	12.55	2.44	7.09
1991-96	INC	1361.23	173.16	12.72	2.20	0.64
1996-98	BJP/JD	1537.64	193.00	12.55	4.64	7.03
1998-04	BJP	1899.50	232.03	12.22	2.08	4.56
2004-09	UPA-I	2551.85	396.14	15.52	9.23	15.24
2009-14	UPA-II	3788.22	722.65	19.08	4.94	8.40
2014-19	NDA-I	5482.26	1058.08	19.30	7.11	8.27
2019-22	NDA-II	6457.98	1255.08	19.43	3.50	3.47
2019-24*		7252.62	1488.00	20.52	9.19	12.83

Note: *implies that data pertaining to 2022-23 and 2023-24 are revised and budgetary estimates respectively. Source: Based on RBI Database on Finances of State Governments

In terms of the share of gross domestic product (GDP) spent on social sector and social welfare, one may observe that compared to 1972-73 levels, the Indian states have spent an increasing share of GDP on social sector and social welfare. The states, in the aggregate, recorded an increasing share of GDP in the social sector till 1987-88 when this expenditure ratio reached about six per cent. Since then, this ratio declined and stagnated till 2007-08, following which, it picked up pace and remained within the range of 5.81 per cent to 8.37 per cent till the 2023-24 period. In order to investigate further, the study has collected information on three constituents of social welfare expenditure, viz., social services, labour welfare and SC, ST and OBC welfare. It may be observed that a large chunk of social welfare expenditure, over time, is spent on the provision of social services and the welfare of SC, ST and OBCs. Labour welfare receives the least attention and in terms of GDP spent, it remains one-thousandth part during the entire period of the study (Figure 2).

One may relate such expenditure trends in the social sector and social welfare to various political regimes that Indian democracy witnessed during the 1972-2024 period[2] as political regimes and their ideology influence the allocation of public resources (Sekhar, 2005). It may be observed that in the 1972-77 regime of the Indian National Congress (INC), the average per capita SWE remained at Rs. 57.90 – it increased to Rs. 84.36 in the 1977-80 period during the regime of the Janata Party (JP). This increase

in social welfare was 45.70 per cent. With the return of Mrs. Indira Gandhi to political power, the initiation of the new Sixth five-year plan and the introduction of pro-poor schemes like the minimum needs programme, per capita SWE witnessed a subsequent increase of 62.97 per cent during the 1980-84 period when per capita SWE reached to Rs. 137.48 – the share of SWE in total SSE peaked to 15.22 per cent.

The introduction of economic reforms and gradual transformation of the Indian economy to a free market economy had a dampening impact on provisioning for the social sector and social welfare – growth of SSE and SWE reduced considerably during the 1991-96 period. But, with BJP/JD taking over political power in the 1996-98 period, both the SSE and SWE witnessed massive growth, a trend that UPA-I had to maintain. Under the UPA-II regime, growth in SSE and SWE remained moderate and these were subsequently picked up during the NDA-I regime but it again moderated during the NDA-II regime. On the whole, it may be observed that since 1972, expenditures on the social sector and consequently, social welfare remained influenced by the nature of political regimes. Political parties accorded more significance to social sector development and social welfare provisioning in their first term. In subsequent terms, annual growth rates witnessed moderation. Nonetheless, the emphasis of political parties on the promotion of social welfare has increased over time and consequently, the share of SWE in total SSE has increased from 9.57 per cent in the 1972-77 period to 20.52 per cent during the 2019-24 period.

Disparity at the State Level

Given such a macro-level profile, one may find considerable variation at the state level. In order to have a rigorous analysis, the states need to be classified. An easy approach could be to classify them as per their affluence levels, i.e., high-income, moderate-income and low-income states. However, it needs to be noted that the categorisation of Indian states as per this criterion may lead to erroneous conclusions as the states may move over time from one category to another. In such a situation, a better alternative could be to consider the growth aspect. It may be presumed that rapidly growing states might perform better in incurring relatively high magnitudes of social welfare expenditures than those recording moderate to lower rates. In this context, this study has focused on major Indian states only and classified them into four growth categories.[3] The period of analysis is also restricted to the 1991-2024 period when continuous data for most of these states is available.

A.   *High Growth States*

Among high-growth states, the highest per capita social welfare expenditure is provided by Telangana and Andhra Pradesh – the former being part of the latter. During the 2004-09 period, Andhra Pradesh provided 2.86 times more per capita social welfare expenditure than its preceding period (Table 2) and it has been largely the outcome of the formation of INC-coalition government at both central and state level. The state of Tamil Nadu which was once better in the provision of social welfare (Jain, 2009) is not found to be performing well, especially during recent times when it witnessed a fall in inter-state ranking from four (during 2004-14 period) to seven (during 2014-22 period).

Among all the high-growth states, the experience of Gujarat in the provision of social welfare has been worrisome. The state has been a low provider of social welfare even in the 1991-96 period and it could not perform well over time despite recording high growth as a consequence, its per capita social welfare expenditure grew only by 4.95 times over 1991-2022 period - with such low performance in the provision of social welfare, its inter-state ranking has fallen from 12 to 17 and it has remained so consistently over 2009-24 period.

Table 2
Per Capita Social Welfare Expenditure (PCSWE) Trends: High Growth States

	Andhra Pradesh		Uttarakhand		Gujarat		Telangana		Tamil Nadu	
	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R
1991-96	303.31	4			167.75	12			235.77	7
1996-98	280.83	7			189.71	11			292.99	5
1998-04	373.55	4	126.84	18	234.14	11			363.18	5
2004-09	1070.51	1	528.2	6	294	15			606.56	4
2009-14	2005.59	1	750.23	9	441.1	17			1135.12	4
2014-19	2813.61	1	1336.53	6	680.85	17	2445.02	2	1301.08	7
2019-22	3291.21	2	1454.63	8	831.12	17	3639.05	1	1250.92	10
2019-24*	4153.7	2	1725.99	8	926.01	17	4562.68	1	1426.15	9

Note: * implies that 2022-23 and 2023-24 data are revised and budgetary estimates respectively; PCSWE - Per Capita Social Welfare Expenditure; R – Rank; state ranking is estimated for all the 21 major Indian states.
Source: Based on RBI Database on Finances of State Governments

B.   *Moderate Growth States*

Among moderately growing states, Kerala could record significant performance. Though the growth of per capita social welfare expenditure during the 1990s has remained limited, it grew considerably during the post-2004 period – per capita social welfare expenditure almost doubled every five years during this period which improved Kerala's inter-state ranking

over time - somewhat similar has been the experience of Karnataka. The state of Haryana could provide relatively high per capita SWE over time. Similarly, Himachal Pradesh could record better performance during the 2019-22 period (Table 3).

Table 3
Per Capita Social Welfare Expenditure (PCSWE) Trends:
Moderate Growth States

	Kerala		Haryana		Himachal Pradesh		Karnataka		Maharashtra		Odisha	
	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R
1991-96	188.28	9	343.44	2	220	8	264.62	5	173.69	11	240.1	6
1996-98	285.89	6	316.94	3	245.34	8	293.17	4	202.36	10	239.57	9
1998-04	300.23	7	401.15	2	282.37	8	331.08	6	257.69	10	267.57	9
2004-09	458.02	9	607.87	3	476.06	7	550.84	5	471.16	8	399.58	13
2009-14	932.57	6	980.16	5	698.62	10	1137.82	3	804.05	7	792.87	8
2014-19	1789.5	4	1697.05	5	1110.2	10	2028.82	3	1070.04	11	1290.22	8
2019-22	2308.03	4	2343.84	3	1777.03	6	1996.22	5	1210.41	11	1254.47	9
2019-24*	2431.37	3	2428.16	4	2025.02	6	2321.46	5	1386.07	11	1366.31	12

Note & Source: Same as Table 2

Among these states, Maharashtra remained the worst performer which despite being the affluent state could not provide relatively high per capita social welfare expenditure – its inter-state ranking has remained in the range of seven to eleven for most of the post-1991 period. The state of Odisha remained a laggard performer, especially during the 1991-2004 period. It showed somewhat better performance during the 2004-24 period.

C.   *Slow Growth States*

Among slow-growth states, West Bengal emerged as a better performer. Per capita social welfare expenditure remained low till 2009 but afterwards, it witnessed an improvement, due to which there has been some improvement in its inter-state ranking (Table 4).

In contrast, Madhya Pradesh which was once a lead performer in the provision of per capita social welfare expenditure till 2004, its performance deteriorated over time, due to which its inter-state ranking witnessed a sharp fall – similar has been the experience of Chhattisgarh as its per capita SWE witnessed a drastic fall from Rs. 1303.96 in 2009-14 to Rs. 625.26 in 2014-19. Rajasthan also remained a poor performer. Nonetheless, it witnessed a minor improvement over time. Similarly, Bihar remained the worst provider of per capita SWE. It has not revealed any growth or signs of catchup over time.

Table 4
Per Capita Social Welfare Expenditure (PCSWE) Trends:
Slow Growth States

	Madhya Pradesh		Rajasthan		West Bengal		Bihar		Chhattisgarh	
	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R
1991-96	303.67	3	80.74	17	96.95	16	144.07	13		
1996-98	424.47	1	76.49	17	103.24	15	101.99	16		
1998-04	420.65	1	109.82	19	156.3	15	101.46	20	383.69	3
2004-09	400.49	12	185.92	19	272.09	17	136.68	20	787.91	2
2009-14	641.51	13	359.66	19	687.9	11	315.1	20	1303.96	2
2014-19	704.2	14	683.64	16	1123.3	9	496.87	20	625.26	18
2019-22	855.92	15	1035.68	13	1570.7	7	515.05	21	679.07	18
2019-24*	998.18	16	1138.88	15	1864.91	7	548.43	21	775.46	19

Note & Source: Same as Table 2

D.   *Very Slow Growth States*

Among states recording a very slow growth rate over the 1991-2024 period, the state of Jammu and Kashmir recorded a maximum fall in inter-state rankings of per capita SWE. Punjab also depicted a similar trend as its per capita SWE remained constant during 1991-2004. Uttar Pradesh also could not do better and remained the worst performer among very slowly growing states with 20th rank during the 2019-24 period. Most of this decline in ranking remains attributable to a decrease in per capita SWE after the 2009-14 period. Similar to their counterparts, the performance of Jharkhand and Assam also remained dissatisfactory as their inter-state ranking of per capita SWE remained much lower (Table 5).

Table 5
Per Capita Social Welfare Expenditure (PCSWE) Trends:
Very Slow Growth States

	Punjab		Jharkhand		Uttar Pradesh		Assam		Jammu and Kashmir	
	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R	PCSWE	R
1991-96	177.96	10			111.75	15	113.42	14	433.39	1
1996-98	170.04	12			158.01	13	120.26	14	415.98	2
1998-04	171.64	13	147.32	16	161	14	131.12	17	211.21	12
2004-09	241.36	18	409.5	11	367.65	14	286.11	16	455.63	10
2009-14	525.25	16	561.39	15	653.44	12	415.3	18	607.75	14
2014-19	683.75	15	743.72	13	604.62	19	454.18	21	856.75	12
2019-22	1108.85	12	954.57	14	571.96	20	601.7	19	854.94	16
2019-24*	1409.36	10	1217.75	13	686.13	20	903.94	18	1146.54	14

Note & Source: Same as Table 2

State Level Social Welfare Effort

The above analysis has revealed that states have been making significant contributions to promote the social welfare of the masses. But,

how serious has been this effort? In order to have a more informed conclusion, such contribution at the state level may be assessed, in a relative sense, by examining the social welfare effort which is nothing but the ratio of social welfare expenditure to gross domestic product. Such estimation remains guided by the affordability argument by which one may say that the states which are relatively better resource-endowed most often, enjoy a greater affordability to finance social welfare. It is observed that during the 1991-2024 period, there has been a varying trend across major Indian states as far as their social welfare effort is concerned. States like Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh have recorded negative social welfare efforts whereas some states like Rajasthan, West Bengal and Telangana have recorded relatively high growth rates in their social welfare effort (Table 6).

In fact, with the onslaught of globalisation, the states in general refrained from making significant contributions towards social welfare. As a consequence, most of the states either recorded negative or negligible social welfare efforts during the 1991-2001 period. However, these states have recorded major improvement over time and have allocated significant proportions of their GDP to promote social welfare. The performance of low (and very-low) growth states like West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Jammu & Kashmir in this respect is praiseworthy, especially during the 2001-10 period. During the recent 2010-24 period, the performance of Rajasthan and Telangana is remarkable.

Table 6
Percentage Share of Real State GDP Spent on
Real SWE across Major Indian States

	State	1991-2024		1991-01		2001-10		2010-2024	
		%	Gr	%	Gr	%	Gr	%	Gr
High Growth States	Andhra Pradesh	2.37	2.79	1.69	-4.06	1.94	5.68	3.14	1.53
	Uttarakhand	0.87	4.28			0.75	4.74	0.99	4.05
	Gujarat	0.52	-0.13	0.55	0.61	0.50	-1.34	0.51	0.89
	Telangana	2.38	8.05					2.38	8.05
	Tamil Nadu	0.92	1.26	0.75	1.4	0.88	3.44	1.06	-3.04
Moderate Growth States	Kerala	0.94	3.92	0.60	1.77	0.65	2.95	1.37	4.84
	Haryana	0.96	2.13	0.77	-1.62	0.82	2.63	1.18	4.51
	Himachal Pradesh	0.82	2.59	0.64	-0.6	0.66	5.83	1.05	5.90
	Karnataka	1.00	3.44	0.66	-1.68	0.75	7.78	1.41	1.16
	Maharashtra	0.68	2.88	0.46	1.41	0.62	5.89	0.86	1.89
	Odisha	1.32	2.57	0.97	-1.38	1.02	2.75	1.77	-0.54
Low Growth States	Madhya Pradesh	1.59	-0.47	1.78	1.93	1.45	-0.34	1.55	0.10
	Rajasthan	0.65	5.87	0.29	-1.32	0.43	4.75	1.04	8.03
	West Bengal	1.15	6.98	0.44	0.57	0.67	10.91	1.95	7.37
	Bihar	1.35	2.25	1.18	-6.59	0.86	9.14	1.80	1.52
	Chhattisgarh	1.55	-3.65			2.02	2.81	1.30	-7.73

	State	1991-2024		1991-01		2001-10		2010-2024	
		%	Gr	%	Gr	%	Gr	%	Gr
Very-Low Growth States	Punjab	0.56	3.97	0.37	-2.77	0.37	7.79	0.83	6.37
	Jharkhand	1.49	3.02			1.24	4.65	1.65	4.43
	Uttar Pradesh	1.26	3.91	0.67	3.8	1.27	13.81	1.69	-2.90
	Assam	0.77	4.09	0.42	1.26	0.72	10.22	1.06	2.81
	Jammu & Kashmir	1.13	1.85	1.01	-13.2	0.87	11.54	1.38	3.64

Note: Gr refers to trend growth rates which are estimated through regression function ln $Y_t = a + \beta\, t$
Where Y and t refer to the ratio of real SWE to real GDP and time respectively.
Source: Same as Table 1

It may also be observed that the experience of high growth across states has not resulted per se in better social welfare expenditures over time – states like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra are glaring examples of such failure. At the same time, there are others who despite recording moderate growth have assigned high priority to promoting social welfare – states like Rajasthan, West Bengal, Assam and Uttar Pradesh deserve mention in this respect.

Further introspection into state social welfare efforts is made through an examination of the growth elasticity of social welfare (Table 7) where West Bengal emerged as a state that has recorded a 2.6 growth elasticity of social welfare, especially during the 2001-24 period. Telangana also recorded better elasticity.

Some of the states like Punjab, Bihar and Jammu & Kashmir recorded negative growth elasticity of social welfare during the 1991-01 period but they improved significantly in subsequent decades. Among newly formed states, the worst performer has been the state of Chhattisgarh which could not record relatively better performance over time in this respect.

Table 7
State-wise Trend in Growth Elasticity of Social Welfare, 1991-2024 Period

	State	1991-2024		1991-01		2001-10		2010-2024	
		Elasticity	R	Elasticity	R	Elasticity	R	Elasticity	R
Rapidly Growing States	Andhra Pradesh	1.681	3	0.006	14	2.652	2	1.130	13
	Uttarakhand	1.341	9			1.162	16	1.641	9
	Gujarat	0.770	19	0.796	7	0.733	20	0.931	15
	Telangana	2.244	1					2.244	3
	Tamil Nadu	1.029	17	1.045	4	1.210	15	0.179	19
Mid-High Growing States	Kerala	1.548	6	1.169	3	1.395	12	1.815	7
	Haryana	1.042	16	0.202	12	1.121	18	1.621	10
	Himachal Pradesh	1.226	12	0.656	9	1.592	9	2.005	5
	Karnataka	1.328	10	0.494	10	1.951	8	1.024	14
	Maharashtra	1.221	13	0.893	5	1.430	11	1.219	12
	Odisha	1.237	11	0.174	13	1.293	14	0.625	18

Disparity in Social Welfare Expenditure across Indian States...

	State	1991-2024		1991-01		2001-10		2010-2024	
		Elasticity	R	Elasticity	R	Elasticity	R	Elasticity	R
Mid-Low Growing States	Madhya Pradesh	0.668	20	1.499	2	0.798	19	0.826	16
	Rajasthan	1.653	4	0.393	11	1.351	13	2.231	4
	West Bengal	2.089	2	0.833	6	2.651	3	2.685	1
	Bihar	1.073	15	-0.714	16	2.048	7	0.823	17
	Chhattisgarh	0.158	21			1.132	17	-0.522	21
Slowly Growing States	Punjab	1.500	7	-0.069	15	2.107	6	2.260	2
	Jharkhand	1.199	14			1.460	10	1.776	8
	Uttar Pradesh	1.431	8	1.532	1	2.808	1	0.135	20
	Assam	1.568	5	0.794	8	2.508	5	1.292	11
	Jammu & Kashmir	1.025	18	-2.490	17	2.607	4	1.828	6

Note: R-Rank
Source: Same as Table 1

Conclusion

Focused on examining social welfare expenditures in India in general and across states in particular, this study has made certain striking observations which are as under:

- The share of SWE in total SSE has increased over time in a step-like pattern and it has remained considerably influenced by changes in political regimes at the central level. The contribution of Indian states, in general, to strengthen their social sector has risen to 7.41 per cent of their GDP wherein one-fifth part is attributed to social welfare.

- Social welfare expenditure remained largely focused on the provision of social services and the welfare of SC, ST and OBCs in general across all the states and the aspect of labour welfare has been overlooked across all the states which is a cause of concern especially when India is aspiring to be a developed nation by 2047.

- Growth per se does not ensure better social welfare as the study has found some high-growth states are the worst performers whereas some slow-growing states have emerged as better providers of social welfare.

- The onslaught of globalisation and the adoption of a market-based economy appeared to have a dampening impact on the state's expenditure on social welfare. Nonetheless, there have been some states which bounced back and provided better social welfare in subsequent decades.

- The growth elasticity of social welfare has remained above unity for 18 (out of 21) major Indian states which implies that states have been allocating a proportionately higher share of their GDP for promotion of social welfare which is an encouraging trend.

Nonetheless, inferences drawn by the study remain contingent on the availability of secondary data – regular data for most of the Indian states is available after 1991. The analysis remains restricted to major states only and due to the paucity of data, it could not draw comparative analysis for north-eastern states. Similarly, it could not trace out various determinants of social welfare at the state level.

Appendix

Figure A1: State-wise Trend Growth Rate (%), 1991-2024 Period
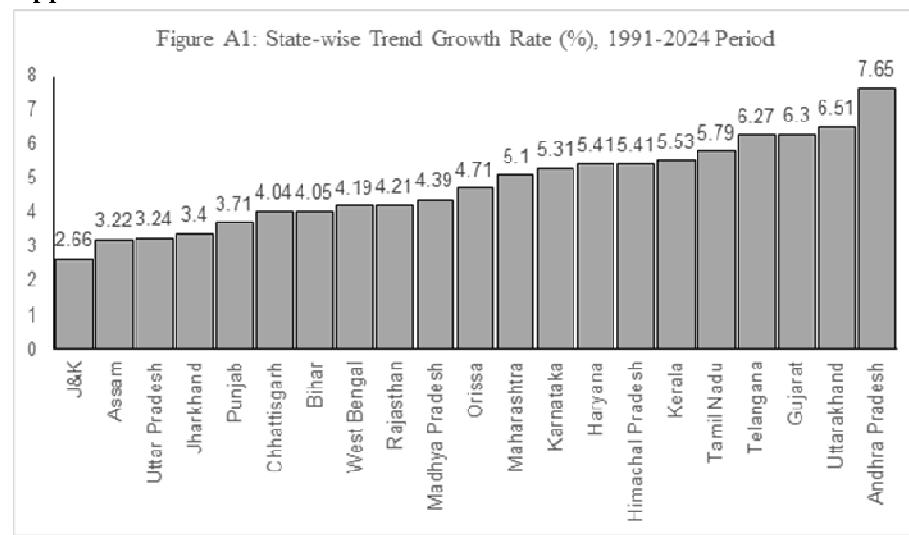
End Notes

1. UNDP's constant release of Human Development Reports aptly exemplifies adherence to such approach.

2. Though the government of Indian National Congress (INC) was formed in 1971, secondary data on social sector and social welfare is available from 1972 onwards.

3. Trend annual growth in GDP across major Indian states ranged between 2.66 per cent to 7.65 per cent during 1991-2024 period (Figure A1, in appendix). Four levels, as per growth quartiles, define state-level growth category as follows: Very slow growth states (if gr<3.875 per cent), Moderately less growth states (if 4.71 per cent <gr>3.875 per cent), moderate growth states (if 5.66 per cent<gr>4.71 per cent) and High growth states (if gr>5.66 per cent).

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Role of NGO, Civil Society and Issues of Development: The Indian Experience

Deepika Gupta*

The notion that development can be the offshoot of democracy captivated the minds of the people of India till the 1980s and, therefore, the state as the caretaker of the developmental aspirations of people also continued to grapple with them. However, the fact that economic growth had not brought the desired results and the number of those living below the poverty line increased in real terms aroused a sense of disenchantment with the state as the panacea of growth. The pressure to bring systemic reforms based on neo-liberal policies provided the ground for further consolidation of discontentment among the people. The withdrawal of the state from the role of the main caretaker increased the need for substitute institutions for development. This was the time when civil society asserted itself in an unprecedented manner and a kind of interaction began between state and civil society. The efforts to deepen the democracy by bringing forth the Right to Information and the growth of independent Media also resulted in strengthening the civil society. The unfolding of scams with the help of RTI brought resistance to state-sponsored development programmes. The beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century witnessed an unprecedented rise of NGOs and a new phase of social movements. This paper tries to analyse the role of NGOs in the developmental process in India from the broader perspective of civil society.

Key Words: Democracy, Development, Civil society, NGO.

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Role of NGO, Civil Society and Issues of Development: The Indian Experience

Introduction

In a democratic setup, the major task of fulfilling the developmental aspirations of people lies with the state or elected government. In India, too, with the dawn of independence, the state took up the burden of empowering people and playing a crucial role in formulating and implementing social and economic development programmes. However, the problems that people faced in India were multifarious and much more complex. The efforts were required not only for economic development but also for social equality.

Therefore, the objective of India's development strategy (Kothari, 1984) became the establishment of a society built on the socialistic pattern in which growth, social justice well-being and eradication of poverty became priorities. The achievement of these objectives was tough as the chosen framework was democracy and the economic model was of mixed economy. In the mixed economy, public and private sectors existed side by side but all important ventures were supposed to be looked after by the public sector. Hence, over the years, the expanding task of tackling this burden by the state became cumbersome and was partly shifted to non-state agencies which became further strengthened by the strong push given by the process of liberalisation and globalisation at the beginning of the 21st century.

Growth of NGOs

NGOs are non-profit organisations, independent of government influence but entitled to government funding. These can be found in almost all walks of social life (Amin et al, 1990). In India too, these are varied and can be found in almost all fields of work. Starting from charitable societies, NGOs took up the cause of education, primary health, social awakening, calamity relief, environmental protection, religion etc. Historically, the existence of NGOs in India was not an unknown phenomenon even prior to independence as social service or *Samaj Seva* had been an integral part of Indian culture. The existence of NGOs can be traced to many religious reform movements that took place in the 19th century. Brahmo Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Theosophical Society, and Arya Samaj all worked for reform in Hindu tradition and practices, as well as, played a role in the freedom of India. Likewise, a number of NGOs emerged in India after Independence. The reference is often made to Mahatma Gandhi who opined to do away with Indian National Congress and turn it into a Lok Seva Sangh or NGO. This could not happen but many voluntary agencies were set up by

the followers of Mahatma Gandhi to work on various social and economic issues.

