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## Editor's report

April 2024

It is my pleasure to present the 16th issue of Explorations. The present issue consists of ten papers published under the 'Articles' category, one conversation and one book review.

The first paper, titled *“Family, Digital Resources, and Education of Girls among Meo Muslims in Mewat Region of Haryana,”* by Saheed Meo & Rajshree Chanchal, attempts to understand the complex interaction between family, access to digital resources, and online education during Covid-19 with reference to the Meo Muslim girls in the Mewat region of Haryana. The study found that digital deprivation, skewed allocation of familial resources, lack of leisure time, and the state apathy intertwined with pandemic-induced school closure had adversely affected the education of Meo girls and pushed the educational futures of many to the brink of collapse.

The second paper titled *“Women’s Political Participation and Representation in India”* by Pratyusna Patnaik examines the political representation of women in the Indian Parliament and explores the determinants of women’s inclusion and presence in institutions of democratic politics. The paper critiques the state policies and cultural politics responsible for preventing the active participation of women in politics. The paper argues that higher political presence for women in institutional politics is an assured opportunity and support for women to come forward to contest electoral politics.

The third paper titled *‘Prasad’ and its Discourses: Translation of Food Identity in Rajbanshi Community of North Bengal*” by Pragya Sengupta and Sriparna Das aims to critically engage with construction of Prasad, and its socio-cultural and linguistics significance among the Rajbanshis of North Bengal. The paper argues that the discourses of the community’s identity are successfully translated through their consumption of food, food practices, and through their concepts of inclusion and exclusion.

The fourth paper, titled “*Hashtag Student Politics: A Digital Ethnography of Digital Activism Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic*” by Soumodip Sinhas, discussed the significance of digital ethnography. Based on content analysis of online material he argues that the virtual field has not only become a field of competition in the Bourdieusian sense but also a principal site for doing fieldwork. The paper concludes with two ideas: one, that hybrid methods of campus activism can lead to the formation of political capital for student organizations or their activists; and two, that hybrid methods of doing ethnography can prove useful in communicating research, especially in extraordinarily uncertain times, forging pathways for doing research in the ‘new normal’.

The fifth paper titled “*Stigma and covid-19: contextualising Goffman’s ideas*” by Corrine Rita War & Prof. D. V. Kumar’s discusses, sociology of stigma in explaining the experiences of diverse social groups during the COVID-19. Using Goffman’s conceptualization the authors argues that , ignorance is one of the main factors causing stigma in the context of COVID-19 where myths reigned supremely, stigmatising helpless patients who were afflicted with the coronavirus disease.

The sixth paper titled ‘*Urbanising’ a River: Twin tales of Yamuna and Delhi*’ by Reema Bhatia & Meeta Kumar’argues for the holistic river management for optimal utilizaion of the water channels. The paper used insights from the commons literature to review the changing equation of the river and the city.

The seventh paper, titled “*Market Economy and Farmers’ Movement in India: Contextualizing Farmers’ Resistance of 2020-21* by Venkatesh Vaditya examine the social contestations peoples aspirations and the amking of protest movements by diverse sections of the society in in democratic countries like India. The article seeks to understand the current farmers’ agitation and its contradictions in the larger context of structural changes that have taken place in the Indian economy since India adopted a neoliberal economic model of development.

The eighth paper, titled “*Preparing for Future: The Influence of Coaching Institutes in Hyderabad on Global Higher Education,*” by Rajender Bugga submits that the international education coaching centres play a significant role in choosing a country and selecting a university. These centres also guide the students in exploring funding opportunities, selecting courses, and becoming familiar with the cultural practices of the host country. The coaching centres also play a significant role in training students to clear the competitive international entrance exams and visa process.

The ninth paper titled “*The Problems of Elderly: A Sociological Study of the Aged in Cuttack City of Odisha*” by Harapriya Barik & Dinabandhu Sahoo analysed the problems of elderly people in Cuttack city, Odisha in general, and India in particular. The study assesses the socio-economic problems, health problems, psychological disturbances, abuse, and neglect of elderly members in Cuttack city, Odisha. The study observed that elderly people often lack interaction with

their family members. The marriage and education of their children, debt, and medical treatment are the main neglected tasks of the elderly. The study also highlights societal issues affecting elders, financial crises, psychological wellbeing, and abuse and neglect by family members and caretakers.

The tenth paper titled “*Does School Choice Exist? Insights from an Urban Slum in Delhi*” by Bhuvaneshwari Subramanian examined the various international and national debates surrounding the issue of school choice and analyse how school choice is understood in the Indian context. The paper shows that despite the vast expansion of schooling options in India, the urban poor do not actually have much of a ‘choice’ when it comes to selecting a school for their children. The study argues that due to the prevalence of caste-based discrimination in some schools, lower caste parents consciously opt out from taking the advantage of government policies that can get their children admission in well-resourced private schools.

This issue of the journal also includes an interview of **Professor B. K Nagla** a noted Indian sociologist, shared his life academic experiences with teaching and research which is great learning experience for the young generation of sociologists in India.

This issue of the journal also includes one book review by Kalla Naga Aditya.

Explorations invite your contributions to future issues of the journal. We will appreciate your feedback or suggestions on the journal.

All the articles reflect diverse sociological interpretations of social facts across the states in India. I sincerely thank all the authors for choosing the explorations for publishing their articles. I am sure that the explorations enrich scholars' sociological imaginations across India's states.

Thanks & Best Wishes



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**Article: Family, Digital Resources and Education of Girls  
among Meo Muslims in Mewat Region of Haryana**

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## Family, Digital Resources and Education of Girls among Meo Muslims in Mewat Region of Haryana

--Saheed Meo & Rajshree Chanchal

### *Abstract*

*This paper is based on an empirical study that attempts to understand the complex interaction between family, access to digital resources, and online education during Covid-19 induced school closure and its impact on the education of Meo Muslim girls in Mewat region of Haryana. The study employs 'Time Use Survey' framework to understand how school-going girls utilise their time during the day and their ability to access smartphone and internet data-packs for attending online classes or receiving 'homework' via WhatsApp and self-study. Taking Covid-19 as an immediate frame of reference, this study seeks to understand prevailing socio-economic causes and systemic bottlenecks that may put the educational journey of girls at stake. The study has found that the digital deprivation, skewed allocation of familial resources, lack of leisure time, and system's apathy intertwined with pandemic-induced school closure have adversely affected the education of Meo girls and pushed the educational future of many to the brink of collapse.*

**Keywords:** Gender inequalities, Family, Digital deprivation, Online education, Schooling

### **Introduction**

A number of studies have focused on the widening digital divide in rural and urban India, schooling and socio-economic disparities during Covid-19 induced school closures in the year 2020-21 (Reddy et al., 2020; Rahman, 2020; Meo and Chanchal, 2021; UNICEF, 2021; ASER, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic induced lockdown and the closure of educational institutions for one and a half years from 2020 have brought many phenomenal changes in the lives of students and parents. First, moving towards an online mode of educational dissemination has put the family at the center as parents are required to arrange necessary digital devices and internet connection to

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facilitate children's online learning. This shift has rather put family not only at the forefront but in an unusual quandary where parental preferences, values, control and power dynamics play a crucial role in deciding whether the son or daughter can get the digital devices to access online classes/learning material. Second, given the patriarchal nature of society, girls' access to digital and non-digital family resources remains skewed. Boys are often prioritized over girls in terms of ensuring better schooling, attaining higher education, choice of occupations, and procuring resources required for future opportunities in the job market. Quite often, the elder siblings or the girls are asked to compromise and/or allow their [younger/brother] siblings to get education-related extra support in the form of resources to be spent on leisure time activities and attending private school, coaching/tuition. Constraints are put on girls in terms of 'time-use' due to familial expectations that the girls should help with the household chores as they don't have to go to school. Some research studies (Cofey et al., 2020; Kabeer et al., 2021; Meo and Chanchal, 2021) suggest that during the lockdown, the burden of unpaid work on women and girls increased, and they had minimal time for leisure to engage in learning, recreational and self-enriching activities.

Hence, for the girls, in the context of Covid-19, the time spent on educational activities is also an essential and decisive resource that predicts their future educational pathways. The present paper, based on an empirical study of a school in rural Haryana, has used the Time Use Survey (TUS) to examine the complex interaction between family, access to digital resources, and online education and its impact on the education of Meo Muslims girls.

**Muslim Minorities and Girls' Education: The Context**

Research on gender, family relations, and strategies around the schooling of girls and boys in India has revealed that the parental decisions about the schooling of their daughters and sons differ in terms of choice of school, duration of schooling, and the socio-cultural location such as urban, rural

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[agrarian landowning and landless] (Chopra, 2005; Harma, 2012). Apart from the family's economic status, the socio-demographic factors also constitute the basis of differential treatment. The number of children in the family and their sex, age, and birth order influence and shape parental decision-making and resource allocation. In a rapidly privatised and marketised educational context, parents prefer to send their girls to government schools while boys are enrolled in private schools (Srivastava, 2007; Hill, Samson, and Dasgupta, 2011; Harma, 2011; Ramachandran, 2018). Chopra (2005) has emphasized that it is essential to consider gender, age, and status to understand the social aspects of schooling choices. Family, being the primary institution, influences the educational pathways of boys and girls proceeding with the available resources and capital at its disposal. Besides the resources, the families' schooling decisions are also influenced by the norms and values of the larger community (Chanana, 2001; Farooqi, 2020; Meo, 2023; Chanchal and Lenka, 2023).

Scholars highlight that Muslims in general and Muslim girls in particular remain underrepresented in educational institutions in India. Sachar Committee report (2006) has underscored the miserable state of education among Muslims. Poor academic attainment levels, higher dropout rates, and inaccessibility to quality education institutions are some of the serious concerns, the report raised. Further, demystifying the prevalence of Muslim parent's aversion to girl's education and the higher dropout rate due to early marriage in the community as the main causes of Muslim women's educational backwardness, the report especially emphasized that 'the problem lies in the non-availability of schools within easy reach of girls at lower levels of education, absence of girls hostels, absence of female teachers and availability of scholarships as they [girls] move up the education ladder' (p. 85). Alam (2021, pp.75-78), in an ethnographic study of a government-aided school in old Delhi, notes that the Muslim communities, grappling with miserable socio-economic conditions, systemic discrimination, and a sense of insecurity, often

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consider the government school located within their vicinity as 'last resort' which reflects their 'ghettoized aspirations'. Jeffery et al. (2007) in their study on the education of Muslims in the Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh reported that though there is a general increase in the number of government primary schools in the district, the geographical location of such schools makes them relatively less accessible to the Muslim children. This relative exclusion of Muslim children from primary schools is also responsible for their lesser number at the Secondary level of education in the rural areas. It is widely presumed that Muslims mainly attend Madrasas and similar traditional educational institutions. Jeffery et al. (2007) argue that Muslims viewed Madrasas as a viable option for their children's education because these are seen as places that besides giving general education also impart religious education and cultural ethos among the community's children. Many scholars argue that socialisation in Madrasas plays an important role in the identity formation of the Muslim youth (Jeffery et al., 2007; Gupta, 2015). Nonetheless, the Sachar Committee report (2006) forthrightly demystified the prevailing assumptions of Madrasas being the most sought-after choice for Muslim parents, rather, the report revealed the fact that only a minuscule percentage of Muslims (4 %) cater to these institutions. Gupta's study (2015, p.152) on the education of Muslim girls in Delhi tries to understand the life of girls in the context of religious-cultural ethos of family and school and how this context affects identity formation of young Muslim girls.

