

Beyond alliance and patronage: asymmetric interdependence and structural power in Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations are examined using the Complex Interdependence Theory (CIT) with focus on asymmetric vulnerability interdependence. Basing on the classic framework of Keohane and Nye, the paper argues that the relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are characterized by deep economic, security and institutional linkages, with the distribution of power in this relationship being skewed. The absence of economic diversification and strategic independence is clearly reflected in the context of Pakistan, which is dependent on Saudi Arabia for energy security, financial help and access to labour market. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's economy is diversified and the country has strategic independence. The article shows how the hybrid civil-military form of governing system in Pakistan could end up weaponizing this interdependence, strengthening Saudi Arabia's asymmetrical power in the relationship. The combination of CIT and the concept of structural power provide the study with a sophisticated insight into Pakistan-Saudi ties beyond the conventional concept of alliance or patron-client relationship.

Keywords: *Complex Interdependence Theory (CIT), Vulnerability interdependence, Remittances, Strategic partnership, civil-military, financial assistance, foreign policy.*

Introduction

The bilateral relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have long been exceptionally close due to similarity of religious identities, ideological orientation and strategic cooperation. Defense cooperation, oil supplies and financial assistance have been some of the key dimensions that make it a strategic partnership with some enduring convergences. Saudi Arabia is one of the most important political, economic and diplomatic allies of Pakistan since its birth in 1947, using intertwined instruments of religion, culture, and Islamic education to

influence Pakistani state and society (Ahmed & Karim, 2024). When discussing the relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the context of international relations, it is generally described as a security alliance or a patron-client relationship (Rizvi, 1981; Kumar, 2025): Saudi Arabia offers material assistance in return of geopolitical and military loyalty from Pakistan.

Even though conventional analyses shed important light on various aspects of the relationship, they do not illuminate the aspect of power dynamics in the context of everyday economic, institutional and social connections that define Pakistan-Saudi relationships. Even interdependence per se can be an asymmetrical source of influence, as opposed to a mechanism that is neutral or mutual. This paper contends that the best theoretical approach to study Pakistan-Saudi relations is the Complex Interdependence Theory (CIT), especially in terms of asymmetric vulnerability interdependence. As developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in the 1970s, the CIT rejects the central premise of realism that the most significant currency of international politics is military power. Rather it focuses on economic relations, institutionalized collaboration and transnational relations as important levers of power (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Notably, the CIT does not presuppose the equality of interdependent state because this theory differentiates between ‘sensitivity interdependence’ and ‘vulnerability interdependence’. The former refers to mutual costs imposed within existing policy frameworks, implying that changes in policies of one state impose costs on another state. Quite often, these costs can be mitigated by one side through making short-term adjustments in policies without leading to long-lasting power advantages to the other side. On the other hand, vulnerability interdependence refers to a situation where a state has to incur substantial costs even after changing policies because of lack of alternative options or because costs of policy adjustments are too high. The asymmetries in vulnerability i.e., the differences in adjustment costs incurred by the states in cases of disruption, are the main source of power for the less vulnerable state (Keohane & Nye, 2012). On the other hand, the more vulnerable state faces higher long-term adjustment costs, and this makes it more susceptible to influence.

To complement the CIT is the notion of structural power, as put forward by Susan Strange. It says about the capacity to control and determine the very structures of global political economy (security, production, finance and knowledge) within which states have to function (Strange, 1988).

The structural power operates through arrangement of rules, norms and frameworks that will define the actions that are either feasible or costly to take. The interdependent relationships characterized by the asymmetries of vulnerability witnesses the most powerful actor wielding structural power in a non-coercive manner by limiting conditions that control the dependent actor's choices. For instance, the powerful actor can change the pattern of market access, financial frameworks or redesign regulatory standards in such a manner that would raise the costs of adjustment for the dependent actor. Seen in this way, the vulnerability interdependence and structural power are mutually supportive in that asymmetric dependence brings about the conditions for structural power, whereas structural power formalizes asymmetries through time.

When this framework is applied to Pakistan-Saudi relations, one can notice the tendency of uneven interdependence. The economic vulnerability, dependency on remittances, and lack of other viable diplomatic options are the sources of high levels of vulnerability in the case of Pakistan. In its turn, Saudi Arabia enjoys diversified economy, huge financial reserves and flexible foreign policy options. Such asymmetries enable Saudi Arabia to exercise structural power to influence the foreign policy decisions of Pakistan which reduces its freedom of choices.

Pakistan-Saudi relations: a case of asymmetric interdependence

The Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations serve as a clear example of the concept of complex interdependence that can take place on the economic, security, institutional and social levels. But a closer examination reveals that there exist structural power asymmetries of vulnerability that define this high-profile bilateral interaction. Pakistan is immensely dependent on Saudi assistance for macroeconomic stability and strategic security, and Saudi Arabia continues to have a high degree of autonomy, diversified relationships and a significant leverage in many areas of partnership. This disproportional interdependence echoes the larger processes inherent to the formulation of Keohane and Nye. Dense networks of engagement need not generate equality, but may generate hierarchical processes in which one actor has structural power over the other.

Economic interdependence

The most prominent sphere of relations between Pakistan and Saudi is economic interdependence, which however is quite one-sided. Pakistan is of great significance to the labour market in Saudi Arabia as it produces

a huge expatriate labour force and is a significant oil consumer and investment destination. However, the Pakistani remittances from Saudi Arabia comprise a large portion of its foreign reserves, and the Saudi oil constitutes almost a quarter of the imports in Pakistan. Pakistan's reliance on Saudi Arabia is evident in three main domains which include energy supplies, financial aid and remittances.

1. Energy dependence

In particular, structural vulnerability is highlighted by energy dependence. Pakistan is a major importer of its oil requirements with a main share of the oil imports being Saudi. In times of economic crisis, such as balance-of-payments shortages in 2018-19 (\$3 billion in cash and deferred payments for oil imports worth another \$3 billion) and the more recently during 2023-24 financial distress, Saudi Arabia supplied oil on deferred payment plans or concessional terms (Gul, 2018). Pakistan has been facing serious problems of external debt and the current account deficit and their resolution is a prerequisite for its economic revival and security. Immediately after the Ukraine crisis, one Pakistan-based think-tank even contented that there was a strong likelihood that the Pakistan economy would either default or experience a Sri Lanka-like situation if remedial steps were not taken, one of which included asking "a Saudi facility for deferred payment for oil" (Institute for Policy Reforms, 2022). In early 2025, the Pakistani government again requested Saudi Arabia to defer by one year a \$1.2 billion payment on the country's oil imports, and Riyadh approved this import financing facility in February 2025 through the Saudi Fund for Development (Reuters, 2025). Clearly, the ability to regulate energy supply by controlling costs and permitting late payments or springing credit provides Saudi Arabia with a considerable bargaining power over Pakistan's financial stability. In terms of CIT, this is a good illustration of vulnerability interdependence, because Pakistan is exposed to high adjustment costs in the event of disruption, whereas Saudi Arabia has several alternative markets to which to sell its oil.

2. Financial assistance

The asymmetric vulnerability is also enhanced by the Saudi financial aid to Pakistan. The Saudi aid is usually in form of deposit in the State Bank of Pakistan, concessional loans or actual grants, especially when there is severe fiscal crisis. Saudi financial interventions in Pakistan are ad-hoc and political in nature unlike multilateral institutions that function under

standardized structures and regulatory controls. Such support would get Pakistan through IMF talks and prevent economic meltdown. It should be noted that in 2019, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman signed an MoU worth US \$21 billion in Pakistan, which comprised of a US \$12 billion deep conversion refinery and petrochemical complex. However, these efforts failed to yield as geopolitical issues complicated them.

In 2019, the relations had worsened when Pakistan condemned the Saudi-led Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) due to its perceived inactivity or neutrality on the Kashmir issue and threatened to set up a rival institution. The core of this diplomatic turmoil was Pakistan's irredentism on the issue of Kashmir and the refusal to accept Saudi Arabia's even-handed approach on the Indo-Pakistani relationship. The invitation to India as the 'guest of honour' at the 2019 OIC meeting just two weeks after the Pulwama terror attack, when tensions between India and Pakistan were on the rise, was an indication of a major shift in Saudi foreign policy towards the two South Asian competitors (Cheyaden, 2022). Therefore Islamabad's indictment of the OIC was tantamount to criticism of Saudi Arabia and therefore was received extremely negatively in Riyadh. Relations took a downturn. In retaliation, Saudi Arabia recalled US \$1 billion interest-free loan, and refused to renew deferred oil payment facilities, which greatly hurt Pakistan's economy (Bhowmick & Ghosh, 2023).

The relations also got colder when Saudi Arabia changed strategic priorities and turned to India signing US \$100 billion worth of agreements (Laskar, 2023). However, since they have a long history of relations dating back to the period of Pakistan's creation and vast network of connections, efforts were made by Pakistani establishment to iron out differences, with PM Imran making a special state visit to Riyadh in May 2021 (Cheyaden, 2022). Relations were gradually back on track, and in 2023 Saudi Arabia promised Pakistan to pay it \$3 billion in IMF bailout on the condition of fiscal discipline and to help Saudi priorities in the Gulf region, which is an illustration of how discretionary aid can strengthen leverage and affect foreign policy behaviour. This kind of arrangement proves that vulnerability can be used to create structures of power in which Pakistan, simply by being dependent, gives Saudi Arabia a chance to exercise influence without necessarily employing coercion.

3. Remittances

Remittances have become a lifeline for Pakistan's struggling economy. In 2024, Pakistan received US \$34.6 billion in remittances which formed 9.4 percent of its GDP and contributed generously to the welfare of the household while supporting the balance of payments. Saudi Arabia stands as the largest source of remittances to Pakistan at US \$7.4 billion, or 25 percent of total remittances received by Pakistan (UN Migration, 2025). Pakistanis work in Saudi Arabia in millions on the construction, services, and technical sectors and their remittances keep the households running and the foreign exchange reserves in Pakistan. In year 2023, more than 800,000 workers were registered with Pakistani authorities for migrant labour and almost 96 percent went to the Gulf countries. The biggest portion was absorbed by Saudi Arabia (49.5 percent), following by UAE (26.7 percent). In 2024, Saudi Arabia became the leading destination of Pakistani migrant workers with more than 62 percent of the registered overseas workers, resulting in the strategic role of Saudi Arabia towards economic stability and foreign exchange resilience of the Pakistani economy.

One of the major sources of migrant labour in the Gulf region is Pakistan. While majority of Pakistani migrants are either unskilled or semi-skilled, there is a trend that suggests highly-skilled workers would also prefer to move out of Pakistan for better employment opportunities in the Gulf, partly attributable to Pakistan's pro-emigration policies (Shah & Qazi, 2025). This explains the importance of remittances of Pakistani migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, which is an important pillar of economic interdependence. Research has shown that at the household level, remittances have ensured higher educational enrolment rates in Pakistan and better health outcomes for women and children compared to the households where no remittances are received. Furthermore, income earned by migrant workers abroad gives them the power to establish independent livelihoods (Shah & Qazi, 2025). Thus, any interference in labour access, such as the modification of visa policies, labour quotas, or restrictions on the labour market, can be an instant economic pressure, confirming Pakistan's structural vulnerability. In recent years, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have taken stringent measures against Pakistani citizens living in these countries due to their involvement in organized begging and criminal activities. In 2025 alone, Saudi Arabia sent back 24,000 people from Pakistan on the grounds of begging. (NDTV, 2025; Mallik, 2025). It is likely that the Saudi labour reforms, targeting to

provide more job opportunities to the local population as part of the Saudization program (Cyrill, 2025), would also create problems among Pakistani workers, which underscores the role of labour market control as an indirect form of leverage.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia has considerably less susceptibility in these fields of the economy. With diversified energy export markets and large financial reserves, Saudi Arabia has alternative sources of labour i.e. the Pakistani labour remains valuable but it is also mostly replaceable. This imbalance highlights the unequal allocation of the cost of adjustment, which by implication makes it possible for Saudi Arabia to influence the policy decisions of Pakistan in a subtle yet effective way.

Defense and security cooperation

Another level of asymmetric interdependence is security and defense relations. Traditionally, Pakistan has assisted the Saudi armed forces in terms of military training, advisory service and operational support and Pakistani officers have been appointed in advisory roles and defense arrangements between the two countries have been institutionalized (Shay, 2018; Zweiri & James, 2021). The efforts of Pakistan to strengthen the stability of Saudi regimes indicate the intentions of Islamabad to have a strong strategic partnership. However, security interdependence does not mean equality. Saudi Arabia has alternative security relationships which include strong partnership with the western powers such as the United States and France who provide it with the strategic flexibility to vary its security relationships.

On the other hand, Pakistan reaps huge political and financial gains by continuing to play the security role and receiving military assistance, and lobbying on the regional matters. For instance, the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, which was led by Saudi Arabia, revealed the complexity of strategic partnership, politics of pressure and dependence between Riyadh and Islamabad. The Pakistani government had, through the parliament, refused to join the coalition against Yemen due to the concern of Iran and fear of regional instability. But under massive diplomatic and economic pressure from Riyadh and other Gulf countries, this decision was slightly revised. As pointed out a scholar, this particular, episode highlighted the asymmetry of the bilateral relationship, where Saudi Arabian political and financial advantages influenced the foreign policy decision of Pakistan. This involved diplomatic persuasion and material concessions to push Pakistan into the rebalancing of its strategic position (Ahmed, 2018). This demonstrates

the CIT principle that interdependence does not have to imply that there are no hierarchical power structures. In fact, the interconnection between Pakistan and Saudi increases interdependence and enhances Saudi power, as Islamabad depends on the relationship in terms of securing its own survival.

Institutional and social connections

Asymmetric interdependence is further institutionalized through deep-rooted cooperation and social connections. The bilateral committees, collective membership in Islamic institutions like Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as well as the organized religious diplomacy offer platforms for continuous communication and agenda-setting. The relationship is socially legitimized by religious solidarity and symbolic fraternity, which underlines interdependence in moral and ideological terms. Nevertheless, such cultural and institutional connections cannot overcome structural asymmetries. Quite the opposite, they tend to obscure the existing hierarchy to allow Saudi Arabia to wield power covertly without the need to appear rude while still creating an impression of a fraternal relationship.

Saudi Arabia is able to practice considerable religious diplomacy since it is the home of the two most sacred cities of the Islamic religion – Mecca and Medina. This allows Riyadh to exert disproportionate influence over Pakistan by projecting itself as the protector of the Islamic practices and norms, which lead to loyalty and legitimacy at the social level. To illustrate, the policies such as the Hajj facilitation programs sponsored by Saudi Arabia annually to Pakistani pilgrims, deepen interdependencies. For Hajj 2026, Pakistan has been allocated a quota of 179,210 pilgrims, for which 118,000 seats have been allocated to the government scheme (Imran, 2025). Although such interdependencies lead to increased social cohesion, at the same time they also increase Saudi bargaining power during policy negotiations.

II

Saudi Arabia's exercise of structural power

Saudi Arabia wields immense structural power towards Pakistan which is evident in multiple domains. This enables Saudi Arabia to determine the frameworks of interaction with Pakistan beyond relational or coercive power, thereby restricting the choices available with Islamabad. As regards four aspects mentioned by Strange, (security, production, finance

and knowledge), the dominance of Saudi Arabia is specially manifested in the domain of finance and knowledge, which reinforces the asymmetries in vulnerability interdependence.

Saudi Arabia's huge wealth reserves and vast oil revenues make it a key external financier of Pakistan in the financial domain. It would be interesting to recall that when Washington had imposed economic sanctions on Islamabad following Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998, Saudi Arabia had provided the country with free oil for three years (Afzal, 2019). Since the 1980s, billions of dollars in aid, loans and deferred oil payments have been provided to Pakistan. This critical support has proved consequential in times of Pakistan's balance-of-payments crises which have become quite frequent due to economic mismanagement, soaring debt obligations and distorted national priorities. Besides, Saudi Arabia has parked billions of dollars in Pakistan's central bank that help it avert any default. However, this all-embracing support structure has also created vulnerability for Pakistan as any disruption in this would lead to unavoidable economic instability and restricted access to international markets, implying unbearable adjustment costs. On the other hand, there is only limited reciprocal cost for Saudi Arabia in case of any disruption. This asymmetry allows Riyadh to leverage financial aid for influencing Pakistan's policies, as witnessed in many cases discussed above.

Saudi Arabia's structural power is also felt in the sphere of knowledge, making its influence stronger in relationship between the two countries. Saudi Arabia has been involved in promoting religious-cultural norms and values in Pakistan through multidimensional frameworks. It has been funding Pakistan's religious seminaries, mosques and educational institutions which are aligned with its Wahhabi/Salafi ideology (Afzal, 2019; Press Trust of India, 2016), and has also invested huge money in various media outlets including news channels in Pakistan (Karim, 2025). Particularly since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, when Saudi Arabia collaborated with the US and Pakistan to fund and train millions of Mujahedeen in their fight against the USSR, Saudi Arabia's religious influence has steadily proliferated across Pakistan, shaping societal and elite discourse in a decisive way because this embeds ideological affinity in influential policy-making circles in Pakistan (Ahmed & Karim, 2024). This has allowed Riyadh to sync the social-cultural norms of Pakistan with those of Saudi, thereby restricting Islamabad's freedom of action in transnational aspects of religion. The overall impact of these structural advantages has been that Saudi Arabia

is capable of exercising non-coercive influence over Pakistan. This is disadvantageous for Pakistan because it limits its manoeuvring space and perpetuates an asymmetrical interdependence which is not a characteristic feature of traditional alliances.

Civil-Military mediation and interdependence securitization

Pakistan has been operating under a hybrid civil-military regime since Imran Khan came to power, with formal civilian government existing superficially and awkwardly alongside a military establishment that is deep-rooted and restrictive of its autonomous functioning. This system of governance, rightly termed “as a pseudodemocratic façade covering the reality of continued military tutelage” (Shah, 2019) has further strengthened the role of military in framing Pakistan’s foreign and security policies. The most unique dimension of the contemporary Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations is the mediation aspect of the hybrid civil-military government in Pakistan, which has influenced the management and functionality of vulnerability interdependence. The growing dominance of Pakistan military in foreign and security policies makes the country economically and institutionally dependent on the security-focused system which places more emphasis on regime stability and institutional interests of the military rather than a more diversified economy and an autonomous policymaking set-up which is governed on principles of regional peace and democratic accountability. Pakistan’s lopsided civil-military nexus makes it imperative to rely on Saudi Arabia for strategic and operational requirements, making vulnerability interdependence a key factor of national security.

Economic dependence on Saudi Arabia, whether in terms of energy supply agreements, financial assistance or labour remittances, has been securitized. Military-to-military interaction enhances Saudi trust in the ability of Pakistan as a dependable security partner, and at the same time limits the ability of civilian institutions to renegotiate terms of relationship or enter into alternative partnerships with other countries. In 2019, then Prime Minister Imran Khan had indicated Pakistan would take part in a Kuala Lumpur conference, which was co-sponsored with Malaysia and Turkey, to build closer relationships between Muslim nations. However, following a last minute trip to Riyadh just before the summit, Imran suddenly cancelled his attendance at the summit and this sudden decision was seen to be giving in to Saudi interests because it threatened the relevance of Saudi-controlled OIC (Waikar & Osman, 2020). Two months later in February 2020, Imran had to visit Malaysia

to placate the country's leadership for abruptly skipping the Kuala Lumpur (Press Trust of India, 2020).

Likewise, in December 2015 when Saudi Arabia tried to seek Pakistan's full military support in the Yemen conflict, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif initially did not agree, and the Parliament voted to be out of the conflict. The decision of civilian government not to support Saudi Arabia in Yemen was based on two strategic calculations. First, its military was already overstretched in dealing with militants on its restive Afghan border, and therefore, a Saudi-led ground operation in Yemen would have been too challenging. Second, Pakistan was keen to maintain a healthy relationship with Iran, a vital source of energy for Pakistan (Ritzinger, 2015). Yet Pakistan eventually expressed its partial support to Riyadh, as reflected in the appointment of Pakistan's former army chief General Raheel Sharif as the first commander-in-chief of the Saudi-led counterterrorism coalition (Ahmad, 2017; Gul, 2017). This shows the persistence of the Saudi influence over the relationship. In this respect, the strategic arrangements, including the recently signed 'Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement' (SMDA) in September 2025, are one part of a multitude of ways in which the military priorities shape the bilateral relationship and institutionalize the elements of the defence cooperation without altering the inherent asymmetry of dependence.

Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed SMDA on 17 September 2025, making it a collective security framework under which an attack on one party would be an attack on both parties (Dahan & Shah, 2025). The agreement brings together over decades of bilateral military cooperation, such as troop exchanges, joint training exercises, sharing of intelligence and synchronized defence planning (Akhtar, 2025). However, in the eyes of Riyadh, the SMDA is more of a signalling system directed towards gaining strategic independence over Washington.

Even though Saudi Arabia has been operating under a relatively non-hostile stance towards Israel, its recent efforts to establish diversified security alliances are sending a message to the United States that Riyadh does have viable security options in the event American commitment to the Gulf region falters (Ardemagni, 2025). In effect, the deal is of little immediate operational benefit since Saudi Arabia remains still very close to the US and does not want a direct conflict with Israel. In this interpretation, the benefits to Riyadh are quite symbolic, which strengthens its diplomatic advantage without a significant change in the

balance of military power. However, for Islamabad, the SMDA has substantial strategic value and domestic ramifications. In financial terms, Pakistan expects to receive more aid that will support its military budget, as well as supply it with the resources to modernize its army (White, 2025). Strategically, the pact is aimed at tightening Pakistan's hold in the Middle East, making it more influential security partner capable of projecting its power outside South Asia (Gambrell & Ahmed, 2025).

In terms of the Complex Interdependence Theory, this dynamic shows a deviation of classical expectations according to which interdependence decreases the salience of military power. As opposed to CIT, which expects dense connections between actors to influence policy and distribute power across multiple channels, the hybrid civil-military regime in Pakistan has shown the tendency to push the decision-making process through the military, which strengthens the relationship between Pakistani military and other regional and international actors. This institutional mediation enhances the structural power of Saudi Arabia. Saudi control of economic resources and cultivation of strategic partnership is internalized in Pakistan's military establishment and converted into policy decisions by Islamabad without coercion. In simple words, Saudi Arabia has the structural power to dictate without any explicit force.

Even the civilian ministries in Pakistan, which formally control economic policies, are in practice in an advisory or implementation role, with the overall strategic posture being orchestrated by the Pakistan military led by General Asim Munir (Kaura, 2025). This domestic institutional form of securitizing interdependence shows that asymmetry is not simply an effect of material vulnerability but equally a product of external impact mediated and exaggerated by internal governance institutions. Overall, the civil-military mediation of asymmetry in Pakistan-Saudi interdependence exemplifies how domestic institutional setup determines the externalization of structural power. The frame of economic dependence and strategic collaboration has strengthened hierarchical relationship while minimizing the role of independent policymaking in Pakistan. The SMDA would give an institutional foothold that tightens the military's strategic alignment within the wider asymmetric relationship.

Conclusion

This article indicates that Pakistan is vulnerable in terms of energy security and its financial dependence and labour market accessibility to Saudi Arabia is a multi-dimensional vulnerability. The security and institutional connections add to these economic dependencies and further limit the scope of Pakistan's strategic autonomy. Saudi Arabia, in its turn, is blessed with diversified economic resources, more security allies and greater financial standing, which significantly reduce its susceptibility to reciprocal vulnerability. It is this asymmetry of vulnerability that creates the imbalance of power asymmetry in the bilateral relationship. These asymmetries are what enable Riyadh to influence the policy decisions of Islamabad by setting the agenda, providing conditioned aid and strategic signalling instead of overt coercion.

Another important issue brought out by the article is that domestic institutions play a critical role in mediation of interdependence. The hybrid type of civil-military system in Pakistan has institutionalized Pakistan's dependency on Saudi Arabia and securitized the economic dependence as a strategic necessity. The process enhances the structural power of Saudi Arabia as it instils a sense of external reliance in domestic policy-making machinery of Pakistan, especially the military establishment. On the theoretical level, the article also shows that the concept of Complex Interdependence Theory is most analytically effective when supplemented by the notion of structural power and domestic institutional analysis. Even though interdependence does not necessarily flatten hierarchies, in some political and institutional circumstances it can reproduce the hierarchies. In terms of policymaking, it indicates that Pakistan's ability to attain long-term strategic autonomy cannot be based on enhancing security-based interdependence, but on alleviating vulnerability by means of economic diversification and institutional balance in governance. If these structural conditions are not addressed, relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia will continue to show asymmetric interdependence where Saudi power will be practiced quietly, continuously and mostly out of sight.

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Examination of the sociological aspects of stigmatization and mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic in India

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& Saurabh Kumar Sharma**

ABSTRACT

The unforeseen onset of the Coronavirus pandemic has had a devastating impact on human life. The situation caused widespread worry, anxiety, and terror among people, leading to the stigmatization of sick individuals. This stigmatization further impacts the way people seek healthcare, owing to a lack of faith in the public health system. The virus has left the globe in a state of powerlessness as individuals helplessly witness the death of their loved ones due to the lack of adequate medical intervention. The required standards implemented by governments to combat the epidemic prevent dead people from receiving a decent death. This article aims to comprehend the process of stigmatization around the Coronavirus and its impact on people's health-seeking behavior. Furthermore, this stigmatization, along with dread and worry, resulted in the refusal to acknowledge the possibility of dying with dignity in India.

Keywords: *COVID-19, India, Stigmatization, Death, Social Stigma.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic has had significant societal ramifications worldwide, and India is not exempt from these effects. The epidemic has not only presented health difficulties but has also highlighted and worsened pre-existing societal dynamics, especially with stigmatization. This investigation explores the social dimensions of stigmatization

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during the COVID-19 epidemic in India, including its origins, expressions, repercussions, and proposed solutions to reduce them. The number of Coronavirus cases is rapidly increasing at an unprecedented level worldwide. The consequence is a rapid increase in mortality rates, since several deceased individuals who were infected are abandoned and left unattended in residences, public areas, and morgues (Gray, 2020; Horowitz & Emma, 2020). These severe situations have emerged due to hastily drafted rules and directives implemented by authorities, such as an abrupt prohibition on burial services in some nations. The global population is compelled to observe this significant era as passive onlookers of the widespread destruction wrought by the epidemic. It had caused widespread feelings of bereavement, sorrow, and anxiety among individuals. Maddrell (2020) correctly observed that those regularly exposed to the virus are susceptible to high levels of viral infection. Similarly, people who experience an elevated frequency of tragic death and personal problems are subject to a heavy emotional burden, referred to as an “emotional-viral load”.

Novel coronavirus as pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is classified as a severe respiratory disease. The primary agent of this condition is the SARS-CoV-2 virus, a member of the Coronavirus family. This virus is encapsulated and has a positive single-stranded RNA (WHO, 2019). The primary transmission mode for the virus is by the intake of respiratory droplets and their subsequent deposition on the mucosal surface. However, other studies have shown that transmission may occur via contact with infected body excretions and the fecal-oral pathway (Vidua et al., 2020). Authorities emphasized the need to implement key steps such as isolating oneself, identifying potential sources of infection, and using PPE to safeguard against infection. The head of the WHO emphasized the need for contact tracing in managing this outbreak. According to the WHO (2020b), because this approach has successfully controlled previous significant outbreaks, including Ebola, smallpox, and polio, it will also effectively suppress COVID-19. Despite being found in 2019, the state of the planet remains alarming. Although technologically advanced countries have made significant progress in research and development, they have been unable to find an efficient remedy for this lethal virus. Multiple individuals perished while awaiting a remedy. The circumstances had become very dire, with morgues overflowing with deceased individuals and hospitals overwhelmed by an excessive number of patients. Therefore, it has

clearly shown the inefficiency of our healthcare system in managing significant disease epidemics. In India, several people were refused medical treatment by hospitals owing to a lack of adequate hospital equipment, including beds, proficient healthcare staff, and personal protective equipment (PPE) kits. The condition was alarming, prompting the India IMA to issue a red notice to medical professionals and the administration of medicine responsible for coronavirus containment efforts (Sahay, 2020). In addition, the cost of therapy that the individual must pay reaches one hundred thousand dollars for 10 days. The allocation of such a substantial price is challenging for families with limited income, highlighting the government's ineffectiveness in addressing the Coronavirus. In response to the extraordinary circumstances, the Indian Supreme Court became involved and mandated the government to establish a set of guidelines on the expenses associated with COVID-19 therapy. The statement emphasized that no patient should be denied medical care due to the exorbitant cost of COVID-19 therapy (Thomas, 2020). In addition, many problems were faced in finding efficacious therapy for the Coronavirus: The first concern was undergoing testing to determine the existence of the Coronavirus. Despite asking a charge of around four thousand five hundred, even privately owned laboratories could not offer a COVID-19 test without any obstacles. Despite 30 percent of testing laboratories in the private sector, only 12-18 percent of the total samples were actually examined in these private labs.

The 2nd issue is the lack of a timely report, which resulted in the patients being denied hospitalization. Meanwhile, the patients' illnesses worsened significantly, and in several instances, individuals perished either in the ambulance or at home owing to the lack of access to the COVID-19 test findings.

The third aspect pertains to the hesitancy and unwilling to cooperate demeanour of individuals in divulging their signs and symptoms because to the societal stigma associated with Covid-19, leading to challenges in promptly diagnosing the illness. Another issue arose owing to certain technicalities, such as the need to notify higher authorities before conducting the last rituals for a dead COVID patient. Furthermore, many instances in India were not reported due to a lack of necessary resources.

The impact of stigma on our daily lives has been extensively studied, but more investigation is required to understand how stigma represents the identity of individuals with Coronavirus. The stigmatized status of individuals with COVID-19 arises from the lack of a successful therapy,

as well as the virus's heightened virulence and frequency of occurrence. This paper aims to comprehend the phenomenon of stigmatization around COVID-19 and its impact on people's health-seeking behavior. Moreover, several occurrences emphasize that deceased individuals were deprived of a respectful burial as a result of the fear and social disapproval associated with the Coronavirus. Recently, in Bihar, there was an incident when a COVID-19 sufferer took their own life at a quarantine centre. In response, the authorities compensated a guy with fifteen hundred rupees to carry out the burial rites for the deceased individual. The individual absconded with the sum of money and abandoned the partially incinerated corpse. Subsequently, feral canines consumed the deceased remains (Mishra, 2020). This was only a singular occurrence. Numerous such situations were occurring daily. This paper aims to comprehend how the stigmatization, fear, and anxiety surrounding the pandemic outbreak in India have resulted in a refusal to acknowledge the possibility of a dignified death.

1. Origins of stigma

Association with disease

Geographic stigmatization occurred during the early stages of the epidemic, especially targeting individuals from metropolitan hotspots such as Mumbai and Delhi, which were significantly impacted by the virus. People from these regions were often unjustly accused of being responsible for transmitting the virus.

The epidemic resulted in the stigmatization of specific jobs that were considered high-risk, including healthcare professionals and sanitation personnel, based on social class and occupation. Despite their crucial contribution in fighting the virus, they were sometimes unjustly linked to its transmission.

Norms regarding culture and society

Lower-caste people and those from underprivileged groups experienced heightened social stigma due to their caste and socioeconomic status. The long-standing biases based on caste were intensified, resulting in a disproportionate impact on lower-caste and economically disadvantaged communities, who were also unfairly held responsible.

Religious and ethnic groups experienced stigmatization as a result of disinformation or biased media narratives. For instance, some

populations were unfairly depicted as the main agents responsible for the transmission of the virus.

2. Manifestations of stigma

Isolation from society

Community Reactions: Individuals who had positive test results or were suspected of being infected with COVID-19 often experienced social exclusion. Neighbors and even family members sometimes isolated themselves out of concern about potential contamination.

Quarantine Challenges: Individuals undergoing quarantine or isolation felt alone and secluded, exacerbated by societal disapproval. Consequently, their social networks failed to provide the necessary support.

Service-based discrimination

Healthcare Access: There have been reports of discrimination against those seeking medical treatment. Hospitals and clinics were often unwilling to give treatment out of fear of infection, compounding the disease's stigma.

Concerns Regarding Employment: Individuals who had tested positive for the virus or were connected with it reported employment instability and discrimination in the workplace, which is reflective of wider cultural stigmas.

The impact of media and disinformation

Sensationalist Reporting: The media often exaggerated the virus in their coverage, which added to the dread and stigma surrounding it. Dissemination of negative depictions and false information on the virus and its impact has contributed to establishing and perpetuating biased views.

Social Media Influence: Social media platforms serve a dual function, disseminating reliable information while amplifying disinformation. The prevalent dissemination of stigmatizing tales on certain groups or places significantly intensified prejudice.

3. Psychological and social impact

Psychological implications

The stigma surrounding COVID-19 has led to a rise in mental health problems, including anxiety and depression, among individuals

impacted. Individuals suffered from increased levels of anxiety, despair, and stress as a result of their fear of being socially excluded and blamed. Obstacles to seeking help: Individuals who are stigmatized frequently hesitate to seek medical assistance or support because they are afraid of being judged. This anxiety causes them to postpone seeking treatment, which worsens their health problems.

Social dynamics and community

The erosion of trust occurred due to the stigmatization and fear of infection, resulting in a decline in communal cohesion. Distrust among people and institutions has weakened, impacting the community's cohesiveness and the effectiveness of collective response efforts. Resilience and Support Networks: Despite the negative perception, several communities came together to assist individuals impacted. Grassroots organizations and local groups arose to provide assistance and counteract social stigma, showcasing their strength and unity.

4. Pathways for mitigation

Public awareness and education

Addressing Misinformation: Initiatives aimed at disseminating precise, evidence-based information on COVID-19 might effectively diminish stigma and oppose spreading false information. Public health efforts should prioritize the promotion of empathy and solidarity. Promoting empathy: Educational programs prioritizing empathy and comprehension might help reduce stigma. We may encourage a more empathetic reaction by showcasing narratives of persons impacted by the virus and their hardships.

Policy and institutional measurements

Protecting Vulnerable Groups: Policies should be implemented to prevent prejudice against disadvantaged and stigmatized groups. This includes providing equitable access to healthcare and job opportunities. Supporting Mental Health: It is critical to provide mental health assistance to persons impacted by COVID-19 while addressing stigma. Mental health services should be more accessible and sensitive to the needs of marginalized people (See Thakur, 2022a; Thakur, 2022b).

Enhancing community assistance

Constructing robust networks: Enhancing community support networks may mitigate the effects of stigma and aid those impacted. Promoting

community cohesion and reciprocal assistance helps develop a nurturing atmosphere.

Social stigma and infectious diseases

With the rapid escalation of the Coronavirus epidemic in India, impacting Millions of individuals, society is confronted with an existential crisis characterized by dread and worry. According to Strong (1990),

A pandemic outbreak is a situation that poses a significant danger to existence. A large, fatal epidemic seems to present to social order; on the waves of fear, panic, stigma, moralizing, and calls to action that seem to characterize the immediate reaction. Societies are caught up in an extraordinary emotional maelstrom which seems, at least for a time, beyond anyone's immediate control. Moreover, since this strange state presents such an immediate threat, actual or potential, to public order, it can also powerfully influence the size, timing and shape of the social and political response in many other areas affected by the epidemic" Strong (1990).