In independent India, under the leadership of Congress, economic development was planned insisting on all important ventures to be taken care of by the public sector. However, by the 1960s a sense of realisation grew that the task of rural development cannot be completed entirely by government agencies and supportive agencies were required. Thus the need to develop NGOs at the grassroots level was felt. Two wars and drought in the 1960s exposed the need to be self-reliant on the food front and gave impetus to the growth of NGOs in rural areas (Chandra and Taghioff, 2016). The five-year plans, nationalisation of banks (1969), community development plan, green revolution, and direct attack on poverty did not have much-desired results and the Indian economy grew only at a three-plus rate. Emergency created an environment where there was no right to strike and other rights were suspended. Therefore, 20-point programme gave direction besides pushing industrial and agriculture sectors to growth. Because of these, the 1980s saw economic growth getting better but still slow and touching only five (industrial growth touching 6.9 and services sector at 6.3). In such a situation the government had no choice but to further enhance the role of and get support of NGOs for rural development during the sixth five-year plan. The same was felt necessary for developing self-reliant communities during the seventh five-year plan.

The continued poverty and slow rate of growth in India were attributed to state control and planned economic development which had undermined the free market forces. The alternative was to give a free hand to market forces and make structural reforms in the economy so that the role of the state was reduced. Though some of the financial and economic reforms were introduced in the mid-80s, doing away with socialist inputs of the economy altogether was a gigantic task and required great political will as any systemic change in the economy would have been treated as pro-rich - anti-poor and opening to external influences. For a democratic government in India which survives on populism, it was difficult to thrust upon this course. The situation became worse in the late 80s when the rising expectations of people and frustration of unemployed youth got mixed up with the Mandal Commission recommending reservation for other backward classes. This was the time when on the social front, fragmented India was burning and on the other hand the growing imbalance on the economic front was culminating in a severe balance of payment crisis as the current account deficit had reached 2 per cent of the GDP.

The balance of payment crisis in 1991 created an impeccable situation when India had to implement a structural adjustment programme as prescribed by the World Bank and IMF which was popularly known as economic reforms. India had to procure a 1.8 billion dollar IMF loan to bail out itself from the precarious situation created by the balance of payment crisis. The then finance minister Man Mohan Singh, presented the Union Budget on 24th July 1991 and the process of liberalisation was set in motion. The liberalisation process was aimed at doing away with the licence permit raj and decreasing government intervention in business and other economic fields. The policy also opened the Indian economy to the global market besides encouraging privatisation. Disinvestment became necessary. Inefficient PSUs had to be gotten rid of as these became liabilities to the Government rather than assets. The low profitability of PSUs resulted in reduced national savings and low domestic product. Hence, the thinking that the Government should venture only in core areas was strengthened. The idea that the Government should leave non-core areas to the private sector was also strengthened as the private sector was increasingly doing well in non-core areas. Thus, a change in the Industrial policy reduced the list of industries reserved solely for the public sector from 18 industries to three. The Government kept only Railways, Atomic Energy and Defence Ventures with it. Other heavy industries like iron and steel, minerals and mining, oil, air transport, telecommunications, electricity generation and distribution etc. were opened for the private sector. This disinvestment process was marked by some institutional changes. A new Department for Disinvestment was created in 1999 which eventually upgraded to the Ministry of Disinvestment in 2001.

This withdrawal of the state from the earlier held responsibilities posed a challenge to the hitherto enshrined goals of growth with social justice. Hence, in the ninth five-year plan, NGOs were given a significant role in the development on a public-private partnership basis. Since then the role and involvement of NGOs grew not only in agricultural development policies and their implementation mechanisms but also in providing expertise in different fields. They also developed capacity to help in mobilising the local resources to be used for development projects.

The significance of NGOs increased with the ushering of a new era which came along with the idea of good governance and implementation of Panchayati Raj in India. Good governance was seen as a necessary precondition for development and power to people necessary for good governance. In fact, the disintegration of the Soviet Union brought problems

to India as India lost its trusted partner in trade, development and security. Therefore, for the overhauling of the Indian economic system and development, the idea of good governance came as a much-needed reprieve. The term governance was used to define the reinventing of administration, to make it more receptive to the needs of globalisation.

The nineties were a tough time for India politically as well as economically. The LPG process was pushed without any political or business people supporting it. The electorate at large did not support this policy either and the result was Congress getting defeated in the Lok Sabha elections of 1996 and two consequent elections (Kumar, 2004). The successive governments too lacked a majority and could not speed up the reforms. National Democratic Alliance (NDA) which gained majority in 1999 tried to accelerate the process of reforms. However, globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation too could not deliver the expected result as the structural reforms could not be completed and the bottlenecks and slow speed of reforms adversely affected the business scenario. Liberalisation and privatisation did not do much to expand the industrial base. On the contrary, India witnessed unprecedented farmers' agitation. Farmers protested against land acquisition. Land was required for setting up of industries and for creating Special Economic Zones. Violent clashes took place in many places, especially in Singur (W. Bengal), Jaitpur (Maharashtra), Appal (U.P.), Sanand (Gujrat), Dadri (U.P.), Bhatta Parsaul (U.P.), Yamuna Expressway (U.P.), Nandigram (W.Bengal), Greater Noida (U.P.), Posco (Orissa).

The land acquisition and displacement of people have been a troubling matter since the days of building big dams. The protest movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan were witnessed. The major cause of this was the land acquisition which was done on the basis of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and no proper compensation was paid to farmers. The continued protests compelled the Government to enact a new law in 2013. These protests had a great impact on the political scenario too. The Nandigram movement in West Bengal proved a watershed and made Mamata Banerjee the leading political figure of West Bengal. Her party Trinamool Congress defeated the Communists and the long rule of party in West Bengal came to an end (India.com).

NGOs became more proactive at the beginning of the 21st century. The field of their operations expanded and encompassed poverty alleviation, child and women rights, child labour, caste discrimination, rural development, water, sanitation, environment and health issues. The growing presence and good finance supply increased the power of these NGOs. These

became successful in influencing the government to bring out certain policies like the right to information, MNREGA, (Jakimow, 2014) right to education, juvenile justice, food security, Nirmal Gram initiative etc. The filling of Public interest litigation and judicial activism played an important role in strengthening civil society. The direct intervention of NGOs and social activists in the decision-making process as the representatives of Civil Society became clear during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

A consultative body called the National Advisory Council was formed under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi and many social activists made members of it. These members found themselves so important that some of them like Aruna Roy kept threatening to end their association with the council if the government found itself unwilling to increase welfare spending or enact certain laws as desired by them. Soon, this growing power of NGOs and their functioning came under the scanner. The Comptroller and Auditor General of India indicated an organised scam in the giving of grants by the Ministry of Environment and Forest. No accounts were maintained for 20 years against grants released to NGOs and expenditure incurred thereon amounting to Rs. 597 crores (Hindustan Times, 29 November 2010). Suspicions grew about the real motive of their existence and the sources of their funding, especially, foreign ones. During 2009-10, 22,000 NGOs got ten thousand crores of rupees out of which 1663.31 crores were from the US, UK, Germany, Italy and Netherlands. These organisations were alleged to have gained strength with this money and started raising the interest of their donors rather than the Indian people, state or society. The Intelligence Bureau also examined the fund sources, motives and working interests of NGOs and found that these were working in the interests of foreign countries. In a report, it said that these NGOs were noticed to be using people-centric issues to create an environment, which could stall development (Times of India, 24 October 2015). NGOs were patronising agitations and creating an atmosphere against the installation of nuclear and coal power plants in India. It was alleged that NGOs had built up a nexus with local organisations and with the help of these NGOs were involved in such activities that had adverse impact on GDP and growth in India. Greenpeace was named as the NGO working against coal-based power plants and coal mining activities in India. It was using foreign funds to generate agitation in and around major coal-based power plants in India (New Indian Express, 24 October 2015).

In 2015, the Government of India made an enquiry and identified over 42,000 NGOs which had foreign funding and took action against some international donors for not obeying the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) 2011. Several charity organisations were suspected of diverting funds for purposes other than the permitted use of foreign funds. The list included NGOs operating in religious, cultural, economic, social and educational fields (Sundar, 2010). The money launderers were also suspected of using this method to transfer black money. Many religious groups were found to be not paying taxes. An enquiry was ordered and about 8,875 NGOs were found to be evading taxes. The permits were cancelled for not filing returns and acting against the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA). Lok Sabha debated the issue and made critical remarks (XII LOK SABHA Debates). In 2016, the deadline for NGOs to declare assets was extended (NDTV 28 July 2016). The Lok Sabha passed the bill and extended the deadline for declaring assets. It benefitted 50 lakh central government employees' directors and trustees in NGOs. To facilitate the process, a bill amending section 44 of the Lokpal and Lokayukt Act was brought in LokSabha. The passage of the amendment bill was so smooth that only a single CPM member not favoured and voted against it. This episode was questioned by the left parties as to what the urgency to passing the bill and opined that it could be seen as a negation of the anti-corruption law. During the Anna Hazare-led movement for Lokpal, the voice was raised to include NGOs and corporations under Lokpal's preview (Naidunia, 18 April 2012).

NGOs and Civil Society

Growing power and interference of NGOs in governance coupled with protest movements against corruption created a situation where people at large felt agitated. It was not only in India but throughout the world that at the beginning of the 21st century, the concept of civil society became one of the most talked about concepts among scholars, academicians and activists alike (Kaldor, 2003). The civil society became the context in which to relate all the happenings and the events around. India experienced a parabola of democracy enlarging in 2011 onwards as more and more people joined protest movements and felt that only the assertiveness of civil society could save them from unjustified excesses (Kaviraj, 2001). The strong civil society was seen as the cornerstone of democracy, good governance, pluralism and for achieving social and economic goals (Edwards, 2011).

The protest movements which India witnessed in 2011 and 2012 were against corruption. The organisers of India Against Corruption (IAC)

campaigned massively against corruption. Masses were mobilised and demand was raised for the creation of a Lokpal (ombudsmen) that they hoped would help to bring about a corruption-free India. One could see some similarities between the Anna Hazare-led IAC campaign and the campaigns of the 1970s led by Jayaprakash Narayan. Anna Hazare led the IAC movement and attracted great support because of the electronic and social media building a massive network of supporters. However, core members of IAC had differences of opinion and their differences became so wide that a split was made. It resulted in division within the movement. The point was whether to take a direct part in politics or not. The majority of IAC members supported direct participation in politics. Following this one of the prominent members Arvind Kejriwal formed the Aam Aadmi Party. Another member of the movement Anna Hazare formed a separate group called Janatantra Morcha. It was seen to be taking the place of IAC and having greater work. Aam Aadmi Party was the answer to civil society when the Lokpal issue did not bring the desired result. People of Delhi with one voice send it to power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the civil society in India has enabled the voiceless and unorganised people to raise their voices and get organised and empowered. Civil society gets active at times when the state fails to do its duty and when it is supposed to bow to the general will. Thus, civil society has performed its basic role of limiting and controlling the power of the state. The movement against corruption shows civil society wants to check, monitor and restrain the use of power by the state. The NGOs are part of the civil society and despite some lacunas acted as facilitators for civil society. The growth of NGOs in India can be attributed to the pressure generated for development and the state's incapacity to deal with the plethora of work it has been assigned. The NGOs acted as the stretched arm of the state and helped not only in rural development and associated fields but also came up with ideas to strengthen democracy. Because of NGOs' legislation, many laws like the Right to Information became a reality and it became possible to access information and make use of it for the betterment of the polity. This ensured the accountability of the state in many spheres too (Tandon and Mohanty, 2004).

Accountability on the part of NGOs is also called for. Non-government organisations have a crucial role to play, not only in rural development but in other spheres too (Singh, 2003). NGO's role is expanding

day by day. This expansion of working expanded their need for increased funding. Today a large number of NGOs depend only on the funds which they receive from foreign donor agencies. NGOs will have to be watchful lest they lose their autonomy in return for such financial assistance. Not only this, NGOs need to ensure that funds are not misutilised and misappropriated and the funds are not used by voluntary workers for their or their relatives' benefits. The NGO leaders should adopt a simple lifestyle. The NGOs should maintain links with foreign donor agencies to finance only those programmes which have a direct connection with the objectives they have pledged. The NGOs should serve the larger community and should not nurture sectarian deals so that the social fabric of the society is not harmed. NGOs should avoid any serious lacunae in their functioning which may turn them into a closed entity and lastly, they should remain transparent.

The role of NGOs in the political sphere also needs caution. The NGOs have the potential to act not only as pressure groups but as an extended arm of political parties. These can act as facilitators for parties for conducting surveys, garnering support, mobilising voters and even for campaigning (Clarke, 1998). This implies they can carry great influence over political parties, the electoral process and the local bodies (Tandon and Mohanty, 2004). It seems the protest movements organised against corruption in 2011 and 2012 had a major impact on the parliamentary elections in 2014. It became a turning point in the electoral history of India.

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National Education Policy 2020 and Malviya's Vision on Education: Examining the Confluence Points

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The key role of education in making a healthy society and a strong nation has been recognised since time immemorial. In the Indian case, the nationalist leaders, during the colonial period, could understand that along with an organised effort for political freedom, efforts must be made towards making India self-reliant, and they found education as a key component of self-reliance. The post-independence educational development of India shows the deep impact of the ideas of these visionaries. The National Education Policy 2020 is a leap forward in this direction, the policy aims at evolving an education system that would be a blend of indigenous and global, science and spiritualism and ethics and reason, it is ready to import ideas from the outside world but, at the same time, want to remain rooted in the Indian knowledge system. The present paper makes a parallel reading of NEP, 2020 and Mahamana's educational vision to uncover the points of correspondence between the two.

Key Words: National Education Policy, Value Education, Multilingualism, Quality Education, 21st Century Education.

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Introduction

Education shapes the nature and character of an individual and society. Education has a twin role to play: moral and ethical growth of the individual, and development of skills, capacities and capabilities, if any education system fails in meeting any of these goals, it would be a flawed system.

The Radhakrishnan Commission rightly pointed out:

"The civilised peoples of the world are puzzled as to why intelligence and education do not bring peace and order; as to why democratic constitutions do not bring democracy; and why religion does not bring brotherhood. One reason is that while professional men in a large degree are in key positions in modern society, education has failed to discharge one of its important responsibilities, that is, developing principles and philosophy by which professional men should work. The engineers serve anyone who pays them well, regardless of the social value of their services. The lawyers' skills are for the sale for right or wrong while the physicians seek a place of largest income rather than that of greatest service. While each may be highly skilled, the total effect is that of great internal stress and even social deterioration" (Radhakrishnan Commission, 1948).

Most philosophers and thinkers, since time immemorial, have agreed on the key role of education in laying the foundation of a good society. However, there is a difference of opinion on the question that 'what is good education'? There are diverse views and perspectives on the purpose, content and method of education. The education system of any country is shaped by its history, ethos, traditions and worldview. However, in the globalised world, education systems throughout the world are going through a major transformation. On the one hand, it has to address the local needs and requirements, on the other, it must meet the global standards and expectations. Reflecting on the challenges of 21st-century education, the Report of the Delors Committee - a committee constituted by UNESCO - Learning the Treasure suggested that education in the 21st century should be planned in such a way so that it can respond to and overcome tensions between: the global and local; the universal and the individual; tradition and modernity; the long-term and short-term considerations; the need for competition and the concern for equality of opportunities; expansion of knowledge and human being's capacity to assimilate it; and spiritual and material (Delors, 1996).

It emphasised the need for life-long education which is 'based on 'four pillars':'learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and

learning to be' (Delors, 1996). Thus, education is the means of holistic development of the individual as well as society.

It would be correct to argue that in the 21st century, the position of a nation-state depends not only on its economic, physical, and military power but also on its educational power. There is a paradigmatic shift in the whole discourse of national power, the traditional notion of national power conceived economic resources, natural resources, and military resources as the key requirements for strengthening power whereas the contemporary notion of national power highlights knowledge as one of the major sources of power, and in fact, as 'the most democratic source of power' (Toffler, 1990). While writing on the structure of power, Toffler conceptualised the trinity of power - knowledge, wealth, and force- and argues that in the twenty-first century knowledge is the most important source of power shaping the intra-society and inter-societal relationship (Toffler, 1990). In fact, a country's ability to make optimum utilisation of its economic, natural and military resources depends on its knowledge resources. 'The first half of the 20th century was dominated by the manufacturing sector and the second half by the service sector. The twenty-first century will be progressively shaped by intellectual capital and convergence of technologies' (Pai, 2004, p. 176).

Thus, the 21st century is the century of human capital and the share of a particular society in the distribution of global power depends on its contribution to the production of knowledge, skills and capabilities. Malcolm Gillis argues that in the contemporary world, the wealth or poverty of a nation depends on the quality of higher education. Those with a larger repertoire of skills and a greater capacity for learning can look forward to lifetimes of unprecedented economic fulfilment' (Pai, 2004, p. 176). Now there is a global consensus on the significance of education in making a better world and fostering a 'deeper and more harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war' (Delors, 1996, p. 1).

However, the significance of education in shaping power dynamics is not absolutely a new phenomenon, the key role played by education in the process of nation-building has been recognised long back. To illustrate, when we look at India's struggle for independence and its efforts to construct a powerful Indian nation-state, we find that, on the one hand, colonial power tried its level best to weaken India's indigenous educational system, on the other hand, the nationalists, along with their political struggle for freedom, invested immense energy in developing an educational system based on

Indian ethos, values, needs and aspirations (Pandey, 2021). In fact, the development of an education system which is truly Indian in its spirit and intent was considered a key component of 'Swaraj'. This is well reflected in the vision of nationalist leaders like Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya, M. K. Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghosh and Rabindranath Tagore who could understand that 'Swaraj' is not possible without an indigenous education system. Tagore's Shanti Niketan, Malviya's Kashi Hindu Vishwavidyalya and Gandhi's Rashtriya Vidyapeeth were not merely educational institutions but rather were the portrayal of their vision of a self-reliant India based on the confluence of finer elements of tradition and modernity. It must be underlined that the educational ideas of these visionaries emerged against the backdrop of nationalist movement but these ideas had a far-reaching impact. It played a very crucial role in shaping the educational policies and programmes of post-independent India.

I

Educational Planning and Development in India: Since Independence

Restructuring the Indian educational system to meet the Indian needs and aspirations after independence was done in the light of the educational ideas of these visionaries. In 1948, the first Education Commission - the University Education Commission- was constituted under the chairmanship of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan to investigate the status of Indian University Education and to suggest measures for improvement. It suggested that university education should be properly planned and designed to ensure the holistic development of students across caste, religion, class, and gender (The Report of the University Education Commission, 1962). In tune with the ideas of Gandhi and Malviya, it laid stress on the need for vocational and professional training as well as religious education for the moral development of students.

To review the status of secondary education in India and to suggest measures for improvement, the Secondary Education Commission, also known as the Mudaliar Commission, was appointed in 1952 under the chairmanship of Dr. A. Lakshmana Swami Mudaliar. The Commission submitted its report in 1953, it recognised the need for multipurpose schools and diversified courses of studies at the secondary level. The objective was to give opportunities to students to choose courses as per their needs and interests (Secondary Education Commission Report, 1956).

The next major development in Indian educational history was the appointment of the National Education Commission under the chairmanship

of D.S. Kothari to advise the Government on 'the national pattern of education and on the general principles of policies for the development of education at all stages and in all aspects' (National Policy on Education, 1968, p.38). The Commission recognised the key role of educational power in the process of national reconstruction. Emphasising the need for equalisation of educational opportunity, the report said: 'The education of the backward classes in general and of the tribal people in particular is a major programme of equalisation and social and national integration. No expenditure is too great for the purpose' (Report of National Education Commission, 1966).

In response to the recommendations of the committee, the Government of India implemented the first National Education Policy of independent India in 1968 with the conviction of 'radical reconstruction of education' (National Policy on Education, 1968). The policy underscored the necessity of sustained efforts to expand educational access, enhance quality across all levels, promote scientific and technological advancement, and instil moral and social values. The core objective was to cultivate capable and principled young individuals, dedicated to national service and development. (National Policy on Education, 1968, p. 38). To attain the constitutional goals of justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, dignity of the individual and unity and integrity of the nation, the policy suggested the provisions for free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14. Further, academic freedom and dignified status and emoluments for teachers were recommended so that they may contribute to the production and dissemination of knowledge. It suggested recognition of regional languages as a medium of education through a three-language formula, equalisation of educational opportunity, special efforts for the education of girls, backward classes and differently abled children to accelerate social transformation, bridging the gap between the community and campus by making work experience and nation service an essential component of education, development of part-time education and correspondence courses in higher education, and adoption of uniform (10+2+3) educational structure (National Policy on Education, 1968). Thus, the NPE 1968 was an ambitious policy which set higher goals for improvement in the Indian education system to facilitate and strengthen the process of national building.

The next major landmark in the educational history of independent India was the implementation of the National Policy on Education 1986 which intended for quantitative expansion as well as qualitative improvement in education. It envisioned an inclusive education system paying attention to specific needs and inclusion of the groups at fringes like

women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, other backward sections, minority groups and physically and mentally challenged students. To optimise employability, emphasis was laid on an effective management system for the vocationalisation of education. The policy aimed at qualitative transformation in higher education ensuring a combination of freedom, autonomy and responsibility (NPE, 1986).

To improve the quality of teaching in higher education, a scheme for rigorous teachers' training through Orientation and Refresher Courses was introduced. Further, the use of computer networks was introduced to improve efficiency in different aspects of the functioning of the university system - like library management, administration, maintenance of financial records and research - and a background was created for the massive use of ICT in education. The policy also highlighted the significance and potential of the Open University System. Thus, the National Policy on Education, 1986 brought major transformation in the Indian education system by responding to the changing aspirations of the Indian democratic milieu and emerging needs of the global society.

However, the need for further modifications in the policy, in light of developments of the 1990s, was felt very soon. The Government of India appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Acharya Rammurti to review NPE, 1986 in May 1990. Further, a committee was set up in July 1991 at the request of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) to recommend modifications in NPE 1986 in light of the support of the Rammurti Committee. The Committee worked under the chairmanship of Sri N. Janardan Reddy and submitted its report in January 1992 and the National Policy on Education (with modification undertaken in 1992) was implemented. The policy suggested the 'creation of a system of performance appraisals of institutions according to standards and norms set at the national or state level' to promote efficiency, quality and effectiveness at all levels of education. It stressed the need for an independent national accreditation agency which led to the establishment of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in 1994. The policy, further, highlighted the need to accelerate the use of educational technology and media for improving quality, ensuring accountability and equalising opportunity for education (National Policy on Education, 1992).

The need for revising and reconstructing the Indian education system to meet the requirements of the 21st-century society was felt again in 2015, almost after three decades of NPE, 1992. A committee under the chairmanship of Late Sri T.S.R. Subramaniam was appointed on 3rd October

2015 and submitted its report on 27 May 2016. On 24 June 2017, a committee to draft education policy was constituted under the chairmanship of Dr. K. Kasturirangan which submitted its report on 31 May 2019. After many rounds of debate, discussion and deliberation at different levels, the National Education Policy 2020 was approved by the Union Cabinet on 29 July 2020. It is one of the most ambitious education policies of independent India aiming at the reconstruction of the education system to attain the goal of a world-class Indian education system by 2040 ensuring 'higher quality, equity, integrity' and accessibility (NEP, 2020).

Thus, the educational journey of independent India- starting from the appointment of the University Education Commission in 1948 to the implementation of NEP, 2020 - speaks of the conviction and commitment of Indian leaders, educationists and policymakers to develop a world-class education system in India. Despite all the flaws and limitations, the Indian education system suffers from, it cannot be denied that the concern for improvement in the education system has remained central to the Indian political and administrative thinking and planning. The credit for this goes to those nationalist leaders who made immense efforts to convince Indian people that only a world-class education and 'a wide diffusion of knowledge' (Malviya, 2012, p. 99) would lead to a self-reliant and powerful Indian nation.

II
Examining the Impact of Mahamana's Educational Vision on National Education Policy, 2020

A thorough reading of NEP, 2020 uncovers that it is deeply influenced by the vision of Indian nation-builders who could dream of India's glorious future when the country was in the shackles of slavery and also took concrete steps to make this dream true. An in-depth reading of NEP, 2020 shows its close resemblance in spirit and essence with Mahamana's educational ideas, despite the gap of almost one century between the time when Mahamana framed his educational ideas and when the NEP was implemented. It speaks of the contemporary relevance of Mahamana's educational ideas and testifies that Mahamana's educational ideas went beyond his own time and age (Mishra, 1961). Despite being an admirer of Indian tradition, Malviya's educational approach was quite flexible, innovative and progressive, he was open to adopting good practices from everywhere (Srivastava, 2013; Bakshi, 1991). In many places, he refers to the education system and practices of the West as remedies for the flaws

of the Indian education system. However, he was a staunch opponent of westernisation of education, what he wanted was a creative blend of tradition and modernity and science and religion in education (Tiwari, 2013; Patel, 2013). Mahamana firmly said that 'the education system which is in vogue in India is unsuitable to our national and cultural needs hardly need saying, we have been blindly imitating a system which was framed for another people and which was discarded by them long ago.' (Malviya, 1929, p. 135).