Feminist scholars have voiced concerns about the nature of education offered to women. As far as women's education in India is concerned, it remains entangled in the tradition versus modernity debate. The socio-cultural norms govern the education of women. Chanana (2001) asserts that cultural formations are imbued by communal formations and influence the responses of religious communities towards women's education. She illustrates that in the states such as Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan female seclusion is prevalent in all the religious communities which influences their response

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toward women's education. Society can't neglect the demand for the education of women. Still, at the same time, it tends to strike a balance and educate women in such a way that they remain dutiful towards their feminine roles and responsibilities (Chanana, 1990, cited in Chanana, 2001). Karlekar (1988) argues that the male-dominated society actively tries to limit the educational choices available to women and restricts the emancipatory role of education in their lives. Indian family life is organized on gender-based segregation of the tasks, and the gender attitudes explain the uneven distribution of chores between male and female members where mothers and daughters are disproportionately burdened with household responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning (Manjrekar, 2020). Gupta (2015, p. 152) argued that prevailing socio-religious and miserable economic conditions coupled with systemic shortcomings such as shortage of teachers, lack of infrastructure, and unavailability of teaching-learning material conjointly 'constrained the school's institutional effectiveness'. Hence, the 'school does little help in breaking the gendering process and the binary of 'home- outside' in the life of girls'(ibid).

**Family, Resources and Girl's Education: Understanding the Linkages**

Access to family resources is gender-biased. Patriarchal ideology, embedding almost every institution in society, dictates education decision-making and controls girls' education in terms of accessibility, duration, and type of schooling (government or private). Family as a primary unit of socialisation provides the ideological ground for gender-based discrimination and inequality, further reflected in material inequality and access to education where women belonging to marginalized sections are segregated at the lower-end educational institutions, whether government or private (Chanana, 2001). The notion of resources is not limited to economic resources but includes a wide array of social, cultural, and emotional resources that families have access to. As far as access to property/land is concerned, the women in the family are hardly given any legitimate ownership rights. Kabir (1999) highlights the complex inheritance rules prevalent amongst the Muslims and

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Hindus in north India. Among the Hindus, the patrilineal principles of descent and inheritance govern access to land. Women can also legally claim equal inheritance rights at par with their male counterparts. In contrast, Muslim women have the right to inherit property. She further elaborates that this doesn't mean Muslim women have relatively better access to resources. Women are encouraged to waive their rights to patrilineal property, favouring their brothers. Most women effectively do not have any right over family resources and income, which renders them dependent on the males for their sustenance (Kabir, 1999). The critical interplay of religion, gender, and socio-economic conditions construe women's lopsided identity and status.

Though girls are sent to schools, the prevailing gendered socialisation reinforces them toward 'feminine' activities such as household chores. In this context, 'time' is an important resource for girls as they are expected to shoulder domestic chores with their mothers, which controls the amount of time they would likely spend on studies at home. Women often spend most of their time doing unpaid domestic work and caring for others; thus, they hardly have any leisure time. In the words of Veblen (1899, p. 33), leisure is the "non-productive consumption of time". It is thus inferred as a moment of personal relaxation, enjoyment, and quality enrichment of oneself. Women's leisure experiences relate to household duties, chores, and family responsibilities (Srivastava, 2021). Her personal needs and time required for learning and enrichment become secondary to enforced familial responsibilities. This prevailing scenario adversely impacts girls' schooling and their studies at home. The situation is further complicated due to online modes of educational dissemination during the Covid-19 pandemic. The online education has blurred the boundaries of space and time, and has rather constrained the time girls could spend on educational activities at home. Children attend classes from home or access learning material through online mode and have the liberty to do it at their ease. However, this 'ease' appears incredibly difficult for the females as they are often asked to help with the

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household work instead of investing time in studies. Besides, there is competition among the siblings to access compatible digital devices, internet data packs, and the time devoted to catching up with online instructions in synchronous and asynchronous modes. Scholars have reported that within the household, the mother or father also ensures control over the assertion of girls, and there is a subtle 'tension' between her ability to enforce her rights to acquire knowledge and denying help in domestic chores (Chanana, 2001; Kumar, 2010; Lahiri-Dutt and Sil, 2014; Srivastava, 2021). Girls found themselves 'torn between their personal needs of enrichment and relaxation and the 'care ethic' of family, plunging their educational futures down to the brink of collapse (Srivastava 2021, p. 34).

**Methods and Field Setting**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study is to understand the complex interaction between family, access to digital resources, and online education and its impact on the education of girls of Meo Muslim community [minorities] in Nuh district of Mewat region in Haryana. The study attempts to address a few specific questions such as how did the school-going girls utilise their time at home during Covid-19 induced [intermittent] lockdown measures and imposition of restrictions in 2020-21? How did family resources, parental support and societal norms factor into the educational pathways of the girls? Lastly, while looking into the lived experiences of the girls related to their education and familial responsibilities, we seek to analyse the prevailing socio-economic and systemic bottlenecks that may put the educational journey of girls at stake during the pandemic and afterwards when the schools started reopening.

*The Field*

The study is conducted in a government school located in a village of Nuh<sup>i</sup> district (earlier known as Mewat) of Haryana state in India. It is argued that Haryana has reaped the benefits of the green revolution but is marked by stark socio-economic disparities. Mahajan (2004) emphasized that the lack of social movement, which is not being in sync with the growing state's economic prosperity, has rather adversely affected the state's women. The dismal status of women can be understood by the sex ratio of 879 and the female literacy rate of 65 percent in the state. Mewat region, however, is slightly better in sex ratio statistics, yet it is educationally one of most backward regions in the state of Haryana. Mewat has about 80 percent population of Meo Muslims. It has all Hindu caste groups, sparsely inhabited in the region. Meo Muslims are categorised under Backward Castes (BCs) by the State Government and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) under the Central List by the Government of India to avail policies for positive discrimination in education and employment. However a large chunk of Muslim population depends on agriculture, animal husbandry, and non-agricultural daily wage work for livelihood.

According to the district website, Nuh has 79 percent of the Meo Muslim population. About 88 percent of the population lives in rural areas. According to National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog (2018) Nuh is one of the most backward districts. It is part of the central government's 'Transformation of Aspirational Districts' programme<sup>ii</sup>. Nuh stands last in terms of literacy rate with only 54 percent of literates, where male and female literacy rate is 69 and 36 percent respectively, in the state. Education is one such area where the Nuh district performs poorly. The high dropout rate, acute shortage of teachers, and the lack of resources such as electricity, internet and electronic devices to access/attend online classes during Covid-19 added further woes to girl's education (Saini, 2020; Meo and Chanchal, 2021; Chanchal and Lenka, 2023). The intertwining of Covid-19 with the existing educational backwardness makes it essential to pay attention to certain aspects

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of phenomenal developments in education delivery such as the use of online modes of learning, digital divide, lack of resources, and the recurring marginalisation of girls among the Meo Muslims.

***Sampling and Respondents***

We used purposive sampling method to select the school and the participants. We selected a Government Girls Senior Secondary School in Shikran village of Nuh district to understand the everyday experiences of girls before and after the opening of schools since Covid-19 crisis. The data is collected using semi-structured interview and self-reported time use questionnaire. The sample consists of 33 female students enrolled in class IX and X (secondary level), 12 parents, five school teachers, and one school principal. A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, teachers and the school principal during February-May 2022 to understand their perspective regarding girl's education, and allocation of resources to boys and girls. A questionnaire containing close-ended and open-ended questions and a 'self-reported time use table' were used to collect data from the students. They were also asked to write a brief note on their lived experiences related to schooling during the pandemic. Prior permission and the consent were taken both from the parents and the school principal for the data collection. As per the Census (2011), the population of Shikran village is 8,544 with 1,176 households. Its sex ratio of 927 is better than that of the state and district averages. However, Shikran remains educationally backward with a total literacy rate of only 56 percent (74 percent for males and 36 percent for females). The village has four government schools, namely, Girls Senior Secondary Schools, Girls Primary School, Boys Senior Secondary Schools, and Model Sanskriti Primary School, and five private schools catering to Shikran and nearby villages. Pseudonyms are used in the study to protect the identity of the respondents.

***Studying 'Time' in Gender Context***

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Feminist scholars assert that the 'time' available and used for various activities is gendered. They advocate that time justice is essential for a gender-just society where men and women have equitable disposable time to participate in politics, be upright citizen, and attend to other leisure activities requisite for personal growth and self-enrichment (Fraser, 2000). Bryon (2007, p. 82) advocates that to achieve temporal justice for gender in feminist politics of time, three aims should be perused; 'to expose and challenge the distribution of paid work, unpaid work and free time; to value and reward time spent on care, rather than seeing this simply as negative constraint; and to ensure a better balance between the natural temporal rhythms often required for personal and caring activities and the rigid requirements of commodified clock time'. Lister (2003, p.132) argues that 'time' as a 'highly gendered commodity impacts on and is mediated by the public-private divide' (cited in Bryon 2007, p.74). In the larger patriarchal ideology, women are relegated to the private sphere of home with duties of care and nurture of the family members. Lahiri-Dutt and Sil (2014, p.390) argue that 'household division of labour also leads to the segregation of the private space within the home'. There is a significant discernible difference between men's and women's time use, where most women's time is spent in 'unpaid' work such as taking care of the children, aged and doing household chores. In this context, many scholars use the Time Use Survey to show and examine the gendered division of labour (Bryon, 2007; Rajivan, 1999; Lahiri-Dutt and Sil, 2014; Srivastava, 2021). This study uses the 'Time Use' data approach wherein the primary data includes information on how the school-going girl participants use their time during the day, which is further related to their ability to access smartphones and internet data-packs either to attend online classes or to receive the 'homework' through WhatsApp. For this purpose, we have used the 'open interval diary' formulated by Lahiri-Dutt and Sil (2014). Measurement of time use by young girls is pertinent for two reasons; first, to explore the effect of changes in the mode of education delivery through online media, and second, to capture the role of gender in accessing the resources available in the private domain of the

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home. As we used in this study, the time-use data require the respondents to self-report how they spend a typical day in a week, divided into seven parts beginning from five o'clock in the morning to nine o'clock in the night with duration of three hours. The respondents were asked to fill the 'time use data table' to describe their use of 'time' before and after the opening of the school.

**Findings and Discussion****Schooling and Access to Digital Resources**

Many studies have found that government schools, especially in the rural areas, lack infrastructure, teachers and an optimal learning environment (Rampal, 2004; RTE Forum, 2018; Tilak, 2019; Dhungana, 2020), which adversely impact the fate of 'children belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged sections of society, such as the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and socio-religious minorities'. In such case, the girls tend to be the most vulnerable and likely to experience marginalities severely (Nambissan and Rao, 2013). The present study of a Government Senior Secondary Girl School in Nuh district of Haryana corroborates with such evidences. The pandemic context appears to exacerbate the existing gendered and other inequalities (Tilak, 2019; UNICEF, 2021; Meo and Chanchal, 2021; Chanchal and Lenka, 2023). Notably, the school under research was upgraded from Middle level (Eighth grade) to Senior Secondary level (12th grade) before Covid-19 pandemic in 2018. For first time, admissions in the ninth grade started in the academic year 2018-19, and the admissions for the tenth grade started in 2019-20. As per the school's records, 41 children were enrolled at the secondary level in 2019-2020, the number increased to 72 children during 2020-2021. Notably, the pass percentage for tenth grade in 2020 was just 28 per cent close to the onset of pandemic. In absolute terms, only seven students passed out of the total 25 candidates appeared for the Board examination. However, subsequently in the year 2021, all the children were upgraded to next class due to Covid-19 situation as per the decision of the Haryana state

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government. As per our discussions with the school principal, 'the reason for dropout of girls from this particular school was the poor result in the past years and involvement of girls in household chores during the pandemic, whereas only a minuscule number of dropout cases were due to migration of families to other states for work'.