Due to worry and dread, individuals often employ the concept of 'stigma' as a means to actively avoid contact with an infected individual. Infectious illnesses pose a danger to the community's capacity to operate optimally by infecting people and spreading via their interactions within the social system (Smith, 2007). Hence, the reactions of society to the new illness and agents that cause infections are often ascribed to avoiding contact, reducing the likelihood of spread. Quarantine measures have often been used at the societal level, as shown in historical instances like the HIV epidemic, SARS outbreak, etc. Even at the personal level, individuals are shown to avoid infections actively.

Goffman's (1963) seminal research on stigma explains that stigmatization happens when an individual's judgment leads to their discreditation. Stigmatization of individuals results in their systematic exclusion from specific social interactions due to possessing a particular attribute or being a member of a specific group (Kurzban & Mark). Previous studies have identified the specific attributes of stigma that are crucial to comprehending the COVID-19 epidemic: Communicable illnesses that are believed to be acquired by voluntary and preventable actions are subject to significant social stigma. Furthermore, there is a significant social disapproval associated with medical disorders that are both life-threatening and incurable. Furthermore, a heightened level of social disapproval is linked to a disease that presents a potential danger

to others (Herek, 2002, p. 596). Therefore, an individual may conceal their symptoms out of concern for possible social disapproval. However, while “passing,” they constantly live in dread of their stigmatized disease being revealed at any moment. Nevertheless, if the stigmatized individual loses their credibility, they encounter further challenges such as being stigmatized via avoidance, discrimination, and violence (Goffman, 1963). Person (2004) argues that the social consequences of prejudices typically exacerbate the internalization of stigma.

Stigmatization is made easier with the use of symbols that represent stigma. In his 1963 work, Goffman describes stigma symbols as indications communicating social information about a person’s stigmatized position. In the context of Coronavirus cases, strict home quarantine is used with the practice of applying stickers with the name of the COVID-19 patient on the outside of the house to facilitate authentication of the infected individual. The text emphasizes the victim’s uniqueness and assigns identities such as ‘diseased’ and ‘contagious’ to the individual. These labels serve as emblems of stigma, labeling the family as ‘Coronavirus positive’ and warning people to be cautious around them. As a result, they contribute to the stigmatization of the family. Furthermore, the instances of shredding such labels by the stigmatized family emphasize the predicament faced by COVID-19 patients when deciding whether to reveal their socially stigmatized status (Goffman, 1963),

The cooperation of a stigmatized person with normals in acting as his known differentness was irrelevant and not attended to is one main possibility in the life of such a person. However, when his differentness is not immediately apparent, and is not known beforehand, when in fact he is a discreditable, not a discredited, person, then the second main possibility in his life is to be found. The issue is not that of managing tension generated during social contacts, but rather that of managing information about his failing. To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; in each case, to whom, how, when and where

The presence of contagious illnesses not only subjected the patient to victimization but also stigmatized those who had intimate connections with the patient, including spouses, relatives, and even medical professionals. Due to the infectious nature of the sickness, even those who are considered ‘normal’ are apprehensive about the possibility of these individuals serving as carriers of the virus. Goffman (1963)

referred to this stigma as ‘courtesy stigma’. Therefore, this additional manifestation of stigma poses obstacles for those who experience it. The recent incidents in India, when landlords intimidate physicians and nurses to force them to leave their homes owing to concerns about the spread of dangerous diseases, provide a clear illustration of this issue (Jagannath, 2020).

Understanding the influence of stigma on the health-seeking behavior of COVID-19 patients is crucial, since it results in heightened difficulties and barriers. The prevailing worry and dread have fostered detrimental beliefs among individuals, which have been firmly ingrained in their thinking. Bear (2020) contends that a dearth of comprehensive information on the hospitalization process, coupled with restrictions on visiting patients in hospitals, has resulted in uncertainty and difficulties in adjusting to these newly established regulations. In addition, the fear of possible social exclusion and stigmatization that may arise from the breakout of illnesses might cause individuals to reject any clinical symptoms and refrain from seeking appropriate medical treatment.

Some research suggests that stigma in infectious illness might have a beneficial impact by promoting disease avoidance and enhancing personal cleanliness. However, several studies emphasize that the presence of stigma and prejudice creates obstacles when it comes to getting healthcare (Fischer et al., 2019). The presence of possible obstacles may lead to significant health complications and challenges in managing infectious diseases. Fischer et al. (2019) assert that during the occurrence of a contagious illness epidemic; individuals are compelled to adhere to particular guidelines in order to monitor and regulate the transmission of the disease. Public health professionals often advocate for frequent testing, medication adherence, and the adoption of certain behaviors as preventive measures against infection. In previous epidemics such as HIV, Ebola, it was necessary to identify and monitor people, and important steps were made to prevent the virus from spreading. However, stigma discourages patients from exhibiting these anticipated behaviors. Research indicates that Black/African American and Hispanic individuals are less likely to get HIV testing owing to the presence of health-related stigma and negative perceptions. In addition to reduced compliance with medicine, there are increased levels of sadness, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. The stigma associated with TB has also affected the use of contact tracing in epidemic investigations.

Therefore, the combination of stigma and lack of faith in public health, caused by the unavailability of a vaccine and rising death rate, leaves

individuals in a state of confusion and uncertainty. As a result, several instances remain undetected, thus impeding the disruption of the viral transmission. The escape of individuals from the quarantine facility underscores the lack of confidence.

Consequently, as a result of the increased cost of treatment that individuals have to pay themselves and the lack of any successful cure, the epidemic has caused a significant feeling of public concern. It poses a significant danger to the existence of the cultures in which it has originated. Therefore, individuals are using stigma as a strategy to prevent the transmission of these infectious illnesses, which ultimately serves the purpose of self-protection. However, individuals who are stigmatized are encountering several obstacles, which are impeding the progress of contact tracing investigations for COVID-19 sufferers. Healthcare workers are diligently working with few resources provided to them. However, India's current position as the second most afflicted country might be attributed to the government's inability to effectively contain the epidemic. A significant number of deceased individuals are stacked in morgues and hospitals. Therefore, it is important to comprehend the ways in which this epidemic is modifying the dying ceremonies in India.

The coronavirus pandemic was rapidly intensifying in India, with a cumulative total of 111,921,118 cases and 157,694 deaths as of March 6, 2021. Individuals are regularly informed about these incidents via various forms of media. Upholding respect for people's humanity and dignity is essential, since we are not just dealing with approximate mathematical statistics, but with real people who are being impacted by the epidemic. Pathak (2020) accurately observed that the current epidemic has reduced death to a mere statistical concept, without any personal identity or significance. The epidemic has provided a chance for many individuals to have decent final rites. Dignity and respect are universally seen as crucial elements associated with dying in all cultures, and they should never be infringed upon under any circumstances. The Indian Supreme Court has advised the government to ensure the appropriate disposal of unclaimed deceased remains discovered in public areas. War victims' remains should be treated with respect. This highlights the principle that a deceased individual should be treated with reverence, regardless of the circumstances surrounding their death (Prajapati & Bhaduri, 2019, p. 57). In order to comprehend the impact of

COVID-19 on death rites used in Hinduism, it is crucial to get a concise understanding of these ceremonies in India.

Sociological perspective on death

Death is seen differently across many civilizations, and the rituals and traditions associated with death are unique to each society. The criteria used to classify a death as either a 'good death' or a 'bad death' vary across individuals. According to Parry (1994), in Hindu culture, any death is considered favorable if it occurs on consecrated land, and the corpse is cremated in the open air along a riverbank. In Hindu culture, it is widely believed that if a dying individual utters or recites the name of the lord during their last moments, it is seen as a "good death." A "bad death" is sometimes referred to as an "untimely death" because the person who died was unable to prepare for their own death, such as in cases of violence, accidents, or chronic sickness. He further states that in Hinduism, a "good death" is seen as a sacrificial act that brings about the regeneration of the departed, time, and the universe. Death is often interpreted as the mental cessation of a person. However, Hertz provides more details on the notion that death does have a distinct significance within social awareness. Society collectively assumes certain moral and societal responsibilities that are unique to a single tradition and hence dictated by it (Hertz, 1960). Thus, when a human dies, it not only signifies the cessation of their physical body, but also eradicates the social identity that society has bestowed upon them, along with the significance and dignity associated with it (Hertz, 1960, p. 77).

Each community has distinct ritualistic beliefs and rituals pertaining to burial rites, which exhibit variation across different cultures. Parry (1994) explains that Hindus have a certain protocol they follow following the death of a loved one. According to Parry, when a person dies, their body is cleaned, anointed with ghee (clarified butter), wrapped in white linen, and adorned with perfumes and flowers. To venerate the corpse, it is customary to insert a gold object inside the mouth and nose. The act of venerating the corpse is referred to as 'shava puja' in Banaras, a place where cremation is considered to mark the conclusion of the cycle of rebirth (Parry, 1994). Once the necessary procedures for preparing the deceased corpse have been completed, individuals are provided with an opportunity to pay their last respects, marking the beginning of the grieving period.

According to Van Gennep (1991), grieving is seen as a transitory stage in which individuals go through rituals of separation before reintegrating

into society via rituals of integration. Curiously, in some instances, the time of change experienced by the dead is equivalent to the period of transition experienced by those who are mourning (Robben, 1991, p. 213). Therefore, when the departed spirit is thought to become part of the ancestors at the same time, the person grieving is also reintegrated into society.

Therefore, within Hindu society, the rituals conducted in the initial ten days following a person's death serve the purpose of creating a physical form for the 'ethereal spirit' and giving it a new body that is considered to be less substantial than the one the deceased previously possessed. Therefore, it allows the departed individual to reunite with their ancestors. Parry (1980) explains that if funeral ceremonies are not performed properly, the soul may not be able to join its predecessors and instead remain in a state of limbo, wandering like a ghost. This may pose a perpetual threat to the living relatives.

Importance of cremation

Cremation in Hinduism means discussing the spiritual and philosophical aspects of dying. People in Hinduism have differing opinions regarding when they believe death to occur, even at an esoteric level. According to Parry (1994), it is typically the end of a person's body's physiological processes. However, it is said that the heat from the pyre and the "kapal kriya" rite (breaking of one skull) release the life-giving air. As a result, beliefs state that death occurs during the cremation procedure. According to Davies (2005) even the smoke rising from the pyre into the sky is seen as a metaphor for the soul's liberation and assimilation into heaven, signifying a "good death." According to Parry (1994), cremation is considered a sacrifice by Hindus. It is referred to by the erudite Hindus as "antitiesthi," which means "the last sacrifice." It involves giving one's own self as a sacrifice to the gods (Das, 1976). Furthermore, Das highlights several similarities between the practices used in cremation and Other Sacrifice Rituals, such as site cleaning, the prescribed use of ritually pure wood, and the formation of "agni" (fire) with the appropriate recitation of mantras. The deceased is prepared in the same way as a sacrificial victim and given divine attributes.

COVID-19 impacting death rituals

With the increased mortality rate caused by the epidemic, the handling of departed corpses and the proper execution of funeral rituals are worrisome issues worldwide. Typically, the fatalities that are happening

during the COVID pandemic might be categorized as ‘undesirable deaths’ since they are happening unexpectedly and people are not ready for them. A significant number of individuals are perishing in hospitals and inside the confines of their own residences, experiencing profound feelings of isolation and alone. Death-related rites and rituals are essential for easing the suffering of the grieving family and aiding the process of mourning. It is crucial to execute rituals correctly due to the community’s strong belief in incorporating the spirit of the departed with their ancestors (Parry, 1980). However, this epidemic has transformed the whole globe into a passive observer, as individuals just see the accumulation of lifeless corpses, awaiting their funerals. Nations have implemented compulsory norms and stringent regulations to manage the epidemic, therefore prohibiting individuals from transitioning between locations. The family members who have lost their loved ones are already experiencing extreme grief and sorrow as a result of the unexpected loss. In addition, students are required to adhere to those principles when feeling confused. In addition, as a result of the negligent conduct of medical personnel, several grieving families are unable to get the remains of their deceased relatives (Srivastava, 2020). All of these circumstances result in anguish and unease among grieving families. Despite the inability to carry out all the aforementioned procedures owing to the severity of the situation, it is imperative that the deceased corpses be treated with the utmost respect and dignity.

In Varanasi, the city is known for its celebration of death, and it is thought that everyone who dies there achieves ‘Moksha’ (Salvation) (Kaushik, 1976). A cremation powered by electricity was constructed in Harischandra ghat in 1991. Although it has been converted into a gas crematorium, the majority of the deceased are still burned by hand. The primary rationale for this is the deeply ingrained conviction that conducting Cremation by hand, complete with all the prescribed ceremonies and rituals, aids in the departed soul’s attainment of salvation. Simultaneously, transitioning from conventional cremation to an electric crematorium eliminates the observance of significant rites such as ‘Parikrama’ (circumambulating around the pyre), ‘Mukhagni’ (placing fire into the mouth of the corpse), and ‘Kapalkriya’ (cracking the skull of the deceased). These rituals are deeply rooted in strong beliefs and values. The amount and quality of wood used at a funeral are important in asserting one’s elevated social standing. Engaging in rituals is essential for fostering social cohesion within the Hindu community.

Furthermore, submerging cremated remains into a moving river is another significant element of a Hindu cremation. Hertz emphasizes that cremation alone does not complete the process; it is essential to also carry out the accompanying ritual. In accordance with Indian tradition, after the corpses have been fully cremated, it is customary to gather their ashes and submerge them in the river (Hertz, 1960). Parry (1981) expands upon this idea and emphasizes that in order to recreate the world, its complete destruction is required, namely by the means of fire and water. Similarly, the departed corpse is first subjected to cremation. After his cremation, his ashes are submerged in water in order to revive him (Parry, 1981). Therefore, the immersion of ashes has significant importance in Hindu culture. However, there have been complaints over the mixing of ashes from individuals belonging to various castes in electrical crematoriums (Prajapati & Bhaduri, 2019, p. 59). Consequently, the presence of difficulties in conducting rites in the electrical crematorium leads families to opt for manual cremation.

However, due to the epidemic, individuals no longer have the option to choose. Indian authorities have mandated the use of only electrical and gas crematoriums, by the rules set by the WHO, 2020. Therefore, the Coronavirus epidemic has impeded several rites, including 'kapal kriya' (skull-breaking), which is thought to release the spirit from the deceased body. Additionally, the current nationwide lockdown poses obstacles to the practice of scattering the cremated remains of the dead into the flowing river. The lockdown during COVID-19 and the epidemic guidelines hinder individuals or family members from carrying out these rituals/rites, causing distress among grieving families. Moreover, the rising death rate and insufficient capacity of mortuary services on a global scale have heightened concerns, as the number of deceased individuals often exceeds the available space in morgues, crematoriums, and burial grounds. In Italy, the authorities enlisted the army to handle the disposal of dead remains because they were unable to manage the sudden increase in fatalities effectively. In Brazil, the situation was also similar, with gravediggers excavating mass cemeteries. In Spain, the corpses of the old individuals remained at the nursing home until the military arrived to assist in their removal. In Ecuador, there were deceased individuals whose remains remained unclaimed and were left on the streets, awaiting their last burial (Armario, 2020). The mortality toll has exceeded the country's capabilities to handle the issue. In India, a similar situation exists where medical workers are engaged in the mass

burial of remains owing to the rising number of deceased due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the second wave.

In addition to these measures, governments have implemented stringent standards and necessary protocols to manage the onset of the pandemic, which have influenced the welfare of grieving family members. Countries such as China, Ghana, Brazil, and Ecuador have implemented a full prohibition on funeral rites. According to Moore et al. (2020), there are cases when gatherings have been completely outlawed, and these measures may have a psychological and social effect on families who have lost a loved one (Moore et al., 2020). Several nations implemented stringent measures, such as prohibiting funerals, while others enforced mandatory cremation for all religious groups. The authoritative directive to alter long-standing funeral customs has provoked a strong reaction from the community, similar to what occurred in India when the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation mandated that remains of Coronavirus patients be burned regardless of religious affiliation (Singh, 2020). It is essential to provide families the freedom to pay tribute to their deceased loved ones by adhering to practices that are distinctive to their culture, in order to prevent the complications associated with the mourning process. Bear (2020) argues that implementing mandatory cremation will result in societal upheaval. The author advises against implementing mandatory cremations, particularly mass cremations, and delaying the release of deceased corpses due to the significant distress these measures cause within the communities. Moreover, a few countries, like South Korea, India, and France, have placed limitations on the number of people who are allowed to attend funerals. These countries have also established other regulations and standards, including the need to maintain physical distancing throughout the funeral proceedings. As a result of a limited allocation, several mourners were excluded from participating in the last rituals for the dead.

Another guideline, such as seeking permission from authorities prior to conducting funeral rituals, causes a delay in the execution of these rituals. The procedure of awaiting clearance from the authorities caused more disruption and distress. An incident was recorded where family members had to preserve a deceased corpse for two days because there was a delay in receiving the COVID-19 test result. Medical professionals declined to issue the death certificates due to the lack of a COVID-19 test result. The lack of a death certificate has exacerbated the difficulties in arranging a burial, since mortuaries are refusing to take the corpse.

In addition, medical personnel were seen physically pulling and discarding deceased corpses into a common grave for mass burial (Kattimani, 2020). Numerous grieving families had difficulties in arranging a respectful funeral for their loved ones, as funeral personnel refused to perform cremation or burial for deceased individuals who had succumbed to the Coronavirus, out of fear of contracting the infection (Bhalerao, 2020). Consequently, the bereaved family members often have profound feelings of guilt, which may lead to a decline in their mental well-being. (Bear et al., 2020, page 8).

These examples show that, as a consequence of the COVID-19 sickness and pandemic, grieving, which was formerly thought of as a communal expression, is now happening on an individual basis across Urban and Rural spaces. Therefore, Moore (2020) suggests that authorities should consult with religious leaders or community members when devising alternative practices and provide a comprehensive explanation for any modifications made to rituals, including the reasons behind them. Previous evidence from pandemics suggests that individuals are open to adopting new funeral practices if these practices fulfill the symbolic, emotional, societal and requirements of traditional ceremonies and if the communities affected by the changes are actively involved in their development (Moore et al., 2020).

Furthermore, it is undeniable that funeral personnel face immense strain in delivering funeral services for deceased individuals. Although the chances of health professionals contracting the Coronavirus from dead bodies are currently low, the WHO and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India have established recommendations for treating infected corpses. It is recommended to use a leak-proof plastic body bag with a minimum thickness of 150mm. Additionally, it is advised to decontaminate the outside of the body bags. These guidelines are provided by the Government of India (2020) and the WHO (2020b). In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) has advised against washing or embalming deceased bodies (WHO, 2020b). Due to the high level of contagion of the Coronavirus, those who handle deceased corpses are at an elevated risk. Therefore, it is crucial to maintain measures. The World Health Organization (WHO) has suggested that only qualified personnel wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be permitted to handle the disposal of deceased remains, while adhering to all necessary protective measures. In addition, the ICMR recommends the use of electrical or compressed natural gas

crematoriums for the appropriate disposal of remains to be burned (Vidua et al., 2020). However, India's approach to managing this immediate danger is precarious. This raises an important issue about the authority's role in good preparation and its approach to coping with the epidemic.

In Hinduism, traditional cremation is often favored over the use of electricity or gas crematoriums, as previously stated. However, technical issues with the electrical crematorium's functioning are common. For instance, the gas crematorium at Harischandra Ghat in Varanasi is closed for a protracted amount of time. The crematorium's capacity is limited due to the presence of just two chambers for cremating remains (Kumari, 2020). The gas-fueled incinerators at the Nigambodh Ghat electrical crematorium in Delhi had malfunctions at the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak. The government's response to these difficulties seemed inadequate. Consequently, deceased individuals were sent to hospital morgues, where there were already accumulations of corpses awaiting cremation for the previous five days (Kumar, 2020a). According to an official interviewed by Hindustan Times, the number of pending cases is growing daily. Donning personal protective equipment, we endure the scorching sun outside the crematorium, only to be informed later in the day that they are unable to receive the deceased's remains. Currently, there are a total of 28 corpses scattered across the floor, either lying next to one another or stacked on top of each other.

Swift directives were given to cremate bodies using a wooden pyre as a reaction to this crisis, in direct opposition to the guidelines set out by the WHO. Due to concerns about their safety, employees at the crematorium expressed intentions to resign from their positions. Similarly, the cremation in Ghaziabad ceased functioning while a COVID-19 patient's partially burned corpse was still inside. It took around 29 hours to restore the crematorium. A mechanical problem caused the gas crematorium in Varanasi to shut down for four to five days during a comparable time. Consequently, the authorities were putting pressure on the Dom1 community to incinerate the dead using a hardwood fire. The Dom community was anxious since the authorities had failed to provide them with any personal protective equipment (PPE) kits or offer them any training on how to avoid the spread of the contagious illness. Under typical conditions, Dom lacks any safety apparatus for incinerating deceased individuals. However, the monsoon season of 2020 was marked by an increase in worry and panic caused by the extremely contagious nature of the Coronavirus. Due to the cessation of the crematorium and the subsequent rise in water level. Consequently, Personal Protective

Equipment (PPE) kits were deemed obligatory for them, prompting them to advocate for their increased availability before higher authorities. Wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) during the cremation of a corpse may be hazardous because the plastic materials in the PPE might melt owing to the elevated temperatures produced by the pyre.

Furthermore, there were reports of inadequate resources for a suitable funeral in India as a result of the country's abrupt shutdown, as cremations were encountering difficulties in obtaining a sufficient quantity of wood (Amrita, 2020). Therefore, these occurrences emphasize the strategies used by India in managing this epidemic.

Conclusion

Infectious illnesses are stigmatized because they may easily spread from person to person, and the lack of a treatment makes it even easier to stigmatize those who are sick. The stigmatization negatively impacts people's willingness to seek healthcare and also hampers the contact-tracing procedure. The government entities have enacted many steps to authority the outbreak. However, these restrictions effectively deprive individuals of their right to be with their family members during their last moments, resulting in people being compelled to pass away in solitude. Individuals are prohibited from engaging in acts of kissing or embracing the dead as a means of expressing their feelings. These circumstances result in significant worry and stress among the family of the dead. While it is crucial to implement prompt and stringent measures to manage the epidemic, it is also important for authorities to recognize the needs and concerns of the grieving families. Although frontline personnel are under great strain, incidents such as the disappearance of dead corpses from hospitals and the disrespectful dumping and dragging of remains for mass burial cannot be condoned under any circumstances. The sociological dimensions of stigmatization throughout the COVID-19 epidemic in India expose underlying problems pertaining to societal norms, disparity, and apprehension. The pandemic not only exacerbated pre-existing stigmas but also underscored the need for more inclusive and empathetic responses to public health emergencies. To tackle these problems, it is necessary to use a blend of public awareness campaigns, changes in policies, and community assistance. The objective is to diminish the negative perception around these concerns and promote the ability to recover from future difficulties.

Acknowledgements and Financial Support

Saurabh Kumar Sharma is financially supported by ICSSR (F. No. 02/103/2021-22/ICSSR/MJ/RP), New Delhi, India, for this research work.

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Sinking landscapes and shifting communities: climate-induced displacement and governance challenges in Kerala's Kuttanad region

C. Vinodan & Vishnu Aravind

ABSTRACT

This paper examines slow-onset climate-induced displacement in Kerala's Kuttanad, a distinctive agroecological landscape situated below sea level, shaped by environmental fragility and enduring cultural resilience. Based on field research conducted between 2024 and 2025, which included oral histories, stakeholder interviews, and policy reviews, the study demonstrates how sea-level rise, salinity intrusion, and recurrent flooding are steadily diminishing the region's habitability. Framed within ecological justice and critical climate governance perspectives, it reveals how domestic and international governance gaps render such displacement legally and politically invisible. Technocratic adaptation projects, notably the Thanneermukkom Bund and the Kuttanad Package, are criticised for exacerbating socio-ecological vulnerabilities by overlooking local knowledge and excluding community participation. The paper highlights the limitations of global instruments, such as the UNFCCC and the 1951 Refugee Convention, which fail to adequately address the protection needs of internally displaced populations affected by slow-onset events. Positioning Kuttanad as symptomatic of wider failures in global climate governance, it calls for a justice-oriented, multi-scalar framework that safeguards the rights and agency of affected communities. The analysis emphasises the integration of local knowledge systems, institutionalising participatory planning, and moving beyond carbon-centric, infrastructure-led adaptation. Without formal recognition and equitable access to legal and financial mechanisms, vulnerable regions in the Global South will continue to be excluded from substantive climate action and support.

Keywords: *Climate-induced displacement, Ecological justice, Global climate governance, Local knowledge systems, Wetland vulnerability, Internal migration, Climate adaptation policy, Global South.*

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1. Introduction

One of the most pressing complex global issues of the twenty-first century is the increasing severity of climate change, which has disproportionately negative effects on ecologically sensitive and socioeconomically vulnerable people in the Global South (IPCC, 2022). Among these effects, displacement brought on by climate change resulting from gradual environmental changes has become a crucial but underappreciated issue in scholarly discourse and policy practice (UNHCR, 2020; International Organization for Migration, 2019). Gradual processes, such as sea-level rise, salinisation, land degradation, and ecosystem decline, gradually threaten livelihoods and habitability, often without prompting immediate responses, in contrast to sudden-onset disasters that garner immediate humanitarian and media attention (Bettini, 2014; Siders et al., 2019). The international legal framework is yet unprepared to handle such migrations, despite the rising awareness of the connections between human mobility and climate change. The 1951 Refugee Convention limits protection to cross-border relocation caused by persecution and does not recognise environmental factors as grounds for refugee status (McAdam, 2012). In a similar vein, although the UNFCCC's Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage and the Cancun Adaptation Framework suggest rhetorical progress, internal climate displacement remains insufficiently addressed due to their non-binding nature (Biermann & Boas, 2010; Kalin, 2010). As a result, millions of people who have been internally displaced by environmental pressures still lack institutional support and legal recognition.

In light of this, this research employs a case study of Kuttanad, a wetland area in Kerala, India, which is situated below sea level, to investigate the governance gap. Known for its innovative rice farming techniques, Kuttanad is part of the ecologically sensitive Vembanad-Kol Ramsar site, comprising a complex network of canals, polders, and wetlands (MSSRF, 2011). It has been recognised by the FAO as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) (FAO, 2013). Increasing climate-related stressors, frequent flooding, saltwater intrusion, unpredictable monsoons, and inadequate infrastructure have all impacted the region in recent decades, disrupting agricultural livelihoods and leading to displacement (Kerala State Planning Board, 2019; Shaji, 2021). Between 2018 and 2020, over 6,000 families were displaced due to losses in housing, land, and income resulting from flooding (Kerala State Planning Board, 2019). However, because these migrations do not fit into the

current legal definitions of refugees or internally displaced individuals (IDPs), they are still mainly absent from state policy narratives. The obscurity of these movements is further cemented by the state's unwillingness to classify them as climate-related, due to concerns about sovereignty and developmental image control (Vishwanathan, 2021). As a result, relocation programs and welfare benefits are frequently denied to impacted households.

The Kuttanad case highlights the shortcomings of national and international solutions to the complex reality of climate migration. Adaptation strategies, such as the Kuttanad Package and the Thanneermukkom Bund, have relied on top-down, technocratic designs that exacerbate ecological vulnerabilities, overlook local knowledge, and restrict community engagement (Scoones, 2009; Ribot, 2014). Ecological justice, distributive equality, and grassroots agency are neglected in favour of carbon-focused measures and abstract risk models at the global level (Robinson & Carlson, 2021; Nixon, 2011). Therefore, Kuttanad provides a crucial perspective for rethinking climate governance using place-based, justice-oriented strategies. This article argues that a multi-scale governance framework, which prioritises impacted communities, confronts long-standing silences in policy discourse, and incorporates ethically sound, participatory adaptation strategies into national and international responses, is necessary to address slow-onset displacement.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

2.1 Situating climate-induced displacement in contemporary environmental governance

Ecosystems, economies, and social systems around the world are being altered by climate change, which has evolved from a predicted global threat to a tangible and uneven reality. Its effects are felt most keenly in the Global South's socioeconomically disadvantaged and ecologically fragile areas, where recovery and adaptation capabilities are frequently at their lowest (IPCC, 2022). The migration of people as a result of gradual environmental changes is one of its most urgent consequences. Sea-level rise, land degradation, and salty water intrusion are examples of processes that develop gradually and challenge conventional frameworks for disaster response and humanitarian aid, which usually concentrate on sudden-onset disasters (UNHCR, 2020; International Organization for Migration, 2019; Bettini, 2014; Siders et al., 2019). Communities are increasingly being uprooted by these slow disruptions, which are not

caused by catastrophic catastrophes, but by the quiet deterioration of livelihoods and habitability.

International legal frameworks remain structurally unable to address the unique characteristics of slow-onset displacement, despite a recent increase in scholarly interest in climatic mobility. People displaced by environmental deterioration within national borders have no recourse under the 1951 Refugee Convention, which still defines refugees in terms of persecution and crossing international borders (McAdam, 2012). Climate-related mobility has been recognised by UNFCCC initiatives, such as the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage and the Cancun Adaptation Framework, but their rules are non-binding and lack enforcement measures (Biermann & Boas, 2010; Kalin, 2010). Internally displaced climate migrants are thus left out of both national protection and international justice frameworks, creating a governance vacuum.

2.2 Reframing climate displacement: from policy gaps to justice-oriented governance

To investigate the institutional and normative shortcomings in addressing slow-onset displacement, this article employs the analytical frameworks of critical climate governance and ecological justice. Beyond distributive concerns, ecological justice considers relational ethics, historical responsibility, and the interconnectedness of human and non-human systems (Schlosberg, 2007; Nixon, 2011). Technocratic and centralised methods to climate governance frequently marginalise subaltern voices, stifle community agency, and prioritise expert-driven solutions over locally entrenched knowledge, according to critical perspectives (Scoones, 2009; Ribot, 2014). These frameworks offer valuable insights into the limitations of adaptation techniques that perceive environmental change as primarily a technical or engineering issue. By excluding impacted communities from decision-making and ignoring their situated knowledge, infrastructure projects have frequently unintentionally exacerbated ecological injustice. The complex, lived experiences of vulnerable people are often overlooked by the prevailing model of climate governance, which remains carbon-centric and mitigation-focused (Robinson & Carlson, 2021; Nixon, 2011). Kerala's Kuttanad region provides a useful case study. Kuttanad, known for its below-sea-level paddy cultivation and designated as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (FAO, 2013), is located in a sensitive ecological zone that is becoming more unstable due to salinity intrusion,

unpredictable monsoons, and deteriorating infrastructure (Swaminathan Foundation, 2011; Kerala State Planning Board, 2019). Between 2018 and 2020, over 6,000 households were displaced, often without institutional assistance or legal recognition (Shaji, 2021). This type of internal, incremental mobility reflects what Vishwanathan (2021) refers to as a “governance void,” where displaced populations are invisible because the Indian state refuses to recognise internal displacement caused by climate change, which is frequently influenced by development paradigms and sovereignty concerns.

The limitations of state-led, technocratic remedies are demonstrated by adaptation efforts like the Kuttanad Package and the Thanneermukkom Bund. These actions have often disregarded indigenous customs, neglected to involve local populations, and altered hydrological systems in ways that have exacerbated socio-ecological vulnerabilities (Scoones, 2009; Ribot, 2014). This study emphasises the need for a justice-oriented, multi-scale framework that focuses on impacted communities in governance, validates their rights and knowledge systems, and connects local experiences with global policy by highlighting Kuttanad. This strategy highlights the need to decolonise environmental politics and rethink adaptation as a transformational and participatory process, while addressing the legal and normative deficiencies in current climate governance.

3. Methodology, sources and research framing

This study examines ecological injustice and displacement resulting from climate change in Kerala, India’s Kuttanad region, employing a qualitative case study methodology. The intricate interactions between ecological degradation, sociopolitical systems, and the lived experiences of impacted individuals are best captured by the case study method (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Kuttanad was chosen as a crucial location for analysing slow-onset climate displacement due to its distinct agroecological features as a below-sea-level area that is increasingly affected by flooding, saline intrusion, and infrastructure degradation. Both primary and secondary data sources are used in the study. Between January and May 2024, 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted with relocated households, current residents, local panchayat leaders, agricultural officers, and civil society players in the Alappuzha district. The interviews were conducted in Malayalam and then translated into English. To ensure representation across diverse backgrounds, including both highly vulnerable and comparatively resilient groups, participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Government

reports, post-disaster assessments (Kerala State Planning Board, 2019; Kerala Institute of Local Administration & IIT Bombay, 2018), Kuttanad Package assessment documents, reports from environmental NGOs, and policy texts on climate adaptation and disaster governance are examples of secondary data sources. Scholarly works on ecological justice, global governance, and climate displacement inform the theoretical framework. To track changes in land use and flood patterns over time, news archives and satellite imagery were also examined.

A critical ecological political economy viewpoint, which places environmental crises within the larger frameworks of global inequality, developmentalism, and governance failure, serves as the methodological foundation for the study (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Robbins, 2004). It emphasises the geographical, epistemological, and cultural aspects of environmental harm and is based on ecological justice theory (Schlosberg, 2007; Nixon, 2011). Displacement is viewed as a cumulative process influenced by socio-ecological fragility, policy neglect, and caste hierarchy rather than as a single event. Jawaharlal Nehru University provided ethical approval. Anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent were guaranteed; interviews with women and older displaced people received particular attention. Fieldwork was conducted in familiar environments, often with the assistance of local mediators. Findings were disseminated to communities through informal feedback sessions, upholding reciprocity principles and acknowledging participants as knowledge holders rather than merely subjects.

4. Ecological-Socio-Economic profile of Kuttanad: landscape, livelihoods, and fragility

The Kuttanad region, encompassing parts of the districts of Alappuzha, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta, is situated in central Kerala, India, and represents a distinct agroecological and cultural landscape. Kuttanad is a complex hydrological network of rivers, canals, backwaters, and paddy fields that covers an area of over 900 square kilometres, of which approximately 500 square kilometres are below mean sea level (MSSRF, 2011). The Pamba, Achenkovil, Meenachil, and Manimala are the four main rivers that drain the area, which is bordered by the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats. These rivers meet in the Vembanad-Kol Wetland, which is India's second-largest Ramsar site (Kerala State Planning Board, 2019). A fragile ecological balance has long been a defining feature of Kuttanad's socioeconomic structure. Most people work in coir and coconut-based businesses, rice farming, inland fishing, and,

increasingly, tourism (Jacob, 2020). Dalits, landless labourers, and marginalised caste communities who rely on erratic and seasonal occupations make up a sizable portion of the region's heterogeneous population (Alexander, 2013).

Despite having a rich ecosystem, Kuttanad is extremely vulnerable due to its densely populated areas. More than 1.8 million people live in this flood-prone area, and many of their communities lack permanent flood defences, elevated roadways, and drinkable water due to uneven infrastructural access. Conventional dwellings are constructed on elevated mounds known as padams, which are encircled by canals and frequently flooded during the monsoon season. The populace is particularly vulnerable to climate threats due to the intimate connection between ecological and infrastructure precarity (Vijayasree et al., 2014; Kerala Institute of Local Administration & IIT Bombay, 2018). Kuttanad's unique Kayal Nilam (below-sea-level backwater land) rice cultivation system, which depends on bunding reclaimed land from Vembanad Lake and draining it using conventional and electric pumps, was recognised by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 2013 as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) (FAO, 2013; Indo-Dutch Mission, 1989).