A parallel reading of Mahamana's ideas on education and NEP-2020 uncovers that NEP, 2020 also reflects the same spirit when it stresses that only by providing access to quality education, the 21st century India can attain leadership position 'in terms of economic growth, social justice and equality, scientific advancement, national integration and cultural preservation' (NEP, 2020, p.3). It stresses the need for reconfiguration of the education system to develop a comprehensive educational scheme ensuring rational, ethical and social development of the individual as well as accelerating employability (NEP, 2020). Mahamana in his speech, in the Legislative Council on 01 October 1915, in support of the Banaras Hindu University Bill, shared a similar view and said that the proposed Banaras Hindu University aimed at producing students 'who would not only be intellectually equal to the best of their fellow - students in other parts of the world, but will also be trained to live noble lives, to love God, to love their country...' (Malviya, 1915, p. 117). The NEP, 2020 echoes the same spirit when it suggests modification in the existing education system to produce well-rounded individuals. It clearly says that 'a holistic and multidisciplinary education would aim to develop all capacities of human beings - intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional and moral in an integrated manner' (NEP, 2020, p. 36).

Further, one can find a close resemblance between the principles and vision of NEP, 2020 and the objectives and ideals of Banaras Hindu University envisioned by Mahamana. In the twelfth Convocation of Banaras Hindu University, Mahamana clearly said that the Banaras Hindu University 'was an institution which should revive the best traditions of the ancient gurukuls of India - like those of Takshashila and Nalanda, where Hindu sages taught and fed ten thousand students at a time and which should combine with them the best traditions of the modern Universities of the west where the highest instructions are imparted in Arts, Science and Technology' (Malviya, 1929, p. 118). The NEP, 2020 lays a similar emphasis on the revival

of 'rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought' and its integration with modern education (NEP, 2020, p. 4).

Measures for Quality Education: A Glance at Similarity between NEP, 2020 and Mahamana's Educational Ideas

NEP, 2020 expresses concern over the poor standard of education and suggests pedagogical innovations and improvements to make the teaching-learning process 'experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based' (NEP, 2020, p.3). It emphasises that education must not be confined to rote - learning but rather should develop the capacity for critical thinking, problem-solving, logical decision-making, higher-order thinking and creativity, and innovation (NEP, 2020, p. 36).

Mahamana had shown similar concern for the declining quality of education during the colonial period and recognised the need for a total restructuring of education from primary level to higher education. Regretting the poor standard of education in colonial India, he categorically said:

"University may be likened unto the trees the roots of which lie deep in the primary schools, and which derive their shape and strength through the secondary schools. Where both are woefully deficient and defective, where there is no diverting of students to vocational courses, where speaking generally, every student is forced to adopt one general course which leaves him unfit for anything except clerical service of a very poor kind, it is not surprising that universities have been hampered in their work by admitting students who are not fitted by capacity for university education and of whom many would be far more likely to succeed in other careers. In the circumstances that exist at present, universities cannot be expected to secure and maintain such a general high standard as they would naturally desire to" (Malviya, 1929, p. 130).

Here, he emphasised the integrated nature of primary, secondary and higher education and suggested that any attempt to improve the standard of higher education should start from the primary level. Mahamana's view has been taken fully into consideration by NEP, 2020 when it talks about reviewing and restructuring the education system from pre-primary to higher education.

Mahamana, almost one century back, could diagnose that in order to convert academic degrees into employment, redesigning the whole curriculum is needed. He exclaimed that due to shortcomings of the existing

curriculum, Indian students after completing higher education are not able to secure decent jobs (Malviya, 1929). As a remedy, he emphasised the need for practical education, what is called outcome-based education in contemporary times. He was a great advocate of Career Oriented Courses as a remedy to the problem of unemployment. He emphasised that the major cause of unemployment is the poor quality of education, for him 'the remedy lies in providing education on an adequate scale and of the right type in commerce, in agriculture, technology, engineering and applied chemistry' (Malviya, 1929, p.131).

Mahamana did not only preach these ideas but also implemented the scheme of practical and outcome-based education in Banaras Hindu University. The University was, in fact, a laboratory for Mahamana where he experimented with his ideas to evolve a relevant model of education for the nation in making (Dwivedi, 2010; Renold, 2021). It must be underlined that the scheme of education which was implemented in the Banaras Hindu University by Mahamana, almost one century back, included components like an internship, in-house training, academic-industry engagement and institutional social responsibility. In the convocation address of Banaras Hindu University in 1929, Mahamana highlighted the efforts of the university for ensuring outcome-based learning:

"It is our constant endeavour that the instruction and training we impart in Applied Science should be thorough and practical. Our students regularly go out at prescribed period for practical training in Railway and other Workshops and Mines... Unless, a student puts in sufficient practical work, he cannot, according to the Regulations of the University, obtain the final degree of B.Sc. in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering of the University... This insistence upon sufficient practical training in all branches of Applied Science, along with the higher standards of theoretical knowledge which we impart, has given high value to our degrees... It is believed that 95 per cent of the young men who have gone out of this university with such a diploma or degree have obtained satisfactory appointments" (Malviya, 1929, p. 121).

NEP, 2020 on Multilingualism in Education and Mahamana's Ideas on Education in Vernacular Language: Similarities of Objectives and Purpose

NEP, 2020 recognises the importance of the mother tongue as a medium of education at an early age and emphasises that children can comprehend complex concepts easily if taught in their home language. It instructs that 'wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least

Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/ mother tongue/local language/regional language' (NEP, 2020, p. 13). It, further, stresses the need for the availability of quality learning resources in regional languages and textbooks in the mother tongue across disciplines. In the initial phase of implementation of NEP, if the textbooks are not available in regional languages, then teachers will be encouraged to teach in bilingual mode to bridge the gap between the language spoken by the child and the medium of education. To facilitate learning, preferably mother tongue will be 'the language of transaction between teachers and students' (NEP, 2020, p. 13). Recognising the power of language, it suggests that students should be encouraged to learn more than one language because multilingualism would have positive impacts on their cognition ability. In this process, NEP, 2020 recognises the special place of Sanskrit in introducing the student to the Indian knowledge system which includes Indian contribution to science, art, literature, architecture, medicine etc.

When the part of NEP, 2020 on 'Multilingualism and the Power of Language' is read in parallel with Mahamana's views on education in vernacular language and the importance of Sanskrit, it appears that Mahamana's view has a deep impact on NEP, 2020. Mahamana was firm in his belief that unless and until vernacular languages are given due recognition as the medium of education and public business, the pride and glory of the Indian nation cannot be restored. He was disappointed with the deplorable state of vernacular languages and Sanskrit in colonial India:

"The lamentable condition into which Hindus have fallen is, in a great measure, due to their divorce from the ancient religion and literature of India. There is no organisation among them to train teachers who should impart instructions to the people in the greatest lessons of truth, purity, rectitude, self-control and unselfish devotion to duty which are so impressively and so copiously taught in their ancient literature... while the classical language of Greece and Rome form a necessary and important element of a respectable education in Europe and America. Very few of the most highly educated Hindus are proficient in the sacred and classical language of their country, and fewer still have explored the priceless treasures still contained in that language" (Malviya, 2012, p. 104).

It was clear to Mahamana that education in a foreign medium would disconnect Indians from their own culture and tradition and would never allow them to think originally producing only imitators but not the thinkers, visionaries and creators. He was of the opinion that the benefit of science

and technology may truly reach the masses only if studied and taught in the mother tongue. He asserted:

"India cannot regain her prosperity until the study and application of the modern sciences becomes, so to speak, naturalised in the country - science cannot become a national possession so long as it has to be studied through the medium of a foreign language. A wide diffusion of science in India as a means of rescuing the people from the abject poverty into which they have fallen is not possible until science, both theoretical and practical, can be learnt by Indians in their own country and in their own vernaculars" (Malviya, 2012, p. 107).

Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussion, it can be concluded that NEP, 2020 in its emphasis on total restructuring of the education system to make it holistic, robust and outcome-based shows close resemblance with Mahaman's vision of education. The NEP, 2020 aims to prepare India for standing out in the 21st-century globalised world where India, with its age-old treasure of knowledge, may take a lead. Mahaman's scheme of education had almost similar objective during the colonial period, he was preparing India for not only political freedom but also intellectual freedom. His scheme was to free India from the clutches of the Macaulay system and colonial mindset. He could understand that an indigenous education system rooted in Indian values and ethos and based on Indian needs would lead the path to the emergence of an independent and self-reliant India.

To sum up, the close resemblance between the vision of NEP and that of Mahamana speaks of the rootedness of NEP, 2020 in the Indian thought tradition and, on the other hand, proves the farsightedness of Mahamana, whose ideas on education are still as relevant as it was almost one century ago.

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Interrogating the 'Choice' to Stay Back: A Study of Left-behind Wives of Jaunpur District

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The phenomenon of male-dominated migration has been extensively studied in terms of its economic implications, remittances, and labour market dynamics. However, the impact of migration on the left-behind women who stay back at their origin - their agency, autonomy, and lived experiences - often receives less attention in research. This study aims to deconstruct the nature of their so-called "choice" of left-behind women to stay back and examines whether it is an autonomous decision, a forced consequence of patriarchal structures, or an adaptive preference between social expectations and individual aspirations.

Keywords: Left-behind Women, Gendered Migration, Patriarchy, Adaptive Preferences, Decision-making.

Introduction

Migration, particularly male-dominated migration, has long been analysed through the lens of economic development, flow of remittances,

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and labour market restructuring. While such studies offer valuable insights, they often overlook the complex realities of the women lives who are left behind in their places of origin. By foregrounding their lived experiences, this research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of autonomy and agency in the context of migration. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the phrase "migrants and their families" was a code for "male migrants and their wives and children" (Grieco, E.M. and Boyd, M., 1998). Women had been overlooked in writings and discourses on migration because they have been portrayed as homemakers, while men have always been portrayed as breadwinners. However, "the gender blindness of migration studies began to be challenged through the writings of feminist scholars in the 1980s and then some mainstream authors in the 1990s" (Castles and Miller, 2009; Cohen, 1995). The incorporation of a gender dimension in migration studies began in the late 1970s, when women migrated to the United States at a rate comparable to that of men (Curren, 2006). These women are subjected to both being an independent economic actor and a dependent family member during migration (Boyd, 1975; Hugo, 1993). This incorporation of gender in migration discourse has been criticised as a "mixed and a stir" approach (Hondagneu, 2003) where women were just one variable of large data sets and only migrant women's experiences have been documented. In the late 1980s, migration research began documenting the experiences of non-migrant women, specifically the wives affected by their husbands' migration (Gulati and Jetley, 1987). This inclusion adds a new dimension to the scholarship on migration. The wives or women who did not migrate are referred to as left-behind women.[1] However, the examination of the gender dimension regarding left-behind wives is limited to the socio-economic impact and paints them as decision-makers - autonomous and empowered (Jetley, 1987; Gulati, 1987; Desai and Banerjee, 2008). Although a few studies have discussed the pain, conjugal separation, and struggles of left-behind wives (Mazumder, 2010), they have not addressed the reasons why they are left behind at their origin, unable to accompany their husbands to the city. It is indispensable to understand the reason for being left behind to comprehend the processes and incorporate them into migration discourses. Despite being essential components of migration, these left-behind women find neither a place in official records nor a claim to the migration policies, which accounts for their blatant invisibility in migration discourse. Since 1981, the census has collected data on migration, and since 1955, the National Sample Survey has also collected data on migration. Still, owing to the complex social structures, these institutions are inept at identifying adequate

reasons for women's migration, which creates a lopsided gender disparity in migration data. For instance, migration data reveal that the ratio of migrant women exceeds that of men (Datta, 2020, p. 331), but their migration is often considered dependent migration tied to the spouse.

Similarly, the left-behind wives, despite their significant contributions, are excluded from migration data, which only includes the physically displaced workforce, comprising both men and women. They are undeniably an essential component of migration. They provide emotional support by assuring the husbands that they will bear 'all the difficulties in their absence', thereby relieving them of family and household responsibilities. Feminist scholars have often highlighted women as a significant part of migration flows, their theories document the conditions that shape migrant's positions, experiences, and aspirations as gendered (Phizacklea, 1983; Morokvasic, 1984; Kofman, 2000). However, these scholars have not focused much on the rural, illiterate, and unskilled women who stay back in their place of origin.

Area of the Study: Caste Composition and Trend of Migration

Ranipur village, located in the Mariyahu block of Jaunpur district, has been selected as the locale of study. This district has evidence of migration history. Since the colonial period, people have been migrating to different parts of Bengal (Chattopadhyay, 1987). This district is situated in the north-eastern part of the Varanasi division of Uttar Pradesh. Jaunpur has only one industry, i.e., the sugar mill in Shahganj, which is almost on the verge of closure. Due to the lack of industry and low agricultural productivity, people in this region migrate to various areas. According to the 2011 census, there were 48 households having a total population of 318, dominated mainly by Yadavas, followed by Brahmins, Patels, and Mushahars.

However, the village head disclosed that over 1,300 voters reside in the village. This discrepancy in data could be due to the Mushahar community living at the outskirts, approximately half a kilometer away from the village, or to internal male migration. This village has a long history of internal migration. Currently, young boys (20-22 years) from the village migrate for education to cities like Prayagraj and Varanasi, and for employment to Delhi, Surat, Prayagraj, and Lucknow. These males are engaged in unorganised sectors as chowkidars, shopkeepers, rickshaw pullers, junk dealers, contract laborers, and work in seed and fertiliser

companies and motor shops. Due to their involvement in the informal sector, these males left their wives at their place of origin.

Notes on Methodology

This work is purely qualitative. The respondents belong to the lower caste because upper-caste males usually migrate with their families, often for well-paid jobs in the city. Based on a pilot survey, left-behind wives from the OBC and SC castes were selected through representative sampling to ensure representation of different marginal groups. Initially, it was a challenge to reach out to rural women, as the cultural structure does not permit women to interact with strangers. Before speaking to these women, I had to endure the interrogations and inquisitiveness of the elders, specifically the mothers-in-laws, who were present in the house. After the initial investigation, they allowed me to enter the house, although unwillingly. My positionality became an entry point into the field; for instance, my position in the field was that of a semi-participant observer, in addition to my identities as a female and a researcher from the neighbouring district. Open-ended interviews helped me explore the experiences and opinions of these women, as well as the role of families in the decision-making process regarding migration, which revealed the reasons why women stayed back. The narrative analysis method was employed for qualitative data analysis, which helped to ascribe a valid social meaning and impetus to the stories of these women.

Theoretical framework

As a theoretical framework, the vantage point of the present study is patriarchy and gender roles, as both complement each other. Family can be seen as a basic unit of patriarchy (Lerner, 1986; Millet, 1970) - a cultural institution (Wallby, 1996) with an organised system of oppression based on 'domestic mode' of production' (Delphy, 1984), where husbands expropriate even the genuine credits of their wives. The family operates through appreciation as a tool of maintaining gender roles (Upadhyay, 1974). As a cultural institution, the family propagates these norms to the next generation. Although many feminist scholars have addressed gender differences in their discussions of the household, migration decisions, women's labour, and women's identities (Morokvasic, 1984; Nawyn, 2010), the migration literature remains silent on how women accept and internalise patriarchal norms to be good wives. As good wives, they are skilled in listening and shaping conversations, which suits their husbands (Rosenberg,

1990). This happens with left-behind wives. They internalise the gender role that men are the bread-winners and women are home-makers, including unpaid domestic tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and caring. Khader (2011) has called such internalisation 'adaptive preferences'[2] in which women prefer the oppressive structure because going against this structure may cause them to face moral and behavioural obstacles. Their role has been engraved and reiterated as the feminine in the social and cultural history, thus making them too trivial to have a place in the records of and claims to migration. This deliberate omission, due to patriarchal demands (Gledhill, 1995; Hirsch, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994), silenced women's potential in the decision-making process.

Reasons behind Leaving Wives at Origin

Strategy can be defined as a systematic plan or process for evaluating strengths and opportunities to achieve a goal. Here, the goal is to ensure the security at the origin without compromising the mundane flow of engagements. So, the males, before migrating, evaluate who will manage the origin or how they will manage at the destination, where women are deemed as soft targets due to the crafty patriarchal structure. While most studies (Gulati, 1993; Thelma et al., 2006; Desai and Banerjee, 2008) focus on the coping mechanisms of left-behind women, they seldom examine the reasons that lead women to refrain from migrating. Therefore, it is crucial to identify and trace the reasons that prevent women from staying at origin, which in turn may lead to a deeper understanding of their contributions to the migrating workforce. As mentioned, decision-making capacity plays a vital role in women's lives, particularly when they choose to live at origin, often driven by cultural norms or adaptive preferences. The following section analyses the possible reasons why wives are not able to migrate. Is it only the cultural constraint or something else that is imposed on them and conspicuously pushes them back?

Nature of the Job

First among these is the nature of the migrant's job. Most migrant males are engaged in either low-paid jobs or jobs with uncertain working conditions. The uncertain, low-paid jobs, such as those of security guards, shopkeepers, hotel labourers, and taxi drivers, leave them in a dilemma of insecurity and the inability to bear familial expenses. Haan (1997) argued that males mostly migrate to a nearby location as they leave their wives behind. Two male respondents of the Ranipur village are involved in

international migration, working in the merchant navy, and both are from the Yadav community. These two migrants have a decent educational background and good financial condition. Still, they left their wives at the village due to the uncertainty of their living arrangements, as they had to travel for months. These left-behind wives act as a safety valve for low-income migrants, who can preserve their linkages with their origin while managing on their scant wages simultaneously. However, Haan (1997) suggests that the temporary nature of work compelled migrants to maintain their village relations as survival tactics.

Cultural Norms Govern Choices

Cultural practices, such as restricting women's mobility and instructing them to avoid male interaction after puberty to maintain bodily purity (Dube, 1989; Niranjana, 2011), also contribute to women's decision not to migrate. Mobility is perceived as an immoral act for women in the Hindu tradition. Wives are instructed not to roam around the village. One of the respondents reported that "roaming outside is not a characteristic of good women. You are a mother of girls; they observe what you do and learn the same." Left-behind women can step out only for tasks about household responsibilities, as one of the women said, 'Kekare phursat hai' (who is free?). It has been observed that women, who are unable to migrate due to cultural constraints are managing the outside work in the absence of their men. Leaving women at the origin is not only a point of cultural constraint, but it also involves strategies. Culture often serves as a façade to make wives feel valued at home and encourage them to stay in their marriages. In reality, it consists of calculating familial needs, risks, and remittances - the cost-benefit factor (Stark, 1978).

To Take Care of the Household Responsibilities

Marriage and migration appear to balance each other. Where migration is an economic move to support marriage, marriage stands as emotional and physical support for migrating males (Rao, 2012: 26). Migrant men prefer wives who can discursively fit as obedient figures into the patriarchal framework of the household in their absence (Ibid: 32). One of the left-behind women shared her depression (for being left at origin) that 'gai-guru charave ke chhod gayal hai' (left me to look after the cattle and other responsibilities). Left-behind women often feel stressed about fulfilling all their responsibilities alone, as they want to migrate but cannot leave their origin and domestic responsibilities unattended and unaddressed. In the

absence of their husbands, their identity changes to that of farmers. Still, they are not considered farmers (Pachouri, 2019) in the Kisan Gosthi, held by the Tehsil, due to traditional patriarchal structures.

To Make the Claim at Origin

In the study area, most of the left-behind wives belong to the extended family where they have three or four brothers-in-law and their children. Although they had a separate kitchen, the distribution of their paternal land and other assets was not done; therefore, they remained in the village as claimants of such resources. In the long absences of migrants (men), other members of the family might usurp their share of lands and paternal property. It is apparent that migration with the entire family leaves fewer opportunities to return to the origin, which could render them invisible in the village population data, and they may lose their rights to the property. So, usually this becomes one of the reasons for men to leave their wives behind at the origin.

Sexual Aversion

Most middle-aged women report that they accompanied their husbands when they were newly married, but now their husbands are no longer willing to take them along. One of the respondents stated that, "When I was newly married, my husband took me along with him, but now his desire is fulfilled and my reproductive age is over (Ab ka karihe le jayike anda-bachha deyi dihe hain). He left me in the village to manage the household and maintain the livestock. Whenever I insist on accompanying, he abuses me. My life is stuck around him…"he keeps me as he wants." This narrative reveals that bodily attraction is also instrumental in women's migration, often alongside their husbands. However, these women have a strong desire to accompany their husbands but are obliged to obey their husbands' commands as they hold a sacred place in their lives (Chowdhury, 2009). Some of the wives reveal that they have returned after the birth of their first child, as motherhood is considered central to a woman's identity, and seemingly, they are expected to remain within the confines of this definition (Rosenberg, 1990). And after a child's birth, their desire to stay with their spouse is sidelined. One of the respondents shared her story: "…due to some complication, I was unable to conceive in the initial days of marriage; my in-laws sent me along with my husband, and after 15 years of marriage, I conceived and delivered a baby girl, and after that my in-laws brought me back as my task is accomplished at the destination."

Usually, whenever wives accompanied their husbands, it was mainly for procreation, for if they stayed in proximity, they could conceive and have children. For a short span of time, these women stayed at the destination with their husbands, but soon after childbirth, they were sent back to their place of origin.

Care Work

In the field, most of the left-behind wives from the 20-40 age group spent their days engaged in care work, such as caring for children, elder people, and other family members. These wives reported spending at least 4-5 hours a day on care work. One woman reported that she wakes up at 4:00 a.m. She said "I prepare tea for everyone. After that, occupied by many works, such as cooking, cleaning, washing the utensils and clothes, at the time of cooking, I have to prepare the children for school and manage their books, bags, and tiffin; meanwhile, someone calls for another task, I have to attend that too. Therefore, it was not easy to allocate time for any particular task. After completing my daily routine of cooking, cleaning, and caring for my mother-in-law and father-in-law, I must be careful and attentive to their needs so that they do not require anything further. In the afternoon I am busy with the cooking task. Hardly. I get leisure time during the day. Again, in the evening I am busy cooking. At 11 o'clock, I get time to sleep." They have to perform multitasking. Care work provides support to other family members and is considered essential for social cohesion, quality of life, and intergenerational solidarity; however, it remains undervalued. Recognising the social value of the care work is essential for these wives, as without this support, husbands will not be able to migrate.

Analysis of the reasons for staying back reveals that the reasons cited by the left-behind wives for staying back are often imposed upon them by their male counterparts and the cultural surroundings. There is a need to identify the factors that influence how the left-behind wives perceive themselves. Reasons for wives staying back are not only the gender-based institutional perceptions that affect wives' behaviour. They are persuaded to transform their preferences upon normative scrutiny, which affects their personal lives and experiences, in which they willingly choose an oppressive structure (by staying back). However, these wives are unable to understand the difference between their interests and the strategic choices that influence their decision to migrate. However, they gradually build the capacity to negotiate with the circumstances of their male counterparts' absence, in which they assume the position of head of the family, allowing them to

move outside the house. As Bell Hooks (1990) suggests, oppressors use the tool of oppression as a space for negotiation.

Conclusion

Migration is more than an individual phenomenon in which family and culture play a significant role. The family strategically involves itself in the migration process, investing in the early stages and expecting a return in the form of remittances. Leaving wives at the origin is one of the strategies employed by families that are aware that accompanying women to the destination leads to additional expenditure, which may curtail their profits. The family uses cultural norms as a covert tool to restrain women at their origin. They perpetuate strict traditional restraints among women so that they do not insist or demand to move out with their spouse to a destination. Husbands also dominate their wives and often deem them as a means to keep their affiliations with their origin intact in their absence. Thus, the decision to migrate is influenced by the family's cultural norms. Leaving women at the origin helps migrants manage their families, agricultural work, and social networks more effectively. Although migration is a selective process, the decision-making process is often tailored to favour the socially and patriarchally dominant gender, which impacts the migration process. Migration thus becomes more of a masculine activity, as men are socially assigned the role of bread-winner, a fact that women find too weak to resist due to the social conditioning they receive. Apart from gender norms, decision-making ability is also closely tied to financial independence. Sotelo (1992) discusses "family migration", where children and wives migrate at a later stage. In the locale of study, the decisions regarding the migration of the wife are taken by the family without their consent. At the same time, the husband can make decisions independently without informing their family (De Haas and Fokkema, 2010). A few migrant families also revealed that if husband and wife go together, the chance is very low for them to come back to their origin, thus leaving them uprooted from their own origin. It has been perceived that patriarchal norms prevail conspicuously in the Jaunpur region. It is observed that husbands typically make their decisions independently and then inform their wives, hoping they will understand and support them, as the social structure is often patterned in a way that conditions girls to obey and follow their husbands. Hence, women are not typically active decision-makers in the migration process. Roy (2011) stated that the left-behind women play a greater role in household decision-making. Whenever men come back to the origin, the sole authority and

power of the household are snatched from the women, who were running the household till now in their absence, and go back into the hands of husbands due to the cultural construct which sanctions the notion that the head of the family should always be a male. Even in the absence of the husband, women seek the husband's permission for the minor changes at home, such as the use of a new variety of seeds, maintaining relations with the neighbours, admission of a child in school, and so on. It is highly complex to understand the decision-making dynamics between husbands and wives, where following the husband's instructions is often considered the wife's duty. The reason for remaining at the village is not only the lack of female participation in the decision-making process, but cultural norms also play a significant role in this. Their role in decision-making is minimal. The culture of migration in the Purvanchal region remains institutionalised and justifies leaving women in the village. These wives became controlled subjects, rather than economic agents. They are unable to identify their goal, make choices, and act upon them. Therefore, they are unable to emerge as an agency. Their independence and mobility are the results of increasing responsibilities. The lifeworld of these women reveals that their agricultural and labour work, market-orientated work, and maintenance of social relations are merely a result of their economic and socio-cultural responsibilities, which are perceived as a means of empowerment and independence. After the husband's return, these responsibilities become less. So, their responsibility ends, and so does their power. Data agencies like the Census and NSSO should recognise the contribution of left-behind wives and attempt to include them in the migration data. As the Census has evolved,[3] the clause on left-behind children should be introduced in both the Census and the National Sample Survey.[4] It would help the government to document the ignored population and their needs directly because statistical representation is supposed to be the most powerful in the modern state, which can affect social, physical, and political processes and change the lives of the population. Therefore, an appropriate record of left-behind women is the first and foremost component to be included as a pivotal constituent of migration, which will make it more transparent and accurate. The study underscores that the decision to stay back is rarely an outright expression of agency or an absolute act of coercion. Instead, it exists within a complex matrix of patriarchal control, economic realities, and socio-cultural expectations. While some women may navigate these constraints strategically, their choices remain significantly shaped by structural forces beyond their control. By examining the intersections of gender, caste, and

migration, this research challenges the simplistic dichotomy between choice and compulsion. It argues that the restricted mobility of left-behind wives is not merely a passive consequence of male migration but an active reinforcement of patriarchal structures that dictate who moves, who stays, and under what conditions. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing gender-sensitive migration policies and creating opportunities for women's economic and social empowerment in rural India.