It is informed that before the up-gradation and afterward, the school faced an acute shortage of teaching staff<sup>iii</sup>. The situation has not changed much, even after the recruitment drive in 2019. The principal however optimistically remarked that 'the lack of teachers in the school may be addressed in the upcoming special recruitment drive by the Haryana state government'. As per the current record (March 2022), there is shortage of teachers to teach secondary and senior secondary classes in the school. Except four subjects namely Hindi, English (only one teacher posted against the sanctioned positions for two), Geography and Chemistry, the school does not have teachers for Mathematics, Urdu, Sanskrit, Biology, History, Political Science, Physics, Economics and Physical Education. The lack of teachers in the school has put girls at a considerable learning disadvantage. Parents hesitate to send their daughters to the schools located at far off places or to any private school in and around the village, leading to a brewing situation of learning crisis for girls. Exceptions apart, our observations from the field and interactions with parents suggest that the failure at secondary school level most likely put an end to the educational journey of girls. Fear of engagement in domestic chores and the early marriages loom large on their head.

Besides lack of teachers and other material resources, students of the rural areas suffer from digital deprivation which has become stark during pandemic. Studies have adequately highlighted the digital divide in urban and rural areas (Bhattacharya, 2020; Reddy et. al., 2020; Rahman, 2020; Meo and Chanchal, 2021). The shift to online education makes it necessary to access compatible electronic devices to attend the classes. The suitable electronic devices, electricity supply, separate space to attend online class and completing the

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school work regularly is quintessential prerequisites. To cope with the Covid-19 emergent situation and consequent school closure, the school attempted to continue teaching-learning practices by using specific digital platforms like WhatsApp based on directions issued by the state government. Programmes like *Mohalla Pathshala*, *E-Shiksha Mitra*, etc., were run by the special efforts of the district education office. However, the efficacy of such programmes appeared to be marred by the lack of adequate and trained teaching staff, non-participation of girls due to lack of time and parental concern of safety, unavailability of digital devices and related infrastructure like electricity, network connectivity, and space (Meo and Chanchal, 2021).

Unlike the school where girls had some learning space, in the private sphere of a home there was hardly any separate place available for them to study. Further, the girl's education is also less prioritized than boys in the family. This discrimination permeates the access to online mode of education as unprivileged parents tend to prioritize the education of [sons] boys. Hence, boys have relatively better access to smartphones as compared to girls [in the family] to attend online classes/educational material in synchronous as well as asynchronous mode. Most of the girl in the study (27) said that they were able to get electricity supply for four to five hours a day which is not sufficient to complete their school-work at home. Being located in rural area none of the sample households had broadband connection and desktop. Of all the respondents, only one respondent said to have used laptop. Most of the respondents said to have used phone (31), television (one) or both (three). Most of the girls (22) responded that in the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020 they did not have access to smartphone. They had to struggle to access smartphone. They requested their father or brother to arrange for a smartphone only when the school teachers started giving study related homework through WhatsApp. The self-reported time-use data shows that the girls were able to use the smartphone only for one or two hours in a day to access homework given by the teachers.

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Many girls (20) reported that they borrowed the smartphone of their father/brother, some from their relatives (eight) and in few cases (four) from neighbour to access the work sent [online] by the school teacher. A few girls also said that male members used to put a restriction on their mobile use and allowed them to use the phone for a very limited time which disrupted their studies at home during the lockdown. Most girls (23) said that they were permitted to use phone for one hour only. Limited amount of mobile data and slow internet speed further restricted their access to the learning material. Moreover, when physical mobility restrictions relaxed as pandemic started attenuating, people had to go outside the home for work further aggravated the educational disruptions.

Individual and collective efforts were made to continue the schooling. One girl mentioned that her father not only had to work hard to purchase a smartphone but had to sell household items to facilitate her education and she was able to attend the online classes and/or access the school-work. A very few girls (three) reported that they use to study with their classmates who lived in the neighbourhood. Though some girls were able to study using smartphones, there were lot many gaps in their understating and learning of concepts as no one was there to help them with the studies or clear their doubts. In its efforts, the government of Haryana used Education Satellite (EDUSAT) via televisions to impart education during Covid times, this however remain on paper as most of underprivileged communities do not own television set with cable connections (Meo and Chanchal, 2021). In Nuh district, only 17.4 percent of households have televisions which are the lowest in the state (Census, 2011). One of the most probable reasons for this is that most Meo families consider television as profane. It is thus undesirable to keep television at home as it is likely to malign their cultural practices and religious dispositions. Even if some families own television-set, the girl children in the family are specifically often kept away from watching television programmes so as to ensure their behaviour, morality and attitude remain within the bounds

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of prevailing social and religious norms. Manjrekar aptly notes that girls are often considered tools for 'moral reproduction' (Manjrekar, 2018). The movement and expectation of both girls and boys are discreetly shaped. While many girl respondents informed that their male siblings were attending private schools, none of the girls were going for private tuition even after the opening of the school soon after the pandemic started attenuating<sup>iv</sup>. Girls had to face digital deprivation and social disadvantages in the social ecology where gendered inequalities aggravated due to pandemic-induced inaccessibility to resources, online instruction, and other socio-economic deprivations.

**Schooling and the Domestic Chores**

The study observed that all the girls used to engage in household chores while they were at home during the Covid-19 lockdown when the schools were closed. Poor socio-economic conditions of families and gendered perceptions about work appear to force parents to engage their daughters in domestic chores such as cleaning, washing clothes and utensils, cooking, fetching water, agriculture work, livestock, and taking care of younger siblings and the aged. Manjrekar (2020) aptly records consequential impact of this by arguing that the opportunity costs for educating the girls is overwhelmingly high. Our Time Use Survey data shows that majority of the girls had to spend a substantial amount of time in completing the household chores which ranges from an average of four to five hours a day. For most of the girls, their day starts at five o'clock in the morning. Only a few girls shared that they offered *namaj* (Islamic religions prayer) after waking up early in the morning. After waking up, taking bath or finishing early morning essentials, they reported to wash the utensils, sweep the floors and help their mother or female member in cooking. After having the morning breakfast, some girls reported, they had to go to the field and help parents in agricultural work and take care of the livestock. Most of our respondents said that since schools were closed, studying at home was not a priority or rather doing it with focus and substantive engagement was almost an impossible task. They could sit to study

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only after completing the assigned household chores and other related responsibilities. For instance in the words of one girl:

*'While being at home, I have to do the household chores like cleaning, washing utensils and helping my mother in all other kinds of work. It is only after completion of such household chores, I am allowed to study' (Sofiya, 15 years old).*

The question of availing leisure time and fulfilling one's desire becomes critical in this context. Many studies have found that girls get the least amount of leisure time in comparison to their male counterparts in the family (Kumar, 2007; Srivastava, 2021). The closure of school not only limited the access to learning activities for girls but for many it has completely shut them off from the outside world and restricted their physical mobility. As we span through their lived experiences, many girl respondents complained of the unavailability of free time, learning difficulties, suffocations and hectic engagement in household duties. All the girls said that lack of regular contact with the teachers and teaching learning activities has resulted in a learning loss. Many respondents said that they feel very anxious because of the learning lacuna, and think they will not be able to perform in the examination, which will have severe repercussions for their future. One student said:

*'Since the schools closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I am staying at home all the time and have to do all types of work like washing utensils, cleaning, etc. There is no time for studies at home as I have to do lot of domestic work. Sometimes I get school lessons on our home phone, and sometimes I do not get that at all. It seems whatever I had studied earlier I have forgotten totally. I will face difficulties in writing examinations as I do not get time to study' (Nusrat, 16 Years old).*

It appeared that the pandemic and the subsequent school closure have reinforced the gendered divisions and resources allocation within the family in

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rural areas where boys were allowed to study with ample free time. They were given preference to hold on to the mobile phone to attend online classes, permitted to go and play with their friends, whereas the girls were consistently engaged in the household chores with their mothers and/or female siblings. Thus the girls were denied the requisite leisure, playtime and an 'autonomous space' (Kumar 2007, p.176). Forced absence from the school made girls easier target of the families to bind them with household chores round the clock, unlike when the schools were open in pre-Covid times. Leisure as an 'idea of ownership of what one consumes' (Quaiser, 2018), be it freely gossiping, playing, learning, and fulfilling one's desire for self-enrichment while away from strictures of familial responsibilities, appeared missing for the girl students during the pandemic. Notably, we also observed some change in their everyday life when the school reopened after lockdown. For instance, a few girls informed that the first thing they do after waking up is to prepare for school, unlike earlier engaging with household chores. When the school reopened, some form of learning routine restored to their life as most of the girls said that they started for school at eight o'clock in the morning and studied various subjects as per the school timetable, and returned home after two o'clock in the afternoon. It is important to note that girls could engage in learning activities after school reopened, but once they came back to home they hardly got an hour in the evening to study or complete the school-work. We observed that the long-prevailing cultural strictures, social taboos, and keeping girls on edge became excruciatingly sharper and persisting during Covid-19 pandemic. Such situation adequately indicated the lack of support to girls in Muslim families for a sustained learning and dealing with pedagogical difficulties, which we will discuss in the subsequent section.

**Lack of Support, Resources and Pedagogical Difficulties**

During telephonic interaction, the school teachers informed that since the government did not do much to provide access to online education, the orders were issued to open the school partially. The students were instructed to visit

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and meet teachers during school hours, in small groups of two or three or alone, whichever was convenient, with their parent's permission. This partial reopening of school however failed to attract the female students as our interactions with parents and teachers suggest that parents were hesitant to send their daughters to school in comparison to their sons. Many parents candidly expressed their inability to send their daughters to the school as they felt that the outside environment is unsafe for girls. They may become subject to harassment and violence outside the home and/or on their way to the school. The familial support for girls is often based on very shaky grounds. For instance, any academic failure on the part of the girl is either due to lack of facilities or due to any emergent situation like Covid-19, the policy<sup>v</sup> induced bottlenecks, and/or reasons unknown, parents often unequivocally invoked the notion of *kismet* (fate). The invocation of *kismet* appeared to be ready reckoner at the parent's disposal to justify their side of lacunae or shortcomings, which indicate a 'weak habitus' (Meo, 2023, p. 258).