In the past, this legacy system included coconut-based industries, inland fishing, seasonal paddy farming, and duck husbandry as rotational livelihood techniques. Food security and economic diversification were guaranteed by these integrated methods (Chandran, 2019; Sylas, 2010). A unique example of sustainable adaptation to sub-sea-level conditions is the bund-protected padasekharams, which were created during the Travancore era with assistance from tenancy regulations (Ghosh, 1999). Duck farming, which organically fertilised the soil, came after paddy cultivation, which took place during the dry season. Concurrently, during the monsoon, brackish water fishing provided revenue. The traditional coir business, which historically employed marginalised and female workers, was sustained by coconut planting on garden areas and bunds (Mathew, 1997; Aravinthakshan & Joseph, 1990). This intricately linked system demonstrates an adaptive socio-ecological model perfectly suited to the rhythms of a wetland environment. But this resiliency has diminished during the past 20 years. The delicate balance that supported Kuttanad's livelihoods has been upset by erratic monsoons, increasing sea levels, unseasonal rainfall, salt intrusion, and infrastructure degradation (Padmakumar et al., 2019; ICAR, 2022). Over 15,000 hectares of paddy fields were submerged, and more than 50,000

dwelling in Kuttanad were damaged during the most severe floods in Kerala's history in 2018 and 2019 (Kerala State Planning Board, 2019). In addition to destroying agricultural productivity, these catastrophes forced thousands of households to relocate—some temporarily, while others were forced to relocate permanently. Built as a saltwater barrier in the 1970s, the Thanneermukkom Bund has been one of the most contentious infrastructure projects. Paradoxically, it has compromised the biological integrity of Vembanad Lake while protecting rice fields from salt. Fish populations have drastically decreased due to eutrophication, stagnation, and the bund's blockage of tidal flushing. Additionally, it has led to the spread of waterborne illnesses and the growth of aquatic weeds (Kolathayar et al., 2021; Vijayasree et al., 2014). Fisheries and agriculture were both harmed by the bund's alteration of sediment flows and nitrogen cycling. Fishermen, especially those who depend on brackish water species, have seen severe losses in their means of subsistence. This has led to resource disputes with rice farmers, exemplifying maladaptive infrastructure that exacerbates social tensions (Scott, 1998).

4.1 Displacement and the failure of climate adaptation in Kuttanad

In Kuttanad, displacement is marked by a gradual, cumulative process fueled by policy indifference and ecological degradation, rather than a sudden exodus. Sea level rise, salinisation, frequent floods, and crop failure are some of the causes of this type of “slow-onset displacement,” which shows itself as a gradual depletion of land, livelihoods, and habitability (UNFCCC, 2012; Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012). Between 2018 and 2020, over 6,000 families were displaced, either permanently relocating to peripheral urban communities in Alappuzha and Kottayam or migrating seasonally to higher ground (Shaji, 2021). However, neither institutional support nor legal acknowledgement is frequently given to these displaced groups.

They are typically excluded from climate planning procedures, fall outside of official relocation structures, and receive minimal compensation. Their marginalisation is exacerbated by the lack of systematic data, the failure to incorporate local perspectives into risk assessments, and the absence of a national policy on displacement caused by climate change. Concurrently, ecological constraints have intensified, and already vulnerable populations have been further displaced as a result of state-led development projects, including road construction, urban growth, and ecotourism (Vishwanathan, 2021; Viju, 2019). By

avoiding local people, these actions hasten land alienation and undermine traditional rights. However, Kuttanad is more than just a place of failure and loss. Local opposition is still evident and forceful. Together, panchayats, farmers' associations, and fishers' unions have battled poorly designed embankments, poorly run water control infrastructure, and top-down, disaster-prone governance. These movements call for territorial and epistemic justice in addition to highlighting ecological misgovernance.

Kerala is known around the world for its progressive development and decentralised planning, yet the Kuttanad instance highlights a glaring mismatch. The region's governance is dispersed and frequently dysfunctional. Operating in silos, organisations like Panchayats, Krishi Bhavans, irrigation agencies, and disaster management authorities lead to inefficiency and duplication of effort, especially in times of crisis (Kerala Institute of Local Administration & IIT Bombay, 2018; Jacob, 2020). With little community involvement, long-term adaptive measures are either nonexistent or enforced in a technocratic manner. According to Ribot (2014), this is known as "institutional bypassing," in which centralised agencies subvert local institutions under the guise of efficiency and speed, resulting in alienation and poor policy execution.

The repercussions of such governance failings are exemplified by the collapse of the ₹2,139 crore Kuttanad Package, which was introduced in 2008 with the goal of reviving agriculture and enhancing ecological resilience. The effort was tainted by corruption, inadequate planning, and the exclusion of local voices, despite its declared goals of increasing agricultural output, lowering salinity, and restoring ecological balance (MSSRF, 2011; Jacob, 2020). Many suggested actions, including bund fortification and canal deepening, were either carried out without technical or ecological consideration, or they were only half finished. As a result, public trust has been severely damaged and the environment has continued to deteriorate. The Thanneermukkom Bund, a saltwater barrier built in the 1970s, is a prominent example of maladaptive planning.

It helped shield rice crops from salt at first, but it has now upset the hydrology of the area. Eutrophication, fish stock loss, and the growth of exotic aquatic weeds are caused by the bund's obstruction of natural tidal flushing (Kolathayar et al., 2021; Vijayasree et al., 2014). Transparency and responsiveness are undermined by the irrigation department's control over the bund's shutters, which are frequently operated without community consultation. Residents claim that improper or delayed shutter opening during floods might make the difference between safety

and flooding, making the bund a symbol of institutional estrangement and technocratic conceit (Shaji, 2021).

One of the most ambitious attempts to address ecological stress in the area was the Kuttanad Package, which was approved by the Indian government in 2008 based on suggestions made by M. S. Swaminathan. It offered ecological restoration, livelihood revitalisation, soil protection, and infrastructure renovation with a budget of ₹2,139.8 crore (MSSRF, 2011). But over ten years later, the package is considered by many to be an unsuccessful attempt at climate adaptation. Serious flaws, such as execution delays, a lack of interdepartmental coordination, redundant projects, and underutilised monies, were brought to light by India's Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) (CAG Report, 2017). According to independent assessments, the package ignored socio-cultural dynamics, failed to involve local populations, and remained preoccupied with engineering-based remedies despite its broad mandate (Jacob, 2020).

More comprehensive, ecologically imbedded techniques were marginalised in favour of technological solutions like canal dredging, pump installation, and embankment construction. Technocratic responses to climate risk frequently exacerbate susceptibility by ignoring local settings and neglecting to address underlying political and economic institutions, as noted by Scoones (2009). The outcome in Kuttanad was a top-down, well-funded initiative that viewed climate adaptation as a technological issue rather than a complicated socio-ecological process.

The package's marginalisation of Indigenous and local knowledge systems was one of its main flaws. In the past, Kuttanad communities engaged in seasonal livelihood rotations, growing rice during the dry season and then raising ducks and collecting fish. Complex water management techniques, such as water wheels and traditional bunding, encouraged these practices (FAO, 2013; Sylas, 2010). State interventions replaced these adaptive strategies with infrastructure that was imposed from the outside. Flood hazards were increased by embankments that changed natural water flow, new highways that impeded drainage channels, and unscientific dredging that disturbed sediment layers (Viju, 2019). This epistemic exclusion is structural rather than accidental. Development frequently makes local knowledge unintelligible to the state, favouring technoscientific rationalities over vernacular epistemologies, according to Agrawal (2005). According to Fricker (2007) and Schlosberg (2007), adaptation is therefore not only about

engineering resilience but also about recognising whose knowledge is valued, whose risks are identified, and who gets to participate in planning. These questions are still mostly unresolved in Kuttanad.

Meanwhile, the region's ecological deterioration has gotten worse due to Kerala's larger development objective. Wetland encroachment, mangrove degradation, and water pollution are the results of road widening, backwater tourism, and real estate speculation (Chandran & Purkayastha, 2018). For instance, the AC Road crosses the wetland, obstructing natural water flows and creating bottlenecks during floods. Small-scale fishermen and marginal farmers suffer disproportionately from fuel leaks, sewage dumping, and erosion caused by Alappuzha's burgeoning houseboat tourism sector (Mathew, 1997). These actions reflect the accumulated, frequently undetectable harm caused by extractive development ideologies, which Nixon (2011) refers to as "slow violence." A more fundamental problem lies at the heart of these shortcomings, affecting both political and social representation. Dalits, women, landless workers, and small-scale fishermen are among the most vulnerable groups that are routinely left out of climate governance frameworks. When their concerns about crop compensation, flood protection, and safe housing are acknowledged, they are frequently mediated through politicised or bureaucratic reasoning (Vishwanathan, 2021). In this situation, justice cannot be reduced to better infrastructure or monetary compensation. It calls for the freedom to remain dignified, take an active role in governance, and maintain connections to ancestral places. Thus, Kuttanad's unsuccessful adaptation serves as an example of the limitations of technocratic, state-centric government. Justice, local agency, and epistemic pluralism must be given priority in democratic, decentralised, and ecologically based frameworks (Ribot, 2014; Sultana, 2022).

5. Local crisis, global failure: reframing climate governance from below

The gradual submersion of Kuttanad in Kerala is a sign of a larger failure in global climate governance rather than just a regional or developmental problem. It represents the intersection of legal invisibility, socio-political marginalisation, and ecological degradation, highlighting the shortcomings of both national and international institutions to address displacement brought on by climate change. The systemic flaws are worldwide, yet the effects are felt most keenly locally. This section makes the case that Kuttanad is representative of a broader governance void that disregards fairness, recognition, and participation. It advocates

for a bottom-up shift that centres the conversation about climate policy around the perspectives of marginalised groups and ecological ethics. Kuttanad's frequent floods, salinisation, and deteriorating infrastructure show how climatic vulnerability and state failure intersect; this pattern is repeated throughout the Global South, where slow-onset displacement is increasing (Adger et al., 2011; Warner et al., 2010).

There is still a big gap between information and practical policy, despite the IPCC's frequent warnings of climate displacement in low-lying and coastal areas (IPCC, 2022). International solutions have not succeeded in establishing inclusive governance structures or legally binding processes. The systemic disregard for internal displacement, a phenomena that is still marginal in institutional and legal frameworks, is reflected in Kuttanad's lack of visibility in these discourses. Climate-induced internal migrants are left in a legal limbo because the 1951 Refugee Convention only confers refugee status to those who cross international borders as a result of persecution (UNHCR, 2020). Despite providing normative protection, the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are ineffective due to their non-binding character and reliance on state discretion (Kalin, 2010). Due to environmental change, internally displaced people in India have no institutional support or legal recognition, which further marginalises vulnerable populations in areas like Kuttanad (Vishwanathan, 2021; Shaji, 2021).

The issue of climate-induced displacement has been recognised by international organisations like the Task Force on Displacement under the UNFCCC and the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, but mainly through vague recommendations devoid of rights-based commitments (UNFCCC, 2018). As a result, communities like Kuttanad continue to face what McNamara and Farbotko (2017) refer to as "governance voids," which are areas where justice is denied, accountability is postponed, and blame is dispersed. The marginalisation of local knowledge in adaptation planning exacerbates this. Data models, financial mechanisms, and engineering solutions are frequently given precedence over vernacular ecological understanding and lived experience by elite institutions and donor-driven agendas (Sultana, 2022; Escobar, 2008).

The design and execution of adaption infrastructure in Kuttanad, which ignores seasonal livelihood patterns and local water management systems, is a clear example of this exclusion (Chandran, 2019). Similar trends may be seen worldwide in places like the Pacific and the Sahel,

where communities experience epistemic injustice and are denied the validity of local knowledge systems during planning procedures (Fricker, 2007; Whyte, 2020). This erasure is sustained by the state-centric model of the UNFCCC. The most impacted areas have little access to funding sources like the Green Climate Fund, and national governments continue to control the bargaining arena. Such frameworks, according to Agarwal (2005), enable “participation without power,” providing symbolic representation without real voice or impact. This paradox is best shown by India’s climate diplomacy.

India avoids addressing the issue of domestic displacement while simultaneously demanding historical accountability from the Global North and promoting climate justice on the international front. India minimises its internal vulnerabilities in Kuttanad, the Sundarbans, and other climate-risk areas due to concerns about sovereignty and a desire to maintain a developmental narrative (Atteridge et al., 2012; Viju, 2019; Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015). In addition to avoiding legal responsibilities and preserving the appearance of national resilience, this silence makes vulnerable populations invisible in climate governance. Therefore, Kuttanad’s gradual submersion challenges prevailing paradigms of climate governance and policy. Technocratic, top-down measures are insufficient to accomplish justice. It calls for a re-scaling of governance based on participatory frameworks, ecological ethics, and place-based knowledge (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Ribot, 2014).

This re-scaling entails:

- Recognising climate-displaced persons as rights-bearing citizens, even if they do not cross borders;
- Creating institutional platforms for marginalised voices in climate decision-making;
- Redirecting climate finance towards community-led adaptation and ecosystem restoration;
- Embedding ecological justice into legal frameworks and development planning.

This strategy aligns with the expanding body of research on transformative adaptation, which advocates for structural adjustments to societies’ responses to climate risks, such as adjustments to power dynamics, institutional responsibility, and socio-environmental values (Pelling et al., 2015; Nightingale et al., 2020).

Relational accountability must take precedence over statistical vulnerability, lived experience over abstract risk, and communal agency

over individual resilience in a justice-centered global governance paradigm. This entails embracing pluralist, democratic, and moral forms of governance in place of market mechanisms like carbon trading and techno-managerial adaptation. Kuttanad offers the political and moral justification for doing so. In this area, the consequences of delay are quantified not just in monetary terms but also in terms of lost lives, civilisations, and ecosystems. Climate governance must take into consideration the unique ways that vulnerability is created and challenged locally if it is to be considered legitimate. This suggests a change from climate governance as risk management to climate governance as justice-making, which entails democratic engagement, redistribution, and recognition (Fraser, 2009; Sultana, 2022). It also necessitates reconsidering sovereignty as a platform for compassion and solidarity rather than as a defence against accountability.

6. Towards a justice-oriented framework

The experience of Kuttanad reveals the limits of prevailing climate governance paradigms, which prioritise technical fixes and emissions metrics over human rights, social equity, and ecological integrity. As the climate crisis intensifies, particularly for low-lying and ecologically sensitive regions like Kuttanad, the need for a justice-oriented framework becomes not just desirable but imperative. This section outlines the foundational principles of such a framework, one that is grounded in ecological justice and aimed at the recognition, inclusion, and protection of climate-displaced persons. It calls for a transformative shift in global climate governance from top-down mitigation logics to participatory, distributive, and recognition-based approaches.

6.1 Recognition of slow-onset climate displacement

The focus of mainstream climate policy is frequently on abrupt, catastrophic events that are observable, quantifiable, and mappable, such as hurricanes or tsunamis. However, the majority of displacement drivers in areas like Kuttanad are slow-onset phenomena, such as sea-level rise, salinisation, soil degradation, and ecosystem collapse (UNFCCC, 2012; IPCC, 2022). According to Bettini (2014) and Siders et al. (2019), these processes occur gradually, undermining the habitability of landscapes over years rather than hours and frequently removing people in informal, cyclical, or partial ways.

Despite this, current international legal regimes do not recognise slow-onset displaced persons as a distinct category. The 1951 Refugee

Convention is inapplicable, and even the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (UN-OCHA, 1998) do not bind states to legally protect such populations. This creates a protection gap, wherein people displaced by environmental decline are neither recognised nor compensated (Kälin, 2010). A justice-oriented framework must therefore begin with formal recognition of slow-onset displacement, through amendments to national and international legal instruments and the adoption of rights-based protections for people who lose access to viable land, livelihoods, or housing due to environmental change (McNamara & Farbotko, 2017; Sultana, 2022).

6.2 Inclusion of indigenous and local knowledge systems

Communities in regions like Kuttanad have long adapted to dynamic ecosystems through local innovations, such as bunding, rotational cropping, and water management systems. Yet, adaptation policies often dismiss or marginalise such knowledge, replacing it with top-down engineering solutions that deepen ecological vulnerability (Agrawal, 2005; Scoones, 2009). Ecological justice demands that local and Indigenous knowledge systems be treated not as supplementary but as central to planning, monitoring, and decision-making. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (2022) acknowledges the importance of local knowledge for climate resilience, but implementation remains limited.

To rectify this, a justice-oriented framework must ensure:

- Epistemic inclusion in all stages of climate policy, from local planning to global negotiations;
- Co-production of knowledge between scientists, policymakers, and communities;
- Institutional mechanisms within UNFCCC, national adaptation programmes, and disaster governance structures that legitimise and integrate community expertise (Whyte, 2020; Nightingale et al., 2020).

6.3 Responsibility-sharing beyond state borders

Climate displacement has transboundary causes and implications, but responses are overwhelmingly domestic and discretionary. The result is a responsibility gap, where those most responsible for climate change bear the least burden for displacement, while vulnerable states and communities are left to cope alone (Adger et al., 2006; Atapattu, 2020).

An ecological justice framework requires moving beyond national borders in both legal and ethical responsibility-sharing. This includes:

- Common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) as a foundation for climate displacement action;
- Regional and global compacts on climate mobility that share hosting, funding, and protection responsibilities;
- Financial and technical support to assist vulnerable regions in adaptation and planned relocation (Savaresi & Hartmann, 2020).

The Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage and the Task Force on Displacement under the UNFCCC have made preliminary steps in this direction, but lack enforcement and financing. Embedding displacement into climate justice diplomacy, including in forums like the G77, BRICS, and the UN Human Rights Council, is critical to driving global accountability (Roberts & Pelling, 2018).

6.4 Climate finance tied to adaptation for displacement

Most climate finance flows today are oriented towards mitigation efforts, such as renewable energy and carbon trading, rather than adaptation for vulnerable populations, let alone displacement-specific interventions (Buchner et al., 2021). According to the UNFCCC, less than 20% of international climate finance supports adaptation, and of that, a fraction addresses displacement or habitat loss (UNEP, 2022).

A justice-oriented model demands that displacement and habitability be central concerns of climate finance architecture. This means:

- Prioritising vulnerability-based allocations in the Green Climate Fund (GCF);
- Creating dedicated funding streams for community-led relocation, livelihood restoration, and infrastructure resilience;
- Incorporating non-economic losses, such as cultural loss, identity, and ecological belonging, into compensation frameworks (Tschakert et al., 2017; Thomas & Benjamin, 2018).

Furthermore, financing must be participatory, channelled through transparent, accountable mechanisms that empower local governments and grassroots organisations.

6.5 Integrating localised cases like Kuttanad into global forums

Kuttanad's communities' real-life experiences shouldn't be marginalised in the global conversation about climate change. Rather, they need to be included into high-level platforms like as the GCF's governance structures, the IPCC's Special Reports, and the UNFCCC Conferences of the Parties (COPs). These forums must actively involve Panchayats,

farmers' groups, fisher unions, and subnational actors in addition to tokenistic stakeholder engagement.

Additionally, this entails moving governance's scalar focus from states to multilevel networks, such as transnational advocacy coalitions, local governments, and civil society (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004; Bulkeley et al., 2014). Incorporating situations such as Kuttanad not only improves representational justice but also aids in the development of culturally rooted, flexible, and context-sensitive responses to ecological crises.

6.6 Rights-based legal recognition of climate-displaced persons

Finally, justice demands a legal framework that recognises climate-displaced persons as rights-bearing subjects, not just victims or passive recipients of aid. This includes the right to:

- Remain in place with dignity and adequate protections;
- Voluntarily relocate with state support when necessary;
- Participate in decisions affecting their relocation, land access, and livelihoods;
- Access restitution or compensation for loss of home, land, or culture.

Such recognition can take the form of:

- National legislation acknowledging climate-displaced communities;
- Amendments to existing disaster management and land acquisition laws;
- International legal innovations, such as a Global Charter on Climate Mobility or a UN Special Rapporteur on Climate Displacement (McAdam, 2012; Atapattu, 2020).

Ultimately, this legal recognition must rest not on narrow definitions of mobility but on broader understandings of habitat loss, socio-ecological belonging, and the right to place (Sultana, 2022; Nixon, 2011).

7. Conclusion

Ecosystems, livelihoods, and human-environment linkages are all being altered by climate change, which is no longer a far-off forecast. This study has demonstrated how a larger dilemma of ecological precarity, displacement, and inadequate governance is encapsulated in the slow but unrelenting alteration of Kerala's Kuttanad region. In addition to saline intrusion and unpredictable monsoons, the region is vulnerable due to decades of institutional fragmentation, governmental neglect, and adaptation strategies that prioritise technocratic solutions above the agency and expertise of impacted populations. Carbon accounting and mitigation targets continue to dominate prevailing climate governance

models, which often overlook the structural injustices and lived realities of individuals experiencing environmental decline. State-led initiatives in Kuttanad, such as the Thanneermukkom Bund and the Kuttanad Package, have increased socioeconomic marginalisation and weakened traditional ecological resilience, especially for Dalits, women, landless farmers, and fisher groups.

Globally, people displaced by slow-onset phenomena, such as salinisation, wetland degradation, and land loss, have few options due to legal mechanisms like the UNFCCC, the Paris Agreement, and the 1951 Refugee Convention. The lack of legally binding agreements, sufficient funding, and enforceable accountability has left communities like those in Kuttanad both politically marginalised and legally unrecognised, despite the rhetorical significance of “loss and damage.” Therefore, based on the rights, knowledge systems, and lived experiences of frontline populations, this study advocates for a justice-centred reconfiguration of climate governance. It is crucial to acknowledge slow-onset displacement as a separate category that needs inclusive planning, relocation support, and legal protections. Community-led adaptation that increases resilience while maintaining cultural ties must be given top priority by funding sources like the Green Climate Fund. The current top-down methods must be replaced with a truly multi-scalar governance architecture that connects local self-governments, civil society, and marginalised communities. As a result, Kuttanad serves as both a warning and an opportunity to rethink climate justice as inclusive, moral, and grounded in place-based governance.

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Fiscal policy, gender equity, and development: a study of Gender Budgeting in Himachal Pradesh

Abha Chauhan Khimta

ABSTRACT

The concept of Gender Budgeting (GB) has emerged as a new strategic policy instrument in the hands of ruling establishments for promoting gender equality (GE) by systematically integrating gender analysis into public financial planning, implementation, and evaluation. The present study examines that how GB has worked as an instrument for women's empowerment, emphasizing its role in enhancing access to education, healthcare, and labour markets. In the state of Himachal Pradesh. The study also examines the state initiatives such as Beti Hai Anmol (BHA) and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), signifying how gender-responsive allocations reduce structural inequalities and align with national and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: *Gender Budgeting, women empowerment, gender equality, civil society, Himachal Pradesh.*

Introduction

GB has become a critical mechanism in pursuit of GE, used to systematically assess spending and public revenues through a gender lens. It encompasses the application of gender analysis to all phases of the budgeting process - formulation, implementation and evaluation. GB aims to guarantee that public resources are allocated fairly, by meeting the distinct needs of different genders and thus promoting an inclusive social and economic environment. This approach is significant not only to correct the biases inherent in sexes in fiscal policies, but also to question traditional gender roles, thus promoting a substantial social change and promoting GE.

The empowerment of women through GB is rooted in its ability to improve access to essential resources, services and opportunities. According to Showkat et al. (2024), GB plays an instrumental role in obtaining financial autonomy for women by facilitating their access to

education, health care and opportunities for the labour market. By allowing targeted investments in women initiatives, GB helps reduce income disparities and mitigate the obstacles to the full participation of women in the economy. This empowerment extends beyond simple financial independence; It encompasses the broader spectrum of social empowerment, where women are increasingly participating in decision - making processes, paving the way for a more equitable representation. The state of Himachal Pradesh has also introduced GB recently that examination of which forms the primary focus of the current study.

Gender Budgeting in Himachal Pradesh

The GB is a policy tool designed to integrate gender considerations into the government budget processes, thus ensuring that the allocation of resources addresses the different needs and priorities of women and men (Ahmad, 2023). In the context of Himachal Pradesh, a state characterized by different socio -economic challenges, the relevance of the GB cannot be exaggerated. Women in this region often fight with problems such as limited access to education and medical care, gender violence and economic disparities, all of which hinder their potential for socio - economic empowerment and progress (Singh and Kumar, 2025). When analysing how public funds are distributed and spent, the GB seeks to promote women empowerment and improve the results of GE, thus transforming socio -economic landscape for women.

The growing recognition of the GB as a mechanism to promote the empowerment of women in Himachal Pradesh is indicative of a broader change towards the formulation of inclusive policies. This evolution highlights the interdependence between budget allocations and tangible impacts on women empowerment efforts in several sectors. However, understanding the specific implications of these policies requires a detailed analysis of their implementation, effectiveness and socio-cultural dynamics at stake. Previous studies have shown variable impacts of such initiatives, which reflects the disparities in accessibility and the use of resources by women of different socio-economic origins (Mishra, 2025). In the light of these complexities, the study aims to explore the intricate relationship between the GB and the empowerment of women in Himachal Pradesh, evaluating how they have gone to the policies implemented to address the systemic barriers for GE. The study also aims at underscoring the experiences of women in the region, examining to what extent government assignments are translated into real changes in their lives, while considering future perspectives to improve GE

results. When highlighting this link, the analysis seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the GB and the empowerment of the defenders of the search for comprehensive GE initiatives in Himachal Pradesh. The GB represents an innovative approach to public financial management that tries to deal with the systemic inequalities faced by women and promote their strengthening through targeted tax policies. In the context of Himachal Pradesh, a state recognized for its panoramic beauty and the rich cultural heritage, GB emerged as a significant tool to advance women rights and improve GE. This analysis explores the intersection of the GB and the empowerment of women, focusing on relevant policies, their impacts and future perspectives for achieving GE within the region.

Over the years, the state of Himachal Pradesh has implemented several key policies that are aligned with the principles of GB. These include initiatives aimed at improving women access to education, medical care and employment opportunities, which are crucial to promote women empowerment. The BHA program, for example, has been designed to improve the education and well-being of the girl, while the MGNREGA has facilitated the participation of women in the workforce, promote economic independence (Dev et al., 2025; Sharma; Nain, 2023). These policy initiatives not only reflect a commitment to gender-sensitive governance, but are also aligned with broader national frameworks, such as sustainable development objectives (SDG), which aims to explicitly achieve GE and train all women and girls. The integration of the GB within these policies serves to further reinforce their effectiveness, ensuring that financial resources are aimed at addressing the specific barriers faced by women.

The Himachal Pradesh government started the GB in 2008, adopting a picture aimed at integrating gender considerations in the state planning and budget processes. The process provides for the evaluation of the allocation of resources through a gender lens, ensuring that the specific needs of women are identified and effectively satisfied. Key policies, such as the state policy of Himachal Pradesh for women (2016) and various schemes designed to improve women entrepreneurship and access to education, illustrate the state commitment to enhance women. These policies are basically rooted in recognizing the socio-economic disparities that women in Himachal Pradesh face, which include limited access to the opportunities for health care, education and employment.

A significant impact of GB in the region can be observed in the major financial allocations towards women well-being patterns. For example,

the *BHA* scheme, which focuses on the strengthening of girls through education, has received significant budget support pursuant to gender awareness initiatives. Studies indicate that these tax commitments have led to higher enrolment rates of girls in schools and to better conservation, thus contributing to the long-term empowerment of women by promoting school performance. Furthermore, the introduction of development programs for the skills aimed at women, reflects a growing recognition of the need to provide women with skills for sustainable subsistence means.

Despite these positive developments, the challenges persist in the implementation and monitoring of GB effectively. A significant concern remains the persistent social and cultural norms that continue to undermine women empowerment. The data suggest the variability in the execution of programs focused on the genre, with some regions that live disparity of involvement and results. In addition, an inadequate ability between local governance institutions to analysed gender related data further hinders the effectiveness of gender budget initiatives. This indicates the need for a more robust institutional framework that can support the momentum of GB and ensure that its benefits are equally distributed in all segments of the population.

The future prospects for GE in the Himachal Pradesh depend on the continuous improvement of GB practices and the expansion of women empowerment policies. Commitment to local communities to raise women items in decision-making processes can improve the effectiveness of these initiatives. Furthermore, promoting inter-departmental collaborations can help simplify the implementation of gender awareness programs, guaranteeing a more holistic approach. Forestry policies that incorporate gender integration into all sectors, including health, education and employment, will be essential to catalyse substantial changes towards GE.

It can be argued that while the intersection of the GB and the empowerment of women in the Himachal Pradesh presents both opportunities and challenges, the commitment below for tax policies sensitive to the genre has the potential to transform the socio-economic panorama for women. Continuing to analyse and adapt these initiatives, Himachal Pradesh can constitute a precedent for other regions in India, strengthening the meaning of GB as a catalyst for women empowerment and long-term GE. The analysis of GB policies in Himachal Pradesh reveals a multifaceted impact on the women empowerment, in particular

in key sectors such as agriculture, education and health. The initiatives aimed at integrating the genre in budget allocations have led to substantial changes in the distribution of resources, positively influencing the involvement of women in these sectors (Pulikkamath, 2023; Behl et al., 2023). For example, the allocation of funds specifically for agricultural programs focused on women has facilitated greater participation of farmers in decision-making processes, thus improving their negotiating power within families and communities. Empirical studies indicate that greater access to financial resources allows women not only to participate more actively in agricultural activities, but also to carry out financial autonomy and financial control over income (Singh, 2024; Kumar, 2023).

The role of schemes such as MGNREGA is decisive for promoting work opportunities sensitive to the genre. By setting that a significant part of the benefits for employment accumulates to women, this program has been fundamental in increasing the participation of the women workforce. Study cases show that the successful integration of gender prospects in MGNREGA has led to a remarkable decline in gender disparities, with women who earn financial independence and the enhanced agency (Husain et al., 2025; Aggarwal & Gupta, 2025). For example, in specific districts within Himachal Pradesh, beneficiary women have brought greater involvement in the financial decisions of families and a stronger item in their communities, which is essential for long-term Empowerment.

Despite these positive developments, policies face substantial challenges that hinder their complete impact on the women empowerment. Systemic barriers, such as patriarchal norms and socio-cultural expectations, continue to undermine the women agency, their ability to fully capitalize the benefits provided by GB initiatives (Chauhan, 2024; Gothwa & Siwach, 2025). The cultural resistance towards the public participation of women and economic independence prevents the effectiveness of GB policies. Women often encounter difficulties in accessing financial resources assigned to them due to limited mobility, lack of awareness and inadequate support systems. In addition, the intersectionality of the socio-economic factors further complicates the panorama of the empowerment of women in the Himachal Pradesh. Women belonging to marginalized communities face high challenges due to rooted inequalities and limited access to educational and health resources, which worsens their social and economic vulnerabilities. Therefore, while the GB presents a path to improve women empowerment, the intersection of the

genre with other dimensions of identity and circumstances remains fundamental to understand the effectiveness and sustainability of these policies.

Thus the analysis of GB policies in the Himachal Pradesh demonstrates both progress and persistent challenges in the search for women empowerment. The continuous evolution of these policies requires a nuanced approach that not only focuses on financial inclusion, but also faces the fundamental socio-cultural barriers that inhibit women from fully realizing their potential in society. The future perspectives of GE in Himachal Pradesh depend on several interrelated factors, including changes of recent policies and the potential to improve GB initiatives that promote women empowerment. The state government has begun to recognize the importance of integrating a gender lens in budgetary assignments, influenced by national frameworks and international commitments with GE (Thakur and Dalal, 2025; Sikdar and Anand, 2025). Emerging opportunities for women empowerment are intricately linked to the participation of interested parties, defining a collective vision for processable policies. Government organisms, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community leaders play a crucial role in the elaboration of inclusive policies that respond to the nuanced needs of women, particularly in rural contexts (Sunda and Kannan, 2025; Singh, 2024).

The collaboration of interested parties is vital to ensure that the GB is not simply a theoretical framework but a practical tool for a transformative change. The active participation of local women groups, for example, offers information on the specific barriers of the community and the possible solutions that are often overlooked to higher levels of formulation of higher policies. Through participatory budget processes, women can articulate their priorities and influence decision-making, ensuring that policies reflect their needs and aspirations. Such commitment encourages responsibility between policy formulators and improves the general effectiveness of gender-centered initiatives.

The incorporation of a feminist perspective within the broader rural development agenda further expands the framework to achieve GE in the region. This perspective emphasizes the importance of sustainable practices that not only address the immediate economic needs of women, but also improve their agency and general participation in social decision making (Mishra, 2025; Shah and Desai, 2024). By prioritizing women in agricultural policies, skills development programs and access to digital

technology, interventions can be designed to dismantle patriarchal structures that limit women in family and economic spheres. These initiatives, together with the gender sensitive budget, promise to facilitate a more equitable distribution of resources while promoting social equity. Future strategies should also include a solid monitoring and evaluation component to evaluate the impact of the GB on women empowerment. Continuous feedback loops that inform policy settings in response to emerging challenges are essential for sustainable progress. In addition, the use of data broken down by gender in several sectors will allow political leaders to better understand the barriers faced by women and track improvements over time.

In the light of these considerations, a road map for future policies must cover a multifaceted approach that combines legislative reforms with base activism and support systems. Identifying synergies between economic development initiatives and the budget that responds to gender can lead to comprehensive strategies that not only raise women but also contribute to the general socio-economic development of Himachal Pradesh. The interaction of these elements will ultimately draw a course towards sustained GE and empowerment for women in the region, creating a model that could be replicated in other contexts that face similar challenges (Kumar, 2024).

Hence, Gender Responsive Budget initiative can help to bridge these gaps by ensuring that public money is raised and spent more effectively. Working on this idea, the Government of India firstly, integrated Gender Responsive Budgeting in India's Budgeting Process in 2005-06 and since then it has been preparing & publishing the Gender Based Statements (GBSs) every year. GB Statement of the Government of India is divided into two parts – Part-A i.e. Expenditure on 100% women-specific programmes and Part-B i.e. Expenditure on Programmes where at least 30% women are covered. The promotion of GE is also at the heart of the social as well as economic policies of the Government of Himachal Pradesh. In order to mainstream Gender Responsive Budgeting in legislations, policies & programmes, the State Government also envisaged preparing GB Statements (Financial & Physical) annually starting from financial year 2022-23 so that a reporting mechanism is developed & adopted to Page -1 review the progress of departmental schemes from a gender lens/perspective (Government of Himachal Pradesh GB Statement, 2024-25, p:1).

Objectives of GB

Women, both as direct beneficiaries and agents of social transformation constitute the primary stakeholders in the GB framework. Planning Department has a crucial role in determining financial allocations through critical consultations with diverse stakeholders. It also ascertain the developmental priorities and stages. The Women and Child Development Department (WCDD) acts as the nodal agency. It is responsible for the total mandate of promoting GE across different sectors. Other departments such as Health, Education, Empowerment of SCs, OBCs, Minorities and Specially Abled (MSA), and Labour and Employment are primarily responsible for the implementation of gender-specific schemes. Besides the governmental staff scholars, researchers, women's organizations, NGOs, civil society and voluntary organizations, elected representatives, media play a significant role toward the advocacy, accountability, and informed public discourse.

GB in Himachal Pradesh acts as an analytical and normative policy instrument that focuses on embedding gender equity in the state's financial landscape. It primarily aims at critically examine the annual budget to assess gender-differentiated outcomes, thus translating policy commitments into gender justice through tangible budgetary allocations. Instead of constituting a separate budget GB seeks to mainstream women's concerns within the general budget by promoting targeted, gender-sensitive interventions across key sectors such as health, education, social security, labour, and employment (HP Gov. 2024-2025). The preparation of a dedicated GB document further enables systematic identification of women-specific schemes and links financial outlays with physical achievements. Ultimately, the framework aspires to institutionalize GE as an integral outcome of public expenditure and development planning (UN Women, Asia and the Pacific, 2025).