Acknowledgement

End Notes

1. In the Study, the term left behind women/wives refers to women whose husbands migrate to cities for bread and who are left behind to manage the household.

2. According to the Khader, victims become accustomed to their circumstances and they give them preferences. Their preference for their oppressive conditions creates practical and moral obstacles to changing them, since oppressed people work to promote those conditions and it seems cruel or unfair to take away from the oppressed what they claim to like.

3. Census collected migration data on the basis of birth place since 1961. New clause of 'Last place of residence' has been added in 1971. Category of 'Reason for migration' was introduced in 1981.

4. Work/ employment, Business, Education, Marriage, moved after birth/ moved after household and other (Census, 2011).

   In search of employment – 01, in search of better employment – 02, business – 03, to take up employment/better employment – 04, transfer of service/contract – 05, proximity to place of work – 06, studies – 07, natural disaster (drought, flood, tsunami, etc.) – 08, social/political problems (riots, terrorism, political refugee, bad law and order, etc.) –10, displacement by development project – 11, acquisition of own house/ flat – 12, housing problems – 13, health care – 14, post-retirement – 15, marriage – 16, migration of parent/earning member of the family –17, others – 19. (NSS Report No. 533: Migration in India: 2007-08)

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Exploring the Unsung Tribal Legends of India in the 21st Century: A Case Study of the Life of Helen Lepcha

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The independence movement of India emerged to be known with the struggles of popular figures and names. Amidst the cloud of popularity, there are individuals whose names have become forgotten and lost in history. One such name is Helen Lepcha (Sabitri Devi) whose contributions towards the freedom movement of India have yet to receive the due share of recognition in the mainstream. This paper presents fact and field-based insights into the status of Helen Lepcha's life story in popular knowledge. It has adopted a comparative analysis of the data which has been collected from the field surveys and interviews. The paper aims to highlight the state of recognition of Helen Lepcha among the citizens (especially amongst the student community) and suggests certain key measures and actions which can be taken by the authorities and the policymakers to include Helen Lepcha as one of the important women tribal freedom fighters which India ever had.

Keywords: Helen Lepcha, Women Freedom Fighters, India's Independence Movement, Tribal Identity, Gender and Resistance, Unsung Heroes.

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Introduction

The narrative of India's freedom struggle is replete with iconic figures whose contributions have been etched into the national consciousness - Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose, among others. Yet, beneath this dominant historiography lies a tapestry of unsung heroes whose stories remain marginalised, particularly those from tribal communities and women (Singh, 2019). Helen Lepcha, also known as Sabitri Devi, emerges as a compelling figure in this context—a tribal woman from Sikkim who played a pivotal role in India's independence movement. Lepcha's life intersected with major historical events, from aiding Bose's escape from British surveillance to leading thousands of coal miners in protest during Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement (Barla, 2015). Despite her contributions, her legacy remains largely obscured in mainstream discourse, reflecting broader gaps in the recognition of tribal and female freedom fighters.

This paper attempts to locate Helen Lepcha within the interdisciplinary frameworks of public policy, history and politics of India, examining her presence in the cognition of the public of India and the socio-political factors that have shaped her marginalisation. As part of a broader project on unsung tribal heroes of India's freedom movement, it seeks to assess the state of her recognition among Indian citizens and propose actionable measures for policymakers to integrate her story into national memory. Drawing on publicly available historical records, analyses of the data obtained during the field visit, and policy perspectives, the paper argues that refocusing Lepcha's legacy in the 21st century is not merely an act of historical correction but a step toward inclusive nation-building.

Who are The Unsung Heroes?

Before diving into the world of legends and personas whose names have become lost in history it becomes essential to first discuss the very term on which this paper is based, i.e., 'The Unsung Heroes'. All the major names and great personalities e.g. Subhash Chandra Bose, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa etc. are easily recognisable for their efforts and contributions in their respective times, therefore these names fall in the list of those heroes who have already sung. From numerous books, papers, documentaries and movies, much has been said, written, published, recorded and widely circulated about the lives of such personalities. On the other hand, unsung personalities are defined as the ones who perform great deeds but receive little or no recognition for their actions (Greene, 2020). One can say that

despite being present there alongside the great personalities these personalities and their side of life-story and struggle got eclipsed by the larger-than-life shadows of the prominent leaders. As a token of gesture towards their contribution a park or a road was dedicated in their name at best (Sharma, 2021).

As a part of the focal centre, Helen Lepcha is considered as an unsung hero and also as a part of the long list of legends and personas whose contributions and life struggles got lost in history. The first factor is her origin in the Northeastern (NE) state i.e., Sikkim. The NE in India has been less discussed in terms of their contribution towards the freedom movement of India. The second and third factor emerges to be of the tribal origins and identity of Helen Lepcha and also as one of the women tribal freedom fighters of India belonging to the NE belt. The affirmative action policies as enshrined in the Constitution of India and also the ones getting promoted by the Government of India have given attention to the tribal people of India by bringing a dedicated category in the form of a Scheduled Tribe. Helen Lepcha as a personality represents the feminist contributions, the tribal participation and the presence of NE region in the overall shaping of a nationalist identity of India in the post-independence era. The next section of this paper attempts to shed light on some of the women legends of India's freedom struggle whose stories and names are out there amidst the cognition of the public and therefore are the lesser sung heroes of India.

Exploring Lesser Sung Women Legends of India's Freedom Struggle

Before delving into Helen Lepcha's life, it becomes pertinent to acknowledge other lesser-sung and discussed women who not only shaped India's independence movement but also provided a direction with their own wisdom and pragmatism. Here are some such legends, each with a unique story of courage and sacrifice. The first one, Phoolo and Jhanno Murmu symbolise the fierce resistance of Adivasi women from the Santhal tribe during the 1855 Santhal Rebellion and 1857 revolt in present-day Jharkhand. Despite their courage, their story remains overshadowed by male leaders like Sido-Kanhu, Chand, Bhairav, and Birsa Munda's ulgulan (great revolution) (Prasad, 2021). Another one, Matangini Hazra, from Tamluk, Bengal, also known as "Gandhi Buri," participated in the Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements. Arrested in 1932 for breaking the Salt Act, at 71, she led 6,000 - mostly women - to seize the Tamluk police station. Shot three times, she continued marching with the tricolour, chanting 'Bande Mataram' until her death. Honoured with a statue in 1973, Hazra remains under-

recognised outside Bengal, though her courage challenges male-centric narratives of the freedom struggle (Mitra, 2022).

Bhikaiji Rustom Cama was a pioneering Parsi revolutionary who globalised India's freedom struggle. She joined the revolutionary movement and aligned with figures like Dadabhai Naoroji, V.D. Savarkar, and Lala Har Dayal. In 1907, she famously unfurled the 'Flag of Indian Independence' at the International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart (Selvi, 2008). She also helped circulate the banned newspaper 'Bande Mataram' (Chandra, 2000). And none other than, Aruna Asaf Ali, known as the 'Grand Old Lady' of India's independence movement, was a fearless activist who championed secularism and gender equality (Fazal, 2022). Deeply influenced by Savarkar's India's First War of Independence, she went underground at 33 to organise resistance 1942 Quit India Movement. Post-independence, she viewed gender equality as a 'second freedom struggle' (Pati, 2009). Honoured posthumously with the Bharat Ratna in 1997, her legacy invites a broader reflection on other women who bridged public and underground resistance.

Tara Rani Srivastava, from Bihar, displayed remarkable courage during the Quit India Movement. In 1942, she and her husband Phulendu Babu led a protest to hoist the Indian flag at Siwan Police Station. When police opened fire, fatally wounding Phulendu, Tara bandaged him with her sari and marched on, flag in hand, until his death later that day (Prakash, 2017). Kanaklata Barua, from Assam, was only 17 when she became a martyr during the Quit India Movement. Known as 'Birbala', she led a women's procession in 1942 to hoist the tricolour at Gohpur Police Station, defying British authority with slogans like 'British imperialists should go back' (Freese, 2023). Her story underscores the contributions of youth and women from India's northeast, regions often sidelined in mainstream historiography.

Helen Lepcha: A Forgotten Freedom Fighter

Helen Lepcha remains one of the unsung tribal heroes of India's freedom struggle. While mainstream historical narratives have often sidelined tribal contributions, her life and activism highlight the significant role of indigenous leaders in resisting colonial oppression. She is remembered with great affection by the people of Sikkim, as 'daughter of the soil' (Barla, 2015).

Birth, Education and Early Influences

Helen Lepcha was born on January 14, 1902, in Sangmu village near Namchi, South Sikkim. However, due to socio-economic hardships and a lack of proper educational facilities in Sikkim, her family migrated to Kurseong, a town in present-day West Bengal, during her childhood (Bhutia, 2018). Kurseong, located near Darjeeling, was a significant British administrative and educational centre at the time. Growing up in this environment exposed Helen Lepcha to the social inequalities and economic hardships that would later inspire her activism. Helen Lepcha, due to financial constraints, had to discontinue her formal studies at the age of 15 in 1917. Despite her limited formal education, she was a keen learner and developed an early interest in social justice, influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. During her teenage years, Helen was deeply inspired by Gandhian principles of self-reliance, Swadeshi and non-violent resistance (Pradhan, 2021). She actively participated in the Khadi movement, promoting the use of indigenous hand-spun fabric over British textiles. This exposure to nationalist ideals strengthened her resolve to contribute to the larger independence struggle. In 1920, when Bihar faced devastating floods, Helen volunteered in relief operations. Her dedication to serving the people caught the attention of Mahatma Gandhi, who invited her to Sabarmati Ashram, and here he renamed her as 'Sabitri Devi' (Narayani, 2023).

Active Resistance against British Colonial Policies

Helen Lepcha actively participated in protests against British policies. She mobilised tribal and Gorkha communities in Darjeeling and Sikkim, urging them to resist British taxation and land alienation. Her early activism escalated in 1921 when she led over 10,000 coal miners in Jharia (now Jharkhand) during the Non-Cooperation Movement, protesting the exploitation of tribal labourers (Gc, 2021). This act of leadership underscored her ability to mobilise marginalised communities - a hallmark of her career.

Advocacy for Gender and Tribal Identity

Helen Lapcha led movements against the forced acquisition of tribal lands for tea plantations, railways, and British infrastructure projects (Bhattacharya, 2016). Her efforts also aligned with the broader anti-colonial land movements in India, such as the Tebhaga Movement in Bengal and the Jharkhand tribal uprisings (Gurung, 2015). The marginalisation of Helen Lepcha reflects intersecting sociological dynamics of gender and tribal identity. Indian historiography has traditionally privileged upper-caste, male

voices, relegating women and tribal figures to the periphery. Lepcha's identity as a tribal woman from Sikkim - a region often seen as peripheral to the Indian heartland - compounded her exclusion. Sociological studies suggest that tribal contributions, despite their scale, are underrepresented due to colonial stereotypes of 'backwardness' and post-independence assimilation policies (Singh, 2019). Helen's activism helped bring attention to the marginalisation of tribal communities in colonial policies and emphasised the need for indigenous self-governance.

Participation in Underground Resistance Networks

Beyond public activism, Helen Lepcha was involved in clandestine resistance activities. She played a crucial role in assisting Subhas Chandra Bose's escape from British house arrest in Kurseong in 1941. It is believed that Helen, along with her husband, helped Bose communicate with underground networks through letters hidden in bread supplied by a bakery. She also assisted members of the Indian National Army by providing logistical support and safe passage through Darjeeling and Sikkim. These underground operations were crucial in sustaining revolutionary activities against British rule. During the Quit India Movement, she organised resistance in Kurseong. She was arrested multiple times for her involvement in protests and underground resistance activities (Pradhan, 2021). She endured imprisonment and harsh treatment but remained steadfast in her commitment to India's independence.

Despite her contributions, her legacy remains largely forgotten, overshadowed by mainstream nationalist leaders. She not only fought for India's freedom but also advocated for the rights of marginalised tribal communities. Honouring Helen Lepcha's legacy is crucial in rewriting a more inclusive historiography, one that recognises the sacrifices of indigenous leaders in India's long struggle for independence.

Methodology and Findings from the Field Study

This paper has strived to assess the recognition and awareness of Helen Lepcha's contributions and the presence of her life story amidst the memory of the public and the masses. It has adopted majorly a qualitative approach, combining insights from field surveys, interviews, and comparative analysis of the responses. The research was conducted across four key locations - Sikkim, West Bengal, Delhi, and Gujarat - chosen for their diverse demographic and historical significance. The field study was undertaken in two phases whereby the first phase covered the two states of

Sikkim and West Bengal and the second phase covered the states of Gujarat, Haryana and Delhi.

The field study was initiated from the state of Sikkim which also happens to be the birth state of Helen Lepcha. In Sikkim, the capital city of Gangtok was selected to be the first place to undertake the schedule-based survey followed by the visit to the town of Namchi and the Sangmu village in the Namchi district. The state of Sikkim was followed by a visit to the Himalayan hill station of Darjeeling in West Bengal and also to the town of Kursheong in the Darjeeling district where Helen Lepcha spent the majority of her life after moving from Sangmu. The field study subsequently moved on to the Shantiniketan and the capital city of Kolkata in West Bengal. The city of Kolkata was also selected as a part of the field study because of the history of Helen Lepcha's life which included her arrival to the city of Joy further down the years in her life. In the second phase of the study, responses were collected from Delhi and further from the cities of Ahmedabad and Vadodara in Gujarat. The subjects and sample of the study consisted mainly of students, educators and the residents of the cities. The responses were obtained from the student community spanning across the prominent universities and colleges e.g., the Sikkim University, Darjeeling Government College, University of Calcutta, University of Delhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and the Central University of Gujarat. In terms of sampling method purposive sampling approach was undertaken across the study locations which was further bifurcated to and followed by the means of area-based-simple-random sampling method. The sampling method was dedicatedly followed in the local area of Sangmu, Kursheongthe colleges, and universities thereby collecting a total of 200 samples throughout the two phases of field study. The study was undertaken by using a schedule which consisted of a combination of open and closed-ended questions totalling 15 questions. The schedule was employed for the collection of the primary data which was directed towards gauging the awareness levels and knowledge amongst students and the residents about the contributions of Helen Lepcha.

The first set of questions started from a general perspective and attempted to record the opinion about the very idea of 'Unsung Heroes of Freedom Struggle of India' followed by dedicated questions about the names of Tribal Leaders from the freedom movement of India. The next set of questions further dived particularly to the awareness of the respondents towards the names of women tribal leaders and then the women tribal leaders belonging to the North-east states of India. Following a general to

particular stance of questioning the schedule then takes on the questions related to Helen Lepcha, concerning the family background and early life. This phase of questions aimed at assessing the response in terms of the level of adequacy of recognition which was bestowed for the contributions of Helen Lepcha and the oral histories, stories or folk narratives (if any) associated with the life of Helen Lepcha. The next section of the questions explored gathering the recommendations from the respondents which could be utilised by the policymakers to bring the unsung leaders from the days of the freedom struggle to the popular knowledge.

As a part of the field study, the research team was able to locate the home of Helen Lepcha and also managed to have a conversation with the grand-nephew of Helen Lepcha who is now settled in the city of Siliguri in West Bengal and other family members in other parts of the nation. During the field visit, all kinds of pictures and written documents related to Helen Lepcha were obtained with great difficulty and that too at only two places, one at her home and the other in the Netaji Subhash Chandra Museum located at Giddapahar near the town of Kursheong.

Figure 1
Age and Gender-wise Distribution of the Respondents
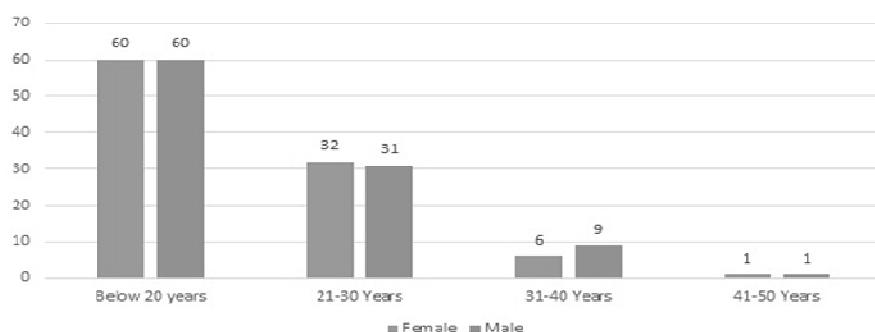
Figure 1 depicts the age and gender-wise distribution of the respondents which shows that the majority of the respondents in both the gender categories, i.e., male and female were those who were below 20 years of age. The figure simply reflects the age spectrum of the respondents ranging from being of the younger ones to those belonging to the higher side of the age. Out of a total of 200 respondents, the number of male and female respondents stands to be 50.5 and 49.5 per cent respectively.

Figure 2
State and Education-wise distribution of respondents
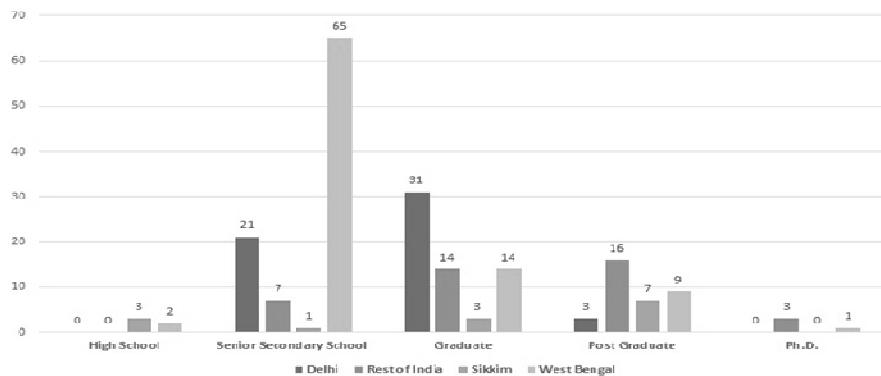
Figure 2 depicts the state and education-wise distribution of respondents. This figure further extends the sub-classification of the respondents according to their educational qualifications which would further in the paper assist in looking at the questions particularly related to the tribal leaders and followed by that of Helen Lepcha. Where the state of West Bengal saw the highest number of respondents having completed their school, the highest number of respondents from Delhi had completed their Graduate degree. The respondents with the lowest number across all the areas of study belonged to those having earned their Doctoral degrees.

Figure 3
Response to the name of Tribal Leader from the Freedom Struggle of India
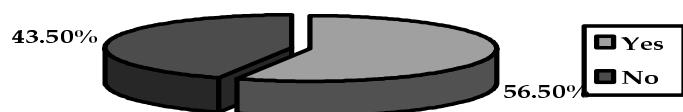
Figure 3 in the form of a pie chart depicts the total response of the respondents in the form of a close-ended question which attempted to find out the names of the tribal leaders who have contributed to the freedom struggle of India. The majority of the respondents to this question answered positively. As a follow-up to this question, the names of such leaders were also asked from those who opted for the option 'Yes'. The responses were interesting as the names which were given prominently reflected those of

Birsa Munda, Sidho and Kanu. The other names that were recorded were those of personalities like Tilka Manjhi, Tirut Singh, Ruph Singh Bhil, etc. The surprising point of the responses was in the form of names of Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and even PM Narendra Modi and President Mrs. Draupadi Murmu. One can gauge the shores of knowledge of the respondents, especially of those belonging to the below 20 years of age.

Figure 4
Response towards Helen Lepcha
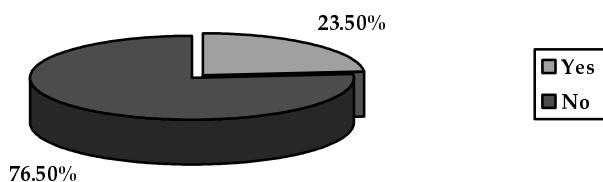
Figure 4 follows from another question in which the respondents were asked the names of women tribal leaders that they could be aware of. Since the question was subjective in nature, the majority of the responses were negative only and the rest of the responses consisted of the names of a few women leaders e.g. Rani Karnawati, Rani Gaidinlieu and Rani Lakshmibai. Out of the few names which were recorded only one was of the women leader who also belonged to the tribal community, the rest of the names were of the non-tribal origins. Figure 4 describes the status and presence of the name of Helen Lepcha amongst the respondents which can be rightly said to be the same for the rest of the public. The data shows that more than 76 per cent of the respondents answered that they had never even heard the name of Helen Lepcha and the rest of the population consisting of less than 24 per cent who have heard the name have cited various resources for their knowledge of Helen Lepcha. Social media websites have emerged as the topmost source of their knowledge followed by schools, colleges and universities in the second position, newspapers and news media outlets have emerged as the third source which have contributed towards the spread of the name of Helen Lepcha.

Figure 5
Response of the Public towards Recognition of the Works of Helen Lepcha

5.50%
28.50%
54.00%
12.00%

Yes
No
May be
No Idea
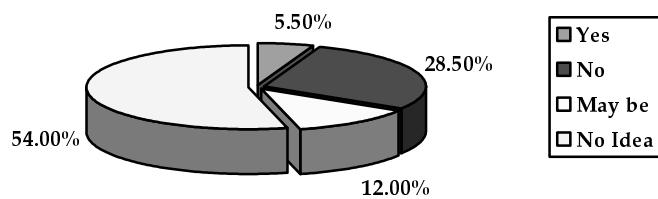
Figure 5 depicts the status of recognition of Helen Lepcha's works and contributions towards the freedom struggle and independence movement of India. A meagre 5.5 per cent of the respondents said yes that her works have been recognised amongst the mainstream public whereas the majority of the respondents to the tune of 66 per cent had little to no idea about Lepcha's works. Not only does the name of Helen Lepcha but also her work seems to have been lost from the memory of the public. This fact is confirmed with the help of figure 6 which has focused on finding out any oral history, story or folk-narrative revolving around the life and struggles of Helen Lepcha. In terms of folk narrative, too more than 95 per cent of the respondents were unaware and only a minute 5 per cent had heard about the life story of Helen Lepcha.

Figure 6
Response towards Oral Histories and Narratives about Helen Lepcha

5.00%
34.00%
61.00%

Yes
No
No Idea
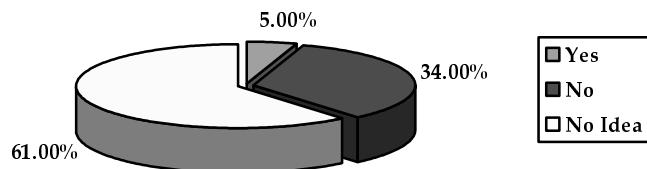
As a last section of research questions, the final question asked the respondents about any government initiative under which any park, road or institution was named after Helen Lepcha. This was the particular question in which the answer by all the respondents emerged in complete negation. Out of 200 respondents, no one could recall any park, school, road or any other instances where the governments in the past had named after Helen Lepcha. However, during the field visit and the discussion with one of the

elderly residents of the town of Kursheong, it was revealed that the local Congress office of the town was named as Sabitri Devi Bhawan in memory of Helen Lepcha.

Major Recommendations and Conclusion

The last section attempts to provide recommendations from the nationalist perspective to the policy-based steps including educational reforms, memorialisation, digital archiving etc which could be undertaken to not only bring Helen Lepcha into the knowledge of the masses but also provide a well-deserved and long-due recognition. The post-independence state, focused on unity, often sidelined regional and tribal narratives to forge a cohesive 'Indian' identity. Besides the renowned names of women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Suchita Kriplani etc the names of women hailing from the marginalised communities or those representing the Northeast region have been less heard, as their share of struggle and history seems to be erased from the history books. The names of such legends and personalities have mostly been limited to regional knowledge and the vernacular intelligentsia (Lepcha, 2018). A rather limited presence of Helen Lepcha in the writings of national outreach is also a disheartening setback for the numerous tribal communities from the Northeast. These tribal communities would also gain a space amongst the readers at the national level by mere publication and circulation by the media having a national appeal. Lepcha's limited recognition - despite her Tamra Patra - mirrors the broader neglect of tribal freedom fighters, raising questions about inclusivity in nationalist discourse. In order to alleviate any concerns and doubts around the inclusivity debate Helen Lepcha could be the first of the many such women tribal leaders with whom the historical justice of giving the due recognition could be initiated.