Majority of the girls were found solely dependent on their elder male siblings for smartphone to attend/access learning material/online class. Most said that their father and/or brother used to support and help them in their studies by providing smartphones. Unlike middle class mothers who are able to provide 'concrete guidance' (Panda, 2015) to children's schooling, the girls in the present study thought of their mothers mainly as partner in carrying out the household chores and related responsibilities. Only in few cases, mother's role is invoked as a helper or a supporter in learning activities such as completing the school homework. Furthermore, the resource crunch found to be a recurring concern for the respondent families towards continuing the schooling of their wards. While putting light on the condition of parental capabilities and resources, the school Principal said:

*'Only a very few families have smartphones which children can use to attend the online classes. Out of total families having smartphone, only about 50 percent families recharge their phone with internet data-packs. One recharge*

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*with 2 GB internet data cost about 250 Rupees. Parents with meagre income are not able to do all that. Further in most cases, a family had a single phone, and there are many school going children in the family. It is thus very difficult for a family to support and continue the education of all the wards through online mode. In simple words, the online education system is not successful here' (Ashraf Hussain, Government Girls Senior Secondary School).*

Parents usually do not allow children, especially girls to have mobile phone and watch television due to the prevailing taboos and the perceptions that they would misuse the device, and likely to go astray from their cultural roots and religious values. Parents were often seen scared that the girls may see some unwanted pictures, movies, etc., in the phone or they may get in touch with some unknown persons. Question of honour is thus invoked unequivocally<sup>vi</sup>. While reflecting on his fear of giving phone to his daughter, a father said:

*'I am illiterate. I do not know what children are doing with the phone. But I am apprehensive of the fact that they may not get misled through this device. I do often hear so many bad things that are taking place through devices like smart mobile phones. I cannot put my child at risk' (Mehrun Khan, father of Sana, a tenth grade student).*

One of the implications of such apprehension was that girls were not given phone for a longer duration while the ownership of phone was a rare possibility. Many teachers informed about the instance of continuous disconnection with female students for receiving lessons and getting back with the completed school work. Further, as discussed elsewhere, girls were allowed to use the phone for a very short duration (both by brother and father), in most cases for an hour under the strict vigilant presence of the owner of the phone, especially the brother, father, close male relative or neighbour. It can be seen as 'yet another male attempt to control women and nature via technology' by eco-feminists (Selwyn, 2011, p. 48). The ease of restrictions in

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the lockdown, between first and second waves of the pandemic, allowed people to work. This situation created further problems for the children who were attending classes or connecting with their teachers using the phone of their father, male siblings or neighbours. In such emergent situation, most girls faced severe learning loss and pedagogical difficulties due to discontinuities in schooling, limited time for study or having no means to get in contact with their teachers. Teachers also informed about high absent rate of girls in the selected teaching sessions conducted during partial re-opening of the schools as and when the pandemic attenuated. This had not only pushed the girls towards bearing learning disadvantage, but some were forced to the risk of dropping out from the school.

Parents appeared to sense the learning loss suffered by their wards during the school closure. This situation was rather better described in the words of a father, Arshad Khan, who sarcastically said, '*pade aur be-pade sab brabar hoge*' (educated and uneducated all have become equal). Parents took such a stance based on observing children's behaviour and everyday engagements in learning and other activities at home and outside. Interestingly, parent invoked '*kismat*' and community values while speaking about girls' education and justifying the incurred learning disadvantages (Meo, 2023). They contend, '*in our community, we educate our girls only this much*'. Secondly, parents often argue, '*whatever is in girl's kismat, she will get. Her educational growth and career depend on her kismat*'. The invocation of the term *kismat* here may be seen as an aspect of one's habitus and wussy disposition located in poor socio-economic conditions and gendered social stratification (Sauder, 2020; Meo, 2023). It was observed that in comparison to boys, the notion of *kismat* is overwhelmingly invoked for girls demonstrating the presence of a restricting 'field' (Bourdieu, 1984) as parental perceptions of girls' access to schooling, retention, and achievements in education are squarely gendered and socially restricted.

### Conclusion

The paper has argued that in the context of Covid-19 the restriction on physical mobility, school closure and the lack of access to online modes of education had incredibly adverse implications for the education of girls of Meo Muslim in rural Haryana. The study attempts to capture how Covid-19 induced school closure and reopening of schools, after a year almost, curtailed the leisure time and the time for the study of girls at home. Male dependency, within familial and social milieu intertwined with Covid-induced restrictions tends to limit educational opportunities for girls. Girls' access to technology to continue schooling was sternly restricted under the constant male gaze and vigilance. Girl's leisure time and learning is considered secondary to the familial responsibilities, and consequently, the 'gendered' identity is necessarily shaped in the framework of religious values and prevailing cultural strictures. The combined impact of poverty, religion, and gender in tandem with Covid-19 induced school closure further pushed girls to the margins. The onus of the failure to perform well at secondary level examination(s) was put on the girls alone without any consideration for the lack of access to resources, absence of institutional support and the system's apathy. It can be concluded that the traditional notions of *izzat* (honour) and *kismet* (fate) are invoked to justify the restricted educational opportunities and minimal 'resources' allocated to girls in the family. The state has also failed to compensate for the Covid-19 induced learning loss and provide equitable learning opportunities to females of the most marginalised communities in the society. In nutshell, this study has underscored the central role of the family in allocating resources to the education of girls. Families effectively control the girls' 'time use'. It is seen as a virtue for girls to prioritise household chores over study at home which reinforces gendered societal norms and exacerbate gender-based educational inequalities.

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### Endnotes

[<sup>i</sup>] Nuh, earlier known as Mewat, formed as a district in 2005 by curving out areas[blocks] from Gurugram (earlier known as Gurgaon) and Faridabad by the Government of Haryana. It was later renamed in 2016 as Nuh, a very small town and headquarter of the district.

[<sup>ii</sup>] The Government of India through its policy think tank NITI Aayog developed the list of Aspirational districts in the year 2018 for the purpose of addressing backwardness in the identified districts to accelerate the growth trajectory of the country. With the release of NITI Aayog's baseline report in March 2018, Nuh district (earlier known as Mewat) hits the headlines of many National Dailies for being the most backward district of the country (see Times of India, 29 March 2018; The Economic Times, 28 May 2018; The Hindu, 02 April 2018).

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[<sup>iii</sup>] Large numbers of schools in Nuh face shortage of teachers. One of the main reasons for this is that the teachers belonging to north and northwest parts of Haryana selected under 'Mewat Cadre' [or in other categories] often get themselves transferred to their desirable [hometown] locations. Posting in Mewat is often considered as 'punishment' (The Hindu, 01 November 2021). Hence, the considerable numbers of posts of teachers, head teachers and/or principals remain vacant. Large number of schools in Nuh is run by single or two teachers, and some even without teachers (see The Tribune, December 10 2021; The Hindu, November 01 2021).

[<sup>iv</sup>] It was noticed that the private schools conducted online classes, whereas the government school hardly done so. Government school in most cases relied on only WhatsApp for sending school home-work or related instructions. No direct contact or one to one communication was made by teachers except on the occasions when the lockdown was relaxed and students in small groups called for interactions, checking home-work and consultations in the schools.

[<sup>v</sup>] Lockdown, imposed in March 2020 to contain the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, resulted in sudden cancelation of ongoing board examinations for 10th and 12th grades in Haryana. Examinations for few subjects were conducted already; rests were to be done based on the formula adopted by the state government. Subsequently the result was declared. Many teachers said that the formula was flawed. It actually put the large of children at disadvantage by failing them. Girls were rather put on huge risk of dropout as parents often do not prioritise their education as compare to their sons (Meo and Chanchal, 2021, p. 76).

[<sup>vi</sup>] Parental perceptions were not however entirely unfounded. In two separate instances, police cases were filed for sharing objectionable videos on WhatsApp groups formed for the educational purposes (Meo and Chanchal, 2021).

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## Women's Political Participation and Representation in India

--Pratyusna Patnaik

### Abstract

The paper examines the political representation of women in the Indian Parliament and explores the determinants of women's inclusion and presence in institutions of democratic politics by using secondary data from the Election Commission of India (ECI). The findings of this study rejected two important commonly held views that: (a) women's increased political participation and representation are associated with levels of socio-economic growth and development, and (b) women have less potential of getting elected in electoral politics, and hence are not recruited in sufficient numbers by political parties as contestants. Instead, the paper argued that what is needed for a higher political presence for women in institutional politics is an assured opportunity and support to women to come forward to contest electoral politics.

*Keywords: Participation, Representation, Women, Democracy, Institutional Politics, Indian Parliament.*

### Introduction

The context of democracy advocates strengthening democratic values and politics to achieve participatory, representative, and accountable governance (UNDP, 2000). It is now affirmed that deepening democracy through citizens' participation needs an equitable representation of all social groups in the process of governance. Nevertheless, democratic systems in the developing world increasingly face criticisms for their inability to ensure proportional representation of various strata of society based on inequalities of gender, class, caste and ethnicity. Although women constitute almost half of the

world's population, except for a few Scandinavian countries, women's number in formal political institutions in most democracies has continued to be inadequate (Geissel and Hust, 2005). The underrepresentation of women in democratic governments has made it clear that democracy, by itself, does not ensure equal representation for all, albeit the principle of equal opportunity for participation and representation.

A closer look at the gender composition of the Indian Parliament since independence reaffirms the low representation of women in Indian political institutions. During the last seven decades of independence, the Indian Parliament has seen a nearly three-fold increase in women Members of Parliament (MP), i.e. from only 22 women MPs in 1952-1957 to 78 women MPs in the 2019 general election to the 17th Lok Sabha. However, the overall representation of women in the Indian Parliament had remained below 10 per cent until the 2009 parliament elections. Only during the last three Lok Sabhas (2009, 2014 and 2019 Parliament elections), the proportion of women MPs remained slightly more than 10 per cent. Against the background of the above discussion, the present paper focuses on political representation and inclusion of women in the Indian Parliament. The broad objective of the paper is to analyse the political representation of women in the Indian Parliament and explore the determinants of women's representation. The paper aims to answer two important research questions: (a) whether the level of development of a state functions as a determinant of higher political representation of women in institutions of democracy and (b) whether women have a lesser chance of getting elected vis-à-vis men. The paper is based on secondary data accessed from the Election Commission of India (ECI) to analyse women's political representation in institutional politics.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Women's Political (under) Representation**

Women's under-representation and inadequate participation raise a pertinent question: why women are underrepresented in most democracies? Three factors have been identified that elucidate women's limited presence in institutionalised politics, operating at the individual and structural level (Geissel and Hust 2005). The first factor emphasises personal intentions and political goals as main variables. It argues that women due to their personal choice prefer not to enter into the field of politics and thus are absent from political arenas. Socio-economic variables such as access to finances and skills constitute the second factor explaining women's limited presence in politics. Since political participation is an outcome of certain specific resources, which women lack, their participation in politics has always remained unequal compared to men (see also Fowlkes, 1992). The third factor emphasises structural facets, such as the recruiting policies of political parties. This factor argues that due to the recruiting policies of political parties, which usually prefer male candidates, women lack representation in majority voting systems (Geissel & Hust, 2005; Patnaik, 2014). Culturally constructed meanings and symbols which produce stereotypical attitudes towards women also hinder women's presence in politics (Noris & Inglehart, 2001). Cultural deliberations proclaim that women are hesitant to lead the political careers in traditional societies as they would lack sufficient support to elections (see also Reynolds, 1999).