Strategies adopted (2024-25 GB)

In order to underscore the actual status of women participation and the benefits forwarded to them through different departmental schemes, the budget statements of Gender Responsive Budgeting are divided into two sections i.e. Financial & Physical. Schemes that target only women have been placed in Category-1 and the schemes with less than 100% women

beneficiaries are and other gender beneficiaries in Category-2. Another category of the scheme (Category-3) has been identified which intend to benefit all genders equally without any discrimination and it is almost impossible to know exact number of individuals belonging to different genders who stands benefitted from this scheme. The strategic architecture underpinning the GB framework for the financial year 2024–25 reflects a deliberate attempt to balance gender-targeted interventions with universally accessible development schemes whose benefits are inherently non-excludable and gender-neutral in character. Core infrastructure and service-oriented initiatives—such as road connectivity, water supply, irrigation, veterinary services, agricultural inputs (whether partially or fully subsidized), and health and education infrastructure—generate both direct and indirect welfare outcomes for all genders without discrimination (HP Gov. 2024-2025).

Owing to their public-good nature and diffuse impact pathways, it remains analytically impracticable to disaggregate beneficiaries of these schemes along gender lines, a limitation explicitly acknowledged in the documentation. Consequently, Category-3 schemes are excluded from beneficiary quantification statements, even as they command a substantial budgetary outlay of ₹4,72,710.00 lakh, accounting for 47.32 percent of the State’s total development budget. The Financial Statements emphasize expenditure analysis of women welfare-oriented schemes, while ‘Physical Progress Statements’ attempt to correlate financial allocations with measurable outputs, thereby enhancing fiscal transparency. Within this broader framework, a provision of ₹3,06,452.85 lakh—30.68 percent of the total development budget of ₹9,98,949.00 lakh—has been earmarked for women-oriented schemes. The GB encompasses 32 schemes across 9 departments that are exclusively women-specific, alongside 100 schemes across 19 departments with mixed-gender beneficiaries. Of the total women-oriented outlay, ₹52,860.59 lakh (17.25 percent) supports fully women-specific schemes, while ₹2,53,592.26 lakh (82.75 percent) is allocated to schemes with partial gender targeting, underscoring a layered and inclusive strategic approach (HP Gov. 2024-2025).

Category-wise Gender Budget 2024-25 (Rs. in lakh)

S.No.	Name of Department	Budget Estimate		Total
		Category-1 (100% Women)	Category-2 (Below 100% Women and other Gender)	
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1.	Health	14200.33	1780.52	15980.85
2.	Police	763.90	-	763.90
3.	Rural Development	86.00	31830.00	31916.00
4.	Higher Education	414.36	7302.09	7716.45
5.	Women & Child	10476.00	35593.60	46069.60
6.	SCs, OBCs, Minorities & Specially Aabled	26793.22	119902.00	146695.22
7.	Food, Civil Supplies & Consumer Affairs	3.00	18050.00	18053.00
8.	Technical education	43.78	239.00	282.78
9.	Transport	80.00	8537.00	8617.00
10.	Elementary Education	-	13327.00	13327.00
11.	Agriculture	-	1733.00	1733.00
12.	Fisheries	-	866.05	866.05
13.	Horticulture	-	155.00	155.00
14.	Tourism	-	45.00	45.00
15.	Industries	-	1970.00	1970.00
16.	Urban Development	-	936.00	936.00
17.	Animal Husbandry	-	1345.00	1345.00
18.	Art & Culture	-	500.00	500.00
19.	HIMURJA	-	110.00	110.00
20.	Labour & Employment	-	9371.00	9371.00
	Total	52860.59	253592.26	306452.85

Source: HP Government, Department of Planning, 2025

The category-wise gender budget for 2024–25 shows a significant emphasis on schemes with mixed-gender beneficiaries, reflecting a mainstreaming approach rather than exclusive targeting. Out of the total outlay of ₹3,06,452.85 lakh, Category-2 schemes holds a dominant ₹2,53,592.26 lakh. It signifies that gender responsiveness is largely embedded within broader development programmes. Nevertheless, a

noteworthy budget of ₹52,860.59 lakh to Category-1 also reveals a consistent commitment to exclusively women-oriented interventions, chiefly within departments such as WCD and ESOMSA. High allocations to the departments of social welfare like health, education, rural development, and labour shows an integrated strategy wherein women's empowerment is pursued through both targeted welfare measures and inclusive public service delivery.

Conclusion

This study reveals that GB in the state of Himachal Pradesh has progressed into an important instrument of gender-responsive rule, with tangible implications for women's empowerment across different socio-economic sectors. By adopting a gender approach in policy making and financial planning, the state has succeeded in transforming normative commitments to GE. The BHA and MGNREGA programmes have shown how targeted expenditures can enhance women's access to education, employment, and income-generating opportunities, thereby strengthening their agency within households and communities. Empirical evidence also signifies that GB allocations in agriculture, health, and education have helped in improved participation, decision-making power, and financial autonomy among women.

The present investigation also notes that persistent structural and socio-cultural constraints restrict the transformative potential of GB. Patriarchal structures, regional diversities and disparities in implementation, inadequate institutional strength for gender-disaggregated data analysis, and intersectional vulnerabilities among peripheralised women continue to mar the equitable outcomes. These problems show that GB cannot operate effectively as a purely technical fiscal tool; but it has to be rooted in a broader institutional reform, participatory governance mechanisms, and sustained social change initiatives. Therefore, the consolidation of GB in Himachal needs a robust monitoring and evaluation system, better inter-departmental coordination, and dynamic engagement of local communities and women's groups. If continuously refined and contextually grounded, GB holds the potential to advance GE and to serve as a replicable model for inclusive development in comparable regional contexts.

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Beyond vice: opium cultivation in Sirmour, c. 1860-c.1950

Balkrishan Shivram & Sunil Pratap Singh

ABSTRACT

Opium poppy cultivation played a significant role in the agrarian economy and social life of the erstwhile princely state of Sirmour during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was primarily cultivated in the first agricultural cycle alongside cereals and oilseeds, thriving in the region's hilly ecology despite being a labour-intensive and uncertain crop. This study examines how the Sirmour state institutionalised poppy cultivation through regulated procurement and pricing, making opium a key source of revenue. However, official control coexisted with informal smuggling networks that connected Sirmour to neighbouring hill states and the plains, illustrating the limits of state authority. Beyond its economic impact, poppy cultivation influenced agricultural calendars, labour relations, and daily livelihoods, while also sparking moral and legal debates about intoxication and regulation. Overall, poppy was not just a cash crop; it was intricately linked to the political economy and social fabric of Sirmour, reflecting broader governance and livelihood dynamics in the western Himalayas.

Keywords: *Opium, Sirmour, state policy, revenue, smuggling.*

Introduction

Reliable evidence from the prehistoric and classical periods attests to the use of substances such as opium, cannabis, alcohol, tobacco, and various fungi for religious, medicinal, and, at times, recreational purposes. Archaeological discoveries have further revealed the presence of psychoactive – or mind-altering – substances in material records dating back long before the advent of written documentation. Over time, the use of these substances has evolved in response to shifting cultural, social, and technological contexts. From traditional plant-based intoxicants to synthetic drugs and modern pharmaceuticals, humans have continually experimented with new substances to serve diverse ends. Today, we stand at a critical juncture, informed by centuries of accumulated knowledge and experience. By analysing historical patterns of drug use,

addiction, regulation, and treatment, it becomes possible to develop more nuanced, compassionate, and effective approaches to contemporary drug-related challenges. Recent scholarship increasingly recognises the inherently ambiguous role these substances occupy within societies. As James H. Mill (2009) observes in relation to cannabis, such substances “elude simple location in any cultural system,” owing both to their complex and often unpredictable effects on human physiology and to the unstable relationships they maintain with moral norms, state authority, and social organisation. Scholars such as James K. and Withington P. (2022, p.10) further argue that intoxicants operate simultaneously as spaces, practices, and material objects, embedded within intersecting temporalities and invested with divergent meanings by different social actors.

This research is grounded in archival exploration and folkloric investigation in the Sirmaur region of Himachal Pradesh, located in the outer Himalayan belt of the Shivalik ranges (erstwhile princely state). The study uncovers the complex social roles of intoxicants and offers insights into the everyday lives of people in relation to these substances. Departing from scholarship that places intoxicants at the analytical centre, this paper deliberately positions them in a supporting or background role. Within this framework, it asks: *How do these substances shape society? How have they shaped the lives of ordinary people?* Framing the inquiry in this manner attributes agency to seemingly inanimate commodities in structuring everyday life—or, more precisely, recognises their inherent social power. Fragmentary evidence and anecdotal records offer valuable insights into the social lives of ordinary people when examined through the lens of intoxicants. This approach is particularly useful in the study of a hill region such as Sirmaur, where the writing of regional history confronts a central challenge of modern historiography: the scarcity of written sources. The methodology, therefore, relies on a careful rereading of available textual materials to recover traces of everyday life related to intoxicants, complemented by an analysis of written folk narratives. This strategy is especially significant because the lives of ordinary people often remain marginal in historical accounts. The broader aim is to demonstrate that practices surrounding intoxicants and their associated objects actively shape social life—structuring routines, expressions, political demands, hierarchies, and celebrations—while society, in turn, continuously reshapes these substances and practices.

Opium culture

The opium poppy (*papaver somniferum*) was entrenched in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Sirmaur region. M. A. Nicolson, posted at Nahan in 1894, records that the opium was used in Sirmaur as a substitute for alcohol or *ganja*, and was beneficial both morally and physically: “It was used medicinally by many natives who live miles from any dispensary as a preventive of fever and a cure for dysentery. It is largely used by mothers nursing children as an application to the breast under the belief that it prevents diarrhoea, dysentery, catarrh, & etc. from attacking their infants” (1894, p. 126). It was traditionally cultivated during the first agricultural cycle alongside other grains and oilseeds. Tobacco was sown in the second crop cycle during late summer and autumn, coinciding with rice cultivation (Fraser, 1820, p. 116). Opium harvesting also occurred within this broader seasonal window. As Fraser observed in 1820, “it grows easily and luxuriantly, but was found in larger quantities as we advanced into the interior: it is said to be an expensive crop, requiring much manure and great attention, whilst the produce is not always very sure. It is an article of considerable traffic with the plains, whither the chief part is carried by the petty merchants who come to the hills for trade” (Ibid., pp. 116-117). A letter from the Raja of Sirmaur (3 January 1894), addressed to the Officiating Chief Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, furnishes a revealing account of the organisation and fiscal significance of opium cultivation in Sirmaur State. Written in the formal idiom of princely-colonial correspondence, the communication seeks to clarify the rationale for its continuance:

Experience has shown that opium in moderation is not pernicious in any way and that it produces no ill effect either on the health or wealth of the people. It never impoverishes a man; it is preventive of many diseases; the rich and the poor consume it with equal safety. It is much more economical than intoxicating liquors or *ganja*. The greatest opium-eater can consume no more than one or two rupees’ worth of opium a month, while an ordinary drinker will easily waste the same amount in a day on alcoholic liquors. Morally considered, no man is ever led under its influence to the commission of any criminal or immoral act; its moderate use never maddens, nor causes any of its consumers to lose their senses, but, on the contrary, encourages, and enables them to work hard (p. 125).

According to Saudagar Lal (Mir Munshi of the Nahan State), the state’s annual opium production in 1893 amounted to approximately 200 *maunds*. Of this total, around 70 *maunds* were officially collected and

deposited into the state treasury, while 130 maunds were illicitly smuggled into neighbouring regions (p. 125). This distribution highlights not only the extent of direct state involvement in opium-related revenue but also the presence of a substantial parallel economy operating beyond official regulation. The Sirmaur State had institutionalised opium cultivation as part of its revenue system. Zamindars were permitted to cultivate opium without restriction and were required to sell their produce to the state at a fixed rate of ₹8 per seer. The state, in turn, sold the opium to licensed retail dealers at ₹15 per seer. This price differential generated a stable and substantial revenue stream, yielding an estimated net annual profit of approximately ₹15,000 (1894, Vol. III, p.175). The state's total revenue in 1894 was ₹ 6 lakhs, and the population was 1,24,134. Nearly all opium produced in Sirmaur was exported to Patiala and Nabha. The Pajhota *ilaqa* of the Pachhad tehsil was renowned for its fine quality of opium (Minhas, 1998, p. 126). Such an arrangement underscores the extent to which opium production was embedded within both agrarian practice and the fiscal apparatus of the state, reflecting a deep mutual investment by cultivators and the ruling administration. The ballad of Sohira presents a compelling narrative providing insights into an opium trader's or smuggler's journey (Sharma, 2022, p. 109):

फीमाणी जुब्बलो दी ताके चाँउकी पोडी पोडी सोहीरामा
तेरे बे जाणी हाथों दी हुली सुने री गुठी गुठी सोहीरामा
फीम आनी जुब्बलो दी तेरी चचपाडो लुटी लुटी सोहीरामा
Phīmōāṇī Jubīlō dī tākē chānūkī pōṛī pōṛī Sohīrāmā
Tērē bē jāṇī hāthō dī hulī sunē rī guṭhī guṭhī Sohīrāmā
Phīmō āṇī Jubīlō dī tērī chipārō luṭī luṭī Sohīrāmā

This ballad narrates the perilous journey of Sohiram, a rich opium trader travelling from Jubbal to Sirmaur while being pursued by the authorities. Notably described as wearing gold rings on his fingers, Sohiram's appearance itself signals the considerable profits in the opium trade. Upon reaching Sirmaur, his consignment was seized by local villagers, prompting an episode of extraordinary resistance: the ballad recounts that Sohiram confronted as many as 140 villagers single-handedly, continuing the struggle until his weapon finally broke. This narrative encapsulates both the vulnerability of itinerant traders operating beyond formal protection and the intense collective eagerness to capture a highly valued commodity. The imagery of violence, pursuit, and conspicuous wealth together underscores the deep social and economic significance of

opium during this period, while also portraying the trade as a potentially lucrative—yet profoundly precarious—enterprise.

Beyond vice

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, opium was the second most significant source of revenue in Sirmour, surpassed only by land taxes. Consumption patterns varied significantly by caste, occupation, and geography. According to the Raja's account from 1894, the hill-dwelling population (*pahari*) was largely resistant to opium consumption, with cases of intoxication reported infrequently among them. This observation stands in stark contrast to trends in other regions of British India, where opium eating was more widely documented across various social groups. Certain occupational communities within Sirmour exhibited a comparatively higher incidence of opium consumption. Official observations highlighted that elderly men from castes such as the *Kahars*, who were traditionally employed as water carriers and dooly-bearers, were habitual users. Among these individuals, opium was not primarily regarded as a source of indulgence or pleasure. Instead, its use was functional and utilitarian, closely linked to the demands of their labour. Engaged in strenuous, itinerant, and predominantly outdoor occupations, often in cold conditions that led to physical exhaustion, these men used opium as a means to alleviate fatigue, combat exposure, and mitigate bodily ailments. In this context, opium acted as a substitute for alcoholic beverages, providing warmth and temporary relief without the social or financial implications typically associated with alcohol consumption. Its use, therefore, can be understood more as an adaptive response to the challenges of manual labour in a demanding hill environment rather than a moral or recreational practice. Dr M. A. Nicolson, a doctor at Nahan in 1894, recorded four main reasons for the consumption of opium by *Kahars* (1894, p.175): (i) As a substitute for alcohol or ganja, (ii) To enable them to withstand the effects of cold and exposure, (iii) For ill health, especially dysentery, rheumatism, and catarrh, (iv) To enable them to endure fatigue and perform their work.

Dr Nicolson further records that, “physically, opium appears to do very little, if any, harm. Alcohol and ganja are much more harmful than opium. Opium-eating never causes violent crime, as both alcohol and ganja are well known to do.” (3 January 1894, p. 126). The moral evaluation of opium use encompassed complex dimensions. Records indicated that moderate opium consumption did not impair physical or moral health. A survey conducted in jail found that only one out of forty-

seven prisoners was a local hillman who consumed opium; the rest were outsiders, suggesting that opium consumption was not typically linked to criminal behaviour in the region. The Raja also warned the British authorities against attempts to ban or heavily tax opium, arguing that such measures would result in financial losses for both the state and cultivators, while potentially pushing users toward more harmful substances like alcohol or ganja. These observations illustrate opium's deep integration into the economic and social fabric of the state and suggest that reform or prohibition efforts would have likely faced significant resistance. Archival and folkloric investigations have established Sirmaur as a significant centre for opium production and trade, with its economic structure closely tied to this commodity.

Additional insight into Sirmaur's role in the regional opium economy is provided by a 1893 report submitted by Mr T. Gordon Walker, the Commissioner of Excise in the Punjab, to the Royal Commission on Opium (Walker 1894, p. 101). This report includes data from several native hill states, including Sirmaur, and sheds light on the scale and characteristics of the opium trade in the region during the late nineteenth century. Import and export records cited in the Commission's proceedings affirm Sirmaur's economic significance within the broader opium trade network, particularly through its capital, Nahan. Between 1885 and 1890, Sirmaur exported fluctuating but noteworthy amounts of opium. The highest recorded export occurred in 1885–86 with 105 maunds, followed by a sharp decline to 33 maunds in 1886–87. No data is available for 1887–88, suggesting either a reporting gap or a temporary disruption in trade. In subsequent years, exports remained modest, 31 maunds in 1888–89 and 38 maunds in 1889–90. Despite these lower figures, Sirmaur's opium held a market advantage due to the absence of acreage tax and import duties, making it more competitive than opium grown in Punjab, though still not as voluminous as Kashmir's output. According to reports submitted to the Political Agent of the Punjab Hill States in Shimla by the Sirmaur Durbar in compliance with the Hague Opium Convention, no drug traffickers were found in 1937, 1939, 1940, or 1944.

Smuggling

Even as official structures controlled and taxed the trade, recurring smuggling cases into the mid-twentieth century indicate the persistence of a shadow opium economy in Sirmaur. Legal proceedings from the 1950s document a series of such incidents. In one case, the Government appealed the acquittal of a man named Kali, accused under Section 9(c)

of the Opium Act (1950). A significant quantity, one maund and twenty-nine seers of opium, was recovered from a hillock approximately four furlongs from his residence. The recovery followed a statement attributed to Kali, in which he allegedly confessed to burying the opium alongside three accomplices. While the defence claimed that Kali had merely informed police after observing others concealing the opium, the prosecution maintained that his statement directly led to the recovery. Although discrepancies in witness testimonies were raised, they were dismissed as insubstantial. In another case from the same decade, a man named Dasondhi was convicted under Section 9(b) of the Opium Act for transporting contraband opium (23 October 1952). He was found guilty of giving a ride in his jeep to Tika Ram, who was later apprehended with a bag containing nine seers of opium. Although questions arose regarding whether Dasondhi knew the contents of the bag and whether proper procedure under Section 342 of the Criminal Procedure Code was followed, the court ultimately ruled that the procedural lapse did not constitute a miscarriage of justice. The petitioner's denial that Tika Ram had even been in his jeep was determined to be false, weakening his defence. In a third case, Nilam Das and Atma Ram were accused of jointly possessing 9 seers and 1 chatak of crude hill opium in Khashdhar village (9 June 1952). When opium officers raided Nilam Das's house, he produced the stash from a room occupied by Atma Ram and claimed it belonged to his guest. Atma Ram reportedly did not object. The opium was seized, and both men were arrested and later convicted by a Magistrate who ruled that joint possession had been established. However, the Sessions Judge subsequently set aside the convictions on appeal, reflecting the challenges in securing convictions despite the presence of material evidence.

In a related case highlighting the social and political implications of opium smuggling, documents from 1952 reveal how past involvement with the opium trade could affect an individual's civic participation. When Hira Singh from Zail Shillai sought representation on the District Board, his candidacy was contested on the grounds that he was a former convict (1953). Confidential correspondence shows the District Commissioner of Nahan being asked to verify whether Hira Singh had been previously sentenced on charges of smuggling opium. This case illustrates how association with the opium trade could stigmatise individuals and potentially exclude them from political participation, demonstrating another dimension of how intoxicants shaped social and political hierarchies in the region. The scrutiny Hira Singh faced reflects the tension between the persistent informal opium economy and

increasingly formalised civic institutions in post-independence Sirmaur. These cases highlight how opium smuggling remained active well beyond the colonial period and into independent India. The persistence of such cases into the 1950s demonstrates the endurance of both economic incentives and local knowledge regarding opium trade routes, concealment techniques, and community networks of production and transport. They also reveal the difficulty in distinguishing casual involvement from criminal intent, especially in regions where opium had long been embedded in the socio-economic fabric.

Conclusion

Labour, state policy, and everyday social practices intertwine significantly in the context of poppy cultivation. Rather than being a marginal or illicit activity, poppy cultivation was officially institutionalised by the state through regulated production, fixed procurement prices, and controlled retail distribution. This administrative framework integrated opium into the agrarian calendar and fiscal structure of Sirmaur, transforming a risky and labour-intensive crop into a reliable source of state revenue. The willingness of cultivators to engage in poppy farming, despite its uncertainties, reflects both the suitability of the hill environment and the incentives created by state monopoly arrangements. Moreover, opium's significance extended beyond revenue and agriculture into the social fabric of Sirmaur society. Consumption patterns—especially among occupational groups engaged in strenuous physical labour—indicate that opium served as a practical substitute for alcohol and medicine, integrated into routines of work, endurance, and survival rather than being used purely for recreation. Folk narratives and archival correspondence further underscore its value as a contested commodity, capable of provoking both communal conflict and state intervention. In summary, these findings suggest that opium in Sirmaur should be understood not just as a narcotic or colonial commodity, but as a historically situated institution—shaped by local ecology, administrative rationality, and social necessity. Its regulation illustrates how princely states negotiated economic autonomy under colonial oversight, while its consumption sheds light on the lived experiences of labouring communities in the western Himalayas. Therefore, the study of opium provides insight into broader processes of agrarian management, state formation, and social adaptation in the hill polities of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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Exploring the influence of artificial intelligence-enhanced online learning platforms on the development of teacher self-efficacy and academic achievement in contemporary digital learning contexts

Jyoti & Asha Yadav

ABSTRACT

Introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a tool to be used in online learning platforms has transformed the digital education environment radically and impacted the teaching process, the engagement between the learners, and the success of the students significantly. This paper explores how AI-enhanced platforms can influence teacher self-efficacy, which in this paper is defined as confidence on the part of educator to plan, perform and evaluate their teaching task and how this impacts student academic performance in online learning environments. The theoretical basis of this study is the theorizing of Bandura (1997) of self-efficacy and the research of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) on teacher efficacy. The study is dedicated to the adaptive learning systems with suggested paths, real-time feedback, and artificial intelligence analytics that assist teachers with the practical data to act and make decisions, to customize the learning process and looking after the multiple virtual classes. In fact, previous studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2021) devoted their attention to how AI could be used to achieve teacher professional development, as well as help facilitate innovative pedagogies. Moreover, the study gives evidence that teacher efficacy when enhanced due to AI tools has a positive impact on student engagement, cognitive engagement, and performance (Kim and Jang, 2021). The proposed study will adopt a mixed-method design that will investigate the perceived and real effects of AI technologies on teacher confidence and competence to teach effectively in the digital world.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, digital learning environment, competence, learning outcome.*

1. Introduction

The quick growth of the digital technology, particularly, the Artificial Intelligence (AI), brought a change in the educational environment, resulting in the paradigmatic change of the modes of teaching and learning. Several current learning settings in the education field, especially the online learning systems, are increasingly dependent on AI technology, including machine learning algorithms, intelligent tutoring systems, natural language processing, and realtime analytics. Although a considerable number of studies have described how AI can be used to improve the learning outcomes of students, little has been even done concerning the effects that such online learning environments have on teachers themselves, particularly in terms of self- efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), teacher self-efficacy is an individual belief held by a teacher regarding the ability to organize, plan, and participate in the instructive activities. Self-efficacy concerning AI-enhanced digital learning platforms is a major milestone towards determining the ability of a teacher to adjust to the constantly changing digital technology, operate in an online classroom, individualize the teaching process, and assess student learning.

With the shift in K-12 education systems in many countries to hybrid or completely online, teachers are expected to operate within the space of technologically mediated pedagogies. AI-enhanced platforms will offer teachers real-time student engagement, predictive performance analytics, automated grading and personalized content suggestions. These characteristics can help teachers to create a control over teaching and improve their practice in general. The opportunities and affordances of these innovations could eventually enhance the teacher self-efficacy through an actionable insight, remedy the high workload of the administration, and differentiate instruction (Holmes et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the relationship between the academic success and the application of AI is mediated by the self-belief and the ability of a teacher to apply facilitative technologies (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2001). As such, it is opportune and significant to know how AI environments afford supports and affect teacher self-efficacy, self-beliefs and eventually instructional efficacy so as to offer a platform to support the emergence of responsive education technologies and professional learning.

The research aims to fill the knowledge gap regarding the subject matter by empirically investigating the impact of AI-driven online learning systems on the self-efficacy of teachers and the academic achievements

of students. The study will help to illuminate the digital changes in the educational field by analyzing (i) the relationships that a teacher develops with smart learning technologies, and (ii) the ways in which these relationships influence their professionalization and classroom performance. The results will also be used to advise those policy makers, education leaders, and those developing education technology, on the pertinent significance of teacher-focused AI design, and the attributes needed to produce teachers who are not only text-confident with technology, but also pedagogically empowered in their use of technology in the classroom.

2. Literature review on the study

The role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in online learning has brought in new opportunities in enhancing the teaching practice and student achievement. Some of the current studies and case studies reflect on the scope of the influence of AI-based platforms on the instructional practices, teacher effectiveness and empowerment, and educational outcomes. In this review, I will outline six significant case studies that are taking these factors into consideration according to different circumstances and establishments across the globe.

The article by Chen et al. (2020) on the topic of the AI-based Smart Classrooms in secondary schools in China was longitudinal. The teachers received an Access to an AI-based Smart Classroom platform where they could receive facial recognition and emotion detection to receive real-time learning analytics and a controlled AI-based learning environment. Teachers also stated that the confidence level was high as the AI tools gave specific feedback regarding the level of engagement, cognitive and emotional states of students. The information visualization of the platform helped to make an adjustment of the approaches of the teachers in real-time. This instructional practice was in line with a change of instructional practices as these practices shifted towards a more referential form of instructional practice that was in line with the needs of students. The authors summarized that AI enhanced classroom management and resulted in better academic outcomes due to a more customized teaching process.

Holmes et al. (2021) assessed the use of IBM Watson Education AI tools in numerous K-12 schools within the U.S. Teachers were utilizing

Watson expectant learning course and cognitive tutor modules. Results of a survey reported that teachers who had undertaken AI-based scoping pedagogical training had statistically significant high self-efficacy and instructional confidence. They attributed part of their growth to the adaptive learning suggestions and automatic student testing that was integrated into the platform that lessened their workload and made their instruction more accurate.

In India, the national platform DIKSHA contained modules of AI, which were applied to monitor learning process and suggest adaptive content. Narayan et al. considered a sample of teachers in government schools who were on the improved platform. The authors showed that AI-assisted information retrieved quick gap detection in the subject knowledge of learners and personal lesson plans by teachers, and led to an improvement in instructional competence. Had there not been the issues with digital training and infrastructure, the immediate promise of the program of DIKSHA could have been absolutely fulfilled which emphasizes the relevance of situational preparedness to form efficacy (Narayan et al., 2021).

AI-based intelligent tutoring systems were incorporated in teacher training modules in one of the teacher-training universities in Finland. The pre-service teachers were able to interact with the AI tutors simulating student interaction, learning in the classroom, and planning their lesson, but the participants demonstrated their observed improvement in their instructional planning and even the state of preparedness. The application of AI in the experiential learning framework was also directly associated with the increase in the self-efficacy of teachers, especially regarding the ability to teach diverse virtual classrooms (Salomaa and Laine, 2020).

Al-Harbi et al. (2022) compared AI-enhanced blended learning systems to Emirati universities. The elements of AI that were present in the studies were plagiarism detecting tools, adaptive quizzes, and learning analytics dashboards. The faculties showed confidence when it came to the teaching of online lectures through control of integrity issues. On the whole, it can be concluded that AI technologies offered more accountability to teachers, and they also facilitated student achievement, in particular, in connection with remote testing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

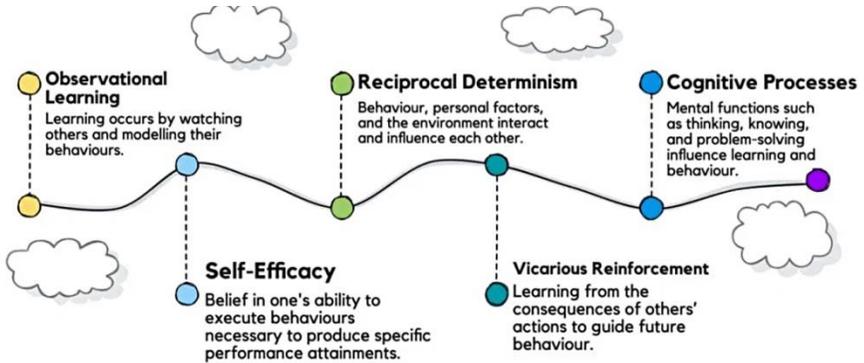
The UK EDUCATE programme assisted teachers with the help of AI tools that offered immediate feedback through AI in areas of their lesson delivery, how they employed engagement strategies, and the extent to which their students participated. The effect of the feedback plans gave the educators a chance to critically assess their practice as well as the ability to implement the results of the data. The qualitative interviews discovered that teachers were more self-assured and knowledgeable regarding pedagogy and this strengthened their self-efficacy. It is worth mentioning that the research observed ethical design of AI, and teacher freedom in the use of AI tools (Luckin et al., 2016).

3. Theories interconnected with the AI-driven online learning platform

The pedagogical consequences of the AI-based online learning platforms cannot be comprehensively explained by applying it to a single theoretical approach in terms of educational psychology, instructional technology, and AI in education (AIED). To conduct this study, we summarize an interrelation of theories so that we could critically examine how an AI-enabled environment impacts a teacher self-efficacy and academic achievement in an online learning environment.

Self-Efficacy and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997)

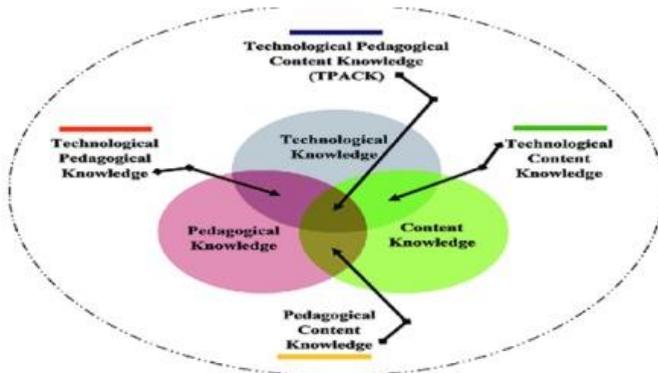
This study is based on the theoretical premise of the Social Cognitive Theory of Bandura and, to be more precise, on its component of self-efficacy, i.e., the idea of the ability of an individual to carry out some specific action. Teacher self-efficacy in the educational setting has an influence on classroom management, choices in planning the instruction, and reactions to the student needs. The AI-assisted platforms influence the teacher self efficacy due to their ability to offer instructors actionable information that establish feedback loops and predictive analytics that make them feel more in control of, and thus own, the instruction. The automated grading tools, adaptive learning engines, etc. allow the instructor to have more time to mentor the student and less time doing office work, so the teacher feels more competent (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), and professionally confident.



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Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006)

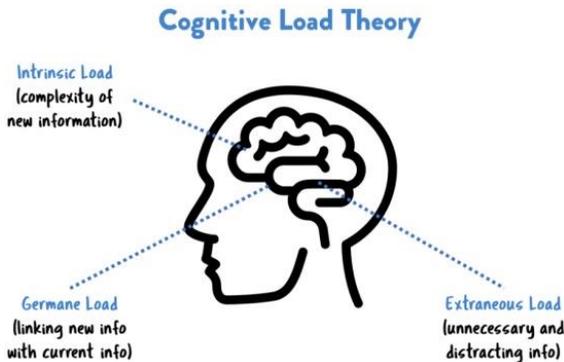
The TPACK model is critical to comprehending how educators utilize technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge together. Furthermore, AI-infused learning platforms will require new knowledge that surpasses minor digital literacy. Educators will need to match their pedagogical intentions with the affordances of AI-sponsored tools including intelligent tutoring systems, personalized user content delivery, and real-time performance reporting. Thus, pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and technological knowledge (AI system) establish the teacher's ability to engage with the AI tools in relevant ways. There is a strong relationship between higher TPACK knowledge and higher self-efficacy beliefs to teach and better student outcomes when employing classes in a learning environment endowed with AI.



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Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988)

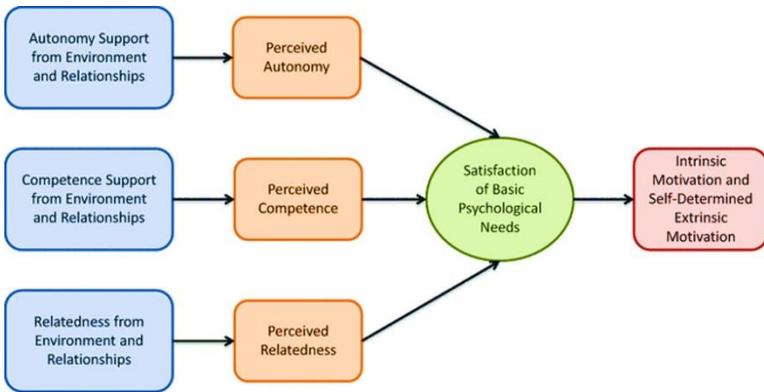
AI can relieve extraneous cognitive load by automating mundane tasks and minimizing decision-making for educators. For example, dashboards informed by AI - the dashboard can show a summary of student learning gaps, suggest appropriate interventions, and then display data in visually intuitive ways. Educators can channel more cognitive engagement into crucial tasks such as critical thinking, lesson planning, and adaptive instruction. As cognitive load decreases, many teachers are more efficacious when managing the innumerable complexities prevalent in a blended or fully online environment.



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Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

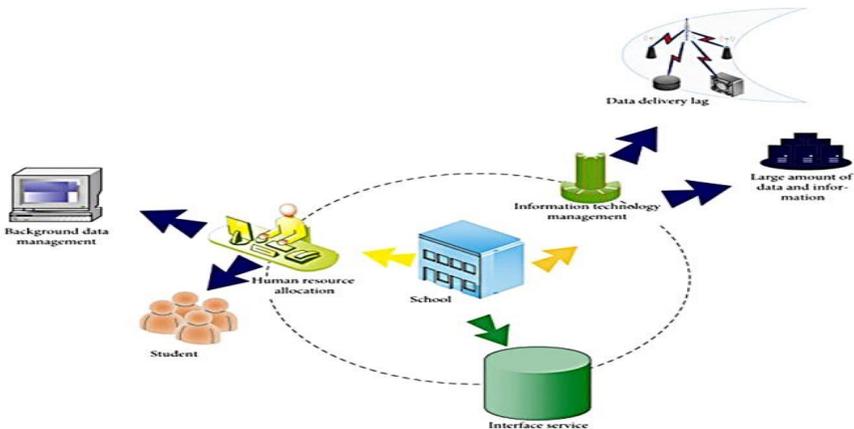
The theory of self-determination theorizes that motivation and psychological well-being derive from the satisfaction of three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. An AI-focused platform could fulfill all three needs through the autonomy to decide (e.g. choose to accept or reject AI-based recommendations or make changes in learning paths) and opportunities to develop instructional competence through evidence-informed feedback and enhanced connectedness through communication tools and collaborative features. Once these needs are fulfilled, teacher motivation and self-efficacy flourish, and teachers adopt more effective instructional strategies and better academic outcomes.