When it comes to the suggestions based on policy reforms, the unsung heroes of India's freedom struggle especially the women tribal heroes can be brought to the knowledge of the masses through the exhibitions and display of their life stories in the prestigious galleries of the tourist monuments like Victoria Memorial and Alipur Jail Museum in Kolkata or the Red Fort in Delhi. These places of historical interest have been already hosting art exhibitions and freedom movement festivals. Dedicating a section completely to the unsung tribal women heroes would give a much-needed boost in their recognition.

In order to mainstream Helen Lepcha's story, educational curricula must integrate tribal and female freedom fighters. Policy measures could

include mandatory chapters in history textbooks and teacher training programmes emphasising her role. Pilot projects in Sikkim and West Bengal could test this approach, with metrics tracking student awareness. During the visit to the Sangmu village where Helen Lepcha was born, a female resident of the village revealed that Helen Lepcha's story has been made a part of the school books in Nepali language and that she became aware of Lepcha through the school books of her kids. Where Helen Lepcha has already been a part of the school books in vernacular, greater impetus shall be infused when the national curriculum setting agencies like the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) or the state educational boards operating in different states for example Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Karnataka, etc.

Public policy should prioritise physical and symbolic commemoration. Establishing a Helen Lepcha Museum in Kurseong, alongside statues and named public spaces, would anchor her legacy in collective memory. Funding could be sourced through the Ministry of Tribal Affairs' existing schemes. Helen Lepcha's life story could be made a part of the public discussion through the enactment of theatres and street plays. The theatre festivals which happen all across the nation can be utilised as a launchpad for a series of dramas and screening of documentaries based on the life of Helen Lepcha and the town of Kursheong where she spent a significant part of her life.

The relatives and kin of Helen Lepcha could be contacted in order to achieve the digital archiving of the newspaper clippings and media reports available to them. Social media campaigns, blogs and dedicated webpages on websites like Facebook, and X could be made which would further enhance the reach of unsung heroes. Leveraging technology, a national digital archive of unsung heroes, including Lepcha, could be created, complemented by media campaigns on platforms like Doordarshan and social media. These efforts would democratise access to her story, particularly among younger generations. Advocacy for a "Tribal Freedom Fighters Recognition Act" at par with the initiatives taken by the United States, could formalise the inclusion of figures like Lepcha in national honours and recognition schemes, ensuring sustained publicity. This would require cross-party support and public consultation. The government of India in collaboration with UNESCO has already initiated the process of building up museums for Tribal Freedom Fighters in 9 states across India, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Manipur, Mizoram etc. to name a few.

Helen Lepcha's journey - from a tribal girl in Sikkim to a freedom fighter aiding Bose and mobilising thousands - embodies the resilience of India's marginalised communities. Yet, her obscurity in 21st-century India underscores the need for a reframing of historical narratives through public policy, sociological reflection, and political action. By implementing the proposed measures, policymakers can elevate her status, enriching India's collective memory and honouring its diverse freedom struggle.

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From Vision to Action:
Tribal Women's Assertion and Pioneering Entrepreneurial Ventures

Satendra Kumar Singh* and Neelu Rawat†

This paper emphasises the critical and analytical approach to understanding the postulation of tribal women entrepreneurship. For a very long time, women have been considered as a deprived group of gender in Indian society. However, entrepreneurship creates space for disadvantaged groups in society. In the same vein, tribal women in India are creating space for themselves with their skills and craftsmanship, such as basketry work, embroidery work, handmade unique products, etc., through entrepreneurial activities as a community of knowledge. It inculcates the idea of representation in the hierarchical society as reflected through cognitive blackout from the multiple spheres. The paper focuses mainly on two dimensions of tribal women's entrepreneurial emergence in Indian society. First, what challenges and opportunities (push and pull factors) were confronted during their entrepreneurial growth? Second, how do the tribal women create their public in the context of entrepreneurship through social capital?

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Women Entrepreneurship, Counter-Public, Social Capital, Tribal Entrepreneurship, Tribal Women.

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Introduction

There is a strong correlation between India's industrial capability and economic growth. For a growing nation such as India, achieving a rapid, sustainable, and intensive rate of economic development is vital. Therefore, efforts are focused on establishing conditions enabling an economic structure to emerge quickly (Desai, 1992, pp. 1-4). In order to guarantee a preferred solidarity of all sectors, the state has therefore attempted to devote all of its resources to tactics that are effective in a variety of amplitudes, including economic, social, political, technological, cultural, etc. The main drivers of economic growth are the ability to restructure the economy through creative ideas and the development of numerous opportunities for profit-making (Desai, 2009, pp. 1-6). Thus, industrialisation could be a more effective social and economic development strategy in emerging nations. The development of a strong economy and social transformation depends on entrepreneurship (Schumpeter, 1983). Gender empowerment and economic growth are made possible by entrepreneurship. Although entrepreneurship provides several benefits, it is unclear if these benefits are meant to include an accreditation impact. Males continue to be prominent as high-profile, entrepreneurial role models in the economic structure of entrepreneurship (Ojediran and Anderson, 2020).

Tribal women are seen to be empowered when they participate in various domains, including the job, education, social sphere, politics, and credit availability. Giving them the capacity to acquire and manage material possessions and exercise influence within the power structure is a process that empowers tribal women (Awwal, 2006). Tribal women's empowerment, according to Das (2012), is shown in their involvement in the workforce and education. The most potent factor in every nation's progress is empowerment in matters of the economy. One of the finest paths to economic freedom, self-reliance, and poverty alleviation for tribal women is entrepreneurship. Tribal women's participation in entrepreneurship may result in improved capital creation and labour usage, raising living standards. Empowerment of tribal women through entrepreneurship is a must for a modern developed economy (Das, 2012).

Tribal women entrepreneurs have had a significant positive growth influence on the economy in several nations, including the US, Canada, Australia, Britain, and Germany. Through entrepreneurship, tribal women set the accepted standard in various fields, including commerce, education, services, manufacturing, handicrafts, etc. They break the ice and aid in social

and economic development in addition to being restricted to the conventional rigid structure of Indian society (Singh and Monga, 2014).

However, not every woman finds the entire process of starting her own business to be so simple. Tribal women have always been interested in entrepreneurship, but sociological, cultural, and market trends and other factors continue to restrict them from pursuing this path (Hisrich and Ozturk, 1999). In order to succeed in their respective fields, tribal women entrepreneurs must overcome plenty of obstacles, difficulties, and problems that arise in a variety of areas, such as juggling their personal and professional lives, lacking market experience, dealing with health issues, etc. (Gautam and Mishra, 2016). Despite facing challenges pertaining to psychological, emotional, professional, financial, and social aspects, their social capital, or network of relationships, allowed them to obtain a favourable and substantial role in entrepreneurial performance (Surti and Sarupria, 1983). Tribal women entrepreneur uses their social capital, or network of relationships, to overcome obstacles and find solutions to these issues while working to build a solid business (Alonso and Trillo, 2014). Though they offer a variety of chances in different forms for tribal women entrepreneurs, the government and other nonprofit organisations encourage and assist female entrepreneurs in several ways, including via training, financial assistance, and mentorship (Bhuiyan and Abdullah, 2007). Together with nationalised banks and financial companies that provide financial assistance on a preferential basis, these entities or organisations were established to safeguard and promote tribal women's entrepreneurship. The major organisations that support women entrepreneurship are the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO), Dalit Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (DICCI), National Alliance of Young Entrepreneurs (NAYE) and others (Gupta and Srinivasan, 2013, p. 134).

Methodology

The information used in this study tries to illuminate the interplay of restrictions and prohibitions of entrepreneurial growth for tribal women entrepreneurs, such as market accessibility, resource allocation, organisational intervention, and much more within the framework of sociological understanding. The investigator used entrepreneur, entrepreneurship, social capital, and women entrepreneurship as operational variables to understand the theme through the sociological lens.

Conceptual Clarification

This section of the study sheds light on the operational variables through which the study attempts to understand the notion as defined by the objectives of the study.

Entrepreneur

One of the most essential elements in starting a firm or enterprise is an 'entrepreneur', who is also in charge of advancing economic advancement (Rusu et al., 2012). In actuality, an entrepreneur possesses the guts to take the lead, the expertise to establish the groundwork for an original concept or idea as a business opportunity, and the unwavering drive to reach the highest levels of success. The French verb enterprendre, which means "to undertake," is where the word "entrepreneur" first appeared (Desai, 2009, p. 29). The consensus among contemporary economists is that business leaders and entrepreneurs are the true heroes, playing an important role in encouraging and evolving economic growth and progress. They take significant initiative and risk when launching, planning, and running businesses (George, 1998, p. 23). According to J. B. Say, an entrepreneur represents the economy that amasses money and labour resources. They determine the product's worth in the resulting form (Say, 1816, pp. 28-29). E.E. Hagen defined an entrepreneur as a businessman who uses creativity and a problem-solving methodology to push his company to the pinnacle of financial gain (Hagen, 1975). According to Schumpeter (1967, pp. 63-64), an entrepreneur is a person who brings something new, a product that is unfamiliar to customers, and who modifies or alters the pattern of production. Entrepreneurship is defined as an opportunity an individual creates in the business world or as the ability to turn a sufficient profit through creative company concepts. As a result, entrepreneurship refers to more than just the company concept (Panda, 2000). It also refers to other attributes like risk, management skills, leadership, etc. Max Weber defines an entrepreneur as someone who possesses the quality of innovation, unusual will and energy, no capital, but clear vision, a strong will, and the capacity to act. Talcott Parsons highlighted Weber's work in his voluntaristic work 'The Structure of Social Action' (Parsons, 1974, p. 515).

Entrepreneurship

'Entrepreneurship' is a complex phenomenon which includes many dimensions related to innovation, economic affairs, the network of relations, the role of the state, the role of the community, knowledge about enterprise,

etc. These interrelated factors help entrepreneurs improve their socio-economic milieu (Rusu et al., 2012). Max Weber propounded that capitalism, which drives relations and market strategies, leads to entrepreneurial activity in any society (Weber, 1947). According to A.H. Cole, "Entrepreneurship is the purposeful activity of an individual or group of associated individuals undertaken to initiate, maintain or to organise a profit-oriented business unit for the production or distribution of economic goods and services" (Cole, 1977). Peter Drucker argues, "Entrepreneurship is neither a science nor an art. It is a knowledge-based practice" (Drucker, 1985). Similarly, Joseph A. Schumpeter opined that "Entrepreneurship is essentially a creative activity or it is an innovative action" (Schumpeter, 1967, p. 63). Entrepreneurship is a purposeful profit-oriented economic activity of innovation associated with an individual or group. It is a knowledge-based practice to establish micro, small, medium, and large enterprises to accumulate benefits that enhance state welfare and contribute to the economic structure of the country as well as its way of life. Entrepreneurship gives a chance to create a social network in society, which helps in the discourse of new ideas and innovation entrepreneurs (Desai, 1992, p. 129).

Women Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is the skilful use of knowledge, expertise, and financial gain from a novel concept by an individual or group connected to an individual. Women's entrepreneurship refers to the entire process that the female member(s) professionally practices (Goswami et al., 2008). Women's entrepreneurship is defined by Schumpeter (1934) as their involvement in a business venture that has entrepreneurial value and engagement. According to Schumpeter (1934), female entrepreneurs have various responsibilities, including ideation and execution, market analysis, project summaries, finance raising, and balancing social and professional life. Women may manage and carry out all aspects of concept, production, risk, employment, risk, and market attributes through women entrepreneurs (Goyal and Prakash, 2011).

In Indian society, women were viewed for a very long time as a disadvantaged and destitute gender category. Since birth, women have naturally played a restricted role in the family (Khan, 1995, p. 45). Although women entrepreneurs in India hail mostly from poor and middle-class origins, their accomplishments and educational backgrounds vary widely; most of them run service-oriented businesses (Patole and Ruthven, 2002). Women who are entrepreneurs feel more confident that they can alter their original social position in society. In some ways, science and technology

progress helps to improve their conventional situation by encouraging women to pursue entrepreneurship (Rani, 1996, pp. 5-8).

Social Capital

The power to mobilise action by upholding social standards and the social network via gratitude developed through social ties is referred to as 'social capital'. The growth of productive firms is influenced by social capital or interpersonal interactions (Anderson and Miller, 2003). A developing theory states that the relationship between social capital and entrepreneurship impacts and fosters the development of entrepreneurs by providing access to opportunities, experiences, knowledge, and other resources - and, occasionally, a betrayal of trust (Cope et al., 2007). Social capital is often defined as an individual's ability to work with others in groups and organisations to achieve shared objectives. It may be attained through social interactions, norms, ideals, and relationships with others (Zhang, 2003). Furthermore, social capital refers to a group of resources that include material, foreign economic, social, and knowledge-based ones, according to Schuster et al. (2010). It may be applied to overcome resource limitations and further entrepreneurial objectives (Schuster et al., 2010). The inter-relationships among ideals, teamwork, dedication, trust, and relationship quality underscore the significance of social capital.

Female Entrepreneurship in the Current Landscape

Women entrepreneurs play a critical role when considering the economic and social structure of both established and developing countries. Tribal women are increasingly making their marks in various fields these days, including politics, business, education, agriculture, government, and service (Gautam and Mishra, 2016). The status of tribal women results from several societal changes brought about by urbanisation, globalisation, and industrialisation. These circumstances positively influence tribal women's status and business chances (Singh and Monga, 2014). Through entrepreneurship, tribal women are prepared to defy social norms, guarantee a high level of living, assist wage earners in the family, make better decisions, overcome poverty, and positively impact the country (Ansari, 2016). These days, tribal women are becoming increasingly involved in entrepreneurship, transforming the face of the global economy. In addition, knowledge, skills, and the network of relationships, or social capital, all contribute to their advancement (Shane et al., 2003).

Tribal women are becoming increasingly involved in economic growth through entrepreneurship in the organised and unorganised sectors (Swarajatalakshmi, 1998, p. 23). Tribal women enjoy respect and dignity in society, and they may advance as recognised entrepreneurs with the aid of self-help organisations, non-governmental organisations, and other resources. However, because men have long held the majority of the market, tribal women must overcome several obstacles to become well-known and prosperous business owners (Chutia and Bhuyan, 2014).

Contributing Factors in the Growth of Tribal Women Entrepreneurship

It will take far more of a cultural shift to support tribal women in business than it will to provide jobs for them. Even if they navigate via producers, publishers, decorators, and designers, they continually investigate new areas of economic involvement (Goyal, 2015). The issue facing tribal women business owners is a shortage of resources, including raw materials, subsidies, training, expertise, and capital. Nonetheless, it has been demonstrated that strong, empowered women catalyse quick socioeconomic development. Tribal women possess the mindset of entrepreneurs, but they haven't been able to make a profit. They are more receptive to and at ease with women leading roles in society due to the changing environment (Mani and Murugesan, 2019). Self-motivation and encouragement, sociocultural elements, socioeconomic circumstances, the company environment, and the availability of market examples are preliminary entrepreneurial aspects that support their growth (Sharma et al., 2015).

India's state and central governments provide a plethora of policies and programs, such as the 1999-2000 Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojna and Self-Help Groups, to encourage and assist women entrepreneurs. According to Shane et al. (2003), development is happening now. However, substantial progress might be observed if the main emphasis is on creating an environment that supports women's entrepreneurship and empowerment. Inevitable push and pull variables include family, economics, culture, challenge, business-related difficulties, capital (either economic or social), government initiatives, self-help organisations, etc.; this incentive catalyses tribal women to explore business (Goyal and Prakash, 2011). According to Das's (2000) research, hard effort, social skills, and personal traits are the most critical factors in determining an entrepreneur's success. The push elements she identified from her research results are family history, social standing and recognition, economic independence, identity, freedom, and mobility (Das, 2000).

Mental, Emotional and Psychological Influence

Humanity has worked to create something novel and beneficial to reach the vertex. The propensity to manage the surroundings and take risks is an epochal element that is a push factor in establishing a company (Deng and Rui, 2010). Tribal females are more likely to start their own businesses when they are motivated by a variety of important criteria, including compliance to develop the organisation, the need for self-determination, resilience, control, obtaining power, the goal to build one's own empire, and personal management (Naffziger et al., 1994). Some underlying elements that may drive someone to launch a business include aptitude, knowledge, experience, managerial abilities, executive skills, and financial matters (Smith, 2005). The enterprise psychology of tribal women is largely shaped by their comprehension, market influence, acceptability, perception, cognizance, and consciousness. Tribal female entrepreneurs and business opportunity awareness are increased when they possess self-confidence (Charboneau, 1981). Thus, an individual's personality, self, and internal factors are crucial in determining their entrepreneurial trajectory.

Cognitive Factors

In addition to an individual's psychological makeup, experience, capacity, ability, and knowledge are other cognitive elements that have a significant impact on entrepreneurship (Bird, 1988). The modern world is completely encircled by technology. To govern technology, entrepreneurs need to have the right mindset, skills, and knowledge. Many entrepreneurs find that having a solid understanding of the technology and industry, including decision-making, marketing, selling, promoting, resources, management, and negotiating, gives them the push they need to succeed (Alvarez and Busenitz, 2001). A well-defined goal combined with strategic planning might propel the business to new heights. Despite being a complex occurrence, entrepreneurship is influenced by various cognitive states and methodologies (Prasastyoga et al., 2021).

Monetary Forces

In order to generate money, enhance her and her family's standard of living, share financial responsibility, and effectively manage her personal and professional lives, each tribal female entrepreneur hopes to capitalise on the concept and launch their own business. Every business needs capital to operate; without it, none could last (Coleman, 2000). The implementation of ambitious ideas and programs, planning, action, marketing, and other

aspects of corporate success are all significantly impacted by finance, either directly or indirectly. Action plans or strategies can meet the expansion of the enterprise after the satisfaction of financial demand arises as essential for the endeavour. It aids with marketing, training, more thorough planning, and concept execution for the business (Cooper et al., 1994). The main driving force is the need to support the family financially, which gives women more authority to fulfil their personal and professional obligations. Statistics show that tribal women are five times more likely than men to work in business to support their families (USAID, 2017). As financial constraints lessen people's desire to launch or develop new businesses. Financial inheritance may aid prospects in collecting finances and resources to manage the organisation in a highly competitive sector (Dyer and Handler, 1994). Indian women entrepreneurs tend to focus more on tiny and micro businesses than on larger ones. Government and bank programs and policies are another driving force behind the growth of women-owned businesses.

Socio-Cultural Influence

Male domination in Silicon Valley and the venture capital industry has long been observed. It has only led to lopsided advancement in startups or entrepreneurship, which encourages immoral and unlawful behaviour, including harassment, to permeate the digital culture (William, 2017). A growing nation such as India has a multitude of social and cultural conventions. According to Wube (2010), family problems and social and cultural standards are the two most essential concerns. Such locations define the sort of entrepreneurial activity at a certain time and place by shaping and trimming entrepreneurial choices around the interaction of sociocultural elements. While social networks have a significant role in the performance and success of tribal female entrepreneurs, they are also vital. Better resources and worthwhile possibilities may be provided (Veciana, 1999). According to Adriana (1997), sociocultural elements like caste, religion, social class, family, and so forth strongly influence how tribal women entrepreneurs in the economy take risks and make decisions. Due to their several responsibilities and tasks in the house, family, community, and other areas, tribal women are hindered in their pursuit of entrepreneurship. Similarly, Starcher (1996), affirms that female entrepreneurs prefer to bring about change that would empower women and create job chances for others. They also work to free society from gender inequality, unequal employment prospects, and economic disparities. Therefore, cultures that support and

encourage tribal women's entrepreneurship want to inspire and encourage tribal women to begin their own businesses.

Entrepreneurial Ecology of Family

The internal or family environment and the business environment in which women operate are essential factors affecting potential women's abilities. According to Cooper et al. (1994), applicants who hail from a household where both parents engage in entrepreneurial pursuits stand a better chance of starting and growing their own company. Davidsson and Honig (2003), found, individuals with entrepreneurial backgrounds possess the ability to recognise business opportunities in challenging and intricate situations promptly. Tribal women may thrive in a challenging environment with the support of a well-defined strategic environment, a framework of policies, market demand and supply circumstances, laws and regulations, and equal chances with inclusive policies adopted by the government (Naude, 2010). His study states that the macroeconomic environment significantly impacts entrepreneurial activity. This environment comprises the legal system, the availability of money in the market, market conditions, the age of the industry, and the overall economy.

Adversities in Tribal Women's Entrepreneurship

Through entrepreneurship, tribal women made a significant economic contribution to India; yet, several obstacles, including financial difficulties, a lack of training, and government norms and regulations, have been recognised as barriers to entry in many industries (United Nations, 2006). In their economic dealings, they face more tremendous obstacles than males do. Indian tribal women business owners acknowledged that starting small and medium-sized businesses presented them with several obstacles and difficulties (Panandikar, 1985). The entire process of starting a business is not that simple for every tribal woman due to changes in societal pressure, market trends, capital, management skills, market reliance, family, priorities, etc.

Various Responsibility in Entrepreneurship and Family Life

According to earlier research, most Indian tribal women entrepreneurs struggle to grasp their familial responsibilities and find it difficult to spend enough time with them (Siddiqui, 2012). Tribal women entrepreneurs in India balance their obligations to their families and their businesses. Their inability to become entrepreneurs is hampered by their

familial obligations. Few are able to devote their whole attention to their company endeavour; most frequently, they take care of their spouse, children, in-laws, and other family members (Mahajan, 2013). Social constructions of her family duty give her little to no time and energy to devote to their business. It isn't easy to guarantee that both sides of duty are handled well since they have to put in a lot of work and energy for a business to be adequately oriented (Jaiswal, 2019).

Deficiency in Self-Confidence, Willingness to Take Risks and Positive Outlook

Evidently, in India, a tribal woman's family is the first to support her when she launches her own business. Sometimes, a tribal woman entrepreneur exists just on paper; in those instances, a male family member runs the business, indicating a lack of trust and confidence in the tribal woman (Ramesh, 2018). According to Suba and Sneka (2016), several research indicates that tribal women entrepreneurs lack confidence when it comes to in-depth capital analysis in the company. According to a 2007 Gem Report, one-third of developing-nation women from low to middle-income groups are afraid of establishing their own businesses because they are afraid of failing and don't want to take risks (Asharani and Sriramappa, 2014).

Male-Dominated Indian Society and Market

For a very long time, Indian society has been controlled by men, and there is still a significant gender gap in the country (Raghuram, 2007). It is acknowledged that they are feeble and unable to carry out the obligations and responsibilities of business. Thus, starting a firm as a tribal woman entrepreneur is challenging due to this predominance of society (Hanson and Blake, 2005).

Insufficient Entrepreneurial Skills and Knowledge

In Indian society, it is pretty standard for tribal women to lack commercial knowledge and abilities. Due to their propensity to maintain social and cultural obligations, tribal women entrepreneurs have more significant challenges than their male counterparts regarding overseeing business operations and using their business administration experience (Amalu and Okafor, 2010). The literacy gap appears to be the reason for the existing gender differences in Indian culture when applying basic knowledge. It is essential to continuously educate and train tribal women to

acquire skills and knowledge in order to empower them in all functional areas of the company. Since a lack of awareness of female entrepreneurs might influence choices and increase reliance. Additionally, it might result in less efficient use of resources, product blockages, and complex administration (Mandipaka, 2014).

Lack of Government Assistance

Both central and state governments operate several initiatives to assist tribal female entrepreneurs. In reality, recipients have several obstacles while receiving this kind of support due to corruption, dishonest advisers, drawn-out processes, etc. (Mansor and Mat, 2010). Aside from this, the government is unable to match the level of funding, workshops, advocacy, training, development skills, etc. The nation's legal and regulatory structure might be challenging for people operating micro, small, and medium-sized businesses (Bharthvajan, 2014). It may be difficult for tribal women entrepreneurs running micro and small businesses to comprehend policies and documents since they are either less or completely illiterate.

Creation of Counter-Public over Traditional Setting

Several scholars have already claimed that Indian society has a fixed order to run it in every sense. Traditionally, dominance in the market by a few particular communities, castes, classes, regions, etc., reflects the need to create space for other underprivileged sections. In this queue, in the context of the Indian market, tribal women asserted themselves through entrepreneurship by using their community of knowledge. Tribal women are using cultural and traditional knowledge, including their specific skills, to disintegrate the traditional setting and learn new entrepreneurial skills. In this sense, informal relations, networks of relations, and social capital emerged as catalysts for them. Through social capital or networks of relations, tribals create a counter-public in contrast to fixed-order market settings.

Social sciences study has included social ties, which are always essential to survival (MacIver and Page, 1949). Nevertheless, as social capital, Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) brought it back. Subsequently, Putnam (1993; 2000) brings attention to social capital's significance and operation, highlighting its positive and negative effects. Numerous academic fields, including linguistics, cultural studies, business, and others, have written extensively about social capital (Baycan and Oner, 2022). While some argue for social capital's advantages and positive aspects, others see it as having negative implications. When it operates on both sides at the same time, it

does, however, have some unique qualities. These include the following: it initially increases and decreases with age, loses mobility, and forms acute connections with others while maintaining a physical distance (Glaeser et al., 2002). Social capital serves as a link between the effects of a network of relationships on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship itself (Burt, 2001). Although, it has both dark and bright sides in the creation of a counter-public.