Several scholars associate women's representation with levels of economic growth, Christian religion and penetration of capitalism (see Rule & Zimmerman, 1994; Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Reynolds, 1999). Some other scholars also point out that since women lag behind men in access to important resources such as education, skills, political background, they have less chance of succeeding in elections, and thus, political parties, therefore prefer male candidates over female candidates in their recruiting strategies (Fowlkes, 1992; Leijenaar, 1996; Hoecker, 1998). The existing literature identifies several factors to the question as to 'what determines women's

(limited) presence in institutional politics'. Factors that are positively correlated with women's representation in institutional politics included: access to education (Christy, 1987 and Matland, 1998); women's presence and position in outside institutional politics (Blumberg, 1984; Randal, 1987); and participation of women in the labour force (Norris, 1985; Oakes and Almquist, 1993; Otunga 1997). Several other scholars have pointed towards the nature of the political system as factors facilitating or hindering women's representation. Systemic factors facilitating women's representation included a multimember proportional representation system as opposed to the single-member majority or plurality system (Norris, 1985; Rule, 1981, 1987; Matland and Studlar, 1996); a democratic system with few but larger political parties (Reynolds, 1999) and gender quotas in the electoral system ensuring assured political representation (Jones, 1996; Jaquette, 1997; Ballington, 1998). In the Indian context, setting up quotas or seat reservations for women to ensure parity in political representation has been highlighted by several scholars (Menon, 1997; 2000; Rai, 1999). In the case of local governments (i.e. Panchayats), where such quotas do exist for women, scholars have identified societal, institutional and individual constraints, which hindered women's engagement in institutional politics. (Ghosh, 2000; Bryld, 2001; Behar & Kumar, 2002; Johnson et al., 2003).

Since this paper intends to inquire implications of economic development on women's representation in Indian parliament and women's chances of getting elected vis-à-vis men, it is appropriate to engage with a review of scholarly literature on these two themes. Barring a few (e.g. Jayweera, 1997; Prihatini, 2019), the mainstream literature positively correlates socio-economic development of a nation with the number of women in institutional politics. Scholars claimed that socio-economic development and an increase in urbanisation of a region leads to a decline of traditional values, conservative attitudes towards women, women's literacy and participation in the formal sector; which in turn pave the way for women's increased representation in

formal political institutions (Togebly, 1994; Matland, 1998; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999; Kunovich & Paxton, 2005; Paxton, 1997; Dubrow, 2006; Stockemer & Byrne, 2011). Besides, economic development of a region also leads to socio-cultural modernisation, leading to changes in women's political and economic roles, gender relations and patriarchal social order, quality of life and development of 'post-material' values (Bell, 1974; Inglehart, 1990, 1997; Norris, 1985; Norris & Inglehart, 2001). Inquiring this issue, scholars have identified a positive association between economic development, socio-cultural modernisation and representation of women in national legislatures (Hughes 2009; Rosen 2013; Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2014).

The second critical issue, which this paper empirically engages, pertains to women's chances of getting themselves elected vis-à-vis men. Scholarly works on voters' attitudes, preferences and acceptance of women candidates in election – vis-à-vis men - suggest mixed findings on the issue. Several scholars such as Darcy and Schramm (1977); Hills (198) and Kelley and McAllister (1984) have indicated gender biases against women in electoral outcomes; and have highlighted that male candidates tend to outpoll women candidates in elections. However, recent studies on gender biases on candidates' chances of winning have highlighted fading of gender-based discrepancies in winning elections. These studies have pointed towards equal opportunities of winning elections for both men and women candidates (Burrell, 2014; Fox, 2005; Gaddie & Bullock 2000; King & Leigh, 2010; Thomsen 2020; Welch et al., 1987; Zipp & Plutzer, 1985). Schwarz & Coppock (2021) in their compendium of 67 studies on the effects of gender on candidate choice highlighted the representation of women in political institutions and rejected voter preferences as a major factor explaining minimal persistence of women in institutional politics.

### **Women's Political Representation and Seat Reservation in India**

The history of women's political participation in the public sphere in India is invariably linked with their involvement in the freedom struggle and nationalist movement. In 1909, under the Montague–Chelmsford reforms, women obtained voting rights, and some of the eminent women like Radha Bai Subharya, Renuka Roy, and Annu Swaminathan became the earliest women who got into the central legislature (Kameswaramma, 1987). Women associations such as Rashtriya Stree Sabha, Bombay, 1920; Mahila Rashtriya Sangha, Bengal, 1928; and Nari Satyagraha Samiti, Calcutta, 1929, mobilised women for political work (Forbes, 1998, p. 130).

The question of seat reservation for women in political institutions has long been debated in India. For the first time, the question of separate political reservations arose during the 1920s. It was opposed on the ground that it deflected from the demand for the universal adult franchise and to stand for elections on the same terms as men. Besides, it was felt that agreeing to it would mean succumbing to the British strategy of “divide and rule” by referring to divisions within the national movement. This opinion was supported by the prominent and leading women's organisations of the time, such as All India Women's Conference, the Women's Indian Association and National Council of Women in India and by the Home Rule League, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League (Raman, 2002). The issue of women's reservation had come up in the Constituent Assembly on the verge of independence. Still, it was rejected by women representatives, as it was felt to be unnecessary since working of democracy in the normal course would ensure representation of all sections of society. It was also felt to underestimate the strength of women to compete as equals with men (Menon, 2000).

The issue of women's reservation came up once again after 25 years of Independence, when the Committee of the Status of Women in India (CSWI) noted that despite equal rights and universal adult suffrage guaranteed by the

Indian Constitution, women's presence in the state and central legislatures had been declining steadily. While the Committee recorded arguments in favour of reservations, many women activists and women legislators believed that women's reservation would be retrogressive, and would contradict the principle of equality guaranteed in the Constitution (Raman, 2002). However, it was agreed that rural women's experience and problems had remained undervalued and invisible, and the CSWI therefore, unanimously recommended the establishment of statutory women's panchayats (Menon, 2000). On the issue of reservations for women in parliament and state legislatures, the debate took a shape, which is still ongoing today, with few supporting it on the grounds of an increased number, new directions to debates and policies; and others opposing it on the grounds of women not being a homogeneous group and the caste-class intersections of gender. Finally, the CSWI decided to uphold the position taken in the Constituent Assembly and rejected the reservation of seats for women in parliament and state assemblies. The recommendations of CSWI is also echoed in the National Perspectives Plan, 1998 – 2000, which recommended for 30 per cent reservation of seats for women in panchayats and Zilla Parishads (District Councils).

The significant under-representation of women in the Indian Parliament ever since independence reiterates the important of quotas in bringing women to political institutions. Though similar arguments were raised in the CSWI way back in the mid-1970s, no concrete action was taken regarding assigning reservation of seats for women to political institutions till the early 1990s, when the Indian Parliament passed the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution with near unanimity in December 1992, which came into effect from 24 April 1993. The purpose of this amendment was to revitalise the decentralised local government institutions, which mandated a more comprehensive representation for historically marginalised and excluded groups like the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes and women. Following the amendment, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are now

represented in proportion to their population in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, and one-third of seats are reserved for women in all three tiers of PRIs. A few states have gone a step ahead and have made provisions for the reservation of half of the total seats (50 %) of decentralised local governments for women. For enactment of a similar quota for women in the national Parliament, several attempts were made during 1996 (The 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill), 1998 (The 84th Constitutional Amendment Bill) and 2000 (The 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill), but without any success. The Women's Reservation Bill was again presented in the Indian Parliament as the 108th Constitution Amendment Bill 2008, which was passed by the Rajya Sabha on 9th March 2010, but could not be tabled for discussion on Lok Sabha. Several political parties (especially the Samajwadi and Bahujan Samjwadi Parties) opposed the bill on the ground that quotas for women will bring upper caste women to politics, undermining the interests of lower and backward castes. The women's quota bill was finally passed in Indian Parliament in September 2023 as Women's Reservation Bill 2023 (The 106th Constitutional Amendment Act), which now made provisions for 33 % reservation to women in national Parliament and state Legislative Assemblies.

### **Methodology and Data**

The paper attempts to test two hypotheses: (a) whether the level of economic growth and development is associated with higher political participation and representation of women in institutional politics, and (b) whether women have a less chance of winning elections, vis-à-vis men. The paper uses secondary data, accessed from the Election Commission of India (ECI), to analyse the history and determinants of representation of women in the Indian Parliament. To understand the association between participation and representation of women in politics and economic growth, the following four indicators were identified:

- (1) Percentage of Women contestants (to total contestants) in parliamentary elections in different states and union territories for 2019, 2014 and 2009 parliamentary elections.
- (2) Human Development Index (HDI) of major states and UTs.
- (3) Gender Development Index (GDI) of major states and UTs.
- (4) Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) of major states and UTs.

The above development indicators provided a comprehensive vision of inclusive development. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) conceptualisation of development has witnessed a paradigm shift from unidimensional income-based indicators for measuring development to include non-income multidimensional indicators such as HDI, GDI, and GEM. UNDP's HDI is an average of three-dimensional development indices, which considers life expectancy at birth, literacy rate and levels of economic growth in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). Since 1995, UNDP introduced two new indices, i.e. GDI and GEM, focusing on opportunities for women and capturing gender-based political and economic inequalities. Following the methods of UNDP, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), Government of India (GoI) has calculated the GDI and GEM for Indian states and UTs in its publication *Gendering Human Development Indices* (MWCD, 2009).

## **Determinants of Women's Representation: Results and Findings**

### **Women's Representation in Indian Parliament since Independence**

India started its democratic journey with only 22 women Members of Parliament (MPs) in the 1st general election to India Parliament in 1952. During the last seven and half decades of independence, our Parliament has seen a nearly three-fold increase in women MPs. The present number of

women MPs stands at 78 after the 2019 general election to the 17th Lok Sabha. Nevertheless, the overall representation of women in the Indian Parliament had remained below 10 per cent, until up to 2009 parliament elections. Only during the last three Lok Sabhas (2009, 2014 and 2019 Parliament elections), women constituted 10.6 per cent, 11.42 per cent and 14.39 per cent respectively (see Table – 1). With such a low representation of women, India is placed 149th out of the 193 countries for which data on women’s representation in national legislature is available with Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>).

Besides, lower women’s representation, there is a gender difference in voter turnout, indicating less percentage of women casting their votes in elections than man. However, as Table 1 indicates, the gender differences in voter turnouts reduced substantially during the last decade. The difference between the percentage of men and women voters was as wide as 17 percentage point in the 1962 general election. The voter turnout differences between men and women have remained up to 10 percentage point till 1991, which was radically reduced to 1.46 percentage point during the 2014 general election. It was for the first time in 2019 election, that women voters outnumbered men voters, with voter turnout differences favouring women (see Table – 1). Such an observation points towards greater political awareness, increasing political interest and participation of women in recent times in India.

**Table 1: Women’s Representation in Indian Parliaments (1951 – 2019)**

Election Year	Differences in voter turnout percentage (Men – Women)	No. of Women representatives	Percentage of women representatives
1952	-	22	4.4
1957	-	22	5.4
1962	17	31	6.7
1967	11.25	29	5.9
1971	10.98	28	4.2
1977	10.72	19	3.4
1980	10.94	29	5.1

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1984	10	43	7.9
1989	8.81	29	5.3
1991	10.23	39	7.9
1996	8.65	40	7.3
1998	7.74	43	7.9
1999	8.33	49	9.0
2004	8.36	45	8.2
2009	4.42	59	10.6
2014	1.46	62	11.42
2019	- 0.17	78	14.39

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Source: Election Commission of India (<https://eci.gov.in>)

### **Levels of development and number of Women in formal political institutions:**

We examined the percentage of women candidates to total candidates in all the 29 major states and seven Union Territories (UTs) in India for the 2019, 2014 and 2009 general elections to examine the variations in different states regarding the opportunity for women to come forward as contestants. To establish any possible explanation for women's involvement in electoral politics, we tried to examine participation of women in electoral politics of different states vis-à-vis levels of development of those specific states, identified through three UNDP indices, i.e. HDI, GDI and GEM. The idea was to see whether women's participation in institutionalised politics in any way related to the level of development of the state. For this purpose, we correlated women's participation in the last three general elections (% of women candidates to total candidates) with the three above composite development indicators.