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Artificial Intelligence in Education (AIED) Instances (Luckin et al., 2016)

The AIED frameworks emphasize the human-in-the-loop philosophy of design which enables AI tools to situate an educational practitioner as augmented, rather than replaced. Within this context, AI is a smart companion or resource to assist in instruction like grading, content editing, or feedback. By learning the logic and structure according to AI recommendations, teachers will be able to work alongside and not separate AI in order to create inclusive learning environments. The augmented teacher efficacy is based on the reinforcement of human cognition and machine intelligence.



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A combination of these theories proves that AI platforms are prompting teacher development when placed into learning enabling pedagogical ecosystems. An enhanced sense of self-efficacy is not an accidental by-product of exposure to technology, and, above all, they will be an outcome of a meaningful involvement with technology features which will relate to the cognitive, motivational and pedagogical needs of the teacher. Under these interrelated theories, this paper builds its insights on how AI-integrated platforms respond to form identity as a teacher, professional capability and achievements to the students.

4. The importance of the online learning platforms in the formation of the teacher self-efficacy and academic success in the contemporary circumstances of online learning.

The global environment is moving towards online and blended education, and digital technologies are changing at an extremely high rate, signifying an alternative approach to education. This has seen us experience a rise in interest in the online learning platforms and their capabilities in terms of pedagogical and effective application to the teachers. Online learning systems are complexed, they can be described as simple online learning management systems which include (Moodle and Google classroom) to multimodal online learning systems that are incorporated with built in analytics. Instructional planning, content delivery, and interaction with students could be based on these systems. Currently most studies on successful students using digital environments give minimal attention to attitudes that impact teacher behaviour and self-efficacy (Bandura 1972). In education, our level of self-efficacy affects not only how we manage the classroom, but also the quality of our instructions and our ability to exploit the huge nature of the digital technology (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2001).

The features of online capability are automated testing, real-time assessment, self-directed learning, and collaborative features, and the said affordances may either strengthen the sense of self-efficacy - alternatively, they may also challenge it. The buttered bread TPACK (Mishra and Koehler, 2006) framework provides that as discussed in Chapter 1 enables the teacher to see the way forward by successfully using technology via content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and technological knowledge. The teachers become relaxed in their exploration of the system and they tend to lean towards pedagogically - giving new methods a go - and consequently the students are engaged in

a meaningful way and the teachers succeed in their academic performance. Nevertheless, the study also demonstrates that unless teachers receive sufficient training on it, or not; the very presence of technology may increase the stress levels, lower the self-efficacy, and make students and teachers disengaged and unwilling to participate (Trust & Whalen, 2020). The understanding of this fact may complicate the problems of participation in digital learning opportunities, especially when the situation is already unequal in access to digital infrastructure and professional learning (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

To react to such a situation, this paper shall offer an analysis of the relationships around online learning systems and their role in supporting teacher self-efficacy and the role self-efficacy plays in shaping academic achievement in the new and digital learning platform. To be more precise, this study aims at making its contribution to the discussion concerning teacher empowerment in online learning, focusing on the experiences of the teachers, technology flexibility, and the ability of instructors to employ technology in their practice. The chosen research questions will give empirical information about whether online learning platforms can foster student learning outcomes and teacher agency, resiliency and possible future professional development.

5. Comparative issues: Before and after online learning, teaching self-efficacy and professional development.

The shift to the Internet-based learning system is already affecting the manner in which educators perceive themselves as able to teach, as well as learn, using technology, and how they grow professionally. Teacher-self-efficacy prior to the online learning platform was constructed largely in the ability of a teacher to provide a linear lesson in the classroom, whereby the classroom culture is based on the observation of peers and professional development. The teaching was typically textbook based and outlined at the margins of the teacher organization and assessment of the textbook content. Because of the lack of a hold of student engagement via the prism of an online platform, real-time data informed decision making was usually absent, and lacked access to on demand professional resources. Therefore, professional learning was based solely on the institutional training cycles, and formal professional learning opportunities with presentation and informal learning opportunities through cooperation with their colleagues inevitably postponed the opportunities of responsive approach in teaching and learning and innovation (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2001).

On the other hand, integration supported an exhilarating transformation to a data informed teaching and learning culture, customized teaching and learning and professional learning in stark contrast to newly accessed educational platforms of the online learning (Holmes et al., 2021). Online learning environment and Learning Management System (LMS) is now accessible to teachers as a means of technological improvement of professional learning. Indicatively, numerous LMS facilitate instructors to deploy such websites as Google Classroom, Moodle, Microsoft Teams and Canvas or Edmodo that are powered by AI to mark tasks automatically. There is real time analytics, adaptive learning modules, and auto graded system which can offer some form of efficiency that gives teachers confidence in their ability to instruct. Better still, due to the instant feedback of how the students are responding to their teaching, the educator is able to adjust their teaching to achieve the learning goals without necessarily waiting to the set deadlines-enhancing their sense of control over the learning process and independence in the instructional situation (self-efficacy, Bandura, 1997). In each of the raised examples, October 2023, which is mentioned by (Holmes et al., 2021), the newly integrated technological advances in education systems and teaching practice, in some cases, predict an increase in self-directed professional learning by 300% through, e.g. teacher resource libraries, video tutorials working with a global community of peers using AI or distance feedback systems or communities of practice.

As qualitative research data taken after the pandemic suggests (Trust and Whalen, 2020; Al-Harbi et al., 2022), the previously reserved teachers changed their professional identities significantly. The mentioned educators claimed that their ability to provide differentiated instruction, consider various learning needs, and develop interesting digital resources increased significantly, which enhanced their self-esteem significantly. As one example, the previously purely lecturer-based approach to teaching had been replaced by the use of discussion boards, interactive quizzes, and visual analytics to assess comprehension and make adjustments. This not only gave these educators power but also developed a growth mindset which was aimed towards continuous digital learning. On the other side, the shift also revealed a digital divide: educators who did not have enough infrastructure or technology skills initially found the challenges to be quite early, which further proves the value of the fair access to technology tools and ongoing institutional support (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Professionally, the post-platform world has provided just-in-time training, flexible learning, and on-demand support compared to the traditional and inflexibility of the pre-digital capacity building methodologies. Whereas teachers used to be mere recipients of the training by the institutions and systems, they are now involved participants in their professional learning experiences. This has been further condensed through AI-guided suggestions and custom-created pedagogical materials on the proposed online platforms which can be applied on the particular teaching setting (Luckin et al., 2016). Thus, online learning platforms are currently enhancing academic performance that is indirectly optimised professional learning to self-efficacy of teachers and consequently, teachers were finally turned into reflective, information-driven and responsive professionals.

We have not simply shown a digital form of a classroom with the emergence of anchored online platforms, where we have also transformed the epistemology of teaching. Before online learning, teaching was more of a content-based approach and dominance of the teacher in delivering instructions where there are almost no constructs of immediate reflection or feedbacks on the part of the learners. In this scenario, the instructional choices of the teacher were based on the relied intuition, preconceived curriculum or the after-and-between tests to measure the learning results. It was also in these contexts that teacher self-efficacy after decades of experience was likely to remain stagnant and based on field-based displays of practice, as opposed to being based on cycles of feedback iteration. Moreover, classroom management besides being procedural, was also physical in nature, and it offered minimal chances of differentiating instruction or applying the concepts of universal designs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). With the introduction of online platforms, teachers are currently working in information-saturated real-time, and this can alter their decision-making protocols. The flows of information about students have enabled educators working in online space to be responsive to their student needs. Educators can review their planning, teaching and assessment within an elastic and adaptive learning ecosystem mediated by student trackable analytics- and modify their behaviors or approaches. The feedback mechanism can be immediate because the Khan Academy, Edmodo, or Schoology platforms can offer educators the immediacy of the information about who has accessed materials, how learners answered the questions asked, and what concepts should be reinforced. Feedback, which previously could only be presumed, and accepted by observation of traditional pedagogical methods, is relevant and it adds credibility to the perceived authenticity

of the teacher that provides to the sense of self-efficacy of the teacher (Klassen and Chiu, 2010).

Professional development too has shifted institutional episodic sessions to embedded microlearning that is constant and tends to be individualized either through platform recommendations or through AI-generated suggested resources. It was customary among the teachers to wait until the external professionals provided some development related to digital skills, but nowadays, the teachers take the initiative to enroll in MOOCs, discussion boards, webinars, and LMS-based professional communities, just to mention a few. Regarding the figures of professional learning democratized to educators through platforms like the Coursera for Educators or the Microsoft Education Center, we can observe the development of educator agency and self-directed professional learning, especially young or mid-career teachers, who are more digitally competent, and self-directed learners. The other transformation area is in the self direction and trial of the teaching. In the past, pacing and design options of teachers were limited by physical resources and schedule of time. In the online environment, a teacher can now choose the rate at which learners advance through their learning process, design their own asynchronous learning courses, and implement some of the new pedagogies of the flipped classroom and project based learning. This has not only created a creative environment in pedagogy, but has also changed the attitude of learning towards more of a constructivist environment by focusing on themselves as facilitators rather than exclusive dispensers of knowledge. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that, according to Mishra and Koehler (2006), the shifts involve much interaction of pedagogy, content and technology; a relationship where extends to greater self-efficacy of the teacher...

Nevertheless, the change is not free of problems. Online learning has brought about new sources of stress - technology breakdowns, information overload, information security fears, and boredom with learning software. They are all problems that indicate scaffolding that is due on an institutional level (reliable bandwidth, peer group that can support, and responsive help desk). Based on the findings of research (Trust & Whalen, 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019) in the absence of the scaffolding, regardless of how promising the platforms developed, teacher confidence and a vast majority of them resulted in techno-stress and stress-related burnout. However, in spite of the minor challenges,

studies have indicated that the net effect of online platform has been good - especially in areas where districts offered professional growth and leadership. The traditional teachers were no longer passive plan implementers, who began with prescribed curriculum, but became an independent instructional designer, as represented by the professionals who are able to ask themselves questions about their teaching based on student data. Essentially, the transformation of the more traditional learning context into the online learning context has brought about a new meaning to the concept of teacher identity, no longer the knowledge expert who delivers the content, but the role of mentoring and facilitating the learning as equals, strategists and learners to which technology is being applied in a manner that is yet to be reconciled with all elements of his or her teaching practice.

6. Conclusion

Online learning environments have radically reformed the model of practice among stakeholders in the education sector by modifying the teacher role and the facilitative role of the student learning. As indicated by the current research, it is possible to utilize the use of online environments worked out in Ontario within the framework of the government initiative into the constituents of learning self-efficacy and academic achievement in teachers significantly. Applying theories of Bandura theory of self-efficacy and TPACK to the interpretation of data of the role of online environments utilized by the Ontario research under consideration as the framework of interpreting data, and as the means of implementing in the practice, the research will have a positive impact on the formation of teacher confidence in the teaching. The information observed that most of the teachers indicated that online environments helped them become more data driven and reflective in making decisions on their practices. The analysis of data revealed the visible development and transformation of the model of teaching, as being a model of resources with a very rigid learning environment to the one, which is more dynamic and learner-centered. Before the digital platforms came into play, the education developmental model was pegged on institutional direct formalized training and the aforementioned development that was based on experience alone. The teachers are now enjoying the advantages of a post access and re-of new working opportunities in an integration of digital access? One of the disruptive elements in the digital integration of capacity is the real time data, quasi-automated feedback, and collaborative and individualized instruction. This has greatly transformed the model of development opportunities, has enhanced perceived

competency of teachers and a consequent decrease in their work, as the structures are integrated into the environmental contexts of online classroom, and has also affected the exploration of shared leadership and positive student success.

However, the given findings also point at the fact that the positive effect of online learning platforms on teacher self-efficacy is conditional on a variety of factors: the equal access to technology, the well-organized professional development, the institutional support, and the innovative culture. Without these conditions, the adoption of technology is bound to increase the current differences and even transform, productively anxious working loads, into digitally troubled lives. Therefore, in order to achieve the promise of the online learning platforms of changing teaching and learning in a manner such that it leads to academic excellence, and empowerment of teachers, the usage of these technologies should also be pre-empted and accompanied by deliberate planning, policies that are inclusive, and models of sustained beginning teacher training and pedagogy, respectively. The results suggest that mindful use of online learning platforms may be critical leverage points that can be relevant in developing teacher self-efficacy and shaping academic performance. The educational systems will be able to create more flexible, contemporary, and trauma sensitive teaching workforce capable of responding more efficiently to the evolving needs of learners by using the technology which will help teachers improve their utilization of digital pedagogies.

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Revisiting Ambedkar: a critical outlook through the lens of social justice

Manaswi Semwal & Amalesh Kumar Pradhan

ABSTRACT

A look at the contemporary deep rooted social cultural and political issues facing India leads us to revisit the ideas of Ambedkar and to address the issues from his planning, policies and arguments. Ambedkar was not confined in the drafting of the Constitution; he was actively engaged in social and political reforms in order to liberate the Dalit and marginalized from their evil destiny and to promote them for participating in the main stream national life: he was a person whatever he thought in his personal life he propagated the same thing for public life particularly for Dalit and untouchables. Protecting the rights in the Constitution he emphasized on social empowerment of Dalit as he realized political and economic democracy cannot be fulfilled unless social democracy is achieved at the grassroots level of the society. For him, mere protection of constitutional rights is meaningless unless social fabric for Dalit empowerment is ensured. Apparently, his thought seems to be complex and distinct from the contemporary nationalist leaders but a critical observation shows that he was a rational and realist thinker who understood the problems of policy execution before policy framing. Behind the backdrop the present paper is an attempt to explore and examine his vision in the context of present-day society and politics.

Keywords: *Annihilation of Caste, Constitutional Morality, Empowerment, Protective Discrimination, Social Justice.*

In the construction of Post-Independent modern India Ambedkar (1891-1956) was a pioneering figure who not only contributed to the Dalit liberation rather he can be considered as the architecture of modern India. Though popularly he is known as a ‘Dalit icon’ but it is not only his identity, he was a foreign expert, alternative visionary of Modern India and a dedicated Human Rights lawyer. Being the chairman of Drafting Committee, he led the entire Constitution writing program and articulated the ideas of social justice in his policy, program and

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arguments. In the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Ambedkar was “a symbol of revolt against all the oppressive features of Indian society”.

The Ambedkarian orientation of social justice is distinctly different from Nehru and Gandhi. While Nehru was engaged to dream for a modern state beyond caste, class and religious conflict Ambedkar visualized that this state would be an instrument in the hands of upper class to create a hegemony undermining the interest of the larger downtrodden people.

Rejecting the ideas of Gandhian *Varna* system Ambedkar argued that caste is the source of social discrimination and that is why it should be abolished completely (Annihilation of Caste, 1936). Having to find valid argument our responsibility is to create an equilibrium environment for all promoting human values and good conscience. In contrast to compensatory justice, where social and political milieu occupied by the higher caste people, a substantive idea of justice for comprehensive well-being of the people is required to be set up. The intensity of belief and action prevailing in the present day social and political discourse may differ from region to region but a holistic attitude from the part of the administration can address the problems in a durable manner. So, Ambedkar felt a constant fight within the system to ensure the interest of the depressed classes.

Justice through constitutional democracy

Ambedkar believed in constitutional democracy. For him, social and economic democracy was more important than political democracy, but it can be achieved only through constitutional democracy. In his view democracy is a ‘mode of associated living’. The social, economic and political values are reflected through the morals of constitutional democracy. And by establishing the principles of supremacy of the constitution, rule of law, fundamental rights and remedies the true spirit of constitutional democracy can be flourished.

He considered the context of state formation from two perspectives- (i) State is the instrument to combat the domination of upper caste Hindu. The majoritarian rule should not be imposed in such a way that undermines the interest of the depressed and oppressed section. (ii) To ensure the interest of backward classes through the state mechanism. In order to fulfill this purpose he advocated for reservation for the minorities in educational institutions and service sectors. By minorities, he meant to say that the people those who are weak and neglected Dalit especially the untouchables. To expedite the state formation process he proposed for several things – (i) to strengthen the position of Governor

so that he can protect the rights of the weaker section or to ensure the interest of the marginalized sections, if there is any anomaly from the majoritarian ruling dispensation; (ii) to form the constitutional committees addressing the various issues of the backward classes; (iii) introducing the proportional representation to ensure the representation of backward classes as he thought that in the uniform electoral domain the Dalit and untouchables would be wiped out. Most probably that is why he advocated for proportional representation. In this context Chandra Mawli (1990) ironically remarked that people in India will not only cast their votes, but vote their caste. That was the realization of Dr. Ambedkar in regard to uniform electoral system.

While the post-independence India is facing the problems of language and divided into binary division – Hindi and non-Hindi division Ambedkar was not against Hindi as national language in principle but his realization is pragmatic and unique. His apprehension was that the domination of Hindi may create a kind of division among the North and South; and as a result of this a large number of marginalized sections from the South would be deprived from the state system (Das, 1993). In order to minimize the dominance of Northern Hindi region he proposed for the division of great Northern states. In the small states the proportional imbalance between upper caste people and marginalized section would be minimized; according to him in this system it would be easier to control the upper caste domination. Realizing the essence of his thought in post-independent India the state reorganization was conducted and even today we follow the same spirit to reorganize any state. It is to be kept in mind that in a multilingual country like India no linguistic supremacy should be promoted keeping in view the national unity and integrity. Language can be considered as a mode of communication and it inherits the local sentiment and culture of the specific region.

Ensuring constitutionalism for promoting justice

In order to ensure the rights of the marginalized people Ambedkar advocated for a written integrated constitution. Though, his idea of constitutionalism is different to a great extent from the present form of constitution because he wanted political equality based on social and economic equality. As the chairman of drafting committee Ambedkar argued that unless and until the rights of the downtrodden and women are protected no society can go ahead. That is why he was in favour of constitutional reservation. He justified the cause of reservation as the positive discrimination to uphold the standard of marginalized people of the society.

Through various provisions of the Constitution Ambedkar's vision for social justice has been reflected. His vision of social justice is reflected in the following provisions:

- (i) Article 14-18 (equality, abolition of untouchability, anti-discrimination)
- (ii) Article 21 (ensuring the right to life, dignity and personal liberty)
- (iii) Article 46 (promotion of SC /ST Education and Economic interest).

To foster the goal of social empowerment Ambedkar advocated for the inclusion of several social and economic policies in the Directive Principles (Article-- 36-51); thus his ideas of social justice have been reflected in the directives of state formation. Austin (2024:66) observed that "By establishing these positive obligations of the state, the members of the Constituent Assembly made it the responsibility of future Indian Governments to find a middle way between individual liberty and the public good, between preserving the property and the privilege of the few and bestowing benefits on the many in order to liberate 'the powers of all men equally for contributions to the common good'."

He was aware about the deviation of the norms while promoting special provisions for the downtrodden and weaker sections and that is why he justified it by the notion of 'Protective discrimination'. Today we find the same arrangements in various segments of the society in order to uphold them in the main stream. So the notion of positive discrimination based on 'intelligible differentia' is well accepted in the present time.

No doubt is there, today, tribals and others marginalized sections are deprived and become vulnerable in the socio economic sector. It is not only the question of the empowerment of the marginalized section, rather it is an instrument of all round development of the marginalized and downtrodden people of our society, he argued. Though he advocated for the empowerment of common masses he vehemently opposed the introduction Panchayet system as he believed that through Panchayet the dominance of the upper caste people would be established. He is of the opinion that the village is, "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow- mindedness and communalism" (CAD, 1948).

He strongly argued to introduce Uniform Civil Code by which the social division, caste discrimination, social hierarchy would be abolished. In 1951 while the initiative to pass the Hindu Code Bill was taken in the Parliament he strongly supported but ultimately, he failed and to protest

it he resigned from the then Ministry. He was also against Article 370 for the special provision of Jammu & Kashmir. He is of the opinion that if Kashmir is the integral part of the nation the Government of India should possess the internal security, border and all other things to ensure all round development of the people of the region. Though, against his will Article-- 370 was inserted in the Constitution. Today, the essence of his argument is realized and by the Presidential order (2019) the provision of 370 has been made inoperative.

Promoting social democracy and justice

People can enjoy the true spirit of political democracy only when he lives in the environment of social democracy. By social democracy Ambedkar meant to say that a kind of environment where liberty, equality and fraternity will be assembled together. He was in favor of western parliamentary form of democracy where individual well-being and social well-being be ensured. He was suspicious about the majoritarian rule because he believed that in a majoritarian rule, the minority voice and interest can be suppressed and compromised. Ambedkar realized that without the abolition of caste system the complete state formation is not possible and this work is not satisfactorily done during the colonial regime. So after independence through a democratic state system the state formation should be done in such a way that it can be used as a tool to uphold the interest of the marginalized section.

In order to develop the condition of vulnerable section of the society he established the Peoples Education Society on July 8, 1945, in Mumbai. He believed that by empowering the untouchables a community would be developed who could led the untouchables. In a caste ridden society no upper caste people would lead the real progress of the untouchables. That is why he emphasized – a) To organize the untouchables and to make them conscious b) To apply to the British Government for the well-being of the vulnerable sections and c) To spread the education among the vulnerable and down trodden peoples of the society.

For promoting social justice for the marginalized section, he proposed various social reformation schemes for the marginalized sections:

- (i) ensuring the representation of untouchables in every stage of the society and administration. Later on he demanded for separate electorate for the untouchables and untouchables leaders to represent them.
- (ii) to spread the higher education among the Dalit and untouchables.

- (iii) promoting for a strong Central government to implement public welfare and duties.

For him social justice implies the right of choice that is their liberty to choose their education and occupation. Ambedkar pointed out some importance rights like right to life, right to move, right to personal property, right to religion for promoting social justice. Apart from these, he proposed few plans to ensure social justice, namely:

- (i) To stop the forced and unpaid labour to the upper caste Hindus.
- (ii) Right to enter into the temples.
- (iii) To give the permission for using the water from public pond, tank.
- (iv) Introducing the scholarship to spread the education among the backward classes.
- (v) To ensure services in military and police.
- (vi) To engage them in social and cultural activities.
- (vii) Ensuring the representation in various government committees.
- (viii) To reserve the seats in central and provincial legislature.
- (ix) A minimum wages for a healthy livelihood.

Realizing the bitter experience in his personal life and social animosity in caste, class, he wanted to throw out the deep-rooted caste system from the society. In his famous book 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936) he advocated to abolish the sub-caste system from the demographic profile. Besides, to remove the superstition, not-touchism and any other separatist tendencies he emphasized on social cohesion and inter-dining. He also supported the inter caste marriage; as he thought that because of these a blood relation would be established and by marital relationship a social fraternity would be created. Thus, the practice of caste division will be eradicated from the society. By criticizing the caste system Ambedkar actually wanted to protect the upper caste domination mainly the *Bramhincal* philosophy of Hinduism. It is in this context he viewed a difference from Gandhi. While Gandhi wanted to reform the caste system but Ambedkar wanted to remove it. For him the *Bramhincal* idea of Hinduism has made the backward class more backward and they have become the subject of exploitation to the upper caste. In 1948, Ambedkar argued in his book 'Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables' (1942) that Indian Varna system is against the social justice. The same line of argument is noticed in his next book 'Who were

the Shudras' (1946). His idea of social justice is basically against the discrimination based on birth and social division. So the greater nation building process is associated with the removal of social inequality and empowering the marginalized section; his life-long effort can be considered and evident towards this end. He also believed that education is the most powerful instrument of social change and for this purpose he founded People's Education Society (1945). His famous slogan was "Educate, Agitate, Organize". In this regard Zelliott (1992) observed that as the architect of Dalit social revolution Ambedkar promoted a social struggle to spread the self-consciousness, self-respect and dignity among the backward classes. Thus, a resistance of the oppressed will be emerged against the upper caste domination. Concluding the position of Ambedkar, Panikkar (2004) argued that the ideas of democracy and caste are conflicting with each other; while democracy talks about the inclusion of all; on other hand caste creates an environment of exclusion.

Justice through political and economic equality

Ambedkar visualized for a society equipped with equal opportunities in political and economic status ensuring the dignity and liberty of the individual. Upholding the universal adult franchise (Article 326) he intended to ensure '*one person, one vote, one value*'. He assumed that because of upper caste domination the people belonging to the lower rang of society may be victimized and underrepresented in the political sector and that is why he advocated for separate constituency for marginalized section. Finally, by incorporating the reservations provisions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Castes the issues were addressed.

The role of Ambedkar and his impact in Indian society and polity have been examined from different outlook by the scholars. His legacy in the electoral polity can be visible through the emergence of Bahujan and Dalit-Centric parties and caste based political mobilization. In order to mobilize the Dalit voters a symbolic presentation of Ambedkar and his vision is a regular phenomenon in Indian polity especially in the backward regions where people are somehow detached from the main stream.

Assessing the reflecting scenario Guru (1991) is of the opinion that, in recent times there is a trend of Hinduisation of Ambedkar where the significance of Ambedkar as a figure of Dalit liberation has been lost significantly.

Constitutional morality and social justice

In the Constitution Assembly speech while introducing the Draft (1948) Ambedkar emphasized on constitutional of morality as a tool for social justice. By bringing the phrase 'Constitutional of Morality' he intended to address the constitutional values which would uphold the security, dignity of the individual particularly the marginalized section of the society.

Enumerating the idea of constitutional morality, he wanted to bridge between political democracy and social democracy. He believed that political democracy cannot last without social and economic democracy. Thus, constitutional morality operates as checks and balances against caste oppression, social exclusion particularly the discrimination against untouchables. Thus, in the present time we see the value of constitutional morality in interpreting the constitution to safeguard the rights of the women and vulnerable.

However, Ambedkar in his lifetime was not satisfied with the implementation and execution of the constitution especially for protecting the rights of the marginals; it became a rhetorical lexicon confined in the provisions and articles. While Ambedkar realized that this Constitution has failed to ensure the progress of the society and to make the society free from casticism he became so frustrated that he remarked, "I have made the constitution but I am quite prepared to say that I shall be the first person to burn it out. I do not want it. It does not suit anybody" (K. Dhananjay, 1990).

In spite of being a modern man Ambedkar at his last phases of life attracted towards Buddhism and ultimately converted to Buddhist religion. It is not because of the great passion for Buddhist religion he chased for this religion; rather he was so frustrated about the so-called religion and that is why he was searching for an alternative. After a careful study of Islam, Sikhs, and Christian religion he concluded that none of these can be a real alternative of Hinduism. Though Islam is different from that of the Hinduism, but it is not completely free from Varna/ caste division. The social division between Altab and Asraf still is evident in Islam. In his book the 'The Buddha and his Dhamma' (1957) he argued that the qualities of Buddhist religion are rational and modern. It is completely made for this world, not for any supernatural salvation for which this earthly happiness is sacrificed. It does not believe in the existence of God and even Buddha himself is not considered as spiritual God. He is just a path finder to get read of the criticality of this world.

But question may arise why being a rational and modern man Ambedkar opted for a religion. To understand the perplexity of his position, if we go through the famous book of Max Weber 'Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' (2001) we can understand the tragedy of modern man. How a modern man because of his rationality and reason has been alienated from his own-self and has been detached from the mystery of this world. Without the mystery of this world how it is difficult to live, the modern man has realized. Perhaps because of this, keeping aside the uniqueness of reason and rationality and the call for modernity Dr. Ambedkar searched and opted for a religion which is based on reason and rationality but as a religion it presents a world of mystery.

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Himachal Pradesh's culinary folklore: an intangible heritage of food, culture, and identity

Simranjeet Kaur & Anil Kishore Sinha

ABSTRACT

The food consumption pattern of human species is dynamic influenced by the complex socio-cultural and environmental processes. Rough and harsh geographical conditions act as boon or bane to different ethnic communities. The inhabitants have created different pattern of consumption for their survival based upon these conditions. The process of finding different foodstuff in surroundings is still arduous task for different groups. The emergence of these groups to society has led to the formation of different believes, taboos, practices and customs. With passage of time, these believes and taboos took the formation of tales and legends which is a part of folklore. Thus, folklore is a rich reservoir of myths, ballads, legends, tales, riddles, proverbs, proverbial sayings and folksongs that gives deep insight into knowledge of food preparation and consumption of primitive man. The present study emphasis on the exploration of oral literature of primitive folks associated with knowledge of food in the state of Himachal Pradesh. It gives deep insight into culture of natives by delineating systematic description of information about seasons, festivals and other important event of life i.e. birth, marriage and death. The information is stored in form of verses which take different forms and reflects culinary depository of natives. This depository helps to understand how cultural practices, myths, legends, believes and norms provide social structure and cohesion in a society. Thus, the current study explores the words of wisdom related to food intertwined in the verses delineated by hill people. The words of wisdom acts as intangible form of culture that has survived through different ages by the process of acculturation and diffusion and formed the rich heritage of society.

Keywords: *Folklore, Folk-literature, Folksongs, Ballads, Folk-drama, Folk-art, Food.*

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Introduction

The emergence of food in history is dated back to an era when hunters and gatherers started collecting food by hunting, gathering and foraging of wild resources. The time period later came when the discovery of fire changed the history of food consumption from raw to cook. In the later stages of evolution, cultivation of crops along with the domestication of livestock took place. The rough and harsh conditions had led to preservation and conservation of edible wild resources. With the rise of society and culture, the food and food ways as a part of it had also emerged (Mukhopadhyay, 2011). The complex structure of society has given rise to distinctive dietary patterns of production and consumption based upon the availability of resources in environment. The knowledge linked to consumption get entrapped in the words of natives which further took form of verses, myths and legends with passage of time.

Every society has its own culture related taboos, practices, patterns of consuming food. Food is also classified as 'edible' or 'inedible' based upon socio-cultural classifications, availability (market and ecological), nutritional or medical properties and consequences of consuming it (Gautam, 2021). The 'edible' food describes the cultural pattern in which a particular cuisine is prepared, consumed and preserved under different conditions by a specific group. The 'inedible' food itself describes the hidden background of prohibition and restrictions on intake of particular item based upon the beliefs, customs and taboos of particular group (Freeman, 2006).

In ancient times, lack of resources to transmit information into written form had led to loss of major amount of knowledge which makes the origin of various food items in a particular culture difficult to trace. Every ingredient which is used to make a particular dish has its own body of cultural knowledge which is preserved in different forms of oral and written literature. This oral and written literature consists of traditional creations of primitive or civilised people. The abundance of knowledge of ancient people is entrapped in the verses of folklore. The term folklore was first used among Europeans in 19th century and they refer it as the oral traditions of peasants. The folklore is basically the songs, myths, legends, tales, ballads, proverbs, proverbial sayings and riddles of natives influenced by the local tradition, culture, ritualistic ceremonies, witchcrafts, beliefs, customs and superstitions. It is rich reservoir which gives deep insights into cognitive ability and behaviour pattern of primitive man; and its traditional usage of knowledge and wisdom in different social conditions (Kongas, 1963). The basic

objectives of studying folklore are identification and interpretation of an item through subjective and empirical speculation to study the transmitted folk knowledge from one generation to another by process of enculturation (Dundes, 1965). Anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists and many other scholars scrutinize different aspects of this literature to study the holistic panorama of culture (Mukhopadhyay, 2011). The approach to examine the different aspects of folk literature by folklorists and other social scientists is different as anthropologists prioritize study on holistic bases on the other hand folklorists' emphasis on contextual holism (Ghosh & Mullick, 2020). The sociologists also examine to understand how verses influence social cohesion within community and how it upholds the social control and structure of society. Thus, Folk-literature helps to study the collective responses of a primitive group and community in different circumstances. It also helps them for comparative analysis of the functional, cultural and structural aspects of society. It describes the psychology and intelligence of traditional societies to store the information by formulating words into phrases. There are various hidden treasure of knowledge related to food in different parts of nation but in the land of deities (Himachal Pradesh), the knowledge related to seasons, festivals and mythologies etc. is explored.

The holy land of the gods and goddesses that is often known as *Devbhoomi* is situated on the north-western lap of the Himalayas extends over an area of nearly 56,000 sq. kms and at the altitude from 4500 to 8000 meters above the sea. The land of Himachal Pradesh has abundant and diverse raw materials present based upon the geography and climatic conditions of an area which acts as ingredients of different foodstuffs (Thakur, 2006). The unique and distinctive nature of these raw materials acts as indicator of particular region for example *Himachali kala Zeera* (2018-2019) and *Himachali Chulli Oil* (2018-2019) are marked as geographical indicators of state (Hindustan Times, 2019). The preparation, formation and consumption of cuisines are distinctive in different region which leads to different dietary patterns and food habits. The consumption pattern of different food items reflects the responses of groups towards their environment for survival. Thus, food does not only provide nutrition to an individual but also reflects the cultural, social and economic importance of group of individuals (Tamang, 2016).

The different communities of Himachal have wide range of preferences and styles of consuming food. Wheat, rice and maize are considered as staple food of state but are used in different manner for consumption

(Thakur et al., 2020; Ahuja et al., 2019). The traditional feast which is often prepared at different ceremonies and occasions to provide plethora of taste is locally termed as *dham*. It is a combination of delicious delicacies made up of various types of dairy products and lentils. It was initially offered to gods and goddesses in temples and served as *Prasad* at different auspicious occasions but later became part of *Himachali* diet due to its distinct flavour and balanced nature. (Savitri & Bhalla, 2007; Tanwar et al., 2018).

Besides *dham*, there are various ethnic food and beverages which are prepared through traditional and modern methods that are categorized on basis of type of ingredients used to make the dish for example-ethnic food made from pulses, cereals, buttermilk, green vegetables, fruits and tubers etc. (Sharma & Singh, 2012). Fermented food and beverages have a special place in traditional food of the state. *Chilra, Bhatore, Dosha, Siddu, Seera, Pinni/Bagpinni, Manna, Marchu* etc. are few unique fermented food of the state. *Chhang, Lugri, Daru, Angoori, Behmi, Sura* etc. are few popular fermented beverages which are served at different regions (Thakur et al., 2004).

The traditional food which has high nutritional value is nowadays commercialized with the changing socio-economic needs of people but their authenticity remains the same. The rich and diverse culture is reflected through colourful attires, fairs and festivals, marriages and religious ceremonies of land. On each auspicious ceremony or occasion, food plays a supreme role to celebrate the blessings of deities on people of state. Thus, current study tries to bestow light upon the proverbs used to describe the consumption of food with changing seasons and festivals. It also includes proverbs that are used to describe the state of people of hills especially women because they play major role in culinary art. There are proverbs used to describe the fate of women along with her position in family. It also includes proverbial sayings related to change in status of women in family when child is born. The folksong and folktale are also included to describe the relationship between mother and her children. The girl child is given special importance as mother-daughter shares a special bond. When daughter grow old and the time of her marriage come then a folksong describes the scenario of her marriage. After marriage, the change in position from daughter to daughter-in-law is also described along with the position of son-in-law in a family. The importance of food in the description of folk-art, folk-tale and folk-dance is also delineated to describe the superstitions, beliefs and myths related to the society. Before exploring the folksongs, proverbs or folk-tales etc.

the current studies start from mythologies in the form of ballads as two of the oldest and greatest epics had laid the foundation of Indian culture. In state of Himachal, these two epics have its own cultural and religious importance. One epic is the Ramayana and other one is the Mahabharata; two greatest Hindu mythologies that have shed light on lives of folks and without which one cannot initiate exploring the treasure of information.