Positive Aspects of Network of Relations in the Creation of Counter-Public

How social capital functions varies depending on whether an entrepreneur is a man or a woman. According to Aldrich et al. (1989), an entrepreneur's success rate can be affected by the network of relationships that they employ as social capital. The existing literature on tribal female entrepreneurs demonstrates that relationships play a crucial role within the framework of social capital. Tribal women heavily depend on informal networks (Spring, 2009, p. 22) rather than formal networks for the growth of their businesses because they are disadvantaged when it comes to market dominance (Raghuram, 2007). In order to favourably impact the success rate of tribal women's entrepreneurship, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) assist home-based, micro, and small-scale businesses and seek to establish a multi-level network (Majid and Malik, 2016, pp. 26-30). Strong interpersonal ties with friends, husbands, parents, and other close relatives are the most dependable and valuable social capital for women's entrepreneurship (Lindvert et al., 2017). In the framework of organising success and possibilities for female entrepreneurs, the function of these networks modifies entrepreneurial activity. Tribal women entrepreneurs' personal resources, social capital, and informal relationships all significantly influence the start-up, development, and growth of their businesses (Harris-White, 2010).

Negative Aspects of Network of Relations in the Creation of Counter-Public

The beneficial impacts of social capital on entrepreneurial activity are readily apparent. However, both formal and informal sectors of entrepreneurship are also connected with negative consequences (Sedeh et al., 2020). According to Newton (2001), trust is the cornerstone of the network of relationships that underpins entrepreneurial behaviour and is a direct correlate of an individual's social capital. Micro and small businesses, as well as the informal sector, comprise the bulk of tribal women's entrepreneurship; in essence, their businesses rely more on trust than on paperwork (Grabher, 2002). Because collective trust makes it easier for customers to trust businesses, it may occasionally impede cooperative behaviour in tribal

women entrepreneurs. Tribal women are less cognitively sophisticated than men, and their ignorance of entrepreneurship might make managing entrepreneurial assets more difficult. People occasionally exploited this circumstance for personal gain and betrayed confidence (Kaminska, 2010).

Agency Assistance for Tribal Women Entrepreneurs

The government, non-governmental organisations, community organisations, and other institutions have an invaluable role to play in supporting tribal women entrepreneurs. These organisations are involved in women's long-standing social location liberation in society (Bhuiyan and Abdullah, 2007). Because there is less mobility and a male-dominated market, the scope of trading is very limited in the context of women entrepreneurship, females who want to engage in economic activity to the emancipation of social location, and poverty (Raghuram, 2007). Self-help groups, the government, NGOs, and a few other organisations banded together and worked tirelessly to make it happen. Opportunities, financial support, workshops, training courses, and other resources are being developed to empower tribal women via business. Ministries such as the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and the Ministry of Rural Development have introduced various policies and plans in India (Natrajan and Gordon, 2007). In order to provide tribal women entrepreneurs with the best possible assistance and enable them to reclaim their place in society, formal institutions encourage entrepreneurial behaviour through programs, regulations, and funding within a legal framework (Langowitz and Minniti, 2007). Since tribal women entrepreneurs operate under strict restrictions and regulations, the government's potential support is insufficient. Tribal female entrepreneurs eventually require assistance from unofficial organisations, particularly those operating micro, small, and medium-sized businesses (Baumol, 1990). These unofficial organisations offer mobility, personal networks, financial help, and other services. In addition, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO), the Dalit Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (DICCI), the National Alliance of Young Entrepreneurs (NAYE), and other organisations are significant supporters of women entrepreneurs (Gupta and Srinivasan, 2013, p. 134).

Conclusion

Tribal women in India still confront many challenges because of gender, cultural emergence, social conventions, limited independence, and

economic dependency. The time has come for tribal women's standing to be elevated. The several difficulties faced by tribal women entrepreneurs in India are clarified by this study, which shows enough push and pull factors affecting tribal women's assertion through entrepreneurship. The study underscored the way tribal women created a counter-public in the predominant setting to transcend the gender-specific historicity in Indian society, including the use of their personal and informal relations. However, government and non-government agencies are sustainably helping and encouraging the tribal women entrepreneurs in growing their entrepreneurial growth.

The findings of the study highlighted psychological influence, cognitive factors, financial forces, sociocultural impacts, business environment of the family, cultural and traditional knowledge and skills, etc., as push factors, while family responsibilities, balance between family and business, lack of confidence, less risk-taking ability, male-dominated market and society, lack of skills and government assistance as pull factors in their entrepreneurial growth. However, the study also highlighted that it was not that simple for every tribal woman to assert herself through entrepreneurship because of hurdles, but to overcome these challenges, tribal women entrepreneurs take assistance from government and non-government agencies and also create their own public for entrepreneurial activities by using their formal, informal, personal, family, relatives and closed one's relation. Tribal women entrepreneurs cope with ground-level problems such as gender inequality, the discrepancy in resource allocation, lack of business tactics, etc., through social capital or network of relations.

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The Interface between Tribal Development and Education in the State of Madhya Pradesh

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Education is crucial for the growth and development of any society, and it is recognised as a fundamental right in the Constitution of India under Article 21A. Education is considered crucial for empowering tribal communities by helping them gain access to and control over their land, forest, and water resources. It also enables them to develop sustainable livelihood alternatives. Madhya Pradesh represents a diverse cultural mosaic of different tribal communities at various levels of socio-economic development. Formal education has not been fully integrated into the tribal social system due to socio-economic and socio-cultural factors. However, there have been efforts to mainstream tribal communities before the planning era and the making of the Constitution. This research paper explores the dynamic relationship between tribal development and education in Madhya Pradesh, examining both the progress and persisting challenges.

Keywords: Education, Tribal Development, Governance, Ekalavya Model School, Madhya Pradesh.

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Introduction

Madhya Pradesh is one of the most diverse states of India. It is home to a significant tribal population. Regarding tribal population, the state of Madhya Pradesh stands number one among all the other states of India. The socio-economic progress of Madhya Pradesh necessitates bridging the developmental gap for these marginalised communities. Tribal groups in the state, such as the Gond, Bhil, and Baiga, often inhabit remote areas, which have historically been neglected regarding infrastructure, access to basic services, and educational opportunities. Tribals in India in general and Madhya Pradesh in particular are still struggling to pace with development and mainstream society, even after so many years of the operationalisation of Constitution in India. In the past various approaches have been adopted by the policy makers beginning from isolation to assimilation and later integration with the coming of the Constitution. The principles of Panchsheel have been much advocated for developing tribes in India.

Education provides a pathway to economic development, social inclusion, and cultural preservation by fostering inclusive growth and empowerment among these tribal communities. However, several socio-economic, cultural, and geographical barriers continue to hinder educational attainment among tribal populations. Factors such as language differences, poverty, lack of infrastructure, and systemic marginalisation exacerbate the challenges faced by these communities in accessing quality education.

Conceptualising Education and Development

Development is not purely an economic phenomenon but rather a multi-dimensional process involving reorganising and reorienting the entire economic and social system. In economic terms, development has been understood as achieving sustainable rates of growth of income per capita to enable the nation to expand its output faster than the population (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). In sociological terms, the term 'development' is used (often by Western sociologists) to mean industrialisation, economic growth, and the living standards associated with prosperity, such as increased life expectancy, health care, free education, etc. Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states (Sen, 1999). The human person is the central subject of the development process and that development policy should therefore make the human being the main participant and beneficiary of development

(United Nations, 1986). Steps should be taken to ensure the full exercise and progressive enhancement of the right to development, including the formulation, adoption and implementation of policy, legislative and other measures at the national and international levels (United Nations, 1986). Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food (United Nations, 1986). The rule of law is not a mere adornment to development; it is a vital source of progress. It creates an environment in which the full spectrum of human creativity can flourish, and prosperity can be built (UN Final Report, 2008).

In understanding education and development, it is evident that the two are closely connected. Education not only empowers individuals and communities but is also influenced by and contributes to the broader developmental objectives of a society. To fully utilise the potential of education as a catalyst for development, it is important to address the challenges related to access, quality, and fairness while aligning educational policies with sustainable and inclusive development goals. This interdependent relationship is crucial for establishing a fair, inclusive, and developed society. It is widely acknowledged that the prevailing trends significantly influence the educational process. Education has historically been constrained by politics, economics, the social order, and technology. Significant social movements, nevertheless, additionally support the current understanding of the nature of the enhanced awareness and comprehension of the individual frequently finds its way into newly developing educational philosophies (Hutchins, 1968) Teachers have attempted to pinpoint the content's origins in the well-known model that connected the disciplines, learners, and society (Tomkins, 1979).

The concept of 'education' includes various ideas like 'training', 'instruction', 'teaching', 'curriculum', and so on. If we are not conscientious about determining what is education and what is not, we may do even more social and individual harm by allowing various constructing activities like 'training', 'indoctrination', and 'instruction' to pass for education (Peters, 1966). The concept of education does not possess only dual connotations but is not an easy subject to define. Education in the everyday sense could mean formal training in schools and institutions, that is, the acquisition of the ability to read, write and calculate. It could mean the specialised training that is provided on the job (Peters, 1977). People can improve personally and professionally by acquiring the knowledge, skills, and competencies that education provides. When more educated people enter the workforce, economic growth, productivity, and innovation all increase.

Education also promotes critical thinking, rights knowledge, and active citizenship, all of which support the growth and stability of democratic institutions. In nations like India, where tribes make up a sizeable portion of the population, education is essential to the socio-economic growth of tribal populations. Historically marginalised, tribes have faced problems with land rights, socio-economic marginalisation, and limited access to education. As education is seen as a crucial instrument for empowering tribes and assimilating them into the larger socio-economic fabric of the nation, numerous policies and initiatives have been implemented over time to address the educational requirements of these groups. Education, particularly for tribal communities, is an essential means to overcome social and economic marginalisation, facilitating their integration into the mainstream while also respecting their cultural identity" (Jha and Jhingran, 2002).

Educational Profile of Schedule Tribes in India

The Government of India recognised education as a vital component of the country's growth soon after independence, and the country set out to improve its educational infrastructure. India's education policy was significantly shaped by the Kothari Commission (1964–1966), which advocated for a unified national education system and strongly emphasised funding for educational resources, teacher preparation, and physical infrastructure (The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009). In recognition of the need to improve educational outcomes for tribes, the Indian government has implemented several policies and schemes to promote tribal education. The Constitution of India, through Articles 15, 46, and 244, provides special provisions for promoting education among Scheduled Tribes (The Constitution of India 1950, Article 46). The National Policy on Education, 1986, emphasised the need to bring tribal populations into the mainstream of national development by ensuring their access to education. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, has also played a crucial role in ensuring that children from tribal areas have access to education. However, the implementation of these policies has faced challenges, particularly in remote and inaccessible tribal regions. Numerous initiatives and plans have been put out to encourage education in native communities. As an illustration, the National Policy on Education, 1986, clearly emphasised advancing tribal education. This included building schools in tribal territories, hiring instructors from those communities, and creating curricula that were unique to that region.

Launched in 2001, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has been instrumental in building school facilities in areas controlled by indigenous communities. Its goal was to make sure that every community could go to an upper primary school in three kilometres and a primary school in one km. In tribal regions, the initiative has made it easier to build schools, add more classrooms, and provide necessities like clean water for drinking. SSA reported that "by 2020, it had successfully established schools in over 50,000 tribal habitations, though challenges in terms of adequate infrastructure and maintenance remain" [(Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Implementation Report 2020 (Ministry of Education 2020)]. Ekalavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), which were established between 1997 and 1998, are another key initiative. Using infrastructure that is tailored to their specific requirements and culturally relevant pedagogy, these schools are intended to offer tribal students a high-quality education in their natural surroundings. Aiming to construct one EMRS in every block with more than 50 per cent ST population and at least 20,000 tribal people, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has further enlarged the programme. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, "EMRSs are envisioned as a model of holistic development for tribal students, combining formal education with vocational training, thereby addressing both academic and skill-development needs [(Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Ekalavya Model Residential Schools: Vision and Roadmap (Government of India 2020)].

The access to higher education, for aboriginal kids, is much more restricted. Since most tribal areas lack universities and colleges, students must go to larger cities to pursue higher education. One important tool for ensuring that funding is set aside for the construction of infrastructure related to higher education in tribal communities is the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP). Nevertheless, TSP has been applied unevenly, with minimal practical effects. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has implemented schemes such as the Fellowship for ST Students and special grants for the establishment of tribal study centres in universities to promote higher education among tribes (UGC 2019). Though many students face financial and cultural barriers that prevent them from completing higher education, the population of Scheduled Tribes (ST) has experienced a notable rise in literacy over the 50 years between 1961 and 2011. Even with these advancements, there are still significant gender gaps and difficulties in providing the ST population, particularly women, with fair access to education. The Chart 1 shows the trends in the literacy rates for men, women, and the ST population as a whole.

Chart 1
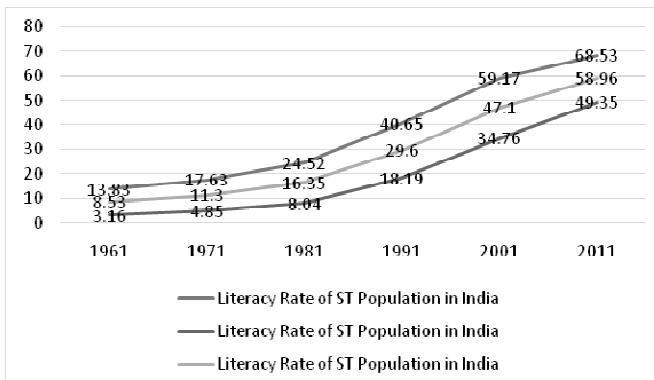
Source: Registrar General of India, Census of India 2011 (Government of India 2011).

Thus, in 1961 the literacy percentage among the ST population was exceptionally low, with only 13.83 per cent for males and 3.16 per cent for females, resulting in an overall literacy rate of 8.53 per cent. This demonstrates the extreme lack of access to education that ST people endured in the first several decades following India's independence. Due to socio-economic marginalisation, lack of infrastructure, and remote location, access to education was restricted. Whereas in 1971 there was a minor improvement, with the total literacy rate rising to 11.3 per cent, the male rate growing to 17.63 per cent and the female rate rising to 4.85 per cent. While there were some early government initiatives in this decade, such as building schools in remote and tribal areas, the rate of advancement remained sluggish. The literacy rate for males climbed to 24.52 per cent and for females to 8.04 per cent, with a total literacy rate of 16.35 per cent. Even if it's small, the rise is indicative of the early success of programmes like the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP), which promoted literacy in the tribal and rural areas. The decade of 1991 saw a notable increase in literacy, with male literacy rising to 40.65 per cent and female literacy to 18.19 per cent, resulting in a total literacy rate of 29.6 per cent. The rise is a reflection of the growing impact of laws like the National Policy on Education, 1986, which gave special attention to the educational advancement of Scheduled Tribes by building schools in their communities and hiring teachers from nearby communities. In 2011, the percentage of literate people had increased to 58.96 per cent, with male literacy standing at 68.53 per cent and female literacy at 49.35 per cent. Though it was still there, the gender gap had shrunk significantly from earlier decades. By requiring free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14 and establishing

elementary education as a fundamental right, the Right to Education Act (RTE), which was put into effect in 2009, significantly increased the number of literate people.

Despite these improvements, the female literacy rate remains lower than that of males, pointing to persistent gender inequality in education, particularly in remote and tribal areas. Societal norms, safety concerns, and the burden of domestic responsibilities often restrict girls' access to education. The gender gap began to close more rapidly during the period 1991 to 2011. By 2011, the difference between male and female literacy had reduced to 19.18 per cent, as compared to 22.71 per cent in 2001 and 29.81 per cent in 1991. This narrowing of the gap can be attributed to the focused efforts on girls' education, including scholarships for tribal girls, the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) programme, and other government schemes aimed at improving girls' access to education.

## Status of Education among Scheduled Tribes in Madhya Pradesh

Madhya Pradesh has the highest population of Scheduled Tribes in India, totalling 15.3 million, or 21.1 per cent of the state's population. State's Scheduled Tribes make up 14.7 per cent of India's total tribal population. Their literacy rate is 50.6 per cent (59.6 per cent male and 41.5 per cent female). Additionally, Scheduled Castes represent 15.6 per cent (113.42 lakhs) of the state's population. The government is working on various schemes to ensure their socio-economic and educational upliftment for better integration into Madhya Pradesh's economy and society. Education is the cornerstone of an empowered society that promotes high literacy, equal opportunities, and economic advancement while reducing poverty and crime. Madhya Pradesh has made notable progress in delivering quality education and skill development through three key departments - the Department of School Education (manages education from primary to higher secondary levels), the Department of Higher Education (supports the holistic development of youth), and the Department of Technical Education, Skill Development, and Employment (focuses on technical, vocational education, and skills training for a competent workforce). In the 2023-24 budget, the Madhya Pradesh government allocated 12.22 per cent of its total expenditure to the education sector.

The responsibility for educational development in tribal areas lies with the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes Welfare Department. Approximately 21 per cent of the schools in the state are operated by this department, which functions under the administrative

control of the Commissioner for Tribal Development. The educational profile of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Madhya Pradesh reflects both progress and ongoing challenges. With one of India's highest concentrations of STs, Madhya Pradesh has implemented several programmes to increase their educational opportunities. Historically, socio-economic, cultural, and geographic barriers have made it more difficult for ST communities to advance toward equitable educational outcomes. The following chart 2 shows the status of the literacy rate among the scheduled tribes in Madhya Pradesh.

Chart 2
Literacy Rate of Scheduled Tribes of Madhya Pradesh and India:
2001 and 2011
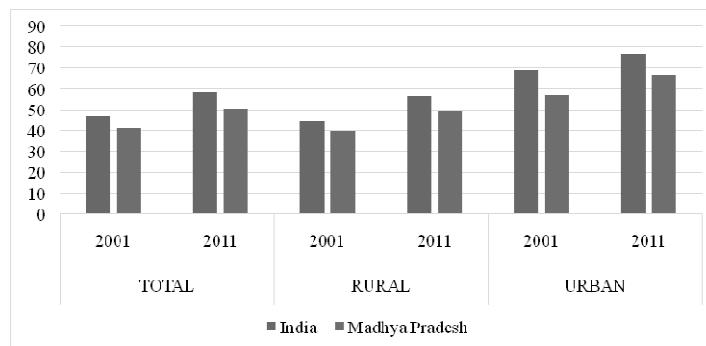
Source: Registrar General of India, Census of India 2011 (Government of India 2011).

Chart 2 provides data on literacy rates for India and Madhya Pradesh in 2001 and 2011. It is divided into three categories: Total, Rural, and Urban. The total literacy rate in India increased from 47.1 per cent in 2001 to 58.7 per cent in 2011, showing an overall improvement of 11.6 percentage points over the decade. Whereas in Madhya Pradesh, the same has increased from 41.2 per cent in 2001 to 50.6 per cent in 2011. Showing an improvement of 9.4 percentage points, slightly lower than the national average.

The Rural Literacy Rate in India has increased from 45 per cent in 2001 to 56.6 per cent in 2011. This is an improvement of 11.6 percentage points, indicating significant growth in rural literacy. Madhya Pradesh has shown an increase of 9.3 percentage points, again slightly below the national average. The urban literacy rate in India has increased from 69.1 per cent in 2001 to 76.7 per cent in 2011. Madhya Pradesh shows an improvement of 9.5 percentage points, which is a strong growth compared to its rural areas. The urban literacy rate in Madhya Pradesh improved more than the rural literacy

rate, indicating that urban areas may have better access to education resources or initiatives during this period.

Overall, while both India and Madhya Pradesh made progress, there remains a gap (Chart 3) between the state and the national average, particularly in rural areas.

Chart 3
Gender Wise Literacy Rate (%) of Madhya Pradesh
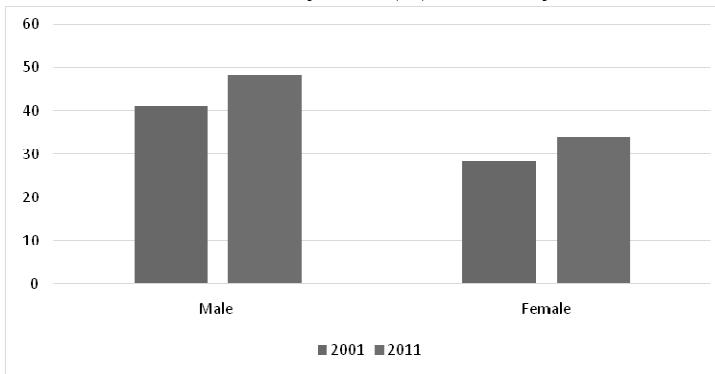
Source: Registrar General of India, Census of India 2011 (Government of India 2011).

Chart 3 shows a significant difference in male-female literacy rates. It is very high among the ST communities of Madhya Pradesh. ST community had a male literacy rate of 41.1 in 2001 and 48.38 per cent in 2011 with an increase of 7.2 per cent and a female literacy of 28.4 in 2001 and 33.94 per cent in 2011 rate with an increase of 5.5 per cent.

Chart 4
Gross Enrolment Rate at Different Education Levels
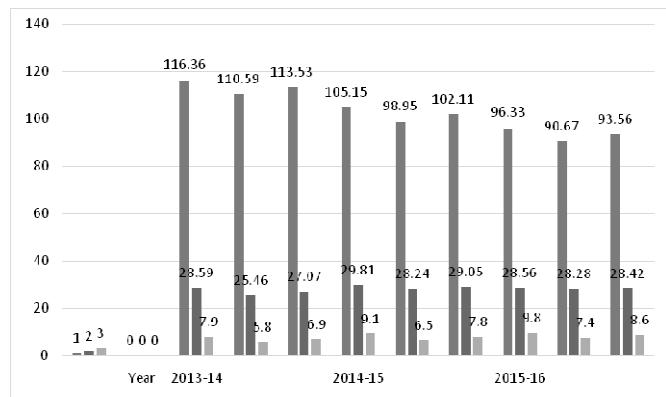
Source: Department of Higher Education, MHRD, Government of India 2016

Chart 4 highlights the enrolment trends for boys and girls at different educational levels in Madhya Pradesh over three academic years: 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16. In the academic year 2013-14, enrolment rates in primary education were relatively high, with boys at 116.36 per cent and girls at 110.59 per cent, totalling 113.53 per cent. This high enrolment percentage suggests that efforts to promote primary education, such as schemes under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), were relatively effective during this period. In 2014-15, the enrolment saw a noticeable decline, with boys at 105.15 per cent and girls at 98.95 per cent, resulting in a total of 102.11 per cent. This could indicate challenges in sustaining school attendance or demographic shifts. In 2015-16 the trend of declining enrolment continued, with boys at 96.33 per cent and girls at 90.67 per cent, bringing the total down to 93.56 per cent. The declining trend may suggest issues related to school dropout rates, possibly due to economic, social, or infrastructural reasons affecting children's continued access to primary education.

Education in Senior Secondary during 2013–14 shows the enrolment rate for senior secondary education was 27.07 per cent, with 28.59 per cent of boys and 25.46 per cent of girls enrolled. There may be difficulties in the transition from primary to secondary education, as evidenced by the enrolment at this level being much lower than in primary education. In 2014-15 the enrolment slightly improved, with boys at 29.81 per cent and girls at 28.24 per cent, totalling 29.05 per cent. This growth suggests that there has been progress in keeping students in secondary education, particularly girls. Whereas in 2015–16 the overall enrolment rate stayed constant at 28.42 per cent, with boys' enrolment declining to 28.56 per cent and girls' enrolment holding steady at 28.28 per cent. The consistency of these data indicates that although a greater number of students are continuing their education beyond primary school, gender differences are less noticeable in senior secondary education.

In 2013-14, the enrolment in higher education started low, with boys at 7.9 per cent and girls at 5.8 per cent, totalling 6.9 per cent. This low enrolment rate reflects the significant drop-off in educational participation as students move from secondary to higher education. In 2014-15, the enrolment increased slightly to 9.1 per cent for boys and 6.5 per cent for girls, with a total of 7.8 per cent. This modest improvement may be attributed to the increasing emphasis on higher education initiatives in the state. The figures for 2015-16 show that the enrolment further improved to 9.8 per cent for boys and 7.4 per cent for girls, with the total reaching 8.6 per cent.

Despite these gains, overall participation in higher education remains low, with a noticeable gender gap. The steady decline in primary education enrolment over the years is concerning. Factors such as poverty, early marriages for girls, migration of families, and inadequate school infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, may contribute to this decline (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Annual Report 2019-20). There is still a low transition rate from senior secondary to higher education. The majority of students, especially girls, are not continuing their education past the senior secondary level, despite slight increases in enrolment in higher education. This trend may be explained by cultural considerations, financial limitations, and a dearth of accessible higher education options. However, the persistent gap in higher education signals a need for more targeted interventions to ensure that girls continue their education beyond secondary school.