Central to the question of women's representation in Parliament and state legislatures is the opportunity for women to contest elections, often against male candidates. Hence, it is pertinent to examine data pertaining to women candidates in general elections before observing elected women

representatives in Parliament. Data presented in Table 2 revealed a significant increase in women contesting the general elections in the country in terms of absolute numbers. While there were only 45 women candidates in the 1957 general elections, their number has increased to 724 candidates in 2019. Even though there has been more than 16 times increase in their absolute number between the 1957 to 2019 general elections, their share to the total candidates has just increased from 2.96 per cent to 9.02 per cent during the same period (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Women Candidates in Elections to Indian Parliaments (1957 – 2019)**

Election Year	Female candidates	Total Candidates	% of Female Candidates
1957	45	1519	2.96
1962	66	1985	3.32
1967	67	2369	2.83
1971	83	2784	2.98
1977	70	2439	2.87
1980	143	4629	3.09
1984	171	5492	3.11
1989	198	6160	3.21
1991	330	8749	3.77
1996	599	13952	4.29
1998	274	4750	5.77
1999	284	4648	6.11
2004	355	5435	6.53
2009	556	8070	6.89
2014	668	8251	8.10
2019	724	8026	9.02

Source: Election Commission of India (<https://eci.gov.in>)

Coming forward to contest the election as a candidate is central to ensure women's political representation in Parliament. Hence, to understand the gendered nature of political contestations during the last decade in various states and union territories of India, we observed the percentage of women

candidates in the Parliamentary elections of 2009, 2014 and 2019. In the 2009 general election, more than one-fourth (27.27 %) of the candidates were women in Meghalaya. It may also be observed from the table that UTs with a lesser number of Parliamentary seats also witnessed less percentage of women candidates than the major states of India. Further, no women candidates ever contested in any of the Parliamentary elections in Nagaland and Lakshadweep. For the 2019 general election, the maximum percentage of women candidates were from Goa and Mizoram (16.67 % each), followed by Odisha (14.37 %). There were no women candidates from Manipur and Nagaland and only 2.2 per cent from Himachal Pradesh in the 2019 general election. (see Table – 3).

**Table 3: Development Indicators and Percentage of Women Contestants (WC) in General Election**

States	Total LS seats	% of WC 2019	% of WC 2014	% of WC 2009	HDI	GDI	GEM
Andhra Pradesh	25	8.46	7.19	6.85	0.650	0.574	0.547
Arunachal Pradesh	2	8.33	0.00	0.00	0.660	0.642	0.469
Assam	14	9.66	9.88	6.96	0.614	0.585	0.417
Bihar	40	8.95	7.74	6.85	0.576	0.479	0.379
Goa	2	16.67	10.53	11.11	0.761	0.747	0.551
Gujarat	26	7.55	4.79	7.24	0.672	0.624	0.485
Haryana	10	4.93	4.78	6.67	0.708	0.632	0.532
Himachal Pradesh	4	2.22	13.16	3.23	0.725	0.664	0.540
Jammu & Kashmir	6	3.80	3.90	7.41	0.688	0.568	0.355
Karnataka	28	5.65	4.61	4.45	0.682	0.611	0.526
Kerala	20	10.57	10.04	6.91	0.779	0.745	0.525
Madhya Pradesh	29	9.13	9.79	6.76	0.606	0.516	0.463
Maharashtra	48	9.11	7.69	6.72	0.696	0.677	0.516

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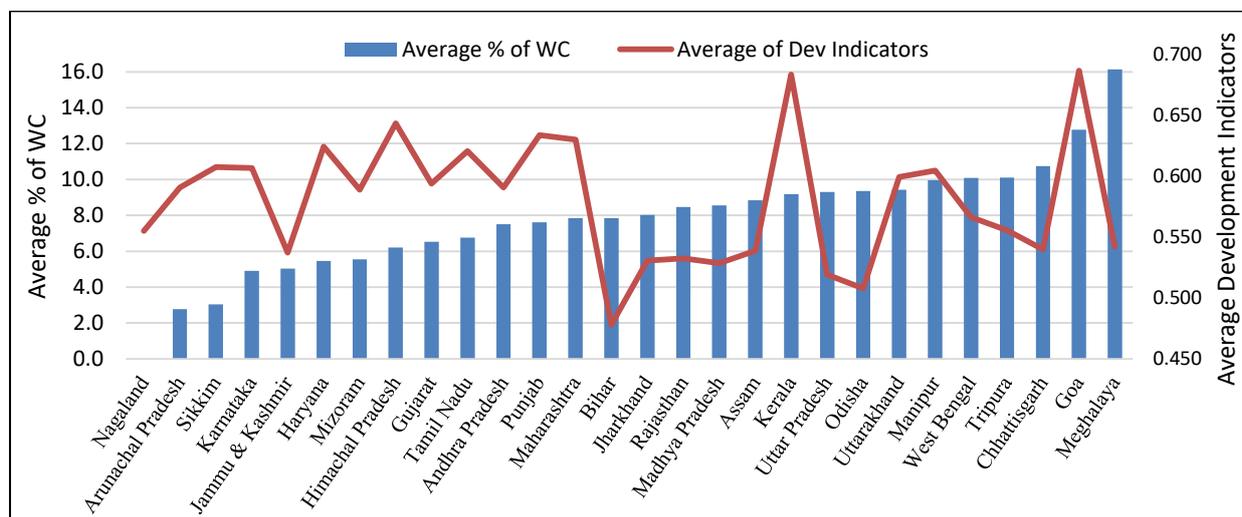
Pratyusna Patnaik

Manipur	2	0.00	11.11	18.75	0.696	0.699	0.418
Meghalaya	2	11.11	10.00	27.27	0.656	0.624	0.346
Mizoram	1	16.67	0.00	0.00	0.705	0.687	0.374
Nagaland	1	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.679	0.697	0.289
Odisha	21	14.37	7.95	5.73	0.606	0.524	0.393
Punjab	13	8.99	7.87	5.96	0.723	0.663	0.514
Rajasthan	25	9.24	7.19	8.96	0.629	0.526	0.442
Sikkim	1	9.09	0.00	0.00	0.716	0.659	0.447
Tamil Nadu	38	7.91	6.51	5.83	0.708	0.655	0.498
Tripura	2	13.04	12.00	5.26	0.658	0.626	0.382
Uttar Pradesh	80	10.83	9.78	7.31	0.596	0.509	0.452
West Bengal	42	11.59	10.81	7.88	0.641	0.622	0.435
Chhattisgarh	11	13.86	9.95	8.43	0.613	0.542	0.464
Jharkhand	14	10.92	7.50	5.62	0.599	0.558	0.435
Uttarakhand	5	9.62	9.46	9.21	0.684	0.647	0.466
Telangana	17	5.64	-	-	0.669	-	-
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	1	6.67	13.33	9.09	0.739	0.692	0.560
Chandigarh	1	25.00	29.41	7.14	0.775	0.763	0.500
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	1	9.09	9.09	0.00	0.663	0.673	0.479
Daman & Diu	1	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.708	0.677	0.503
NCT OF Delhi	7	9.76	8.67	11.25	0.746	0.701	0.564
Lakshadweep	1	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.750	0.635	0.463
Puducherry	1	11.11	10.00	0.00	0.738	0.706	0.558
Total	542	9.02	8.03	6.89	0.647	0.59	0.497

Source: Election Commission of India (<https://eci.gov.in>) and MWCD (2009)

Based on data available for the percentage of women candidates (to total candidates) for the last three Parliamentary elections (2019, 2014 and 2009), we calculated the average percentage of women candidates for all Indian states. Data presented in Figure 1 reveal that over the decade, the highest percentage (16.13 %) of women candidates were from Meghalaya, followed by Goa (12.77 %) and Chhattisgarh (10.74 %). Further, only five states in India, i.e. Meghalaya, Goa, Chhattisgarh, Tripura and West Bengal had on an average more than 1 women in every 10 candidates (> 10 %) in Parliamentary elections. On the contrary, states like Karnataka, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh had less than five per cent of women candidates in Parliamentary elections (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Computed Average Percentage of Women Contestants and Development Indicators**



Source: Election Commission of India (<https://eci.gov.in>) and MWCD (2009)

To comprehend the association between representation of women and levels of development, a Person product-moment correlation was run in SPSS using the

above data. It was interesting to observe that no statistically significant positive correlation existed between the percentage of women candidates (in all the three general elections) and the development indicators ( $p > 0.05$ ). The development indicators (HDI, GDI and GEM) are perfectly correlated with each other (correlation significant at 0.01 level,  $p < 0.01$ ) across the Indian states. Likewise, the percentage of women contestants across the last three Parliamentary elections (2019, 2014 and 2009) are also positively correlated with each other ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, no statistically significant correlation was observed between the three development indicators and the percentage of women candidates in the last three elections ( $p > 0.05$ ). The data, therefore, suggest that levels of development do not in any way influence women’s engagement with institutional politics, manifested in terms of the percentage of women contestants in Parliamentary elections (see Table – 4).

**Table 4: Correlation between Percentage of Women Contestants (WC) and Development Indicators**

Variables	N	M	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Percentage of WC 2019	37	8.88	—					
2. Percentage of WC 2014	36	7.85	.571**	—				
3. Percentage of WC 2009	36	6.43	.127	.400*	—			
4. Human Development Index (HDI)	37	0.68	-.025	.125	-	—		
5. Gender Development Index (GDI)	36	0.63	.057	.178	-	.889**	—	
6. Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM)	36	0.46	.055	.248	-	.495**	.358*	—

*n* = Number of states and UTs of India

\*\* Correlation is significant at 0.01 level ( $p < 0.01$ )

\* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level ( $p < 0.05$ )

**Gender Differences in Chances of Getting Elected**

To understand gender differences in chances of getting elected to institutional politics, we compared the success rate of women candidates to Indian Parliament for all general elections to that of the success rate of male candidates. We calculated the success rate by looking at the percentage of winning contestants to the total contestants in several general elections among men and women. To gain more in-depth insight, we bifurcated the success rate of both male and female into National Parties, State Parties, Registered Unrecognised Parties (RUP), and independent candidates.

Data presented in Table 5 revealed that for National Parties, except for two general elections to Indian Parliament (1989 and 1977), the success rate of candidates in all general elections was higher for women. For instance, in the 2019 general election, while one-third (33.91 %) of the women candidates won the elections, out of the total male candidates, 26.43 per cent of men won the election. In the 1984 general election, as many as 61.9 per cent of women contestants came out as winners. The mean rate of success for women candidates in all general elections in the National Parties remained at 38.21 per cent, in contrast to 30.32 per cent for men. Similarly, in the State Parties also, the overall success rate for women was higher for women than men. In the case of contestants from RUP as well as for independent contestants, women performed at par with men (see Table – 5).