Enriched mythologies in form of ballads

People of land of hills have its own way of describing legends in form of emphasized narratives which are sung on special occasions or festivals. These narratives are known as ballads which delineate the events in form of story by having rhythmic affluence and poetic element in it. There is an episode of *Sita-haran* in the Ramayana that is also narrated in form of ballad by different communities of state. During the exile period of Lakshmana, Rama and Sita in the forest, inauspicious event took place in which Sita was lured by the beauty of a golden deer that was passing through the area where they were residing. Sita persuaded Rama to catch the golden deer but he did not want her to leave alone. He gave a bowl of milk, a green leaf of *pipal* (*Ficus religiosa*) tree and a lamp of *ghee* (clarified butter) to Lakshmana (his brother) to presume the situation of his life in danger. He gave the instructions that white colour of milk will change to red, the lamp will extinguish and the leaf will dry if something bad happened to him. According to this ballad, Rama has used the requisite edibles of nature to symbolise the essence of danger. The comparison of danger reflects quick wittedness of ancient people of using available resources in every situation (Thakur, 2006).

In another ballad of the Mahabharata which is locally named as *Pandavayan* in Himachal, a new episode has been introduced about the dispute between two sisters- Kunti (the elder) and Nandi (the younger) sisters of Narayana fought over the *sag* leaves of green vegetables grown in the shwari (small field) near their house. Bhima (second son of Kunti) infuriated by this matter and went to Duryodhana (eldest of the Kauravas) to solve the quarrel over a dice- game. The whole episode took the form of one of greatest epic which started from fight to Great War. In the another ballad sung in district of Kangra, Kunti showed grievance of not having the meat of birds from the past twelve years and asked her sons to bring it from higher hills. As four of her sons were engaged in individual tasks during their exile, only Arjuna (third son) agreed to fulfil the task of hunting the birds. Before leaving the place, his mother Kunti warned him to not go towards the fourth direction as

illusive stream of *Jauli* flowed there. While roaming around and searching for the birds Arjuna lost his track. Despite the warning he went towards the fourth direction and engaged himself in danger. He was later found by his brother Bhima (second son) in the form of skeleton. Bhima took him in front of his mother where he gained his consciousness. The two episodes in form of ballads sung in different part of state show the eagerness of desired food item and its repercussion (Thakur, 2006).

Besides the ballads of greatest epics sing at different part of state, there are many ballads of different forms that glorify gods and goddesses especially on religious occasions. The verses of these mysterious ballads reflect the heroic tales, cults of local deities and their customs related to it. The legend of Baidra of Nadaun of Hamirpur district is one of these ballads that describe the journey of becoming a *deota* (local deity) after scattering the seeds on the dry place that turned into forest. According to legend, he did not get anything to eat for himself but had grown full forest for others. People worship him as a *deota* because he had sown the seeds of peace and prosperity by destroying cruelty inhabited in nearby place. The nurturing nature of hill people is reflected through this ballad as hill people are always ready to help others. The people of state take pleasure in singing the verses of ballads with relish depending upon the situations and occasions. These occasions are periodic like seasons which come with plethora of pleasure (Thakur, 2006).

Proverbs used during the changing season

The alluring mountains of Himachal are covered with white sheet of snow in winters whereas rays of sun radiate the hills in summers. The changing cold and hot weather effects the lives of hill people as agriculture and horticulture are main source of income of these people. Hill people are mostly agriculturalists so the knowledge about farming, harvesting and seasons is required. Weather plays a major role in predicting the kind of work to be done in a particular season. People of hills have distinctive food habits which change from season to season based upon the resources. Mostly, hill life is simple and away from the impact of western culture. The food habits of these people are authentic and traditional. At the *Nuhari* (morning), *Dhupahari* (noon) and at the *Sanhiyalu* (evening), there is a pattern of consuming three main meals which include mostly boiled rice, *roti* (unleavened bread) along with curried dal (Indian Lentil Curry), vegetables and buttermilk (Vyathit, 1984). Knowledge related to these meals in different seasons is stored in short and concise form of proverbs. These short and concise forms are thoughts of people written in wittiest manner which reflects the

philosophy of hill people through fixed and convincing way in different situations. Proverbs and proverbial sayings are usually the concise description used in various situations for example:

Chaitra ri chaitryali, sat kalari sat biyali (Thakur, 2006).

It is believed that in older days, an old lady usually took seven breakfasts and seven dinners in a single day in month of Chaitra. It is cloudiest month in later half of March and first half of April. It has mostly thicker and darker rainy days due to abnormal and sudden change in weather. It is advised that an individual can take more food as body's capacity of consuming food increases in this weather. In another proverbial saying,

Barse Magsir, Khae khand khir, Barse kati, agla sangh na pichhla sathi

(If there is rain in the month of Magsir, it is suggested to eat sweet pudding made up of sugar and rice whereas if there is rain in month of Kartik, it is believed that awful weather will usually destroy the standing crops of maize and rice) (Thakur, 2006).

The verses describe the changing dietary pattern according to the change in weather. The rain that occurred in month of *Magsar* (it starts from middle of November to middle of December) is often celebrated by consuming sweet rice pudding whereas rain in month of *Kartik* (it starts from the middle of October to middle of November) is deleterious for crop production. It reflects the awareness of hill people about climatic changes and how it changes the consumption from one month to another based upon the environment.

There are two proverbial sayings related to eating *satu* (flour of fried roasted chickpeas or barley mixed with water and salt) in month of *Ashadha* and *Jeth*. In month of *Ashadha*, eat four cakes of *satu* and work for the whole day long (*Au mahina Shar, char mathingle satu re mar, kom kamona dhar*), where as in month of *Jeth* it is advised to eat cake of *satu* and leave the work for rest (*Au mahina Jeth, satu re kha mathingla kom pitla let*) (Thakur, 2006). *Asadha* corresponds to fourth month in Hindu Calendar that starts from middle of June and ends at middle of July. It is considered as cherished period for spiritual growth and it fosters positive energy and devotion whereas *Jeth* (also known as *Jyeshtha*) is considered as hot and humid month that starts from middle of May to middle of June. The hot and humid conditions are unfavourable for a person to work so it is advised to take rest and eat less

whereas *Asadha* bestows more energy so an individual can consume more food and work according to surroundings.

The above-mentioned verses describe the significance of food with the changing season as the same piece of foodstuff has different effect on body depending upon the season. It is the rule of nature of bestowing fruits to her children on its time. Every grain has its own season of germination and consumption but hill people always discover different occasion for savouring every mouthful. These occasions are observed in form of festivals to celebrate.

Proverbs used during festivals

Devbhoomi has various auspicious occasions to celebrate the existence of gods and goddesses at holy land. Fairs are often organized to celebrate the eminence of deities. The fairs also reflect the rural life and their related customs. On the other hand, festivals are celebrated to glorify the importance of day on which auspicious events take place. These are also celebrated to honour rich heritage, when seasons are changing and crops are harvested. There are various folklores linked with festivals of deities and changing seasons. Different delicacies are also prepared based upon the occasion and festival, for example Chaitraul (festival of pictures) is celebrated in month of Chaitra in Sirmaur district. A special delicacy (*Poltu*) is cooked on this special occasion. *Sairi* is winter festival celebrated in month of *Ashwin* (usually begins from middle of September to middle of October) when the harvesting of maize crop is done. *Pakodus* (urd dal dumpling) and sweet *bhaturas* are cooked in this festival.

There are different festivals celebrated in different states but Diwali is one of auspicious festival celebrated throughout the country and in Himachal, the significance of festival is more because there are two types of Diwali that are celebrated; one is national Diwali and other is *Budhi* Diwali. *Budhi* Diwali is celebrated after one month of national Diwali on *Margshirsh's Amavasya* and will continue for one week. On this auspicious occasion, an idol of *Bali* prepared with wheat flour is laid on ground and worshipped with dishes of delicious food, roasted grains and walnuts along with lamps burning to its surroundings. For the whole night, people worship this idol of Lord Vishnu and sing songs in his praise. In the morning, it is nailed to the ground by saying:

*Aweli Diyali re Kobai? Khoro muri re lobhe,
Chajari chewri re lobhe. Chajare gabhru re lobhe.*

(When will you come- Diwali along with the walnuts and roasted grains to celebrate with the beautiful women and handsome young men)
(Thakur, 2006).

During the month of Diwali festival, even the poor person tries his best to cook sweet delicacies and all members of family start coming back home to unite even from the distant places to celebrate the festival. The women of hill kept waiting for their husbands to visit the home and eat freshly prepared cuisines. They suppressed their sentiments and start preparing food. These suppressed emotions are reflected through the verses delineated below:

O my woodcutter, you live at distant place,
when will you visit the home?
Have you forgotten the sweets (*Babroos*) of Diwali
and the *Khichadi* prepared during *Lohadi*? (Vyathit, 1984).

The wife of woodcutter is missing her husband during Diwali and want him to come back home to have sweets with other delicacies prepared with love for him. She prepares *Khichadi* on *Lohadi* and *Babroos* on Diwali. Thus, the consumption of certain food items according to occasion is a way of acknowledging the connection and harmony with nature.

Folk-Dance, folk-art and folk-tale of people of state

The people of colourful land form blissful and cheerful moments through celebrating different forms of ceremonies, marriages, fairs and festivals. There is no such event that remains untouched from the embellishment of food items; even the music, dance and art of state include these essentials. In Kinnaur region, the *Kayang Mala* dance is very popular that is performed by forming crisscross pattern of rows of dancers to look like a woven garland. There is a tradition of drinking *Chaang* (a rice brew) while performing to form the lusty beauty of dance (Vyathit, 1984). In *Chamba* region of state, *Til-chauli* dance is very famous that is performed by bridegroom's mother during marriage ceremony. During the performance, a plate of soaked sesame seeds along with rice mixed with jaggery or sugar is placed on the head (Thakur, 2006).

The folk-art of state also depicts the tales and legends in form of pictures and paintings. The pictures of *Hoi* (she-demon) are painted on the walls in many regions of state which includes she-demon and man carrying a packet of food along with his mother. There is a story behind this folk-art

that resulted into the celebration of *Hoi-Ashtami*. According to legend, *Hoi* was a demon living in the forest that tortured people in many ways and devoured them. The villagers begged for the mercy and promised her that they will sacrifice human being each day. After a while, when a young man who was about to get married was send to her. His mother gave him food and sweets to eat during the journey. He saved the food and put it at *Hoi*'s altar to save his life. *Hoi* ate the delicacies and was pleased by his gift. She blessed him and sent him back to get married. From the day onwards, it is celebrated as Hoi-Ashtami that has put an end to human sacrifice. This folktale has taken the form of folk-art which is still portrayed on the walls to delineate the legend (Vyathit, 1984).

Besides the dance, music and art; the hill people have their own beliefs and myths related to their surroundings, certain places, rivers and animals etc. There are some superstitions attached to certain things as if something bad happened in its past then it is prohibited to utters its name. If one hears the name or utters it, one must immediately suck sugar or lump of jaggery to ward off the bad luck. Animals and trees are essential part of hill people as their lives are dependent on it. The superstitions related to these animals reflect their admiration towards nature. All fresh new grains, vegetables and other food articles are offered to the deities before consuming by its owners. It is believed that failure to do so would result either in a lessening of the yield or the death of an animal (Vyathit, 1984).

There are some other beliefs such as if an animal kicks during milked, then it is said to have caught the evil eye of a *dagi* (even sorcerer). To ward off the evil spirit, red chili is put in the fire, if smell is not released then it is believed that it is sign of *nazar* (the evil eye). Milk is also supposed to catch the evil eye and upset the child, so a burnt cinder is put in the milk to ward that off. Thus, hill people have their own myths related to events and their own ways of preventing it (Vyathit, 1984).

Urbanization and modernization have affected many parts of lives of hill people but most percent of population still practice traditional set of production. Men of state are still involved in agricultural practices and follow conventional way of living. The women of state are very assiduous in performing their duties. They make tireless efforts to take care of their households. Every woman shows honour and reverence for her hearth as it is a place of creating food for their survival. They make different cuisines based upon their preferences, availability and choices. They follow the traditional practices of preparing food based upon believes and knowledge. Besides the art, dances, myths and superstition

of people related to food; women hold the superior position of performing culinary practices in their households. Apart from their strenuous efforts towards life, fate of these women plays a major role in shaping their lives. The hard lives of state women are inscribed in form of verses which are uttered in form of proverbial sayings at different regions as described below.

Women described as symphony of grace and strength in form of proverbs

Women's luck is like potter's pot *Betri ra bhag, Kumhare ri handi*, earthen pots made by potters is used for different purposes, one might be used to store milk, other might be used to store butter and one might be used for nothing. Thus, women's fate is also like an earthen pot which may be blessed or may be destroyed based on the family in which she gets married. Women's destiny is sculpted by her fate and the role she plays. The position in her family describes her role and responsibility. She has to perform every role with perfection especially as a mother as it is believed that her reflection is seen in her children. As a proverbial saying:

Jisha dudh, tishi budh

(As the milk so the intelligence) (Thakur, 2006).

It means the children take after their mother. The first mouthful of child is mother's milk as it gives all the essential nutrients to a child along with her intelligence and qualities.

Child is considered as boon to a mother as it completes her life. The number of children describe her status in family as more number of children born to a woman, more blessed she is. In older days, elder women gave blessings to a newlywed daughter-in-law by saying:

Jeti daru re bij ghane, teti bohti put jane

(May the bride blessed with as many sons as there are seeds in pomegranate) (Thakur, 2006).

According to traditional norms, a childless woman does not acquire respect and any position in society. She is not allowed to be a part of any auspicious function and considered as useless. As a proverbial saying:

Aj niputi, kal niputi, kesar phula sada niputi

(She is useless today, tomorrow and even if the saffron blooms, she is still useless) (Thakur, 2006).

The beginning of life starts when a child enters into this world. This joyful and cheering occasion begins with the first tasting of cereal known as *Annaprashan*. As the child grows and become seven-month-old, the first meal in the form of *kheer* (rice pudding) is given at the ceremony of *Kheerpoo*. A special article (spoon) made up of silver is used to feed *kheer* to child (Vyathit, 1984). A girl is considered as complete woman after she bears a child. According to traditional belief, son take after their father and daughter take after their mother. Daughters are the precious jewels of a family that connects all bonds of a family but the most cherished bond is mother-daughter bond.

Folksong and folk-tale used to describe the relationship of mother and daughter

Most sacred bond of love is mother's love towards her children. A shadow of mother is always seen in daughter. Daughter is a part of mother's heart. Mother gives her everything for sake of her love. Daughters of hill state are often getting married at earlier stage of her life. The time later come when she has to leave her maternal home is heart wrenching. The fondness of mother towards her daughter is expressed through the verses of folk song written in form of conversation between mother and daughter during her departure from home (Pathania, 2022).

*Daughter-Charke da tand maaye charkha ch raheya,
dudh raheya kadhaye mai chaliye jaana*

(The thread remains in the charkha. The milk will remain in vessel but I will leave this house and move to in-laws' house).

*Mother-Ann bi dinghe dhiye, dhan bi dinge,
hor dinge jagiraan, dhiye nahiyon jaane*

(My daughter, I'll give bread (Wheat), I'll give money, I give you even the share in property but please don't leave my daughter).

*Daughter-Ann taa dhan teriyan nuuhan lenne,
putran ne leniyan jagiran, mai chaliyan jaana*

(Wheat bread will be taken by daughter-in-law, property will be taken by your son and I should leave) (Pathania, 2022).

It describes the loving and sorrowful relationship between daughter and her mother during her departure from home. Mother wants to give everything to her daughter as much as possible but do not want to let her go. It is the bitter reality of leaving her natal home after marriage either she wants to leave or not (Pathania, 2022).

The verses of this song reflect the love of mother towards her daughter whereas the verses of another folktale “*Dhaiyan dhiyareyan ra peuka*” reflects the love of daughter towards her mother and natal home. The tale reflects the mental outlook of hill people and their nurturing nature towards each other. Two of them collected piece of bread from the neighbour; one smaller and other the bigger one. Mother always took the smaller share and gave bigger one to her daughter. One day, daughter replaced the smaller piece of her mother to the bigger one because she did not feel good about having biggest share always. After knowing her deed, mother started running towards her daughter with cudgel in her hand asking for her bread (*mera tikar de*). Her daughter hid in forest to protect herself. A king who was passing through jungle found her and married her. This folktale describes the journey of a woman who is born in poor family and later became a queen. It started over the fight to give bigger piece of bread to other person and described the love of mother and daughter towards each other through this tale (Thakur, 2006)

The pleasing and alluring beauty of mountains has mesmerized its people and has sown the seeds of love and fondness in form of folk-songs. The love is present in the atmosphere of hills which has given rise to various love stories. Among various bonds of fondness, some take the form of marriage and some take the form of tales and legends.

Folksongs sung during the ceremony of marriage

According to Titus (1994), marriage is union between male and female having intimate and economic relationship approved by the society. There are different types of marriage take place at different region of state. In most part of state, monogamous marriages are conducted but in some part of state polygamy type of marriage occurs. There are different ceremonies also take place throughout the process of marriage, for example in Gaddis the marriage ceremony take place twice. Firstly, when girl is young, groom's family visit the bride's house and breaks a lump of jaggery on the name of girl and distribute the jaggery to all the passengers coming through their home back announcing the confirmation of *betrothal*. After five to ten years, second part of marriage take place known as *sadnoj* (Vyathit, 1984). The voyage of this loving bond begins when the members of bridegroom's family visit the natal home of bride and ceremony of marriage take place. On the name of lord Rama, members are greeted with ghee, jaggery and rice (*Khao janetiyo ghee, shakkar mande bhatt, ki bolo ram ram*) (Thakur, 2006). The verses of

folksong of marriage also narrate the whole satiric scenario of marriage ceremony.

Mirchan charperiya chaneya di daal karaari-2
(There are a lot of chillies in the chickpea lentils-2)

Larra khai kari hor mangda, botiye karchhi maari
(Bridegroom asks for more after having it, but cook hits him with the serving spoon)

Labada te khoon aa gaya, mukadma ho gaya jaari
(Bridegroom's lips started bleeding and resulted in court case).

Mircha charpariyan chaneya di daal karaari-2
(There are a lot of chillies in the chickpea lentils-2)

Laare da babu khai kari hor mangada, botiye karcchi maari
(Bridegroom's father asks for more lentils but cook hits him with serving spoon)

Mirchan charpariya chaneya di daal karaari-2
(There are a lot of chillies in the chickpea lentils-2)

Larre da jija khai kari hor mangda, botiye botiye
(Bridegroom's brother-in law asks for more lentils but cook hits him with the serving spoon).

Karchhi maaari mirchan charpariya chaneya di daal karaari-2
(There are a lot of chillies in the chickpea lentils-2) (Pathania, 2022).

Through above verses, it is observed that marriage in Himachal is engaging ceremony where all the members of bride's family and groom's family come together to celebrate the union. Due to traditional belief, bridegroom and his family always get more attention during this ceremony. The verses of folksong portray the scenario of marriage where bridegroom and his family are asking for having more of delicacies which include a lot of spices. In some region of state like Chamba, different communities consume food which includes a lot of chillies. Chamba *Chukh* is one of example of Chutney which includes *Chitrali* chillies grown in local valley of Chamba (Raj, 2020). The gluttony of bridegroom is depicted through verses of this song and his relationship with other members of bride's family. It also reflects the status of bridegroom's family in a society where they always demand for more even if they are having substantial amount of goods. It is the classical example of portraying the social image of the real episode of a marriage that describes difference between men and women's position in a society

where men are given more importance in many circumstances as compare to women.

Proverbs used by daughter-in-law

The father of bride tries his best to provide all essential commodities to his daughter and her husband but it is difficult to fulfil all desires. Daughters in their natal home are free from all constrains and enjoy all privileges but when they get married and move to their second abode, all their freedom gets limited. The responsibilities towards the other members of family increases and she has to perform various roles to be an ideal daughter-in-law. The change in position from one family to other makes a lot of changes of her roles and responsibilities. In some cases, she gets the best treatment from her in-laws and in other cases she is ill-treated. When she is treated well then she praises her in-laws by saying:

*Bana phule ban-barah, bage phule kesar,
sas meri parvati, saura mera pamesar*

In the forest, flowers are grown, in the garden, saffron is grown, my mother-in-law is Parvati and my father-in-law is Shiva (Thakur, 2006).

It tries to delineate that a daughter-in-law will bloom like a flower in the loving atmosphere of abode but when she is ill-treated, she complains to her mother about her sufferings. She says:

*Mein ni rehna maye, mein ni rehna,
chhaliyan di roti ni khane jo dende hathi dende fafru da sag*
(Oh my mother, I do not want to live here in my in-law's house, I don't want to live here. They do not give me bread made up of maize's flour to eat. They only give me course bread along with the wild grass's vegetables) (Thakur, 2006).

She faces discrimination for having inadequate food as compare to other family members. In other proverb, she complains about how her sister-in-laws treated her as she says:

*Drsdani-Jethani kren pidhe patlde, Minju beera manjru da toda,
Drani-jethani khayen shali-jhinjhan minju beera kodre da toda*
(Elder brother's wife and younger brother's wife take fine bed to sleep and do not give even a cot of ropes to sleep. Both take lavish food of rice and do not allow me to have even koda) (Thakur, 2006).

Proverbs used by son-in-law

To reduce the social stigmas related to relations in society, various jokes and anecdotes are represented in proper jest to make the situation humorous. The satiric criticism and emotions which cannot be directly explained through words are often represented through hilarious verses to intensify amusement and laughter. Elements of humour are reflected through folk-proverbs. The dyads are mostly related to son-in-law and in-law's relationship which is of mostly joking and avoidance.

The relation of son-in law with his in-laws has a very uncanny and strange aspect. He always gains the high respect and often offered various delicacies, cuisines and desserts in the form of present but his gluttony never satisfies, for example-in an occasion, mother-in-law has prepared Twenty loaves of bread for five members of family and asked her son-in-law to have some of it but he refuses to eat it by saying "Am I a glutton, who can take all the loaves, just give one loaf to mother-in-law. Rest is sufficient for me to consume". Thus, in literature he is considered as donkey, clown or burden if he is living in father-in-law's place and having all the food that is prepared for five members of family. The greed of son-in-law for food and desire to have more from in-law's house are delineated in form of verses as follows-

Dura ra jawain, jawain braber

(A real son-in-law is one who is living at distant place from his in-law's house)

Nere ra jawain adha

(Son-in- law living at nearby place is equal to half)

Ghar jawain gadhe braber

(Son-in-law living at his wife's maternal house is like a donkey)

Jab marzi tab lada

(When it is necessary, then it is used) (Thakur, 2006).

Food plays significant role in various phases of life. There are various rituals and customs attached to every phase that are deeply embedded in a culture. These food rituals are performed to express gratitude, embody beliefs and strengthen spiritual and physical wellbeing; for instance, birth rituals signify purity and rituals performed at marriage signify unity. Thus, food rituals perform multifaceted role either to celebrate a milestone or to provide comfort in the hardships of life. From birth to death, there are various transitional phases of life but death is considered

as ultimate truth of life. Hill people also perform various rites related to departure from life.

Proverbs used to describe departure from life

Death is inevitable process that leads to ending of life. It is considered as ultimate reality that transform soul from this realm to another i.e. passing of living being from microcosm to macrocosm as described in verses-

Jatasya vai manusyasya dhruvam maranam iti vijaniyat

(Know that for the individual who is born, death is inevitable indeed)

(Chaitanya, 2005).

In Vedic traditions, there are many sacraments performed in form of religious rites to fulfil the final act. According to Hindu mythology, it is believed that the final death occurs on the funeral pyre so cremation is considered as last sacrifice of an individual to god (Perry, 1994). There are different communities residing in the lap of Himachal following different rituals related to funeral and bereavement. The Pangawala people of *Pangi* region of state is such community that follows certain set of rituals till the *kriya* ceremony. It is believed that the person who is dying should lie on the ground while heading his feet towards the south direction as it is associated with death. The other members of family should assemble around the dying person and pour melted *ghee* in his mouth during his last breath. After the death of individual, the corpse is given warm bath and dressed with white shirt pyjama, *pattu*, a pair of socks etc. made up of *Khasaan* white cloth. The other members of village are gathered and starts mourning for the deceased person. The Aryans are also invited to play instruments consists of *ghanta*, *dhole*, *flute*, *nagarah* and *sankh*. The logs of woods are joined to prepare *vimaan* on which the corpse is lied. On four angles of *vimaan*, small lamps made of kneaded wheat flour filled with *ghee* (clarified butter). The male member of family walks three times around the corpse and take the *vimaan* to the cremation ground. After funeral ceremony is over, all villagers head back to homes and members who have joined the ceremony eat one meal a day or three times *sattu* for three days. On the third day, *kriya* ceremony known as *Kathi* occurs in which all villagers are invited. *Chappatis* along with *ghee* is given. For the whole year on the day of death, a feast is organised in which each of nearest relative give some quantity of wheat to household. After one year, *Kathi* is

organised again with special feast containing *cheena* and *manday*. Before feast, *Havana* is conducted by village *pandit* in which relatives are present. When relatives are about to leave, they are provided with *cheena* and *manday* and village *pandit* is given utensils, cloths and other eatables. This is considered as ending of all rituals for death (Thakur & Singh, 2022).

Different regions follow their own rites of mourning for demise. A ritual of *pind dan* is also performed to offer food to the dead ones, with the feeding of balls made of cooked rice, sesame seeds and curds to birds at many parts of state during the lunar month of *Pitra paksha* (fall between mid of September and October). There are many other rituals that are followed for instance, a piece of bread stuffed with dal is thrown on the rooftop for crows in Kinnaur area. According to them, it is believed that food would help them to communicate with the dead ones (Vyathit, 1984).

Conclusion

The art of weaving words into phrases of wisdom and forming the oral literature of information is one of admirable qualities of primitive societies. Every society has culinary lore of dietary rules and regulations that provide information linked to food items either fit or unfit for consumption. It also provides the detailed elucidation about the systematic consumption of food items based upon its nutritional value, seasonal availability, environmental conditions and phases of human life cycle. The intake of certain food items is often associated with the beliefs, superstitions, legends and cultural significance of food etc. in a society. These beliefs or superstitions shape the dietary pattern of an individual. The prescription and proscription of food items will allow effective utilization of resources and protection from allergies or diseases. The current study also tries to present a part of this rich reservoir of culinary lore enriched with information of food. It also includes the information about the changing seasons and its impact on natives as they spent most of their lives in lap of nature. The hill people mostly perform traditional food practices associated with changing seasons as it plays crucial role in forming rhythmic bond with nature. The consumption of sweet pudding in month of *Magsir* is such example that gives insight into the intelligence of natives by saying that rain in

this month would be beneficial for them as compare to other month like *Kartik* so they celebrate it through consuming different delicacies. The seasonal changes are not only celebrated with specific food and delicacies but are also marked in the form of special ceremonies and festivals. These ceremonies and festivals are significant events that play crucial role in preserving and transmitting traditional values, for instance Diwali is one of most important festival that act as vibrant expression of cultural heritage and social cohesion. It is considered as 'festival of lights' that symbolises the triumph of good over the evil. It is widely celebrated among different communities throughout the country showing religious and historical significance. In Hindu traditions, it is associated with the victory of Lord *Rama* over the demon king *Ravana* as narrated in one of greatest epic *Ramayana*. *Ramayana* is one of the greatest epics in Indian literature that provides spiritual and philosophical consciousness through its characters for righteous living. Thus hill people also celebrate religious events by performing folk-drama or singing emphasized narratives in form of ballads on special occasions and festivals. The cultural art in form of pictures and dance also play significant role in preserving folk-traditions as presented in pictures of *Hoi* (she-demon) and *Kayang Mala* dance.

The people of state are simple and hardworking individuals who follow conventional way of living and make tireless efforts for their survival. Folklore gives them chance to express their sentiments about their struggle or suffering in form of verses. Folklore is mostly considered as creations of indigenous and rural communities based upon their knowledge and experience towards environment. In culinary dimensions, women and elder members of family act as custodians that pass down the information in form of lullaby, proverbial sayings, stories and songs. According to the conventional image of women, they are mostly bounded to perform their duties within the domestic sphere especially near the hearth. Women are expected to be good at culinary arts to look after the other members of family. They are often considered as central locus from where all web of relations is created. The entangled web of relations and attached high expectations create suppressed sentiments in their hearts which are not able to express to others. So mostly women expressed their suppressed emotions through verses. These verses

include their sentiments about their surroundings in which they are preparing food, doing household chores, taking care of children or elders etc. The present study also tries to highlight the notions and norms attached to different roles of a woman.

In this world, the superior role that a woman can play is by giving birth to a child. She is considered as a creator and a nurturer to a living being. There are various rituals performed to celebrate the beginning of new life on earth and motherhood. The food creates the purest bond between the new born baby and mother as she provides nourishment to the soul. Thus, a mother always offers unconditional love to her children but share special bond with her daughter. She always wanted to give more to her daughter than she can afford as expressed in tale *Dhaiyan dhiyareyan ra peuka*. Daughters have special place in her natal home but they have to move to another house after marriage as part of cultural traditions in a society. The departure from natal home is always sorrowful as expressed in folksong *Charke da tand maaye charkha ch raheya*. After marriage, the role changes from daughter to daughter-in-law so as the responsibilities. Based upon the treatment, she either praises or expresses her sadness through verses. On the other hand, a son-in-law is taking advantage of situations and asks for more goods. He is associated with greed and gluttony as described in folksongs *Mirchan charperiya chaneya di daal karaari* and *Dura ra jawain, jawain braber*. The portrayal of son-in-law as selfish or greedy character in different narratives and folk-songs signify cultural stereotype in a society. The good and bad things always have the ending in life after transforming through different phases. Death is considered as ultimate ending of life and rituals associated with it expresses grief and pay tribute to deceased. Death rituals also show deep meaning in a culture as it provides period of mourning and healing. Thus, current study has tried to describe the attached myths, beliefs, superstitions, rituals and traditions attached to important phases of life i.e. birth, marriage and death in form of folk-songs, proverbs, proverbial sayings or riddles. It also tries to describe how folklore provides the emic perspective of the natives towards their gastronomy. The current study has made efforts to revive the enriched knowledge of ancestors and to explore the different aspects of folk-literature to acknowledge the intelligence of natives. Thus, the study of folklore is important to understand the intangible heritage of culture

enriched with experiences that need to be documented and preserved as it influences the tangible part of culture.

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Unveiling the Tiger-widows of Sundarbans in India: analysing the factors behind the incidence

Moitrayee Basu & Samrat Roy

ABSTRACT

A major portion of population from the fringe villages of Sundarban Reserve Forest depends upon the forest resources as their livelihood activities. Thus, proximity of human settlement and Tiger Reserve and expedition to the forest for resource collection made Human Tiger Conflict (HTC) a regular event in Sundarbans. Most of the forest-goers are landless poor people, husband being the only earner of the family, and his untimely death in tiger attack hurl the widow into deep poverty and hardship. The study attempts to analyse the factors that lead them to such incidence and their coping strategy to overcome such situation. The study focuses on 264 households of tiger widows spreading over 11 villages that are near to the forest having greater population of tiger-widows, i.e. Kultali and Gosaba block of South 24 Parganas. Both primary and secondary data are being used for the study.

Keywords: *Tiger-widows, human-tiger conflict, livelihood, forest-resource, livelihood strategy, ostracize.*

1. Introduction

Along the Sundarban coastal areas, where the dense forest passes into the mangrove swamp, especially the southern region is enclosed with scores of wild animals and estuaries filled with crocodiles which are virtually uninhabited. This area acts as the last preserve of Royal Bengal Tiger and site of tiger conservation project and considered as a 'World Heritage Site'. During 2011-12, about 81 tigers were trapped by camera trap analysis conducted by World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Wildlife Institute of India (WII). However, the latest tiger census, 2022 indicates that the Indian Sundarbans has a population of 101 tigers which is a steady trend of increase from the 88 tigers in the 2018 census. Another encouraging fact that is emerging through ongoing census, 2025 that the

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number of endangered species along with tiger are gradually increasing in South 24 Parganas.

This apex predator requires about 5-10 square kilometres to roam around and 7.5 kgs of meat every day. Aquatic life acts as the preliminary source of about 17.5 per cent of the tiger's food supply (Naha et. al, 2016). Wherever wild tiger populations survive, and encounter landscapes dominated by humans, conflicts happen specifically in the surrounded areas of the Sundarban Reserve Forest. Natural disasters like cyclone, sea-level rise affect the forest and the wildlife in Sundarban detrimentally, as a result the tiger moves closer to village in search of food (Bhattacharya, 2012). Sometimes the tiger's invasion into the villages causes massive threat to the localities and the cattle become easy prey. Often wood-cutters, fishermen and honey collectors fall prey to tigers as they venture deep inside the forest for their livelihood. This livelihood dependence on the forest resources, intersects the incessant human tiger conflicts (HTC) worsening the risks for indigent communities. These intersects are intensified by climate change, governance restrictions and socioeconomic pressures, creating vicious cycle where habitat loss drives tigers into human spaces, while hardship pushes people deeper into forests.

The recent, increasing conflicts between human and tigers are due to remarkable growth of human populations in the forest is one of the reasons (Chatterjee, 2023). Human deaths due to human-tiger conflict (HTC)¹ are fluctuating from a few per year to potentially over 36 (Naha et al., 2016), though many attacks go unreported to authorities, making actual count difficult. Post 2020 cyclones like Amphan, Yaas united with COVID-19 induced reverse migration, have increased forest-dependency and HTC. HTC has resulted in 664 deaths from 1985-2008 with 31 deaths post 2020, mostly in forests (Pathak et.al., 2025). Conservation policies like Sundarban Reserve Forest restrict access, charges fines varied from INR 300 to 4,000 and deny compensation for entries without permits, criminalising livelihoods and fostering under-reporting and trespassing.

After the death in tiger attack the family of the victim hurls into deep poverty and hardships as men typically serve as the sole-earners, engaging into high-risk activities like fishing, crab-collection, honey-collection etc. in the forest. Their widows face a triple blow- locally stigmatised and ostracised as tiger widow (Bagh-Bidhoba) or husband eaters (swami-khejo in Bengali); sudden loss of the breadwinner resulting immediate loss of income and lack of support or no support

from the government pushes the families into deeper poverty forcing children into same high-risk forest dependency.

These conflicts also create a threat of trauma, and stigma to the tiger widows who face the divine curse of Bonobibi, causing isolation, higher stigma scores (65.90 vs. 35.86 for normal widows) and mental health issues (44% diagnosed and 14.8% major depression, 5.5% PTSD) (Chowdhury et al, 2016).

This landscape requires holistic interventions that view Sundarban as an allied human-nature system prioritising equity to reduce conflicts and build resilience.

So, the study focuses on:

1. What are the locational factors leading to such human-tiger conflict resulting into deep hardship of their widows?
2. What are the socioeconomic factors leading them to the incidence of becoming a tiger widow?
3. What are the strategies they adopt to survive in the situation or for betterment of their condition?

2. Objectives

1. To identify the locational, social and economic factors behind the incidence of tiger widows (TW)²
2. To identify the strategies adopted by them to survive in the vulnerable situation.