District-wise Educational Profile of Schedule Tribes in Madhya Pradesh

Chart 5 presents district-wise literacy rates for Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Madhya Pradesh, highlighting significant disparities across districts.

Chart 5
District wise Literacy Rate - ST Madhya Pradesh
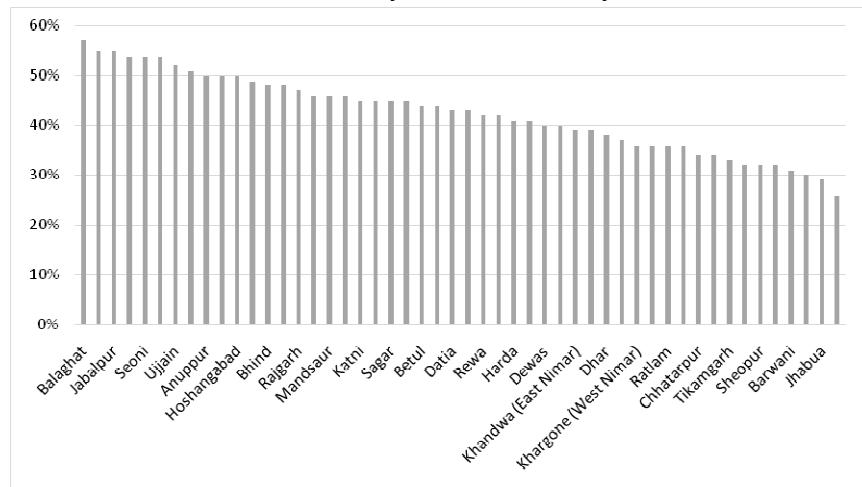
Source: NHSRC: Demographic Status of Scheduled Tribe Population 2011

With percentages approaching or slightly exceeding 50 per cent, districts like Balaghat, Bhopal, Jabalpur, and Narmadapuram have the highest literacy rates. These areas probably have easier access to educational

resources, and their urban or semi-urban environments may help them achieve higher levels of education. With rates ranging from less than 20 per cent to 30 per cent, districts like Jhabua, Alirajpur, and Burhanpur have the lowest literacy rates. These places, which are usually more isolated and populated by tribes, may have major obstacles to education, including a lack of infrastructure, remote location, poverty, and socio-cultural issues. In tribal-dominated areas like Alirajpur and Jhabua, there may be cultural and linguistic barriers to accessing education. Additionally, remote locations might make it difficult for students to attend school regularly, and teaching in non-native languages might also discourage students from continuing their education.

The preceding paragraphs offer a nuanced perspective on the educational status of tribal children, highlighting both challenges and progress. Despite historical obstacles, there has been a notable shift in this landscape due to the growing acknowledgement of the importance of education for tribal communities. Governments have initiated various programmes and policies aimed at enhancing educational opportunities for these children. These initiatives include scholarships, the establishment of schools in remote areas, and tailored curriculum development that respects and incorporates cultural values. As a result, access to education for tribal children has improved, fostering a positive change in their academic achievements and overall development.

The journey of literacy and education in tribal civilizations is profoundly impacted by various cultural influences. In the case of the Bharias of Patalkot, improvements in social mobility and access to educational institutions have played a crucial role in transforming their educational landscape. As families became more integrated into broader societal structures, children from these communities began to pursue higher levels of education than previous generations. This shift not only enhances individual opportunities for learning and personal development but also contributes to the overall advancement of the community. As a result, the Bharias of Patalkot area of Madhya Pradesh is witnessing a significant increase in educational attainment, which offers the promise of better economic and social prospects for future generations. The Table 1 gives a general outlook on the status of education in the villages concerned.

Table 1
Status of Education among Bharias

S.No.	Educational Status	Frequency	Percentage
1	Not Applicable (less than 5 years)	38	8
2	Enrolled in Anganwadi	19	4
3	Illiterate	120	25
4	Primary	107	22
5	Middle	82	17
6	High School	55	11
7	Higher Secondary	44	9
8	Graduation	18	4
	Total	483	100

Source: Singh and Mishra, 2023

The field data shows that the percentage of illiterate individuals continues to be notably high in comparison to those who have received an education. This situation highlights the challenges faced in improving literacy within the community. However, the influence of modern education, along with the integration of mainstream cultural practices, has had a significant impact on the educational landscape in the area. Among the 483 respondents in this study, only 18 individuals have achieved a graduate level of education. This figure represents a mere 4 per cent of the total population surveyed, indicating that while there are some educated individuals, the overall level of educational attainment remains low. Despite this, the presence of graduates is a positive indication of progress in this tribal region. The study focuses on a population that belongs to one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Madhya Pradesh, which has historically faced socio-economic challenges. The increase in education among even a small percentage of this group is encouraging and suggests the potential for further development in literacy and education moving forward.

Major Issues and Challenges

A complex array of historical, socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural challenges has led to persistent issues in tribal education throughout India. According to the 2011 Census, approximately 8.6 per cent of the Indian population resides in tribal communities, which often grapple with considerable obstacles in obtaining a quality education. These barriers include inadequate school infrastructure, a lack of trained teachers, and cultural dissonance in the curriculum, which often does not reflect the local context or languages of tribal students. Additionally, socio-economic factors such as poverty, limited access to transportation, and the need for children to

contribute to family livelihoods further exacerbate the situation. As a result of these challenges, many tribal children are either unable to attend school or drop out early, leading to a detrimental impact on their social, economic, and cultural advancement. This educational disparity not only hinders individual potential but also restricts the overall development and empowerment of tribal communities, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage across generations.

A significant portion of the Tribal population continues to encounter challenges in accessing the benefits of education. These obstacles can include factors such as the limited availability of schools in remote areas, inadequate transportation options, socio-economic barriers, and cultural stigmas. The following paragraphs will elaborate on these issues and explore how they affect educational opportunities for Tribal communities:

Geographical Isolation

Many tribal communities in India are located in isolated, hilly, and wooded areas, creating significant obstacles for children trying to access education. The lack of infrastructure, such as adequate roads, reliable transportation, and effective communication systems, exacerbates this issue. The geographical remoteness of these communities leads to a scarcity of nearby schools, compelling children to walk long distances, often facing hazardous conditions, to attend classes. It is essential to address these challenges to ensure all children have the opportunity to receive a quality education.

Inadequate Infrastructure and Facilities

Tribal educational facilities often lack basic amenities like safe buildings, clean water, restrooms, furniture, and teaching materials. Poor working conditions and low pay lead to high teacher absenteeism. These challenges create an unhealthy, ineffective learning environment, discouraging student attendance and hindering educational outcomes in indigenous communities.

Language Barriers

Tribal children often struggle in school due to instruction in Hindi or English, which differ from their native languages. The lack of learning materials in local dialects creates a disconnect, making it hard to understand lessons. This language barrier lowers engagement and academic performance, hindering educational success in tribal communities.

Cultural Alienation

Non-tribal schools often overlook tribal cultures, making students feel alienated. Curricula rarely reflect indigenous knowledge and teaching methods ignore tribal learning styles. This cultural disconnect leads to low engagement, poor academic performance, and high dropout rates, while also impacting tribal students' sense of identity and belonging in school.

Socio-Economic Challenges

Tribal families in India face deep poverty, forcing many children to leave school to support their households through labour. Economic hardship, malnutrition, and food insecurity are widespread, affecting children's health and learning ability. These challenges severely limit access to quality education and hinder the academic and personal growth of tribal youth.

Ineffective Government Scheme Implementation

The Government of India has launched various educational schemes for tribal areas, but poor implementation limits their impact. Corruption, mismanagement, and resource misallocation prevent these programmes from reaching the most marginalised. Many tribal schools suffer from weak administration, staff shortages, and lack of oversight, leading to poor performance and limited outcomes.

Low Enrolment and High Dropout Rates

Tribal areas face low enrolment rates, especially among girls, due to high dropout rates, early marriages, economic pressures, and migration. Cultural customs often prioritise domestic roles over education for girls, limiting their opportunities. This perpetuates gender inequality and socio-economic challenges, hindering overall progress in tribal communities.

Insufficient Knowledge and Social Disgrace

Indigenous communities often struggle with valuing education due to historical exclusion and low literacy, especially among elders. A generational gap and lack of awareness persist. Tribal students also face discrimination in schools based on identity or status, leading to hostile environments that hinder their learning, participation, and overall success.

Seasonal and Migration Factors

Indigenous families often engage in seasonal work, affecting children's education due to mobility. Flexible educational programmes, like modular or remote learning, can help maintain consistent schooling. These

solutions support children's studies during migration, reduce dropout rates, and respect traditional lifestyles while ensuring access to quality education.

Insufficient Attention to Vocational Education

Tribal communities hold valuable traditional skills but lack formal training to adapt them for modern markets. Vocational education is often inaccessible or irrelevant, limiting youth opportunities and economic growth. Bridging this gap can empower individuals, preserve heritage, and boost community development through skill enhancement and better employment prospects.

Conclusion and Suggestions

A comprehensive strategy that takes into account the distinct socio-economic, cultural, and geographic circumstances of tribal people is needed to address the issues of tribal education in India. Tribal children's educational performance can be improved and the cycle of poverty and marginalisation broken by emphasising inclusive policies, improved infrastructure, culturally suitable curricula, and community involvement. Only then will India's promise of universal access to high-quality education be fully fulfilled. The following suggestions from the authors may assist policymakers and planners in enhancing the success and growth of education for tribal children in general, without limiting the scope to any particular region of the country.

Language and Cultural Sensitivity in Education

Including native languages in the curriculum can help tribal children feel less alienated. When instructional materials reflect their cultural customs, it further fosters a sense of belonging. Bilingual education models are effective in bridging the gap between their mother tongue and the language used for teaching.

Enhancement of Infrastructure and Facilities

The government should prioritise building schools in rural areas, ensure a consistent supply of essential services such as electricity, drinking water, and sanitation facilities, and address teacher absenteeism by implementing suitable incentives and supervision.

Tribal Education Incentive

Tribal youngsters, particularly girls, might be encouraged to pursue higher education by offering financial incentives such as scholarships, free

textbooks, and hostel accommodations. Midday lunches are one example of a special programme that might alleviate nutritional inadequacies and promote school attendance.

Programmes for Community Involvement and Awareness

Raising awareness of the value of education and busting beliefs that prevent people from participating in school can be accomplished through community-based projects that involve tribal elders, local authorities, and non-governmental organisations. Campaigns to raise awareness can emphasise the value of education for girls and the advantages of education for social mobility.

Customised Teacher Training

To enhance the effectiveness of multicultural classrooms and address language challenges, it is essential for teachers in tribal regions to receive specialised training that equips them to better serve students from various socio-economic backgrounds. By investing in this training, we can contribute to reducing dropout rates and significantly improving learning outcomes for all students.

Use of Technology in Education

Harnessing technology, such as mobile learning and e-learning platforms, is essential for overcoming infrastructural challenges in remote areas. This approach will ensure that individuals have access to high-quality educational resources that would otherwise remain out of reach.

Enhancing Vocational Training

Tribal students have the opportunity to enhance their job prospects while preserving their traditional heritage by engaging in skills-based training that aligns with local market demands. Areas such as ecotourism, handicrafts, and agriculture offer valuable training that can empower these students, allowing them to contribute to their communities while maintaining their cultural identity.

Better Monitoring and Evaluation of Government Programmes

To promote equitable distribution of resources and optimise the operation of schools in tribal regions, it is essential to establish robust monitoring systems for educational programmes. This monitoring should be both rigorous and consistent, tailored to address the unique needs of these

schools and the communities they support. By prioritising comprehensive evaluations, we can directly address any deficiencies and make informed decisions that drive impactful changes.

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Hindi Dalit Novels, Dalit Consciousness and the Problems of Translation

Tanya Singh*

The evolution of Hindi Dalit novels as a unique literary genre within the larger body of Hindi Dalit literature is examined in this paper. Hindi Dalit Novels Muktiparv by Mohandas Naimishray and Jas Tas Bhai Savera by Satyaprakash are analysed here in order to determine the genre's ability to express Dalit consciousness, political awakening, and collective identity. The paper addresses the problems of translating Dalit writings while examining the politics of writing Dalit experience, particularly in the context of Hindi Dalit literature. The paper seeks to understand Hindi Dalit novels as the cornerstones of a new literary paradigm that aims to establish and validate Dalit agency and identity.

Keywords: Hindi Dalit Literature, Hindi Dalit Novels, Print Culture, Translating Caste, Dalit Consciousness.

Introduction

Modern Hindi Dalit literature witnessed a literary flourish of novels in the late 1990s, signalling the growth and fostering of Hindi Dalit literature in diverse genres and literary forms. Unlike the genre of pamphlet literature and autobiography, which registered immense popularity in the Hindi Dalit

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literary sphere, novels respond to the contemporary socio-political as well as literary issues through the vastness of the literary canvas and the number of characters. However, like other forms of Dalit writings, modern Hindi Dalit novels are a manifestation of the conceptualisation of Dalit consciousness. The form of fiction allows Dalit writers to embody the characters with Dalit consciousness and set them up as ideals for the Dalit audience and as a symbol of protest for the non-Dalits. Dalit novels show a movement forward in their literary application by interrogating the present social scenario and also attempt to provide a resolution to the same. This paper argues that the genre of Hindi Dalit novels takes further the legacy of Dalit literature as an assertion, witnessed as integral to other genres of Dalit literature, is metamorphosed into demarcating Dalithood and establishing it as the paragonistic value.

In the selection of Dalit novels for this paper, an attempt is made to capture the conundrums of the post-independent generation of educated Dalits who vacillate between the orthodox setup of the caste structure and their educated and awakened sense of consciousness. These novels trace the construction of the political consciousness of the Dalit individuals and their attempt to protest against the rigidity of caste, followed by the exploitation of Dalits. Unlike pamphlet literature that takes its source from a glorious past, or autobiography that centres on an individual, the genre of novel enables Dalit writers to map out multiple characters to bring out various caste issues, the fragmented identity of the Dalit community, and attempt to provide an answer to the same. For the reader and the translator, modern Hindi Dalit writings raise critical issues of authenticity and expression.

Independence and Its Meanings

'Independence' has been a poignant topic of discussion in Dalit literature, where Dalit writers interrogate the ideology of independence and the different meanings that it indicates for Dalits and non-Dalits. Mohandas Naimishray's historical fiction Muktiparv (1999) is an elaboration upon the same. The novel encapsulates a society in transition where the country is undergoing a struggle for independence, and the Dalits are still caught up under the rule of local feudal powers and zamindars. The novel attempts to explicate that the political independence from British rule does not hold the same meaning for the Dalits; however, in the narrative, it is symbolised as that moment of realisation of their enslavement and a determination to overcome it, which marks their independence. Mohandas Naimishray comments on the nature of Dalit writings as he says, 'Dalit protest and Dalit

literature share an intricate relationship. It depends upon the Dalit writer whether he wants to use Dalit literature as a medium to strengthen Dalit protest or not' (Naimishray 55). Naimishray perceives Dalit literature as an extension of Dalit protest. For the genre of Dalit fiction, this protest is seen both in internal and external terms: how a novel is an assertion of Dalit Chetna (consciousness) and Asmita (Identity); and how the genre of Dalit novel furthers the Dalit literature by decentring the Hindi mainstream notions of literature.

The title of the novel 'Muktiparv' translates to 'Festival of Freedom', where independence is equated with the liberation from serving as subjects for the upper caste and a rejection of their enforced ideas. This is highlighted in the novel through the rejection of the naming ceremony of a newborn, which traditionally was done by a pandit. Bansi, a Dalit male, not only refuses to let a pandit christen his son but also declares this denouncement as a practice that the entire community would soon follow. This is not only a rejection of a ceremony but a rejection of the fixity of caste sustained through various such practices. A priest was seen as the one with religious sanctity and, therefore, with the authority to name a newborn child. This was a reinforcement of caste identities, indicating that the priestly class possessed religious knowledge and authority, and 'lower' castes were to follow their religious duty to fulfil the former's commands. The novel elaborates that it was the most abominable names that were credited to the Dalits, which immediately identified their caste. Name is a marker of identity, and the right to claim their identity was not permitted to Dalits. Hence, Bansi's protest is to be seen as his claim to his right to name his son, which is not embedded with caste prejudices and insult. This also marks his first act of assertion, setting it up as an example for the rest of the community as they revel in this decision of his. This highlights the subversion of caste hierarchy, followed by a deconstruction of caste-based societal roles.

Satyaprakash's novel Jas Tas Bhai Savera (1998) also criticises these caste-based roles that are assigned to each individual. The novel presents a criticism of that class of Dalits who have internalised the caste structure so much so as to not be able to identify their exploitation. Hansa, a Dalit male, is portrayed in the novel as an example of that. He spends his entire savings on the ritual of 'pleasing the god' (jaatlagana) as prescribed by the Bhagat. In this endeavour, he loses all his money, with a deterioration of the health of his son, and a sexual exploitation of his wife at the hands of the Bhagat. In contrast to the character of Hansa, his brother Sarvan, who is much radicalised in his approach, defies all these practices that are aimed at the

exploitation of Dalits. He shows his disbelief in these superstitious practices that are aimed at fooling Dalits and underpinning the inflexibility of caste-based roles. The character of Sarvan is employed in the novel to set him as an exemplar of the transformed Dalit self, from being an 'untouchable' to being a Dalit. The novel ends with a similar transition witnessed in Hansa, which deepens the ideology of protest illustrated earlier through the character of Sarvan. This protest is finally translated into the emancipation of the self. The articulation of self-emancipation is equated with the independence of Dalits. Both novels foreground that it is not the external factors that the Dalits need to fight against to be independent. Rather, it is a confrontation with the self and an attempt to overcome the deeply ingrained casteist ideas that denote their liberation.

Dalit Consciousness as the Archetype

The tropes of protest and self-respect are seen as fundamental to Dalit literature, which is forfeited in the genre of Dalit novels as well. Tracing the trajectory of the Hindi Dalit literary movement, Dalit novels move beyond the reflection upon the past. Several Dalit writers and critics have theorised upon Dalit literature and Dalit consciousness. Commenting upon the same, Omprakash Valmiki, Dalit writer and critic, says that 'Dalit literature is a platform for Dalit consciousness' (45, Translation mine). Dalit novels are a demonstration of this consciousness. This section argues that Dalit novels attempt to set certain ideals through various characters for the Dalit audience and show a movement beyond pain and pathos as these characters are not represented as victims but as politicised and radicalised individuals premised upon the ideology of Ambedkar.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, an eminent American essayist and poet, in his speech 'The American Scholar', marked a need for an American literary renaissance where the literature is no longer dependent upon European ideals but looks for the immediate resources available to address the contemporary social as well as literary requirements of the society. Substantiating the same, he says, 'Each age, it is found, must write its books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this' (Emerson n.p, n.d). Dalit novels, in their attempt to establish the canon of Dalit literature, fulfil a similar purpose in the realm of Hindi Dalit literature. Following the same line of argument, it can be said that Dalit novels are to be seen as literature for the present age, establishing certain foundations for the contemporary literary space and hence paving the way for the forthcoming era of Dalit literature.

Naimishray, in his novel, depicts the rise in the consciousness of the erstwhile subservient generation (depicted through the character of Bansi), which is forfeited and magnified in the next generation of the Dalit educated class (illustrated through the character of Bansi's son Suneet). Bansi is shown to be that class of Dalits who raised the first voice of protest against the dominance of 'upper' castes and is an embodiment of Ambedkarite ideology of 'Educate, Agitate and Organise'. His son Suneet, on the other hand, represents the post-independent educated class of Dalits who are a product of that ideology. The latter is represented as a manifestation of the abstract idea of Dalit consciousness. Educational excellence and a determination for egalitarianism are the characteristics embodied in Suneet that are highlighted as the indicators of the future generation.

The caste-based vocations existent in the society are condemned by Bansi as he retaliates to Nawab Sahab, 'neither would I serve anyone nor would my son… I am not in the habit of being a slave to anyone. And, it is an independent nation now. Now, nobody is anyone's master or slave. Everyone is equal' (Naimishray 38, Translation mine). The characterisation of Bansi surpasses being an individual and rather becomes a phenomenon, as is also voiced by the author as he considers him 'not just a person but an ideology' (Naimishray 38, Translation mine). Suneet is a further explication of this ideology. There is an all-pervasive presence of Ambedkar in the novel, either through a direct mention or through an indirect reference. These novels take the thoughts of Ambedkar as a point of departure for the discourse of the narrative, exemplified through these characters. Suneet is familiarised with the leader through the circulation of small booklets. He idealises Ambedkar and imbibes his ideas, which allows him to question the whole idea of tradition and what, in the name of tradition, is followed in society. Naimishray, through Suneet's character, exposes the wide gulf between rhetoric and reality. The textbooks that are prescribed in the schools talk about equality and uniformity, but the idea remains deficient in its application. Suneet discusses with the master a picture in the book where a person is sitting near a water tap, serving water to others. The man in the picture is unconcerned about the utensil through which water is poured, touching the individual. Suneet registers that it is not the case in reality, something which he had experienced personally. The master tries to cease the topic by answering that this is the 'tradition'. To this response, the students retaliate, 'but this is a wrong tradition' (Naimishray 52, Translation mine). Here, one witnesses Suneet raising some fundamental questions necessary to the comprehension of the Dalit self and identity. Suneet's

character comes close to that of young Valmiki, represented in his autobiography. Both were raised in post-independent India and are the first Dalit generation to attend school. However, the set of similarities ceases here. As discussed in the second chapter, autobiographies rely on 'facts', whereas novels are a fictionalised world that allows the author to shape the details accordingly. While Valmiki in his autobiography records the multiple occasions on which he was humiliated in the school premises because of his caste, even to the extent of being asked to sweep the school playground and being verbally and physically abused by his teachers. Suneet, on the other hand, is shown to be more emancipated so that he can question the teachers as well as the books without facing similar consequences as Valmiki. This demonstrates the difference between the two genres and also represents that the genre of novel has more flair in its meditation over the construction of Dalit chetna. It can exceed the trope of victimisation and can establish these characters as an ideal to be inspired by. This also overturns the criticism that Dalit literature is a representation of pathos through the incorporation of characters like Bansi and Suneet.

Satyaprakash's novel, too, represents a similar exemplar of Dalit consciousness through the character of Shivdas. The novel is set in the 1990s and largely addresses the 'upper castes' revulsion and disparagement towards the implementation of the Mandal Commission, which reignited the debates around reservation policies in the public sphere. Throughout the novel, the character of Shivdas is seen in his struggle to address the 'upper caste's accusation of Dalits not possessing 'efficiency and ability' so as to condemn the Mandal Commission. Shivdas can easily be seen as the spokesperson for the Dalit community, especially the educated middle-class Dalits who have moved to the urban spaces and encounter the aversion of the 'upper' castes daily. The new educated class of Dalits in the cities has to bear the brunt of social boycott and discrimination in the workplace. The Dalits in the village, too, have to undergo caste-based subjugation. The narrative of caste is not unidimensional, which is illustrated in the novel through the depiction of two different setups of village and city space. Shivdas is the connecting thread between the two. He represents a part of the world.

The question of 'yogayata' (ability) and 'dakshta' (efficiency) amongst Dalits has been reiterated throughout the novel via the 'upper' caste characters. This is best demonstrated in the scene where Independence Day is celebrated in the village and the 'upper' caste minister is invited to address the audience. In his speech, he expresses his antipathy towards those who

'misuse' the Harijan Act, as, according to him, it fragments society based on caste. This is furthered by another address by Professor Dutt, who believes that 'reservation's biggest impairing aspect is that the opportunity slips into the hands of an inefficient individual. Secondly, the competent one loses this right…Therefore, there should not be any reservation at all' (Satyaprakash 97, Translation mine). The novel seems to present these two voices of the minister and Professor Dutt as a generalised opinion of the savarnas who oppose any wavering of the caste structure and initiatives made for the uplift of the Dalits. This has been a topic of constant debate, which has been registered in the novel by the author. He also seems to present a response to it in the words of Shivdas, who provides a reply not only to the speeches of the minister and Professor Dutt but also by extension to the society at large. He attacks the argument that our 'culture has always considered efficiency and ability', and substantiates his argument with the examples of Eklavya, Karna, Maharishi Valmiki, Shambhuk, and Mahatma Vidur, who, despite having the knowledge and skill, were marginalised and were not given their due and rightful place in society. He equates these examples with the Dalits, as both have been discriminated against and marginalised by those with power. He further argues that an individual needs not only to be efficient and skilled but also to be supreme. The core of his reasoning is highlighted as he says, 'neither can any caste be essentially demarcated as inefficient nor can efficiency be a patrimony of any caste' (Satyaprakash 105, Translation mine). Through these words of Shivdas, the author seems to highlight that it is the caste prejudices that stereotype Dalits as incompetent and undeserving. Shivdas has been used as a medium in the novel to put across this viewpoint and bring forth the falsity of these preconceived ideas. Hence, it can be argued that Shivdasis is shown to be a representative figure for the Dalits in the novel as well as for the Dalit community at large. His protests against injustice and his stance for the Dalits make him an ideal that the author seems to establish for the Dalit audience and communicate the message to the non-Dalits.