**Table 5: Gender Differences in Chances of Getting Elected (% of Winning Contestants to Total Contestants)**

Election Year	National party		State Party		RUP		Independent	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
2019	33.91	26.42	29.82	40.97	0.37	0.19	0.88	0.06

2014	24.30	21.21	15.33	40.36	1.84	3.02	0.00	0.09
2009	32.09	22.36	55.56	35.69	0.53	0.341	0.00	0.25
2004	27.27	26.91	21.21	19.73	1.61	1.675	0.00	0.22
1999	33.65	27.95	23.64	20.86	0.00	1.647	1.28	0.27
1998	28.97	25.69	23.08	21.35	7.81	5.452	1.30	0.27
1996	28.80	21.69	18.18	16.91	0.00	0.282	0.00	0.09
1991	29.41	25.31	9.09	10.26	0.00	0.493	0.00	0.02
1989	29.89	34.47	0.00	19.29	11.54	1.778	0.00	0.33
1984	61.90	34.89	75.00	37.41	0.00	0.000	0.00	0.14
1980	35.06	31.28	25.00	32.35	0.00	0.645	0.00	0.33
1977	41.46	45.53	100.00	56.63	0.00	4.478	0.00	0.75
1971	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1967	48.00	32.20	40.00	28.67	50.00	9.091	20.00	3.86
1962	59.62	33.61	0.00	12.90	0.00	42.857	0.00	4.25
1957	58.82	45.31	2.00	24.79	0.00	-	0.00	8.90
<b>Mean</b>	38.21	30.32	29.19	27.87	4.91	5.13	1.56	1.32
<b>Mean difference</b>	+ 7.89 for Women		+ 1.32 for Women		- 0.22 for Women		+ 0.24 for Women	
<b>t value</b>	2.060		0.166		- 0.050		0.165	
<b>Sig.</b>	0.049		0.871		0.960		0.871	

Source: Election Commission of India (<https://eci.gov.in>)

To examine the gender differences in getting elected to the Indian Parliament across several Parliamentary elections and political parties, an independent-sample t-test was conducted in SPSS to compare the percentage of winning contestants to total contestants among men and women in various general elections and across political parties. Test results presented in last row of Table 4 revealed no statistically significant difference in winning potential (percentage of winners to contestants) between men and women in State Parties ( $t = 0.166, p > 0.05$ ), RUP ( $t = - 0.05, p > 0.05$ ), and independent

contestants ( $t = 0.165$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). On the contrary, in National Parties, there was a difference (favouring women) in the percentage of winners to total contestants for men ( $M=38.21$ ) and women ( $M=30.32$ ), which was statistically significant ( $t = 2.060$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) (refer Table – 5).

Two crucial findings come out from the data presented in Table 5. First, Women do not have less chance of getting elected to institutional politics than men, if given an opportunity to contest elections. Instead, the data reveal that the success rate of women candidates in getting elected to the Indian Parliament has remained relatively higher than men in most of the general elections. Second, women's chances of getting elected to Parliament were higher when they contested from a political party (especially from a National Party), rather than contesting as independent candidates or from Registered Unrecognised Parties (RUP). We may, therefore, deduce that with access to Political Parties, networks and other resources, women have the equal (or even more) capacity of winning elections like their men counterparts, and they do not exhibit fewer chances of getting elected to institutional politics. Hence, lesser chances of getting elected or lesser winning potential may not be considered as a determinant of representation and participation of women in institutional politics.

The data also revealed that rather than gender, access to a political party (which makes women part of a larger political network and provide them with resources to build their own agency) matters in getting elected to politics. While women's success rate in getting elected remained quite higher in both National and State Parties, it remained substantially low for women candidates from Registered Unrecognised Parties (RUP) and independent women candidates (See Table – 6). To compare the percentage of winners to total contestants among women candidates from political parties (national and

state) and non-parties, an independent sample t-test was conducted using SPSS. Test results presented in the last row of Table 5 reveal that there was a statistically significant difference in success rate for women candidates in (national and state) Political Party (M=33.70) and Non-Political Parties (M=3.23), including RUP and independent contestants ( $t = 6.911, p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 6: Women’s Chances of Getting Elected in Party and Non-Party (RUP & Independent)**

Election Year	Party		Non-Party	
	National Party	State Party	RUP	Independent
2019	33.91	29.82	0.37	0.88
2014	24.30	15.33	1.84	0.00
2009	32.09	55.56	0.53	0.00
2004	27.27	21.21	1.61	0.00
1999	33.65	23.64	0.00	1.28
1998	28.97	23.08	7.81	1.30
1996	28.80	18.18	0.00	0.00
1991	29.41	9.09	0.00	0.00
1989	29.89	0.00	11.54	0.00
1984	61.90	75.00	0.00	0.00
1980	35.06	25.00	0.00	0.00
1977	41.46	100.00	0.00	0.00
1971	-	-	-	-
1967	48.00	40.00	50.00	20.00

1962	59.62	0.00	0.00	0.00
1957	58.82	2.00	0.00	0.00
<b>Combined Mean</b>	33.70		3.23	
<b>Combined Mean difference</b>		30.46		
<i>t</i> value		6.911		
<i>Sig.</i>		0.000		

Source: Election Commission of India (<https://eci.gov.in>)

### Conclusion

The results of the present study make one thing amply clear: given an opportunity, women’s potential to become elected representatives in Parliament and state legislatures in no way differs from that of men. The findings of this study rejected two important commonly held views that (a) women’s increased political participation and representation are associated with levels of socio-economic growth and development, and (b) women have less potential of getting elected in electoral politics, and hence are not recruited in sufficient numbers by political parties as contestants. Instead, what is needed for a higher political presence for women in institutional politics is an assured opportunity and support to women to contest electoral politics. Such findings reiterate the importance of affirmative action policies in the context of the debate over equitable representation to institutional politics. In a hierarchical society like India, where archaic institutions of patriarchy curtail women’s presence in the public sphere; factors such as education and critical resources; protective/positive discrimination policies and seat reservation for

women in electoral politics would function as an equaliser balancing gender imbalances in political structures. Similar strategies of affirmative action in the form of quotas for women in decentralised local governments (through the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution, 1993) have helped in bringing rural women to institutional politics, thereby creating a critical mass of women, which in turn is expected to lead to their empowerment in grassroots politics. Likewise, the recent enactment of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women's Reservation Bill) through the 106th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2023 certainly holds great potential to ensure women's effective and enhanced political representation and participation in institutions of democracy.

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**Article: 'Prasad' and its Discourses: Translation of Food  
Identity in Rajbanshi Community of North Bengal**

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**‘Prasad’ and its Discourses: Translation of Food Identity  
in Rajbanshi Community of North Bengal**

--Pragya Sengupta and Sriparna Das

**Abstract**

This paper aims to critically read into the varying constituents of Prasad – from making to the distribution and the beliefs, and the language/s associated with them among the Rajbanshis, an indigenous community of North Bengal. Further, the researchers aim to read into the community’s discourses of identity, purity, and pollution through specific food narratives, in this case, the prasads used in different rituals. Finally, using the understanding of translation as ‘critical reading’, this paper would argue that the discourses of the community’s identity are successfully translated through their consumption of food, food practices, and through their concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Additionally, the paper also enquires if the changing pattern of Prasad is a result of changes in the food pattern of the community as well as socio-economic variations in the production of crops. The Rajbanshi community’s traditions have gone through phases of Hinduisation and Sanskritization due to which their rituals in the contemporary period observe a lot of similarity with Hindu traditions. ‘Prasad’ or sacred offerings to Gods, is associated with a dominance of vegetarianism in mainstream Hindu (Indian) cultures. The distinct identity of ‘Prasads’ in Rajbanshi rituals signifies an individuality of their own traditions though they are influenced by the mainstream Hindu culture. ‘Prasad’ here is a part of the community’s identity and a prism of their beliefs and worldviews. This paper attempts to arrive at this aforementioned conclusion through the critical analysis of Rajbanshi food practices in select rituals through the lens of translation.

**Keywords:** *Culture; food narratives; prasad; sacred food; Rajbanshi; indigenous communities; identity; purity and pollution; rituals; translation*



**Introduction:**

'*Prasad*' or *Prasada* is the sacred offerings made in Hindu culture during the process of worshipping a deity. According to Linda Hess, Prasad is defined as, "any physical item that has been blessed by contact with the deities. It can be flower garlands, sweets, fruits, sacred basil<sup>1</sup> leaves" (Hess, 2006, p.117). Prasad is the manifestation of interconnection between food and worship. As Chitrita Banerji writes,

"Food and worship have been interconnected in Hindu thinking from ancient times... In the early creation myths, the first offspring of Brahma the creator is Agni (fire), who emerges from his mouth and is therefore an 'eater of food'. And it is in order to meet Agni's ravenous hunger that Brahma rubs his palms to produce the very offspring of milk and butter. That was the origin of the Vedic practice of pouring oblations into the fire in order to ensure the birth of one's own progeny." (Banerji, 2015, p.15)

The consumption of food by the deities, thus, establishes the sanctity associated with Prasad. As observed, its concept has been derived from the Vedic traditions of eating food, which is predominantly vegetarian as understood from the composition of making as well as the exclusiveness of the people who are engaged in the process of making. As Dina Simoes Guha observes, the food in Vedic traditions are divided into three categories: Sattvic, Rajasic and Tamasic. While the Sattvic food consists of mainly milk or milk products, fruits, cereals, vegetables, mild herbs and spices, the Rajasic

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<sup>1</sup>Tulsi, the local variety of Basil is considered to be an auspicious plant in Hindu culture. The leaves of Tulsi plant are included in the offerings to make them sacred for the deities.

food consisted of non-vegetarian items like fish, eggs, meat from goat, sheep and chicken and the Tamasic food included pork, beef, non-scaly fish, strong brews etc (Guha, 1985, pp. 147-148). The differences between the food items created a clear distinction between the communities, their physical attributes, their means of sustenance, occupations etc., and also created their worldviews. The Rajbanshi community of North Bengal have their own ethnic ways of making Prasad and distributing them among the devotees. This paper will identify the ingredients of Prasad in Rajbanshi rituals and observe how they are different from the surrounding Hindu Bengalis. Chitrita Banerji's note on Prasad as the "sanctified vegetarian offering" also imbibe the notion of conventional Hindu practices in Bengali community (Banerji, 2015, p.14). The author belongs to upper-caste Hindu Bengali society which believes in purity of food offered while worshipping. The caste hierarchy based on the varna-system had further strengthened the notions of purity and pollution in the food habits of mainstream Hindu Bengalis. They limited their dietary components to Sattvic and Rajasic food. However, their ritual spaces were mostly devoid of Rajasic food as well, except in few cases where the tradition of animal sacrifice like that of goats or buffaloes persisted in temples of female deities like Kali, Durga etc. The Rajbanshis, on the other hand, though abstain from Tamasic food like the mainstream but their rituals are inclusive of Rajasic food as well. In this paper, the researchers aim to observe and read through the ritual narratives of Rajbanshis and interpret the meaning of every food item involved in those narratives. The significance of reading these food narratives is to comprehend the differences between the cultural dimensions of the

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Rajbanshis and the mainstream Bengalis. In this paper, the researchers are looking into the data collected on Rajbanshi ritual practices and the sacred food or Prasad associated with them. The rituals and the narratives on Prasad have been selected on the basis of their ingredients and functions. The dichotomy of sacred vs non-sacred, pure vs impure, Rajbanshi vs mainstream Hindu Bengalis in the readings of food literature with specific reference to Prasad is seen only in the context of North Bengal.<sup>2</sup>

The ritual narratives and their associated Prasad allows us to read them as a store-house of cultural knowledge. The Rajbanshi rituals consist of their ethnic knowledge, their lifestyle, their worldviews which are undergoing changes due to close contact with other communities and these changes can be reflected in the selection of food items, too. Time and space are two major factors that contribute to this changing knowledge structure. Translation operates here as a tool of tracing the changes, and finding a shift in the knowledge structure. This shift, which is gradually distancing the community from their natural surroundings, is also a product of modernization and urbanization. Therefore, the concept of translation is seen here as a process of transferring the knowledge and also preserving the knowledge. The working definition of translation in this paper is twofold: it is a metaphor where reading itself is seen as an act of translation and simultaneously, it is a process of experiences being converted into community's collective memory as knowledge. The narratives of Prasad available in secondary texts and observed in the ritual practices of

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<sup>2</sup> Though Rajbanshis are spread across different states, for the purpose of this paper, the researchers have tried to focus on specific locations. Though there is a shared culture of food practices, particularly during rituals, among the Hindus in pan-Indian context, in this paper only North Bengal, the northern part of West Bengal is being studied.