3. Methods

Based on a pilot study conducted on April 2023 several villages were visited (Table 3) afterwards. A structured questionnaire has been used as a tool to conduct the survey. The questionnaire has covered the required domains that are needed to answer the research questions. 264 Households from 11 villages out of Kultali and Gosaba block interviewed along with interviews of some key informants. Selection of the households for the purpose of the interview are only those who were willing to participate.

3.1 Data sources

Both primary and secondary data sources are used for the study. Secondary data sources that include various departments of the state and

central government, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Block Development Offices (BDOs), forest ranger offices and published and unpublished reports, articles, thesis to different non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The major sources of secondary data are as follows in the details:

- Census of India 2001 and 2011, Office of the Registrar General of India (ORGI), National Statistical Office (NSO) (Migration in India 2020-2021) and Village Directory.
- District Statistical Handbook of South 24 Parganas, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics (B.A.E. & S.), Department of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of West Bengal: The B.A.E. & S. gathers wide range of data sets from socioeconomic infrastructure to climatic data from different governmental sources and publishes a handbook for all districts of West Bengal. A handbook of South 24 parganas district provides data up to Community Development (C.D. Blocks) levels.

Along with these, other important sources are Department of Sundarban Affairs (DoSA), Government of West Bengal; 19th and 20th Livestock Census, Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GoI.

Primary data are collected through field investigation. Structured questionnaire schedule are used to collect data. A total of 264 households (HHs) are surveyed. The survey was conducted in three phases: in April 2023; August 2024 and in June 2025.

3.2 Sampling design:

Sundarbans is the largest deltaic region in the world and fringed over 105 islands with a labyrinth of rivers, rivulets and creeks. The Indian side of Sundarban is the southernmost part of the delta mainly in the coastal districts of West Bengal namely South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas (Arbesi Block only). The Dampier-Hodges line separates Sundarban from rest of the state.

The North 24 Parganas Sundarban shared the international border with Bangladesh, separated by rivers like Kalindi, Raimangal and Harinbanga. A small portion of the reserve lies in North 24 Parganas (Arbesi Block) while the most of it is in South 24 Parganas.

So, the sample for the study focuses on South 24 Parganas.

Table 1: Protected Area (National Park) of South 24 Parganas

Protected Area (National Park)	Area (in Sq.Kms.)	Flagship Species	District
Sundarban National Park	1330.10	Tiger	South 24 Parganas
Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary	362.40	Tiger	South 24 Parganas

As per Census Data 2011, the South 24 Parganas district administrative profile is divided sub-division wise that includes five major sub-division of South 24 Parganas like Alipore sub-division, Baruipur sub-division, Canning sub-division, Diamond Harbour sub-division and Kakdwip sub-division.

C.D. blocks in accordance with the sub-divisions which are near to forest having greater population of tiger-victims were selected for the study.

Table 2: District Administrative Population (Census, 2011)

Sub-division	C.D. Blocks	Mouzas	Inhabited Villages	No. of Households (HHs)
Baruipur sub-division	Kultali	46	43	45099
Canning sub-division	Gosaba	51	50	58197

Census villages are considered as a least geographical unit of sampling, and a respondent in a household within a census village is considered as a least social unit.

11 villages from these two C.D. Blocks were selected for the study based on proximity to the forest and increased number of tiger attacks as presented in the news from where 264-household data of the tiger attack victims have been collected to conduct the study. These villages are:

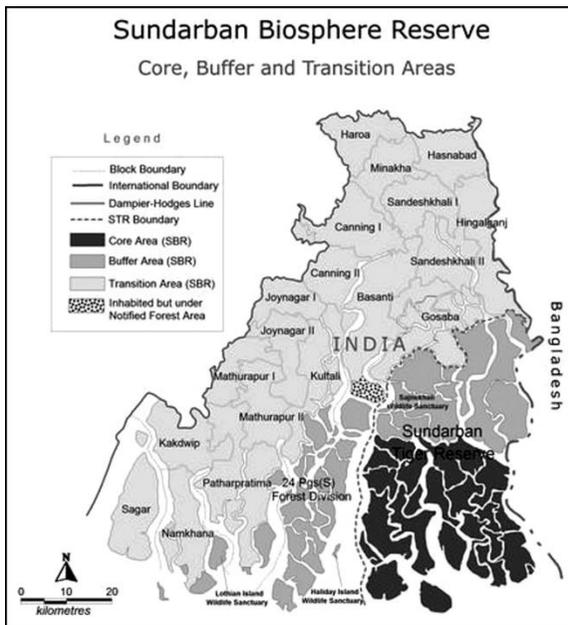
Table 3

Blocks	Villages	Nearest Town	Distance from Nearest Town (in Kms)	No. of Household (Surveyed)
Gosaba	Lahiripur	Canning	120	33
	Pakhiralay	Canning	49	12
	Kumirmari	Canning	107	35
	Chhota Mollakhali	Canning	90	39
	Satjelia	Canning	76	31
Kultali	Deulbari	Jaynagar	33	46
	Katamari	Jaynagar	30	8
	Kaikhali	Jaynagar	40	3
	Purba Gurguria	Jaynagar	37	25
	Gopalganj	Jaynagar	35	14
	Dakshin Durgapur	Jaynagar	31	18

Source: Field Survey

The no. of HHs surveyed out of the total affected HHs (tiger attack victims/ tiger-widows) is considered in the study.

Plate 1



Source: Geographical Review. 105. 10.1111/j.1931-0846.2015.12101.x.

4. Discussions

Factors behind the incidence of Tiger-widow

In rural India, agriculture forms the main livelihood option making this the backbone of the economy (Kumar & Parappurathu, 2013) and Sundarban is no exception to it. However, the natives often face consequential challenges based on their socio-economic conditions and geographical location. The rural locales have a substantial lack of access to clean water, sanitation and healthcare services. This leads them to the poor health conditions creating hindrance to engage in rural activities. Also, they encounter difficulties in utilizing economic opportunities (Saif-Ur-Rahman et al., 2018).

The communities residing in the delta always infiltrated forest to gather forest resources for survival. Many people residing in the rural areas of Global South, forests are intricately woven into their social cohesion, their livelihoods and their well-being. Estimates of forest depended people's count vary but Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN report that around 1.3 billion people (FAO, 2014) are dependent on forest or forest products for their livelihoods; whereas world bank puts this figure at 1.6 billion (World Bank, 2001) which includes 350 million people who depends on dense forest for their daily means (Miller & Hajjar, 2020).

Such grazing leads to frequent human-animal conflict and many lose their lives in tiger attacks. Even though the deaths by tiger attacks have increased, the full extent of the problem is unknown. A large proportion of such deaths go unreported because of a legal conundrum. Access to the Indian Sundarbans is dependent on permits issued by local forest officials. However, many locals are forced to enter the forest illegally because they cannot afford these expensive permits. To avoid being harassed by forest guards, families of tiger victims who entered the forest illegally refrain from officially reporting the mishaps.

Women who lose their husbands to tiger attacks become 'tiger widows'. They are believed to be ill omen and are ostracized as '*swami khejos*' (Jalais, 2004) (husband eaters in Bengali). Tiger attack widows (*bagh bidhoba*) are often prevented from undertaking the traditional occupations of the islands—agriculture, fishing and crab collection. To make matters worse, those who had entered the forests without permission, if they get killed by the tiger attacks, it disqualifies the family from availing financial compensation from the government.

Consequently, the widows face the immediate blow of societal as well as financial traumas.

So, the study tried to find out the economic, social and locational factors which led them to the incidence of tiger widow.

4.1 Locational factors

Several accidents happened in those villages which are nearer to the Sundarban Reserve Forest, the closer the proximity to the forest the more the likelihood of human-tiger conflict. These remote villages have limited opportunities, making people heavily dependent on natural resources of the forest including fish, crab, honey, and firewood. So, interactions between humans and tigers are frequent, resulting in fatalities.

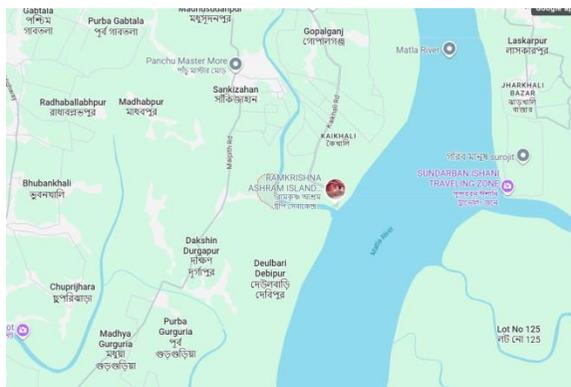
Kultali block

Kultali CD block is situated in the central part of the Indian Sundarbans region and bordered to the south by the Sundarbans National Park and the South 24 Parganas South Forest Division. Multiple villages like Deulbari-Debipur, Purba Gurguria, Dakshin Durgapur near the Ajmalmari Forest Block of South 24 Parganas. These villages are separated from the forest by a narrow creek called Makri.

Kaikhali, Katamari and Gopalganj village contain the Dorabagda Mangrove Patch which is part of the larger mangrove ecosystem that forms the Sundarbans.

The villages studied from Kultali Block:

Plate 2



Source: Google Earth; Field Sites in Kultali Block.

Gosaba block

Gosaba block within the Sundarban forest is difficult terrain because villages in the Sundarbans are spread across numerous islands and are in constant flux due to changing river channels and land erosion. The proximity to the forest makes residents of these villages vulnerable to natural disasters and human-wildlife conflicts, such as tiger attacks.

Based on their geographical location the key villages which shares the border with the dense forest are Kumirmari, one of the last frontiers of the human habitation before the core area starts; Lahiripur and Satjelia are located near the border; Pakhiralay situated in the Satjalia gram panchayat area, this village is a well-known destination for ecotourism, is on the edge of the forest also a part of the buffer zone area which is the part of this study.

Plate 3



Source: Google Earth; Field Sites in Gosaba Block

4.2 Economic factors

The economic factors considered here are family income of the households, land holding by the households, work and work status and number of dependents.

Table 3: Family income

Family Income (Annual)	Code	Percentage	Frequency
<12000	1	1.14	3
12000-36000	2	32.58	86
36000-60000	3	41.67	110
60000-120000	4	13.64	36
>120000	5	10.97	29
Total		100	264

Source: Field Survey

The monthly income of the households varies from minimum of Rs.1,000 to maximum of Rs.10,000. The median income or point of income distribution, gives a more accurate representation of average monthly income of the family. Almost 41.67% households earn Rs.3000 as monthly income and only 10.97% households earn more than 10,000 as income. The rural areas of South 24 Parganas having estimated monthly income in the year 2011-12, more than Rs.10000 is 29.30% (indiastat.districts); 29.36% having monthly income less than Rs.5,000 whereas in the sample survey it shows 75.39% of the households having monthly income less than Rs.5,000.

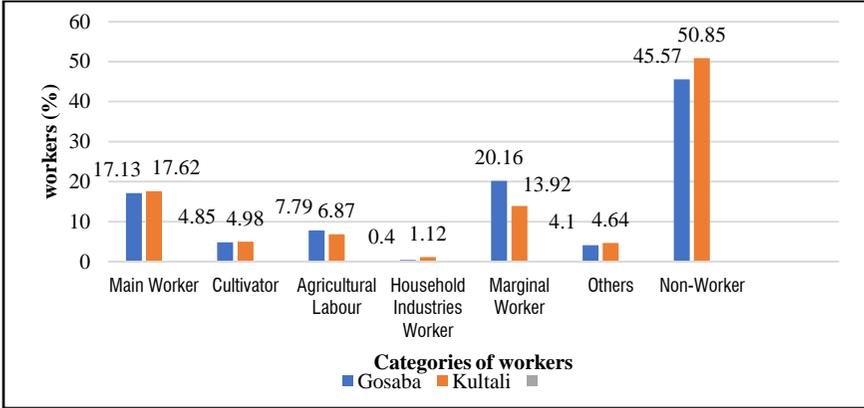
This infers that the HHs surveyed are highly vulnerable in their income status.

Worker and work status:

According to Census 2011, the total number of workers in Sundarban is 1.7 million and the work participation rate (WPR) is 38%, whereas the national and West Bengal (WB) averages are 39.8% and 38.1% respectively. About 59% of workers are engaged in farming (Census, 2011) and 33% are engaged in fishing (B.A.E. & S, 2013) in Sundarban.

Within the total population of Sundarban Kultali and Gosaba block the work force distribution looks like:

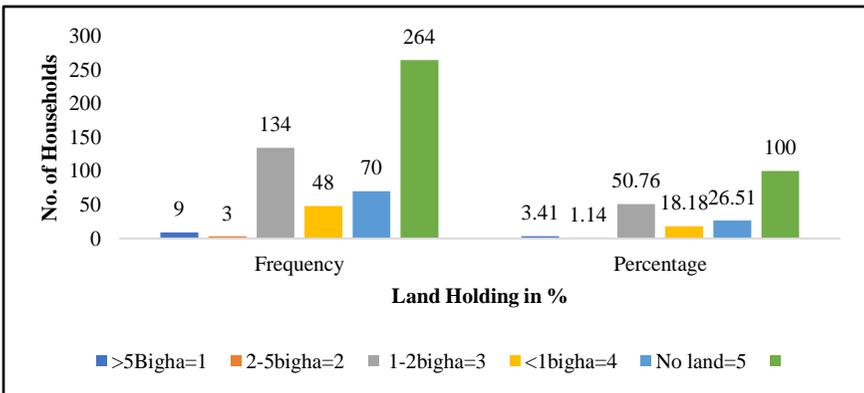
Table 4: Classification of workers in Gosaba and Kultali (Census, 2011)



In the sample of 264 households, it has been seen that 14.68% are agricultural households including both cultivator and agricultural labour whereas, 53.79% were marginal workers and 18.56% were dependent on fishing and farming for their livelihoods.

Also, landholding in Sundarban is primarily marginal in size class 63% distributed among the 86% owners. The increasing population in Sundarban from 3.8 million in 2001 to 4.43 million in 2011 at a geometric growth rate of 1.65% each year, resulting in huge pressure on cultivable land, affecting conversion in settlements, aquaculture (Hazra et al., 2010). Also, due to river erosion cultivable lands were lost (Ghosh, 2012), hence the net cultivable area is decreased. The landholding distribution of the sample looks like:

Table 5: Landholding percentage



Household size: Household size indicates the family burden on the earning member. Various studies (Massey 1990, Stark and Lucas 1988) suggest that large families diversify the labour portfolio through migration. In developing nations more siblings put the responsibility on the elder. The median household size of the sample is 6, whereas the mean household size of West Bengal is 4.6 (Census, 2011). In India, men are the main earner of a family, and their death pushes the widow and children in hardship and suffering.

Dependency ratio: This ratio indicates the economic burden on the country's current working population (aged 15-60 years). A high ratio reflects slow economic growth and placing a greater strain on the working class. In India this ratio will be approximately 543 in 2026, which means the number of dependents on every 1000 working age individuals (Saha, 2025). Whereas, in West Bengal that has been projected as 478 for 2026, implying a better ratio in comparison with the whole of India.

But in the household sample of 264, the median ratio has come out as 2000 which denotes that every working individual carries the responsibility of at least two people, making the scenario much worse.

Livestock: Livestock plays a crucial source of livelihood globally, providing food, income and employment opportunities especially for rural communities and acting as a vital safety net and asset for the poor. Women's substantial involvement in dairy production underscores the sector's importance in gender inclusion and economic development (Priyadarshini et al., 2024). Overall, the livestock sector is vital for increasing farmer incomes, supporting agricultural practices, and providing diverse socio-economic benefits in India.

Like many South Asian and Sub-Saharan countries, India uses Tropical Livestock Unit (TLU)³, a standardized unit to measure and compare between different livestock species (Rothman-Ostrow et al., 2020). Specific conversion coefficients are applied which allows the livestock population into a single comparable unit. TLU has been determined as:

Tropical Livestock Index = (0.7*Cattle) + (0.1*Sheep) + (0.1*Goat)+ (0.01*Chicken) + (0.03*Duck)

The latest data about livestock in West Bengal is available from 20th Livestock Census, conducted in 2019 where it has seen an increase of 23% in livestock population in West Bengal from the 19th Census,

making it the State having the highest increase in livestock population in India.

Whereas in the sample HHs in Sundarbans have the median TLU score of 0.06 and around 36.74% HHs not having any livestock. Mere 9.84% HHs have TLU score of more than 1.

4.3 Social factors

Social factors lead people to access to quality education, access to healthcare services and safe housing, sanitation and access to drinking water. These factors influence a person's overall well-being by shaping their access to resources and affecting their opportunities. Here, the focus given to access to educational and health facilities as these two are acting as core social determinants of health (SDOH). With the help of these two factors people can foster improved socioeconomic status, enhance health literacy, promote social cohesion and ensure more equitable access to opportunities.

Access to educational facilities

Kultali Block has two government high schools across 43 inhabited villages.

- i. Jamtala Bhagaban Chandra High School (H.S.)
- ii. Baikunthapur High School (H.S.)

In 2005, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar College, the only college in Kultali Block, was established.

Gosaba Block also have two Government sponsored schools:

- i. Gosaba RR Government Sponsored Institution UP [Upper Primary]
- ii. Kumirmari High School

In 1961, Sundarban Hazi Desarat College was established in Pathankhali.

According to the 2011 census, the total number of literate persons in the Kultali CD block was 134,101 (69.37% of the population over 6 years) out of which males numbered 78,601 (79.01% of the male population over 6 years) and females numbered 55,500 (59.14% of the female population over 6 years).

The gender disparity (the difference between female and male literacy rates) was 19.86%. Kultali CD block had the lowest female literacy and highest gender disparity among all CD blocks of South 24 Parganas

district. Whereas literacy in South 24 Parganas district was 77.51% and literacy in West Bengal was 77.08% in 2011.

- The literacy rate of Deulbari Debipur village is about 56.90%, with male literacy at 64.64% and female literacy at 48.60% and out of the widows interviewed in the village 28 are illiterate making literacy rate of the sample as 39.13%.
- The literacy rate of Katamari village is about 52.31%, with male literacy at 61.44% and female literacy at 42.52%. But out of samples of 8 widows 5 were illiterate making literacy ratio as 37.5%.
- The literacy rate of Kaikhali village is about 56.25%, with male literacy at 68.25% and female literacy at 43.73% and out of the widows interviewed in the village all are illiterate making literacy rate of the sample as 0%.
- The literacy rate of Gopalganj village is about 55.49%, with male literacy at 65.36% and female literacy at 44.99%. In the sample the literacy rate remains as 28.57%.
- The literacy rate of Purba Gurguria village is about 70.98%, with male literacy at 79.12% and female literacy at 62.33%. In the case of this village the literacy rate is a bit better among the tiger widows (sample) at 52%. It is because the overall female literacy rates in this village are better than other sample villages in Kultali Block.
- The literacy rate of Dakshin Durgapur village is about 55.97%, with male literacy at 63.34% and female literacy at 48.37%. In the sample the literacy rate remains as 44.44%.

As per the 2011 census, the total number of literates in Gosaba CD block was 172,781 (78.98% of the population over 6 years) out of which males numbered 96,642 (86.40% of the male population over 6 years) and females numbered 76,139 (71.22% of the female population over 6 years). The gender disparity ratio (the difference between female and male literacy rates) was 15.18%.

As per 2011 Census India, literacy in South 24 Parganas district was 77.51%. Literacy in West Bengal was 77.08% in 2011.

- The literacy rate of Kumirmari village is about 71.05%, with male literacy at 79.14% and female literacy at 62.65%. In the sample the literacy rate remains 42.86%.
- The literacy rate of Lahiripur village is about 77.52%, with male literacy at 82.92% and female literacy at 71.95%. In the sample the literacy rate remains as 33.33%. out of the sample of 33 widows only 11 were able to read and write.

- The literacy rate of Pakhiralay village is about 68.09%, with male literacy at 74.53% and female literacy at 61.47%. In the sample the literacy rate remains as 8.33% because only one tiger widow interviewed had the primary level of education.
- The literacy rate of Satjelia village is about 71.60%, with male literacy at 77.75% and female literacy at 65.13%. In the sample the literacy rate remains as 45.16%.
- The literacy rate of Chhota MollaKhali village is about 68.63%, with male literacy at 75.08% and female literacy at 62.11%. In the sample the literacy rate remains as 57.14%.

Access to a lesser number of schools and colleges affecting the literacy rates and the distance between the sample villages and the schools are quite pronounced, hindering the prospect of education level.

Access to health facilities

In 2014, the Kultali CD block had one rural hospital at Jamtala having 25 beds which is the major Government facility for the block (District Statistical Handbook 2014 South 24 Parganas).

- Four primary health centres and 2 NGOs/ private nursing homes with a total of 62 beds and 10 doctors (excluding private bodies).
- There is only one maternity and child welfare centre which is 10 kms away from Purba Gurguria Village. Consequently, villagers face troubles to access the basic healthcare facilities.
- Twelve villages have medicine shops.
- Seven villages have no medical facilities.
- Out of the sample villages only two villages Katamari and Kaikhali are having primary healthcare units. So, other four sample villages not having that facility making them more vulnerable.

In 2014, Gosaba CD block had one rural hospital, two primary health centres and 1 NGO/ private nursing home with a total 71 beds and 7 doctors (excluding private bodies) (District Statistical Handbook 2014 South 24 Parganas).

- Only three villages have primary healthcare centres.
- Nine villages have maternity and child welfare centres but none of these are in the sample villages.
- Only 19 villages have medicine shops in the Gosaba Block out of 172 inhabited villages.
- Two villages have no medical facilities.

Due to these disastrous medical facilities available, natives are heavily dependent on quack practitioners in the sample villages or else they must travel to Kolkata for any kind of medical emergencies. Specially, in case the villages sharing borders with the forest lack of medical facilities make them more vulnerable.

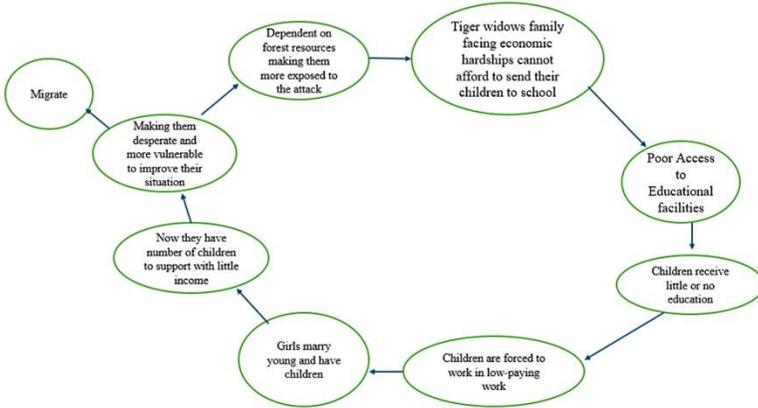
After discussing on the locational disadvantage and the socio-economic conditions it is evident that due to unavailability of opportunities or basic facilities, they are forced to go to forest to collect resources for their sustenance. Environmental income contributes to poverty prevention, through support to current consumption and sometimes through gap filling and functioning as a safety net (Velded et. al, 2007). For the tiger widows the dependency to forest resource-based income increases after they lost their husbands. With not much education, skill and opportunity left they compel to choose 'jongol kora' (forest-based living) as their profession.

Out-migration is one of the most prominent outcomes as their strategy to cope with their situation. Out of the survey approximately 65% households are such wherefrom any member of the household has migrated in search of their livelihood. Three widows in my study, moved to Kolkata in search of work and currently they are working as house help or as a cooking assistant in hotel, and their children are in custody of their maternal grandparents.

Remarriage is not at all encouraged as they are held responsible for their husband's death. In some cases, they are so attached to their deceased husband that they do not want to replace that with someone else. In my study, out of all those who have been interviewed only two young widows who were in their mid-20s married again, to a widowed man who also have children from his deceased wife. So, the chance of remarriage is rare (less than 1%).

To cope with this crisis, they instigated their children to discontinue their schooling and send them to work for the survival of the family. This had led to high rate of dropouts from school and increase in child labour. Many tiger widows will arrange their daughters' early marriage (sometimes at the age of nine) not only to secure their financial condition but also to ensure their social security (Chowdhury et al. 2014). It has been reported that the Sundarban girls are at risk, especially of being trafficked to other states of India (Gupta, 2010).

Plate 4: Vicious trap of the incidence of tiger-widow



5. Conclusion

The Sundarban is environmentally fragile region. Its remote location and habitation of socioeconomically backward people demand a significant role by the Government for the development of the region. Equitable access and distribution of resources, employment opportunities and protection of people are essential prerequisites for this region, then only it would be possible to hinder them from going to the forest. Sundarban is a world biosphere reserve having a global exposure; thus, various non-governmental organisations at national and international level relentlessly work for the development of the region.

NGOs have started up schools for the children of tiger victims and skill development training programmes for the locales. Government has also taken initiatives for creating livelihood options by providing them with livestock and conducting training programs like, building artificial bee hives or fishing in ponds etc. whereas, rural livelihood security programmes like MGNREGA, falls flat on face.

Government also announced one-time compensation of INR 5,00,000 for the tiger-widows and employment of any family member if the deceased had the permit to enter the forest; still only one widow have received the compensation while two widows have got a job in the forest department. Others were entangled in the process of getting it.

Nature Environment Wildlife Society (NEWS) developed SAIME⁴ (Sustainable Aquaculture in Mangrove Ecosystems) model for Sundarban which earns FAO recognition as this model will benefit the

community by promoting climate-adaptive approaches and fostering empowerment, including women's cooperatives. Beyond promoting livelihoods, the model contributes to carbon isolation and overall mangrove conservation. It also focuses on improving market access through branding, certification and farmer institutions leading to substantial increase in their profits. But again, the problem lies in the implementation and monitoring of the model.

All these make them attached to their primary activity as livelihood strategy which is forest dependency, no job diversification and maximising tolerance limit. These lead them to stay in the loop of the victimhood.

Notes

1. HTC is a situation where there is an overlap between human populations and tiger territories. In Indian side of Sundarban increase in the number of tiger as well as human population increases the chance of conflict even more.
2. Tiger Widow (TW) are those women who lost their husbands in tiger attacks and faces social ostracization and hurl into deep poverty.
3. TLU is a standard measure to compare different types and sizes of livestock in tropical regions which has been proposed by FAO and National Livestock Mission (India) also uses TLU as a measuring unit to provide veterinary support and feed subsidies.
4. SAIME is model earned global recognition from FAO which blends mangrove conservation with profitable, sustainable shrimp farming, ensuring 5-30% mangrove cover in ponds, using natural mangrove litter for feed boosting coastal resilience along with farmer's profit by 100%.

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Ethical foundations in the Bhagavad Gita: a unified framework for counselling psychology and Indian jurisprudence

Ruchi Gupta & Kartik Sharma

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the fragmentation of ethics in modern professional practice and provides a solution to unify them into a single ethical framework, using the Bhagavad Gita as the foundation for both Counselling Psychology and Indian Jurisprudence. Using a systematic legal textual analysis, the study links the underlying principle of Dharma (Righteous Duty) to the scientific principles of evidence-based Psychology regarding Emotion Regulation. The Study supports the idea that the Gita's ideal of Sthitaprajna (One of Steady Wisdom) can be equated with the Self-Regulatory aspects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and that the Gita's idea of Nishkama Karma (Action Without Attachment) creates a strong Psychological foundation for Judicial Impartiality. This research provides the link between Neeti (Procedural Guidelines) and Nyaya (Real Justice). The Research re-defines the Gita's concept of Svadharma (Prescribed Duty) not as a sectarian point of view, but as a secular concept, beneficial for mankind. Therefore, the Research supports the idea that the Gita is the source of Secular Moral Science.

Keywords: *Bhagavad Gita, Counselling Psychology, Indian Jurisprudence, Dharma, MBSR, Restorative Justice.*

1. Introduction

Today's view of professional ethics from the perspectives of Counselling Psychology and Jurisprudence is facing the greatest crisis in the purpose of both professions. As both groups of professionals are experiencing, an increase in compassion fatigue (i.e., becoming psychologically desensitised to the pain of others), experiencing an increase in ethical desensitisation to their professional responsibilities, and high levels of burnout, they find themselves working within a mechanistic approach that is driven by purely procedural metrics rather than on the basis of the

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substantive well-being of humankind. This fragmentation of self (whereby the person's professional identity as a member of an organisation becomes completely separated from their ethical beliefs) has left an empty space that has yet to be filled by modern secular theories. The Bhagavad Gita has emerged to fill that void, as it addresses not only issues of spirituality and religious philosophy but also offers an advanced understanding of conflict resolution, which exists in our minds and in our society, particularly in the age of materialistic beliefs.

Historically, due to its classification as a religious text, the Gita has seen limited benefit in non-religious government actions as well as its application to therapy. But with new jurisprudence, the previous view that the Gita could only be seen through a religious lens has been dismantled. The judgement by the Madras High Court in 2025 on *Arsha Vidya Parampara Trust v. Union of India* ruled, in a historic decision, that the Gita is not a sectarian type of sacred text, but instead is a compilation of Naitik Vigyan teachings regarding Moral Science. According to the Court's comments, the truths taught by the Gita regarding duty and resiliency are not limited to a particular religion, but are part of an eternal, internal and universal truth about people. Therefore, the Gita forms a part of the larger Bharatiya Civilisation, and is not the property of a particular religion (*Arsha Vidya Parampara Trust v. Union of India*, 2025). This affirmation by the judiciary is of great importance for the reason that it frees this scripture from the confines of religious formalism and situates the text as a legitimate source of ethical jurisprudence of a secular nature. This legal recognition builds upon a robust constitutional legacy. The first case to explore the difference between Dharma and Religion was *A.S. Narayana Deekshitulu v. State of A.P.* (1996), a landmark decision by the Supreme Court of India, where Justice Hansaria referenced the Gita to state that Dharma refers to that which sustains society. Dharma is a secular code of conduct and is therefore essential for building community and joining together; it is not the same as the private religious life (*A.S. Narayana Deekshitulu v. State of A.P.*, 1996).

In terms of psychology, the Gita discusses the same issue of paralysis that many professionals today find themselves in. The Gita begins with a battle scene on Kurukshetra. Arjuna (the main character) feels the stress of despair, an emotional state similar to depression and cognitive dissonance that develops when someone suffers from a situation or has conflicting ideas about themselves and their role in life. Through his actions, he is faced with two conflicting ideas: his duty as a soldier and

loyalty to his family. Krishna's message did not include something religious or platitudinal, but rather, it included cognitive restructuring principles. This concept is also used in modern Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). Through the teaching of equanimity, the ability to remain constant through success and failure, the Gita gives the practitioner emotional controls that will prevent the practitioner from experiencing burnout (Sharma, 2014).

This paper, therefore, establishes the main assertion that the Bhagavad Gita articulates a comprehensive unified Dharmic Framework which synthesises both an individual's internal psychological aspiration of Samatvam (achieving inner tranquillity) and an external legal objective of Nyaya (manifestation of fairness). Although Amartya Sen (2009) has made a clear division between Neeti (rules as defined by the state) and Nyaya (fairness), the paper argues that this dichotomy does not exist in the Bhagavad Gita. By integrating both concepts, we can state that without a solid base of discipline through yoga, one cannot achieve true fairness (Nyaya). The principle of Nishkam Karam (selfless action) serves as the bridge between these fields by providing both a therapeutic method of addressing anxiety, as well as the basis of the requirement of impartiality in legal proceedings (Bhatia et al., 2013). By combining these concepts, we can create a strong ethical foundation that is based on culture, and in addition to that, one that adheres to the principles of the Law and Constitution.

2. The psychological paradigm: from conflict to clarity

The categorisation of the Bhagavad Gita in terms of religion, and solely as a religious book, may be prevalent; however, when evaluated for its narrative structure, it can be seen that the Bhagavad Gita is an advanced form of psychotherapy. The conversation between Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra is one of the first examples of documented crisis intervention, and it goes beyond philosophy and engages with a psychosocially influenced individual experiencing acute emotional distress. Using contemporary clinical theories, specifically Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and the Process Model of Emotion Regulation perspicuity, this paper will provide insight into the applicability of the findings as a source of Bharatiya Manovigyan.

2.1 The cognitive crisis of Arjuna: a clinical analysis

Chapter one of the Bhagwat Gita, titled “Arjuna-Vishada Yoga”, gives an in-depth view of all the ways that Arjuna’s mental state is suffering from. Rather than serving just as a structural element of the story, the manner in which Arjuna presents his condition mirrors what modern mental health professionals would consider clinical indicators of an Anxiety Attack that has also developed an acute depressive reaction. The combination of physical, emotional and cognitive symptoms makes up the full picture of a syndromic presentation of panic disorders commonly diagnosed by today’s clinicians.

Throughout verses 1.29 and 1.30, we learn that Arjuna is experiencing deep somatic and emotional symptoms. He states that his body shakes because of extreme anxiety before the war (due to the fear of fighting against his family members), as evidenced by his limbs giving way and his mouth becoming dry. He further indicates that he feels a burning sensation on his skin and is unable to support himself. This describes a very high degree of arousal in the autonomic nervous system, a classic fight-or-flight response to the trauma he is experiencing. However, ironically, Arjuna feels frozen due to the overwhelming fear of the consequences his family would face if he were to fight against them.

At the centre of Arjuna’s mental disorder is a cognitive distortion. Beck (1979) referred to a Negative Cognitive Triad, which is defined as the negative attitude that individuals have towards themselves, the world and their future. According to Beck, individuals who exhibit this Negative Cognitive Triad are considered to have a depressive disorder and would include Arjuna within this definition of depressive disorder (Beck et al., 1979).

- 1) **A Negative view of oneself (Personalisation):** Arjuna expresses his self-perception as that of being the most significant contributor or reason for all the potential destruction that could possibly occur due to his actions in the war, and he ignores the political complexities of the war. In contemplating this action, Arjuna asks himself, “What will I enjoy after I kill the sons of Dhritarashtra?” (BG 1.36), effectively creating an anticipatory guilt that he carries prior to the actual battle even occurring.
- 2) **A negative view of the world (negative filtering):** Arjuna has chosen not to recognise the justice or Dharmic righteousness of his cause for entering into this conflict. He defines the war as an action

that will destroy all the family traditions of the people of Kula, through subsequent civil chaos (BG 1.40).

- 3) A negative view of the future (catastrophizing):** Arjuna believes there is an absolute sense of doom awaiting him and his family: “The family destroyers will certainly go to hell” (BG 1.44). His catastrophic future scenario includes the complete collapse of the social order; that all the women in the Kula are going to be corrupted, and that the forefathers will fall from heaven.

According to Sharma (2014), what Krishna sees in Arjuna is not cowardice, but rather Karpanya-dosha (the fault of being a coward); a state of mental collapse characterised by when Moha (delusion/attachment) takes full control of Buddhi (intellect/discrimination). Therefore, Krishna must intervene with knowledge-based methods instead of using other related approaches or administering religious rituals.

2.2 Cognitive restructuring and REBT: Krishna’s Socratic method

Chapter 2 shows Krishna acting as a guideline or support for the Rational Emotive and Cognitive Behavioural Therapies. Unlike other counsellors who might validate how a client feels, Krishna is an example of what Ellis termed a Directive Therapist. This type of therapist will confront clients about the accuracy of their thinking; this is what Ellis called Disputation of Irrational Beliefs (Bhatia et al., 2013).