Romanticisation

As discussed in the previous section, the novels in discussion here attempt to establish the ideal characteristics of a Dalit persona and hence underscore Dalit consciousness via these characters. In the pursuit of doing so, Dalit authors often seem to romanticise the characters to make them fit in that mould of Dalit consciousness that has been argued in the Dalit discourse. This section presents that these Dalit novels romanticise the

notion of Dalithood and often seem to focus on being justificatory and preachy.

As discussed earlier, all three characters epitomise the new Dalit persona who is not a victim but a protesting voice, and an idea to be followed. Bansi and Suneet from Naimishray's novel and Shivdas from Satyaprakash's novel are created along the same line of what can be called ideological characterisation. Bansi outrightly rejects the idea of serving the Nawab and is shown to be engrossed with other ideas for the uplift of the community. This rejection of the only source of income is not shown to have affected the income source of the family, just like Suneet could easily escape with the criticism that he offered towards the school textbook. The autobiographies discussed in the second chapter depict similar instances; however, neither Naimishray nor Valmiki could act similarly to these fictionalised characters. Their action and reactions are not met with the same repercussions, and they are shown to have transcended their subjugated positions. The ending of both novels is also romanticised as it intends to provide a resolution to the complexities of Dalits. Both novels end with an objective of creating a vision for a bright future that is achieved through the paradigmatic values that these characters embody. The ending of the novel Muktiparv portrays Suneet as a teacher who wishes to change the past as well as the present, as his moral responsibility towards his community. He is even shown to have put away his interests before the welfare of his community, as he politely declines any furthering of his relationship with Sumitra. Similarly, the novel Jas Tas Bai Savera ends with philosophising Dalit responsibility that demands that the Dalits not be deluded by the false promises of the 'upper' castes but try to consolidate the Dalit community for a collective welfare for the entire community. Both the novels here suggest a social and moral responsibility that each Dalit individual must fulfil. By providing a resolution to the problems of Dalits, it is recommended as an ideology to be adopted and adapted for the purpose of the welfare of the community. Speaking in the context of Hindi Dalit fiction, scholar Laura Brueck argues:

The bulk of Hindi Dalit prose narratives exhibit a dominant style of melodramatic realism, often using a sort of exposé storytelling style that at once reveals the insidious exploitation of Dalits while speaking in a highly emotional register. Hindi Dalit literature, in its social-activist role, orients itself towards two specific target audiences: a Dalit audience among whom it intends to foster political consciousness, and a non-Dalit audience for whom it endeavours to reveal the 'reality' of caste society (Bruekn.p, Emphasis mine).

Brueck here proposes that Dalit fictional literature has a different set of aesthetics, which is premised upon melodramatic realism and has a social-activist role to play for both Dalits and non-Dalits. This, however, makes these novels inclined towards being preachy by trying to recommend a certain model for the Dalit community.

Translating Caste

Hindi Dalit novels are unique in showcasing the politics of translating Dalit writings as well. Scholars and practitioners of translation have long argued that translation has been attached to a significant degree of literariness in the larger landscape of Indian literature. However, in the context of Dalit writings, the act of translation presents a two-fold problem – one in which Dalit writings that draw upon the aesthetics of experiencing caste are seen as untranslatable in English or other regional languages of India and the other, where Dalit writings gain a new audience, reach and meaning when translated in English in particular. Scholars have expressed scepticism towards the role of the translator as over-determined by caste.

In the context of Hindi Dalit writings and Hindi Dalit novels, in particular, the act and politics of translation acquire a new meaning. Dalit writings in regional languages such as Tamil, Marathi, Bangla, among others, have seen proactive translations where the intent to gain a new audience and meaning has been explicit. The same cannot be argued about Hindi Dalit writings, as Hindi writings by Dalit writers have seen only a few translations. American scholar Laura Brueck has translated a collection of short stories by Ajay Navaria, which was published in 2013. The English translation, which has been critically acclaimed, reignited the debate about the process of translation, where the culture-specific experiences and jargon have been framed for a wider readership that is a subset of the English language community in India and outside. The act/neglect of translation also becomes a telling narrative of hierarchies in vernacular writings that raises questions regarding the roles of writers, readers, academicians, publishers, and translators. Hindi Dalit writings, and novels in particular, stand to gain from the critical attention of the actors and the process of translation.

Conclusion

Alok Mukerjee in his introduction to English translation ofSharankumarLimbale's book Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature presents three stages that explains an absence of Dalit literature: 'erasure'

(Mukherjee 5) of their presence because they were not to learn or read Sanskrit, their 'containment' (Mukherjee 5) into mainstream literature, lastly, to treat them as 'objects of pity' (Mukherjee 8). Dalit writings are a response to this kind of treatment meted out to Dalits in literature and otherwise. The development of Dalit literature can be mapped out as: reclamation, recollection and reconstruction, and romanticisation. In this process of evolution, Dalit novels can be seen as a further shift from a reinterpretation past as it indicates an emergence of a new aesthetics, which, however, is in the process of attaining a concrete shape. The process of translation will further enhance the reach and access for a body of literature as rich and diverse as Hindi Dalit literature, especially novels.

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Book Review

Media Analysis Techniques
Arthur Asa Berger

**6th Edition, San Francisco State University, Sage South Asia Edition (2018)
368 pages, Rs. 4,743, Paperback, ISBN-13: 9781506366210**

Rupa Rani Sonowal*

Media Analysis Techniques, authored by Arthur Asa Berger is presented in a very precise way which enables the readers to enhance the information with ease. The book emphasises mostly the teaching techniques of media criticism which is constructed on personal opinion with supporting observations and facts. Media criticism is necessary to understand in order to ascertain how certain parameters of media products function, execute or fail to meet the targets. Consequently, an elaborative description in the book presents with analysis and interpretation of the mediated content. Through the pedagogy's perspectives, the author describes how the book would empower the students to critique mediated culture rather than learning from the teachers, philosophers and media text. This is crucial because the media and the medium are always evolving with new techniques and presentation styles in this fast-paced world where everything is progressing. The analysis techniques described in the book could assist the student in dealing with the

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constantly evolving media content and the uniqueness of popular culture in the time and place that it follows.

The book begins with a brief introduction to semiotics, exploring the contemporary interpretation of semiotic analysis and the meaning it produces. The discussion that followed extended to the detailed examination of many kinds of signs, objects and identification that are carried out in order to comprehend how semiotic analysis could be read in various media contexts. The chapter, however, lacks an aesthetic component which is crucial since media information often reveals underlying or hidden meanings. Hence, the main goal of media semiotics is to investigate the ways in which the mass media produce or reuse signs for their own purposes. Similarly, Thauvin's account of the French wrestler in the book "Mythologies" illustrates how the public perceives the body as a semiotic that carries distinct meanings and emotional implications. The reference of 'Morphology of the Folktale', and Ferdinand de Saussure constitute some of the important works in this chapter. The semiotic codification in the game of football is elaborated by focusing on the several subsystem signs that serve as indicators of positions, skills, and functions. The print advertisements for Fidji perfume are also interpreted from the perspective of semiotic analysis, paradigmatic analysis and psychoanalytic theory. Nevertheless, a strong theoretical foundation is not clearly interpreted for a number of essential sociological concepts, which have some terminological disorientation. It also lacks an aesthetic component which is crucial since media information often reveals underlying or hidden meanings.

The fundamental principles of Marxist analysis are discussed several times throughout the book. Materialism was elaborated as the way a society organised itself, a superstructure that describes the values of a society. The false consciousnesses which were even dosed by a number of media theorists are on the opinion that the consumer culture has been shaped by unthoughtful entertainment. This is further explained by popular art forms such as advertisements as a product of stimulating desire and a merchandised tool to take control of the everyday life of a person and also dominate social relationships. On a similar line, Marxists refer to the heroic figure as the capitalist ideology by inscribing the values of individualism but is always connected to alienation. Even so, the hegemony as a cultural and ideological perspective is present in mass media, thus shaping the worldview. Few cautions and the doctrine of being in danger have been described about the role of advertisement in the creation of lust among the consumer. However, post-modernist views hold that beliefs are arbitrary

and challenging to determine what to believe. Does the philosophical idea therefore make any sense in the same context?

The author had dissented on one of the important concepts in psychoanalytical theory known as 'unconscious', stating that human cannot always gives rational reasoning but are often influenced by vulnerable emotional choices. As an interpretative art, psychoanalysis tries to find meaning in the behaviour of people and the art such as the media text. It is argued that much of the text in mass media, culture and society analyses are found to have elements from Freud's theories and concepts. However, Freud's psychoanalytical thoughts are not delineated elaborately in reference to the media text. Further, the chapter consists of a significant aspect of psychoanalytic theory and thoughts that explore the hidden meaning that is explained with the work of Hamlet, Pac-Man, Cigarette Lighters, Star-Trek and King Kong. Yet, it is found that the structural hypothesis was not defined in the study of cinema character, which would be problematic if the reader was unfamiliar with the issue of psychoanalysis critique. Furthermore, the analysis is based on an American audience, neglecting the rest of the region or the continent.

The author also highlighted the work of prominent scholars referred to, in explaining the concepts and tools of analysis used in the study of societies at large and how its applications are useful to examine the mass media. The contemporary debates in media have a sociological concept and the author had rendered the various discussions with the immediate applicability to the media analysis. The viewer's different perspectives and the satisfaction level of the media contents constitute the explanation of the uses and gratification theory. One of the sociological techniques, content analysis was extensively discussed taking reference from the studies of sociologist, Leo Lowenthal. Further description of how the content analysis can be an advantage and also problematic for conducting interesting and useful experiments. The Marxist analysis, which also emphasises sociology, had certain ideas in common with the analysis of mass media content. As a result, in the modern period, it can also be argued that every item of information from the mass media cannot be evaluated through a critical lens.

In the second half of the book, the chapters concentrate on the context of its applications in mass media. Semiotics, Marxist viewpoints, and social and political dimensions are employed to interpret the detective mystery genre in Agatha Christie's Murders on the Orient Express. The discussion expressed is how the 'codes' of mysteries are violated in the film. The murder mystery is in fact an instrument of false consciousness creating a

revolutionary potential in the film. The element of distraction such as class conflict found to divert the audience's attention from the murder mystery with the subversive elements inferred in the structure of the story narrative. The story's mysteries, which require figuring out how the different characters in the movie are related, received more emphasis from the author than the problems that exist among the characters.

The Marxist interpretation of the game of football and the news that support the ideological perspectives gives the reflection on the treatment of commodities, the role of diversion and the marketing aspect. The author's description of a baseball game was deemed dull. However, when viewed from the perspective of players or viewers, the game does capture interest. For this reason, it is incorrect to say that football is the only sport that attracts spectators. While, the interpretations made on news radio stations are defined as capitalist economic systems and American cultural signifiers, which are linked to their dependence on the stations. The news supports the ideological perspectives of the ruling class, thus rolling the consumption level of its content. This, however, further generates anxiety and the need for constant surveillance. Besides, the trending leisure activity amongst the younger generation is found to be dwelling in video games. It has become one of the major forms of entertainment around the globe. The various classification of video games including the medium as a form of art, the various genre and the role of interactivity is discussed. Arthur has also given an insight into the study of Janet Murray on narrative video games, Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace. The addiction level of the users and the violent nature of video games, the treatment of sexuality and various social and physical problems associated with video game playing are explained. Nevertheless, video games have become the global media which has grabbed the attention of scholars, semioticians, sociologists, psychologists and critics. With a diverse range of perspectives, the potential customer base for this platform is vast and encompasses a burgeoning business in video games. The chapter's treatment of psychological and sociological viewpoints, which is equally pertinent for more research, is not covered in great detail.

In the last chapter of cell phones, social media and the problem of identity are discussed in the purview of new media technologies. The virtual community in social media on the other hand represent the 'escape attempts' from the loneliness, alienation, and sense of separation that modern society generates. The author does not give as much attention to the negative effects of teenage psychological and mental health concerns, which are among the

major issues facing the younger generation. Therefore, by providing a few additional specifics, the book offers a useful manual for media analysis methodologies that concentrates on different theories, philosophical ideas, approaches, and critical analyses of mass-mediated culture.

Book Review

The Social, Cultural and Political Discourse of Autism
Jessica N. Lester and Michelle O'Reilly

Subham Bhattacharjee*

Recent times have shown that autism can be viewed from multiple dimensions. As autism is not a homogenous condition but rather a broader spectrum, and it can have different impacts on the emotions and behaviour of the person and family. In the quest to gain a holistic perspective, the book tends to encompass unique and critical arguments to construct the meaning of autism in society. The proliferation of individual diagnoses with autism spectrum disorder over the years has shifted the world's discourse towards disability in general and autism in particular, given the abundance of diverse literature on autism, autistic people and their families. They transcend this boundary and foray into new territories to explain the intricacies of the society on autism. The book serves as a buffet of diverse discourses locating autism beyond the argument of ability and disability, normality and abnormality. The book offers eight chapters, which hold six main chapters,

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leaving the introductory at the beginning and the last chapter, which summarises the argument and concluding remarks.

The introductory chapter maps the terrain by demonstrating a theoretical paradigm in the conceptualisation of autism, covering bio-medical viewpoints and nuanced trends of social science and humanities with cutting-edge debates on the meaning of autism and how we give meaning to it. The chapter also explains the sensitive choice of words while preferring to use the term 'Autistic person' instead of 'person with autism' as the former term refers to perceiving autism as an integral part of the person's identity; the latter lends to understanding autism is external facet from their identity. The author is reflexive on her positionality in constructing autism as embracing the diverse intellectual identity of autistic people personally and professionally. Substantively, the first chapter carefully introduces the readers to the arguments and themes in the remaining chapters of the book without leaning heavily on explicitly explaining every argument and theme in this chapter.

Following the discussion in the second chapter, the book dives into the historical context of disability and autism. From reminiscing when disability was considered as a result of witchcraft or magic and curing was done through spiritual healing to the Enlightenment period, which led to the introduction of psychiatric intervention in institutions, further moving into the present-day context where there is a paradigm shift enabling to bring social reforms and the disability movement. It is essential to note that labelling can have a powerful effect on the individual's outlook for their deviance in behaviour. The transformation of the course from viewing disability from several perspectives, from the play of supernatural powers to scientific explanation to an act of social discrimination against disabled people. This chapter challenges the nosological framework and peregrinates the readers to different models of disability that constantly shape and reshape perspectives on viewing disability.

The third chapter is credible in understanding the characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), describing the impairment in social interaction, communication, restricted interest and repetitive behaviours, sometimes combined with a learning disorder or motor skills disorder. Through the interview with parents, they profoundly explore the general emotional aspect of the parents. The linearity of the diagnosis and intervention can be correlated with negative and positive emotions and may be in the long-term transformation of grief and guilt into acceptance. The prevalence of autism is more common in males than in females, which may

probably be less evident in their social applicability or if diagnostic tests are gender biased. The chapter acknowledges the shift in meaning and language in clinical psychiatry while reflecting on how it impacts not just the autistic individual but also their parents and family.

After providing us with the backdrop of clinical and medical positions on autism, the fourth chapter discusses the socio-cultural construction of autism. The authors critique the functionalist reductionist approach of the medical model and bring our attention to understanding the lived experience of the autistic individual and their family. The neurodiverse movement gave autistic people an opportunity for self-advocacy, defying the deficit model and neurotypical values of normalcy by society. Ostensibly, the movement was accelerated through the internet and social media, reaching out to more people with more stories, which has encouraged autistic individuals to embrace their identity. The last section of the chapter reflects on the everyday struggles of autistic people, where some of them require very little to no assistance from others, while some of them need their close ones to be with them. After setting both the clinical and social position of autism in the preceding chapter, in the fifth chapter, the author takes the reader to explore the negative connotation of labelling autism as a deficit condition that can lead to stress, cynical, violent or abusive behaviour and can even lead to discrimination. Understanding autism only through physical or perceptible characteristics may often create a stereotypical outlook accorded by high verbal proficiency society. The chapter guides us through different interviews and stories of parents, therapists, and autistic individuals.

In chapter six, the authors shed light on the plethora of challenges faced by autistic persons and their parents, which include commotion in realising autism efforts to get proper diagnosis and therapies. The inequality in the distribution of resources or lack of opportunities for autistic individuals to access the resources, especially during a pandemic like COVID-19, worsens the scenario for them. The author makes contrasting remarks with her previous chapter on neoliberal society promoting equality and acceptance. On the other hand, the neoliberal market imperils the economic, medical care and educational needs of autistic people as the market runs on a consumer-driven agenda. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the barriers for autistic people while accessing employment and education opportunities resulting from cultural prejudice, which often stands as a barrier. The seventh chapter expounds on the role of stigma in the lives of autistic individuals and their families, redefining our frame on

how we perceive the concept of autism. The author addresses us through the contours of media portrayal of autism and the religious and societal ideology on autism, which may hinder the possibility of getting a diagnosis and therapy. The individual or the family follows these moral implications because of the fear of ostracising. The reinforcement of social stigma is more common against mothers. The author highlights that, in most cases, mothers are often blamed and excluded from the family and society. Circumventing more neurodiverse language while talking about someone's mental condition can contribute to the process of creating an inclusive society. The chapter balances the two dominant views, one the negative connotation of medication while carefully weighing other points of its potential role of professional therapies for a better quality of life for autistic people.

The eighth chapter highlights the significant points in the book and analyses and synthesises the arguments mentioned in the book, information novitiates and data acquisition, and data comprehension and overview and research outlook. The authors, with their years of experience in disability studies, introduce us to the possible research direction on the subject matter, emphasising that the voices of autistic individuals have the potential to stir up a new wave of knowledge and a perspective that can prove to be valuable in advancing our understanding regarding autism and its many related situations. The chapter exposes us to discourse analysis and conversational analysis that work on the narratives of autistic people and their families, making sense of their cognitive ways. Congruently, the author urges for Video Reflexive Ethnography (VRE) that can become a yardstick to generate nuanced insight into the lives of autistic individuals. For what autism is can be a varied perspective, the chapter likely shed light on new approaches to understanding the more profound thoughts by decoding their personal voices on autism.

Globally, the biggest challenge is to make society aware of and acknowledge the diversity that exists in the world, and without adequately understanding public perception, it is difficult actually to achieve an inclusive education and an inclusive society. Therefore, it boils down to the question of what relevance and value the book can provide in the present-day context to understand and solve an issue. The book is a wonderful ride in the quest for understanding autism through both the medical and social worlds, which both lie at a distance pole and link them without strongly endorsing any argument but guiding them through the contours of stories and issues. The author adopts reflexivity to ensure that the readers are open to myriads of ideas that address the lived experiences of autistic people and

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their families. The book is an interesting choice as it defies cultural stereotyping and aligns with the idea of creating an inclusive society. Additionally, the book ensures poly-vocality by incorporating the views of people in diverse fields working with autistic people, such as anthropologists, sociologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, public policymakers, health carers, and paediatricians, to achieve the ultimate goal of creating an inclusive society across the globe.

Book Review

Sreeram Chaulia, Friends:
India's Closest Strategic Partners
Sreeram Chaulia

Ahmed Raza*

     In a world full of wars, rivalries, and shifting alliances, how can a country like India protect its national interests and rise as a global power? According to Professor Sreeram Chaulia, the answer lies in having trustworthy friends. In his latest book titled 'Friends: India's Closest Strategic Partners', he explores India's relationships with seven countries that have become its closest strategic allies: Japan, Australia, the United States, Russia, France, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Each of these countries gets its own chapter, where Chaulia explains how the friendship with India developed over time, what it looks like today, and what challenges lie ahead. This is not just a history book. It is also a book of ideas. The author shares unique and sometimes controversial thoughts about where India's foreign policy is heading, and what role each of these countries can play in helping India become a major global power. This

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review will break down the key themes and insights from the book in a way that's easy to understand—even if you're new to global politics or international relations.

In our personal lives, friends give us support, share our problems, and celebrate our successes. Countries also need friends. But international friendships are more complex. In Friends, Chaulia compares strategic partnerships to live-in relationships—they are serious, but still allow both sides the freedom to have other relationships. In contrast, alliances are like marriages—rigid, exclusive, and often come with fixed rules. India, according to Chaulia, prefers the flexible model. It wants strong partnerships, but it also wants to keep its independence. This makes sense for a country trying to grow without becoming a puppet of bigger powers like the US or China.

Japan: A Partner in the Indo-Pacific

India and Japan share a peaceful history and common values. Today, their relationship is growing stronger, especially because of rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. Chaulia raises an interesting question: Can India do more to help protect Japan from threats in the East and South China Seas? This is a thought-provoking idea because it suggests that India could take a more active role in regional security, especially against the growing influence of China. Japan is also investing in Indian infrastructure, which shows that this partnership is based on both economic and strategic needs.

Australia: From Suspicion to Trust

The India-Australia relationship has not always been warm. In the past, India saw Australia as too close to the US, and Australia did not fully trust India either. But things began to change after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 2002 Bali bombings. Chaulia explains how both countries slowly built trust, despite early setbacks—such as when Australia backed out of the Quad (a strategic grouping of India, the US, Japan, and Australia) in its early days. Now, under various Australian prime ministers and with changing global dynamics, the two nations have become much closer. Today, Australia and India hold joint military exercises, share intelligence, and cooperate on maritime security.

United States: Balancing Act

India's relationship with the United States is one of its most discussed and debated. Chaulia argues that Indian leaders before Prime

Minister Narendra Modi were unsure how close they should get to the US, especially when it came to standing up to China. This is controversial because many believe that earlier prime ministers like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh laid the foundation of this strong relationship, especially through the India-US nuclear deal. Still, the author gives credit to Modi for deepening the relationship and building personal ties with US presidents like Obama and Trump. Chaulia even raises a daring idea: Could India one day move away from the US if China offers something big in return, like resolving the border conflict? While this seems unlikely now, it shows how India keeps its options open.

Russia: An Old Friend with New Realities

Russia has been a strong supporter of India for decades, especially during the Cold War. After India's nuclear tests in 1998, it was Russia that stood by India when many others imposed sanctions. But Chaulia points out a hard truth: Russia also sells weapons to China, and might not mind if there's a little tension between India and China, because it benefits from both sides buying arms. This does not mean Russia is no longer a friend, but it shows how international relationships are rarely black and white. India and Russia still have strong defence ties, but India needs to be careful and build partnerships beyond just old friendships.

France: A Realist and Respectful Ally

Among Western nations, France stands out for treating India with respect. Unlike other European countries or even the US, France does not lecture India on issues like religion or human rights. Instead, the two countries focus on practical matters like defense, the Indo-Pacific region, and counter-terrorism. The Rafale fighter jet deal is a symbol of trust between the two. Chaulia also highlights how France's support during tensions with China—by allowing its jets to refuel shows that this partnership has deep strategic roots.

Israel: A Quiet but Constant Supporter

India and Israel have had close ties for a long time, even though they were not always publicly acknowledged. Israel has helped India during wars and crises, especially through military support and intelligence sharing. Both countries also face the constant threat of terrorism, which brings them closer. However, Chaulia warns that India cannot copy Israel's "Dahiya Doctrine," which is the use of overwhelming force against enemies. Unlike Israel, India

has to deal with two nuclear-armed neighbours (China and Pakistan), so it must be more cautious. Still, the trust and cooperation between the two countries remain strong.

UAE: A Surprising Strategic Partner

Many people may not think of the UAE as a key strategic partner, but Chaulia shows why it matters. In a little-known incident, the UAE helped India by allowing mid-air refuelling for Rafale jets, helping them reach the India-China border faster during a time of tension. This is just one example of how the UAE has moved from being just a trade partner to a real strategic friend. The UAE is also a link between India and the Arab world, and it plays an important role in regional politics.

Beyond the Seven Friends

One might ask: why only these seven countries? Are not there others that are also close to India? Chaulia admits that many other strategic partnerships exist, but he focuses on these seven because they are either long-standing (like Russia), or have recently transformed (like Australia, Japan, UAE). These friendships show how India is adapting to a changing world and building strong, two-way relationships that go beyond simple trade or aid. One of the strongest ideas in the book is the importance of strategic partnerships over formal alliances. India does not want to be part of any military bloc, like an "Asian NATO," because that would limit its freedom. Instead, it wants to keep good relations with many countries and choose what's best for itself in every situation. This strategy, called multi-alignment, allows India to grow independently while still having support when needed. But it also means India has to be smart, cautious, and prepared—because not all friends will stay loyal if situations change.

In Friends: India's Closest Strategic Partners, SreeramChaulia not only highlights India's growing strategic friendships but also raises critical questions about their long-term reliability, especially in a world where leadership changes and shifting alliances are common. He cautions that heavy interdependence can become a vulnerability if countries weaponise trade or technology during crises. Emphasising the need for both self-reliance and smart diplomacy, the book serves as a forward-looking guide to India's evolving foreign policy. Written in an accessible style, it invites a wide audience to reflect on India's place in global affairs and the challenges of maintaining strategic autonomy while deepening international ties.

To conclude, in a world where no country can survive alone, friendships are not a luxury—they are a necessity. But as Chaulia shows, not all friendships are the same. Some are deep and time-tested, others are new and still evolving. India must keep nurturing these relationships, stay prepared for surprises, and never stop building its own strength. Friends: India's Closest Strategic Partners is a powerful and engaging book that brings clarity to India's foreign policy choices. It deserves to be widely read—not just by diplomats and politicians, but by every Indian who wants to understand how our country navigates a world full of risks and possibilities.

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