We can clearly align the ABC Model created by Albert Ellis, who is credited with developing Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), with the dialogue of the Gita. With this structure, we see how Krishna directs Arjun in overcoming his emotional paralysis via di-rective guidance to take constructive action. The A-B-C Model in the Gita operates as:

- A (Activating Event): The impending war.
- B (Beliefs): Arjuna’s irrational belief that “Killing kinsmen is an absolute sin that will destroy the social order and send me to hell.”
- C (Consequences): Anxiety, despondency, and refusal to fight.

Krishna focuses on converting Arjuna’s beliefs (B) regarding the matter, presenting Arjuna with an immediate cognitive jolt by asking him where he obtained the impurity that he was exhibiting (Gita 2.2). In order to deconstruct Arjuna’s logical arguments, Krishna questions him in a

manner similar to that of Socrates. When Arjuna demonstrates sorrow at the thought of his teachers dying, Krishna shows him the error in his reasoning by saying that he is mourning those with whom he should not be mourning while speaking with wisdom (Gita 2.11).

Krishna's principal means of reframing his argument was by focusing on the difference between the Deha (the body) and the Dehin (the soul or self), stating, "As a man dresses himself with new clothes, while leaving his old clothes behind, so too is the soul dressed in a new material body" (Gita 2.22). Arjuna was reframed from an identification with his temporary biological identity to an understanding of his eternal Atman (self), allowing Arjuna to decenter by perceiving the experience from a more detached, objective perspective, thereby reducing the emotional impact of death from a tragedy to a moment of transition (Jeste & Vahia, 2008).

Krishna also deals with Arjun's confusion about his roles as a Kinsmen and Warrior (Kshatriya). To address this confusion, he tells Arjuna that his obligations as a Kshatriya outweigh any personal attachment he may have towards the person he is about to fight against; "the Kshatriya is bound to fight according to the principles of Dharma" (Gita 2.31). Finding a way to resolve a conflict of roles (ambiguities), as Krishna has helped Arjuna do here, is one of the primary goals of modern occupational psychologists in preventing burnout.

2.3 Mindfulness and detached action: the mechanism of Nishkama Karma

A significant contribution of the Gita to clinical psychology is the idea of Nishkama Karma, or Action Without Attachment, which can be likened to how the concept of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction approaches similar mechanisms of stress alleviation.

Current ideas indicate that many cases of anxiety relate indirectly to a belief that one's worth as an individual depends on what happens (i.e., Outcome Dependency). As seen in Gita, verse 2.47 states: "you are entitled to do your duty, but you are not entitled to any of the results thereof" (कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन). Balasubramanian (2017) clarifies how this teaching separates the Karta (Doer) from the Bhokta (Enjoyer). When someone works toward something, there is generally a dual-cognitive process operating on both the task and the future potential results (the fruits). This dual-task interference degrades performance. By

practising Nishkama Karma, the individual focuses 100% of their attention on the process (the duty).

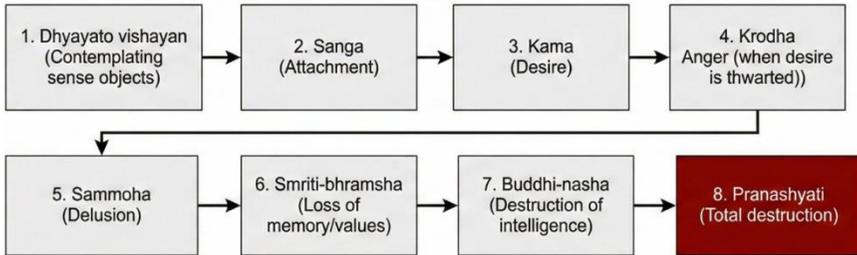
The clinical utility of this approach is backed by recent research conducted by Konduru et al. (2024), through a registered randomised controlled trial, to determine the effects of using a Gita-based intervention for homeless populations in India. The hypothesis was that the Gita's teachings about Atman (the intrinsic self-worth independent of social status) and Karma Yoga (the dignity of labour) would decrease Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) scores. The preliminary findings indicated that this culturally-adapted CBT was able to create a higher level of adherence and resilience to treatment than traditional Western models due to the fact that the therapeutic approach is consistent with the patient's existing spiritual belief system (Konduru et al., 2024).

While MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) teaches non-judgmental awareness, the Gita's teachings on Dhyana Yoga (Chapter 6) take this concept further. Krishna advises practitioners to "hold the body, head, and neck upright...looking at the tip of the nose" (Gita 6.13), which helps to anchor the practitioner's attention to avoid the wandering of one's thoughts. This practice creates a state of tranquillity where the mind becomes "like a lamp in a windless place" (Gita 6.19). This metaphor indicates the development of an extremely stable attentional state with an extremely low level of emotional reactivity and is considered the ideal state of mindfulness training.

2.4 Emotion Regulation: the process model and antecedent control

James Gross's Emotion Regulation Process Model differentiates between the strategies that are applied before an emotion occurs (i.e., antecedent-focused) compared to after an emotion has already occurred (i.e., response-focused). The Gita has clearly provided evidence that it promotes a very advanced technique of antecedent-based emotional regulation through the use of cognitive reappraisal and desire management.

The Psychological Path of Self-Destruction (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verses 62-63)



Krishna provides a causal chain for emotional collapse, known as the ‘Ladder of Fall’. This model anticipates the cognitive-appraisal theory of emotion. It asserts that anger is not a primary event but a secondary reaction to obstructed desire (attachment). Therefore, attempting to suppress anger (Response-Focused) is futile. The effective intervention is at step 1: regulating the contemplation or attentional focus. By practising Pratyahara (withdrawal of senses), the individual prevents the initial attachment from forming.

Sthitaprajna is an expression used for the individual who has attained the highest state of wisdom and understanding (situated within the context of wisdom). An individual who is situated within this state is not completely devoid of feelings, but they remain undaunted in suffering, and untainted by the pleasures of happiness (an individual who, although experiencing suffering or sadness, is still able to find joy even in that experience). In addition, the science of Emotional Granularity and Equanimity, found in many psychological studies, refers to the state of experiencing, in the absence of over-identifying one’s with one’s experience, the suffering or sadness resulting from another individual’s discontent or negative experience. Research findings regarding Healthcare Professionals suggest that the practice of Detaching with Caring while practising Empathy (regardless of the difficult circumstances faced by an individual) will help minimise the loss of Compassion Fatigue (Bhatia et al., 2013).

In the sphere of Moral Development, the Trigunas of yoga philosophy provide a unique opportunity to explore a dynamic view of self and personality through the lens of yoga, using these three modes of nature as opposed to trait-based approaches like the Big Five of Western psychology. As an example, an individual suffering from mild to moderate depression may be experiencing Tamas; therefore, a physician may focus on using Karma Yoga techniques to shift this individual into

an active state (Rajas) and ultimately to Sattva (clarity). Likewise, when considering the Gita’s philosophy of morality, the Gita offers another level of moral understanding than what Kohlberg presented, in that the Gita discusses Gunatita or a state of transcending the three modes of nature (Trigunas) and acting as a mere instrument of the Divine Will to achieve a complete dissolution of the ego and the burdens of the moral agency; this may help alleviate anxiety in individuals (Menon et al., 2021).

Table 1: Convergence of Bhagavad Gita concepts and modern psychological therapies

Modern Psychological Construct	Bhagavad Gita Concept	Mechanism of Action	Relevant Verse (Gita)
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)	<i>Jnana Yoga</i> (Yoga of Knowledge)	Identification and disputation of cognitive distortions (e.g., distinguishing Self from Body to reduce existential anxiety).	2.11
Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)	<i>Sakshi-Bhava</i> (Witness Consciousness)	Non-judgmental observation of mental states; decentering from thoughts.	14.23
Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT)	<i>Karma Yoga</i> (Nishkama Karma)	Acting according to values (<i>Dharma</i>) rather than feelings; accepting internal events without struggle.	2.47
Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT)	<i>Buddhi Yoga</i> (Yoga of Intellect)	Developing High Frustration Tolerance by removing the demand for specific outcomes (<i>Kama</i>).	2.14
Emotion Regulation (Antecedent-Focused)	<i>Sthitaprajna</i> (Steady Wisdom)	Regulating the attentional focus (<i>Dhyana</i>) to prevent the attachment-desire-anger chain.	2.62
Role Transition Therapy (IPT)	<i>Svadharm</i> (Prescribed Duty)	resolving role conflict (e.g., Kinsman vs. Warrior) by clarifying primary ethical obligations.	18.47

In conclusion, the psychological framework of the Bhagavad Gita is not merely a spiritual exhortation but a structured system of cognitive and emotional regulation. By moving the individual from despair to clarity through specific techniques of reframing, detachment, and self-regulation, it offers a timeless, evidence-based paradigm for mental health that complements and enriches modern psychotherapy.

The jurisprudential paradigm: dharma as constitutional value

A significant reconsideration of Indian law doctrine is required for the transition of the psychological internalism of the Bhagavad Gita to the jurisprudential externalism of that same text. While the modern definition of law is often based on Austin's definition of law as 'the command of the sovereign and enforced through sanctions,' in India, as exemplified by the Gita and the Dharmashastras, this definition has been inverted. The monarch is not considered the source of law; rather, he/she is considered a party to the law. In short, the Dharma serves as the 'Basic Structure' doctrine of the universe, binding all individuals, both rulers and ruled. In order to fully grasp the contemporary relevance of the Gita's lessons, one must be able to delineate the subtleties of archaic vocabulary that are often not well captured in the English equivalents. In the following section, the paper will explore how the Supreme Court of India has interpreted the Gita's ethical mandates, namely, the interrelationships between Dharma, Dandaniti (Science of Punishment), Neeti (Rules), and Nyaya (Justice), in order to construct a secular, constitutionally compatible framework of duty and justice.

3.1 Defining dharma, danda, and neeti: the Architecture of Justice

According to the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata, of which the Gita is a key philosophical, spiritual, and theological text, Dharma refers to the ideal state or principle of ethics, and has its roots in the word 'Dhri,' meaning to nourish or provide for. In this way, Dharma is seen as the law of nature, with it being the absolute moral law that nourishes and sustains the social order. The goal of Dharma is to promote the welfare and benefit of all beings, whereas Dandaniti refers to the study and practice of the tools of punishment. Ancient Indian legal thought argues for the need for punishment due to the fact that humankind's inherent nature is to exploit others through Matsya Nyaya, or the law of the fish.

Nonetheless, legal scholars such as Kautilya and Manu maintain that Danda exists solely to serve as a servant to Dharma. A King who brings punishment via the rod of punishment without following Dharma will destroy himself and his kingdom (Subha, 2022). This is a parallel to the

modern concept of Rule of Law as found in modern constitutions, including the Constitution of India. The King's (Executive's) position as King/executive does not equate him to the Law but rather establishes that he is only the executor of Dharma (the Constitution). Thus, should an executive violate Rajadharmā and harm the interests of his citizens, then that Executive, too, will no longer be legitimate or hold authority in the state as it no longer adheres to Rajadharmā. Therefore, the Gita does not encourage Arjuna to fight for the sake of violence (Danda); rather, it commands him to use Danda to reinstate Dharma after the disruption of the constitutional framework (Jois, 2010).

Furthermore, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (2009) has revitalised the distinction between Neeti and Nyaya to critique the limitations of modern legal formalism. Neeti relates to justices within an organisation and how fair procedures through which rules and their governing structures or foundations exist as an organisation. This is illustrated by the character of Arjuna's refusal to fight within Chapter 1 in that it was grounded within the principles of Neeti, as he references the principles of the Kula-dharma or set of social equity that prohibits killing one's relatives or teachers and asks Krishna, "How is it possible for me to shoot arrows against Bhishma or Drona?" (Gita 2.4). At this point in time, Arjuna is immobilised by the written laws of Neeti. Nyaya is the application or enactment of justice within reality and the resolution of acts of injustice occurring in both types of scenarios. Krishna questions Arjuna's following of his commitment to Neeti by providing him with a contextual reference for the greater principle of Nyaya in that if Arjuna were to opt out of engaging in battle by acting out of conscience (a procedural win), it would ultimately result in the establishment of tyrannical rule (a substantive loss of justice). Thus, it is stated in the Gita that the higher state of value or priority is the principle of Nyaya over the procedural vehicle of Neeti, indicating that legal formality can be less valuable than the substantive principle of justice. This is an invitation to today's Indian judges to look to the spirit of the law rather than its literal text when binding to absurd outcomes or unjust resolutions, and is consistent with the principle of purposive construction of the law, where substantive justice transcends procedural rigidity (Sen, 2009).

3.2 The secular dharma: analysis of *A.S. Narayana Deekshitulu* (1996)

Dharma's involvement within a secular constitutional system creates a doctrinal dilemma because the Constitution of India requires the State

not to take a stance on any religion. However, at the same time, the Constitution allows regulation of secular matters related to religious organisations. This argument was tested in a Supreme Court case titled *A. S. Narayana Deekshitulu v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1996). The issue before the Supreme Court was whether the Andhra Pradesh Charitable and Hindu Religious Institutions and Endowments Act, 1987 was constitutionally valid. The Act removed hereditary succession to the position of Archakas (temple priests), and thus a challenge was brought forth claiming that hereditary succession was a foundational component of religious practice and subsequently safeguarded by Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution.

The Court ruled that although religious rituals (Upasana) are protected by religion, the appointment, service conditions and succession of priests are secular activities related to religion and are, therefore, subject to State regulation under Article 25 (2)(a). The Court affirmed the established constitutional position that while religious beliefs and practices are protected, the administrative and or financial aspects of religious institutions may be controlled or regulated by the State for the purposes of social reform (*A.S. Narayana Deekshitulu v. State of A.P.*, 1996).

To clarify the distinction, the Court examined the concept of Dharma. Citing from the Bhagavad Gita and the Karanaparva of the Mahabharata, the Court concluded that Dharma is not the same as religion (pantha). In essence, Dharma refers to one's responsibilities, duties and ethical behaviour that uphold the structure of society and the welfare of all. Religion mainly deals with personal beliefs, faith or modes of worship. The quotations from Hindu scripture were used to explain the concept of dharma in an Indian civilisational context, but were not relied upon as religious authority.

The Court reiterated that secularism in India does not suggest a hostile attitude towards religions but allows for the intervention by the government to eliminate abuses of religious institutions, and to ensure that the institutions operate in accordance with the values set forth in the Constitution. The hereditary priesthood system, in which religious institutions rely upon succession from father to son, is not vital to the practice of religion and is susceptible to change to promote optimal efficiency and inclusion.

The opinion of the court shows that ethical principles derived from the traditional Indian philosophical systems can inform our construction of the Constitution and that this construction will not violate the secular and

pluralistic nature of the Constitution. Thus, it creates a framework for future legal scholarship on the duty-based ethical systems established in India.

3.3 Contemporary judicial discourse: environmental ethics, restorative justice, and secular morality

Over the last few years, we have seen an interesting development in Indian legal thought. Courts are increasingly using the ethical teachings of the Bhagavad Gita when interpreting and applying laws & other rights, particularly so in cases related to public policy, environmental management, and liability for criminal behaviour. Many recent decisions from 2024 through 2025 highlight how strongly judges are relying on these ethical principles from the Gita, a marked change relative to how incidental they were prior to this new development in legal history. In bringing together the Rule of Law and the Rule of Dharma, both are seen as being derived from the same source, the teachings from ancient Indian philosophers, a universal Moral Science that can provide the foundation for a just society.

In Environmental Jurisprudence, the Supreme Court of India has issued an important ruling in *In Re: T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad* (2024). This case involved the conservation of Sacred Groves (Orans) in Rajasthan, which had been adversely affected by the disappearance of formal notifications that would have prevented their degradation as a result of their designation as Community Protected Forests. In its ruling, the three-member bench of the Court relied on the metaphysical realism of the Gita to support the state's obligation to conserve Sacred Groves. In particular, the Court specifically referenced Chapter 13, Verse 20: "The whole of Nature (Prakriti) is the source of all Material Things, the Maker of Material Things, and all Material Things that come into being are made by Nature (Prakriti), and the source of Consciousness is the Spirit (Purusha)." Citing this verse demonstrates that, while in the past, Forests have been exclusively viewed through a utilitarian lens as Resources for Economic Benefit, the Court is now recognising that Forests are also living entities (Prakriti), which form an integral part of Human Consciousness (Purusha). By means of its own philosophical foundation, the Court has mandated the Union of India to enact a federal policy for the protection of Sacred Groves in order to convert this fundamental concept of Lokasamgraha (Universal Welfare) from Scriptural Connexion to Concrete Legal Policy (*In Re: T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad*, 2024).

This interpretative approach has also been applicable to the field of criminal justice and specifically restorative justice through the interpretation of restorative justice by using Interpretive Legal Theory. In *Arun Kumar Mohanty v. State of Odisha* (2025), the High Court of Orissa found that the principles of repentance in the Gita could be used as the basis to quash a criminal complaint of cheating where the accused had voluntarily returned all money received under a mistaken identity. Justice Sibho Sankar Mishra stated that it is necessary to weigh the ethical behaviour of an individual after the commission of an offence in conjunction with the stringent application of *mens rea* (guilty mind). Citing the Gita as stating that the true experience of guilt along with sincere repentance and service to God leads to redemption and rest, the Court established that a person who has made an ethical correction in goodness may not have the need to submit to the retributive system of the State, from a mechanical standpoint. This concept is in line with the idea presented in the Gita that through his or her transforming experience from within, rather than from external punishment, a person can heal societal wounds rather than strictly enforcing the rules of law through the imposition of penalties for technical breaches (*Arun Kumar Mohanty v. State of Odisha*, 2025).

The judiciary has also been confronted with how secularism co-exists with how the Gita may be used pedagogically, as demonstrated in the 2025 landmark decision of the *Arsha Vidya Parampara Trust v Union of India*. The Madras High Court overturned a decision by the Ministry of Home Affairs that denied FCRA registration to the Trust, citing the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita as a ‘religious activity.’ Justice G.R. Swaminathan determined that the Bhagavad Gita should be regarded not just as a ‘religious text’ but also as a Moral Science (i.e., Ethics) text and as a Rashtriya Dharma Shastra, i.e., a National Scripture of Duty. Additionally, he stated that the Bhagavad Gita belongs to an all-encompassing Bharatiya (Indian) civilisation; therefore, using a narrow sectarian lens to judge the Gita dismisses its ability to apply to all humanity and cannot define the underlying universal moral truths of humans’ duties through the Gita. This ruling has jurisprudential ramifications, in that it distinguishes Dharma from Pantha; that is, civilizational ethics versus sectarian religion; hence, it supports incorporating Gita-based values into secular education and activities of the public trust without doing violence to the secularism established by the Constitution (*Arsha Vidya Parampara Trust v. Union of India*, 2025).

At last, in the case of *Rajeev Dagar v. State & Ors.*, 2024, the Gita is noted by the Delhi High Court to be used as an example of mediation and not litigation in relation to Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). In several places throughout the judgment, the Delhi High Court has referred to the teachings of the Gita to reinforce the belief that mediation is a greater tool than litigation. Additionally, the Gita is structured in such a way that it resembles a written dialogue and is thus an excellent model for resolving crises. More courts across India are now recommending that Judges move away from simply being arbiters of the legal term law and become more active in resolving disputes between parties as Mediators and, as a result, resolve the real cause of the dispute instead of just the conditions alone. As a result of the combined jurisprudence of the Supreme Court and High Courts in India, the teachings of the Gita will serve as a living source of law which imparts the necessary ethical framework to enable the harmony of statutory certainty (Neeti) with the realisation of true justice (Nyaya) within the context of Indian Society (*Rajeev Dagar v. State & Ors.*, 2024).

4. Conclusion

Analysis of the Bhagavad Gita within the context of this study shows that it is not simply a work on religion or theology. It is one of the first great works of philosophy to argue that there must be a relationship between the way you think and feel and what you do. The main conclusion of this study is that Dharma (or ethic) is the means by which an individual's mind and character come into agreement with the way of life of the community. This is not something that can happen overnight but requires the practice and dedication of the practitioner. There is a growing concern within professional ethics, whether in the legal or psychological field, that the professional and the individual are becoming separate entities, which has resulted in the presence of many professionals who have lost their ethical compass. The Gita shows that an individual must develop their psychological abilities before they can be effective within the community because there is no 'Just Society' without the development of the psychological abilities of the individuals who are a part of it. An individual such as Arjuna in the story will never experience success and resolution if they only change the laws of war or society without first transforming themselves from a state of despondency (Vishada) to one of equanimity (Yoga). The message of the Gita is that the 'Rule of Law' can only be created by following the 'Rule of Self.' An individual who adheres to their Svadharma (duty) with the Nishkama

Karma (attachment) principle will create harmony between their own will and the cosmic order, thus reducing social conflict while increasing social welfare (Lokasamgraha).

Legal education today is overwhelmingly based on the ideas of Western legal positivism, which defines law simply as an order from power with penalties. While this model might be valid, it does not teach students how to develop the intrinsic sense of morality necessary for real justice. This article suggests that the Bar Council of India and law schools incorporate the schools of thought from the Gita into their ethics training. More defined than that, all ethics training for lawyers and judges must include the concept of Karma Yoga as a model for the ethics of lawyers and judges in the courtroom and advocacy settings. This training would allow lawyers and judges to operate within the ideals of engagement free from outside pressures such as populism, corruption, or a cognitive bias that might preclude them from effectively supporting the Basic Structure of the Indian Constitution. The case of *A.S. Narayana Deekshitulu* illustrates how the constitutional values of Dharma provide the Secular Code of Conduct for society as social integration. Therefore, training for all next-generation lawyers and judges must be modified and include Dharmic Jurisprudence modules in addition to other traditional legal subjects, which will contrast the procedural justice of Neeti with the realised justice of Nyaya, so as to encourage future legal practitioners to strive for substantive equity as opposed to strictly adhering to technical compliance with all laws.

Further, as medical and psychological educators, they have direct correlations to their practices and changing practice. The increase of burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral injury among health care providers shows that the current bioethics, primarily focused on autonomy and beneficence, are not adequately protecting the mental wellness of the healer. Therefore, this article suggests that the National Medical Commission (NMC) should include concepts derived from the Gita in to the AETCOM module (Attitudes, Ethics, and Communications), as prescribed by the Medical Council of India, so that future medical providers benefit from having principle of Atmaupamyā (seeing oneself in others) as a more powerful foundation than simply clinical detachment to establish a sense of empathy for their patients. Moreover, additional techniques used in the practice of palliative care and grief counselling, such as cognitive restructuring, can be established through the application of the teachings found in the Gita, including the concept that the Atman (the true self) is not bound to the suffering body.

Additionally, training medical students in concepts such as Nishkama Karma can protect students from the paralysis of the fear of failing, allowing them to develop a complete focus on the duty of care, rather than the outcomes of their treatment.

The purpose of bringing the Bhagavad Gita to bear on today's professional education is twofold: it provides a means to decolonise India's intellectual environment and validates Indigenous Knowledge Systems through their use in modern professional curricula; and it represents a holistic approach to address many of the ongoing issues facing modern societies, particularly with regard to issues of professional isolation.

By bridging the artificial dichotomy between an individual as a secular professional and as a spiritual being, the Bhagavad Gita offers a means for building a new, free, and just society, in which fulfilling one's Duty is viewed not as a burden, but rather as liberation. As envisioned by the Bhagavad Gita, today's modern professional legal and medical systems will not only have technicians who are proficient at delivering services related to their respective disciplines, but also be composed of Karma Yogis; individuals who are trained to serve their communities with the skill and efficiency of an Expert and the tranquillity of a Sage. In the unison of Dharma, Nyaya, and Yoga as established by the Bhagavad Gita lies the blueprint for a future society that will be resilient, ethical, and just.

Notes

1. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) is a brief, 10-item self-report questionnaire used to screen for general psychological distress, particularly anxiety and depression, in adults by asking how often they experienced certain emotional states in the past 30 days, with scores indicating levels from low to severe distress, guiding potential referrals for mental health support.
2. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, is a structured, eight-week program using meditation, yoga, and body awareness to teach non-judgmental present-moment awareness, helping individuals manage stress, chronic pain, anxiety, and other conditions by changing their relationship with difficult thoughts and sensations, rather than trying to eliminate them.

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BOOK REVIEWS

H.K. Thakur & B. Bhatia (2025). Democracy, multiculturalism and security – Indo-Canadian relations under the shadow of Khalistan

Annapurna Nautiyal

The recent “referendum” on Khalistan organised by Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) in Ottawa on November 24, 2025, has reignited a diplomatic tinderbox between India and Canada. The word ‘Khalistan’, in the Punjabi language means ‘Land of the Pure’ representing the desire of a small group of Sikhs who consider themselves as a separate nation in the northern Indian state of Punjab. The Government of India has raised concerns over pro-Khalistan actions in Canada, stating that they pose a significant risk to India’s sovereignty and security. The Khalistan Movement was originated in the 1970s which sought to establish a sovereign state governed by Sikhs. It acquired significant influence in 1980s affecting the Punjab state of India. The book titled “Democracy, Multiculturalism, and Security: Indo-Canadian Relations under the Shadow of Khalistan”, edited by Harish K. Thakur and Binesh Bhatia (2025) is anthology of research papers from scholars, academicians and subject experts dissecting the Khalistan movement’s diaspora dimension. In June 2023, the assassination of Advocate Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a renowned Sikh activist for the Khalistan cause in Canada has substantially influenced India-Canada ties. Nijjar was a separatist, seen by some people as a prominent advocate for Sikh rights within the community, while for others, notably the Indian government, a terrorist engaged in operations supporting referendums and secessionism. The edited volume by Thakur and Bhatia (2025) is a compilation of scholarly papers divided into two sections. Section-I presents a brief overview of the bilateral relations between India and Canada with special reference to the recent tensions and Section-II briefly presents the prefaces of

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different chapters compiled in the volume. The Bilateral Relations among India-Canada can be traced as a part of the British Empire. The shared colonial past facilitated early migrations and cultural exchanges. Canada and Australia were granted Dominion Status by the British in 1901, whilst the Indian battle for independence ended in 1947. This book focuses a critical blueprint for understanding and perhaps resolving the current tensions as recently vividly articulated by High Commissioner Patnaik exposing the performativity absurdity of SFJ's referendum. A non-binding poll among Canadian Sikhs advocating for a sovereign Khalistan carved from India. As the High Commissioner noted, "Referendums have a certain process. This is a referendum by Canadians done in Canada". Drawing on Canada's own Quebec referendums of 1980 and 1995 formal exercises in democratic self-determination, Patnaik highlights the illegitimacy of SFJ's stunt, which drew a modest crowd but amplified global headlines. The event's optics, featuring banners of violence, further inflamed sensitivities, prompting Patnaik's analogy: "Imagine a situation where some other country would do the same thing with Quebec...how do you feel?".

Thakur and Bhatia's volume frames this as emblematic of a broader pathology. In the opening remarks of former Consul General of Canada, Patrick Hébert message notes "India as an important partner in its Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) that focuses on democracy, diversity, and multiculturalism as core values". The chapter by Sanjeev Kumar examines the influence of Khalistan Movement on the relationship between India and Canada specifically focusing on formation of militant groups like the Sikh Youth Federation, Babbar Khalsa and the World Sikh Organization, reveals how it led to the loss of innocent lives in Punjab. Kumar further analyses Justin Trudeau's connections to the Khalistan Movement and his partnership with the New Democratic Party (NDP), which publicly supported the Khalistan Referendum in Canada.

Other researcher Pavithran Nambiar focuses on how the Khalistan Movement in Canada, bolstered by tacit support from the Canadian government, has played a pivotal role in reinvigorating the struggle in Punjab. The recent assassination of Hardeep Nijjar, the leader of the Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF) in Canada, by two unidentified individuals and the Canadian Premier's accusation of India being responsible for the murder, not only emboldened Khalistani militants but also strained India's bilateral relations with Canada.

The common objectives of democracy and multi-cultural aspects among India-Canada relation need to address to implications of the Khalistan

referendum demanding priorities of India's national interest in territorial integrity, sovereignty, and unity, a multi-pronged approach. Enhancing diplomatic efforts to counter external propaganda by engaging its community diaspora through cultural and economic ties will definitely emphasize India's democratic interest. Domestically, investing in the Punjab's development will revive its agriculture, education, and job creation to alleviate economic grievances fueling separatism could be one solution. Further, a need of strengthening legal framework against Khalistan to prevent hate speech and foreign interference without suppressing legitimate Sikh rights is the need of hour. By promoting interfaith dialogues and national integration programs may foster harmony and witness strengthened bilateral ties and may avoid direct referendums, as they risk balkanization. The editors suggest diaspora dialogue, media literacy and intelligence sharing for inclusive governance reforms among India-Canada relations to address stability in Khalistan issue.

H.K. Thakur. *Sardar Patel: an icon of India's unity*

Bhawna Sharma & Misbahuddin Yousufzai

The present-day political and ideological landscape of India has seen the reassessment of Indian national leadership, shaped by the post-globalisation dynamics like the identity politics, rise of populist outcry, and shifts in party dominance patterns. The emergence of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) as a vehement nationalist force in India has stirred up debates around the legacies of prominent leaders such as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose, V. D. Savarkar, Bhagat Singh, and B. R. Ambedkar, which has resulted in recalibration of historical narratives about India's freedom struggle and nation-building. Sardar Patel, however, has been accorded particular prominence as the "Iron Man of India," symbolising national unity, administrative rigor, and pragmatic political leadership. State-sponsored commemorations such as Rashtriya Ekta Diwas (RED) and monumental projects like the *Statue of Unity* reflect this renewed emphasis.

It is in this backdrop and the evolving historiographical and political context that *Sardar Patel: an icon of India's unity* intervenes. The volume moves beyond the conventional rhetoric of presenting Sardar Patel as the integrator of 564 princely states and presents him as a master mass mobiliser, institution-builder, adept minister, constitutional thinker, and realist statesman. Comprising twelve thematic chapters, the book examines Sardar Patel's role as a grand mass mobiliser, in secularism, education, governance, party organisation, civil services, internal security, and foreign policy, contending that his vision of unity was grounded in strong institutions, social harmony, and responsible citizenship principles central to the making of the modern Indian state.

The volume builds upon and critically extends a substantial body of scholarship on Patel. Besides the multi-volume projects like *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, edited by Durga Das (1974), *Select Correspondence of Sardar Patel* edited by V. Shanker (1974),

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and *Collective Works of SVP*, edited by P.N. Chopra (1991), the volume also draws from the biographies and appraisals by V.P. Menon (1956), D.V. Tahmankar (1970), P.N. Chopra (1977), Maniben Patel's diary (1989), Rajmohan Gandhi (1990), N.D. Parikh (1996), Vijay Tendulkar (2002), Balraj Krishna (2012), Sinha & Roy (2018) and Kothari (2019). All these volumes have variously framed Patel as a realist nationalist, a staunch mass mobiliser during the freedom movement, a stabilising post-independence force, an integrator, an inspiration behind the modern Indian civil service, a constitution maker and a strategic thinker. Thakur's edited volume distinguishes itself by integrating these strands and offering a multi-dimensional reassessment that combines institutional, ideological, ethical, and strategic perspectives.

Patel as mass leader, organiser, and nationalist

Several chapters of the volume foreground Sardar Patel as a strong organisational strategist, discipline maker, saviour of Congress and mass mobiliser. Amit Dholakia's analysis of the Bardoli, Borsad and Kheda Satyagraha presents how Patel evolved as a leader, displaying his exceptional power to translate the complex political demands into accessible language and mobilise both rural and urban constituencies. Abha Chauhan's chapter traces Patel's wide-ranging ideological trajectory situating his political engagement across peasant mobilisation, the swadeshi movement, satyagraha, advocacy for women's rights, and interventions in minority and tribal affairs portraying him as a pragmatic reformer guided by civic values, secularism, and social harmony.

On nation, constitution and secularism

A major strength of the volume lies in its treatment of Sardar Patel as a constitution maker and a critical constitutional thinker. Investigating the role of Patel as Chairman of the *Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights* Ranjita Chakraborty highlights his decisive influence on constitution-making, particularly his role in shaping fundamental rights, federal balance, civil services, and national security. Patel's view about the rights of minorities and individual freedom and social stability constitute the defining feature of his constitutional philosophy.

Harish K. Thakur in chapter five undertakes a critical and comparative evaluation of the conceptualizations of nationhood and nationalism articulated by Patel, Nehru, Gandhi, Tagore, and Aurobindo, thus foregrounding the philosophical foundations, and political implications that guided their notions of the Indian nation. Thakur argues that his nationalism was state-centred and closer to constitutional patriotism than

cultural nationalism. Khalid Mohammed further strengthens this idea when he contrasts Sardar Patel's secular nationalism with Marxism, communalism, and imperialism. Khalid also highlights how Sardar opposed the idea of a Hindu Rashtra and stood firm against sectarian politics, including the banning of the RSS following Gandhi's assassination.

Civil services, and internal security

The volume provides a significant discussion of the debates on governance and administration. Terry Beitzel assesses Sardar's enduring legacy in public administration, critiquing contemporary challenges such as corruption, elitism, and lack of accountability. Beitzel also argues that Sardar Patel's emphasis on integrity, impartiality, and service to citizens is an ever-relevant idea. Pavithran Nambiar, relying on theories like Domestic Impact, Government Legitimacy, and Power Distance analyses Patel's view of internal security and state consolidation. Nambiar also highlights how Sardar Patel transformed the colonial civil services into patriotic national service and emphasised the interdependence of security, social justice, and transparency.

Strategic Realism

Though explored scarcely, the volume consistently reflects upon Sardar Patel's strategic vision and counsel on foreign policy. Vinay Kaura explores the counterfactual possibility of Sardar Patel's becoming as first Indian Prime Minister, suggesting that his strategic realism and emphasis on military preparedness and intelligence consolidation might have altered India's trajectory on Kashmir, Hyderabad, and Tibet. Suresh R. and Rakhee Viswambharan examine Sardar Patel's view of China and Tibet. The correspondence between Nehru and Zhou Enlai, argue the authors, establish that Patel foresaw the strategic consequences of China's actions and advocated a firmer stance. Sardar Patel as a prescient thinker had a deep understanding of the long-term national security. One interesting take is by Chandrakant Langare and Charu C. Mishra who examine Patel's portrayal in Ketan Mehta's film *Sardar* (1993). The author argue that the cinematic representation of sardar Patel has played a significant role in reviving Patel's marginalised legacy. It has also enthused public reflection on the dynamics of post-independence politics in India. The chapter also notes the importance of cultural memory in shaping political understanding.

Therefore, the volume *Sardar Patel: an icon of India's unity* succeeds in presenting Patel as a great statesman whose contributions to the success

of Indian national movement, integration of Indian princely states, constitutional governance, consolidation of Indian administrative service, and strategic realism remain ever relevant. The volume's pluralistic approach avoids hagiography while offering a nuanced reassessment of Sardar Patel situating him within the broader challenges of postcolonial state-building. The volume not only acquaints the reader with the available prominent literature on Sardar but also encourages critical re-engagement with Patel's ideas, and thus book makes a significant contribution to Indian political history. The book is particularly significant for the scholars of nationalism, governance, strategic thinking and constitutional development. The volume bringing together twelve scholars with diverse areas of expertise offers a timely and valuable intervention in contemporary debates on leadership, unity, and the nature of the Indian state.

HIMACHAL PRADESH UNIVERSITY JOURNAL

(Humanities and Social Sciences)

ISSN: 2277-1425; e-ISSN: 2277-1433

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hpuniversityjournal@gmail.com

94180-08900

Published by:
Himachal Pradesh Univesity, Shimla-5

Printed by:
DGT Graphics, Calm Café Building, Summer Hill, Shimla-171 005
Mobile: 98050 22905