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Rajbanshi community are read from the perspective of the observant who are outside the community. The researchers also belong to the mainstream Hindu culture, but their interpretation of the narratives are based on objective study of the data using ethnographic research of translation queries (Saldanha, 2014, p. 208). The researchers are also translators here, since they are documenting the primary data from their observation of the rituals. From the ethnographic point of view, the data collected falls in the regiment of anthropology or the study of human sciences. However, the analytical mode the researcher has borrowed from Translation Studies and moreover, the transfer of knowledge within human beings categorically falls under the practices of translation. The food objects and other cultural terms included in Prasad have been translated and explained in English in the form of footnotes. The researchers have inquired the meanings of these terms from the informants, verified them with secondary resources, and also, studied their etymological sources to understand and explain them in the paper. Their acquaintance with Rajbanshi language is limited, but most of the informants are familiar with Bengali and Rajbanshi which enabled the researchers to decipher the meaning of the Rajbanshi words. It is also interesting to note that most of the informants were proficient in Bengali, compared to Rajbanshi. Hence, the Bengali linguistic identity of the researchers has supported them in analysing the data.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data used in this paper has been collected from the Rajbanshis residing in the villages of Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal. The town of

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Mainaguri, which is about 10 km northeast of Jalpaiguri, and its surrounding villages (Dakshin Mouamari and Nirendrapur) are the primary locations for collecting the data. The residents of these villages consider themselves as Bengali Rajbanshis and they follow the rituals and traditions of both Rajbanshi community and mainstream Hindu Bengalis. The data has been collected by the researchers not only from translated secondary resources but also by directly communicating with the primary informants and simultaneously, reaching out to a larger section of the community through the primary informants. In this process, the researchers conducted unstructured interviews, starting with the schedule of the rituals and the people who conduct them. The devotees and the priests were asked a few questions regarding the ingredients of the Prasad, the names of the deities, the frequency of offering the Prasads in the rituals etc. Photography and videography of the rituals were done along with audio recordings to document the ethnic components.

The narratives of the rituals have been collected from the various Rajbanshi families. Mecheni Puja narratives have been collected from Ms. Fukun Ray and Ms. Dinobala Devi belonging to Dakshin Mouamari village and Ms. Budheshwari Devi of Nirendrapur village. Ms. Buddheshwari Devi also hosted three other rituals, namely Panchapuja, and Noya Khoya and Boroma Shanti. Dharam Puja has been observed in the household of Ms. Sushila Ray from Nirendrapur village. The information on Bhandani Puja has been given by Mr. Bhabendranath Mallik from Dakshin Ulladabri village in Maynaguri. The Bishua Sankranti has been observed in multiple places of Dakshin Mouamari, including the houses of Ms. Rupeswari Devi, Ms. Dinobala Devi,

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and Mr. Manik Ray. The narratives collected from these informants have been verified with scholars like Mr. Dinesh Ray and Mr. Naresh Ray, who have been working on the rituals of Rajbanshis in Jalpaiguri-Moynaguri area for many years.

The rituals selected for this paper are: Mecheni Puja, Panchapuja, Dharam Puja, Bishua, Noya Khoya and Barama Shanti, and Bhandani Puja. The food offered in the form of Prasad and the food used in ethnic performances in each of this ritual will be described and analysed in this paper. Both ethnographic and narrative methodologies are applied in order to explore and interpret the cultural aspects of Rajbanshi community by reading their narratives on sacred food or Prasad. This paper incorporates the lived experiences of the ritual performers and followers in Rajbanshi community. Apart from this, the documentation of Rajbanshi rituals in the secondary texts like Charu Chandra Sanyal's *the Rajbansis of North Bengal*, and Girijashankar Roy's *Uttarbanger Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Puja-Parvana* have served as supplementary to the reading and analysis of Rajbanshi rituals and Rajbanshi Prasad.

### **Identity of Rajbanshi Community**

The Rajbanshis are not a homogeneous community. Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee's observations on Koch tribe and Rajbanshi community is intriguing as it establishes the linguistic transformation among them. He writes that the Kochs are

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“Hinduised or Semi-Hinduised Bodo who have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and have adopted the Northern dialect of Bengali (which has a close affinity with Assamese): and when they are a little too conscious of their Hindu religion and culture and retain at the same time some vague memory of the glories of their people, particularly the days of Viśva Siṃha and Nara-nārāyaṇa, they are proud to call themselves Rāj-baṃśīs and to claim to be called Kshatriyas” (Chatterji, 1951, p.112).

The heterogeneity of the Rajbanshis is also evident in the researches of Dr. Dwijendranath Bhakat. He has noted that Rajbanshis got divided into seven different royal families. They are Coochbehar Rajbanshi (Coochbehar), Raykat Rajbanshi (Jalpaiguri), Pangar Rajbanshi (Rangpur, Bangladesh), Kachar Rajbanshi, Darang Rajbanshi, Bijani Rajbanshi, Beltala Rajbanshi (Guwahati) (Bhakat, 34). The Rajbanshis residing in Jalpaiguri Maynaguri area identify themselves as Hindu Rajbanshis. They do not recognise their community as a part of the Koch lineage. Charu Chandra Sanyal writes in his book,

“It appears from the study of the Kochs of North Bengal preferred to be classed as Rajbansis and the census of 1872 recorded the Rajbansis as a special class of Koch. But in 1881 census such a difference was not recorded and Koch, Rajbansi, Paliya etc., were shown as one unit under the general head Koch. At the census of 1891 many of the Rajbansis recorded themselves as Bratya Kshatriyas as revealed in the break up of Koch figures that year... In 1901 all sub-sections of Koch were recorded as Rajbansis... Between 1921

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and 1931 many Rajbansis took the sacred thread and recorded themselves as Kshatriyas and so a fall in number of Rajbansis in some districts of North Bengal was observed.” (Sanyal, 1965, p.16)

From the above statements it can be observed that the trend of being uplifted in order to get accommodated in the caste structure of Hinduism has been an old practice among the Rajbanshis.

Apart from Sanyal’s documentation, another historical factor that foregrounds the Hindu Kshatriya identity of Rajbanshis is the social movement that was initiated by Ray Saheb Panchanan Berma. In the beginning of twentieth century, social reformer and leader of Rajbanshi Kshatriya community, Ray Saheb Panchanan Berma had begun a movement for the upliftment of the community in social order of caste system. During this movement, the kshatriya identity of the community was foregrounded, shielding the Koch lineage. Rajbanshi community has not only gone through this transition from Koch tribe to Hinduisation, but consequently they adopted other religions as well. As George Grierson reports,

“Those Kōch, who are now Hindūs, are primarily known under the name of Rājbangśī. But large numbers of them have become Musalmāns, so that the mere number of people of the Rājbangśī tribe affords no idea of the number of people of Kōch extraction in the country” (Grierson, 1903, p.163).

The researchers have found that the cultural impact of Hindu Bengalis are observable in many spheres of Rajbanshi livelihood. Their integration is well

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understood in their language practices, their cultural aspects, their rituals, as well as the forms of their deities. For example, the traditional Rajbanshi thaans, which used to be made of mud or stone, are getting replaced with idols. However, they have not been able to eliminate the markers of their Koch traditions entirely. For instance, the ritual of Mecheni and the inclusion of eggs in the Prasad of the ritual serve as a potential symbol of their association with the Koch ancestry.

**Prasad in Rajbanshi rituals:**

The Rajbanshi rituals discussed in this paper include Mecheni Puja, Panchapuja, Bishua, Barama Shanti, Noya Khoya and Bhandani. These rituals consist of diverse narratives of Prasad, including vegetarian and non-vegetarian items. They also include raw and cooked food in the composition as well as distribution. Not all Prasad are consumed by the devotees, and hence, it is interesting to note the culminations of the offerings made to the deities.

Though the researchers have observed many other rituals of Rajbanshis (like Katham Puja, Bonni Puja, Kali Puja, Akashbati, and Jatra Puja), the rituals discussed in this paper have been selected because the researchers have been able to document the Prasad or offerings during these rituals. Hence, the availability of primary sources of information is the first criteria of the selection. Secondly, these rituals engaged a group of people who actively participate in the making, offering, and distribution of Prasad. Hence, the

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engagement of more than one individual fosters the community bond, which is an interesting fact in an ethnographic study.

The Prasad in Rajbanshi rituals are not random selection of food items. In India, the concept of 'Prasad' itself imbibes many social factors. Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi lists out some of these factors as tradition (written or oral), availability, financial possibilities, local cuisine, convenience of preparation, preservability, season, origin of Gods and cults, and characters of Gods and foods. She also writes that the requirement of Gods resembles the human requirement in terms of food (Luzzi, 553). Hence the choices of food for making the Prasad are a complex web of human requirements and fulfilments. Simultaneously, the ingredients of Prasad also reflect the type of food produced and consumed by a community. For example, the ritual of Noya-Khoya is celebrated to offer the first harvest of the Kharif crops in winter. As the demand of the crops in market changes, the production also differs, and hence the content of Prasad also takes inevitable turns in history. The agricultural and spiritual cycles are interconnected and the spiritual beliefs and practices of indigenous communities play a vital role in "protecting and contributing to biocultural diversity in sustainable food systems" (Castagnetti et al., 2021, p.2). The changing pattern of agriculture will, therefore, change the type of Prasad too.

Apart from this, the idea of Prasad also imbibes a role of community bonding. R.S. Khare suggests that "The social function of prasād is mainly to produce a bond of social cohesiveness among the devotees across the caste and class

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differentials” (Khare, 1991, p.99). This factor could be observed during the rituals as well as the Prasad distribution and consumption as the community functions as a group in most of the rituals. Carol Breckenridge’s also states that “in India, feeding the Gods is a special route by which humans feed each other” (Breckenridge, 1986, p.21). Feeding each other is a sign of expressing love, care, devotion, and togetherness which is a resultant effect of the Prasad. The shared emotion and understanding towards the Prasad transcends the class divisions or internal diversity within the community.

### **Prasad in Mecheni Puja**

The ritual of Mecheni consists of Mecheni Khela<sup>3</sup> and Mecheni Puja. While the first part is a collective ritual act of the Rajbanshi women where a prime devotee or Mareyani<sup>4</sup>, goes around the village with a group of women to collect alms. An umbrella, known as Mecheni’s Chhati<sup>5</sup>, is the primary symbol of the ritual and it is garlanded with flowers, tel-sindur<sup>6</sup>, and near the top spring of the umbrella, a cloth containing grains of rice is tied. This chhati is carried by the Mareyani every day for a month until they collect alms from each household in the village. In return of the alms collected, the Mareyani offers a few grains of rice from the cloth tied to the umbrella as Prasad to the households.

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<sup>3</sup>Mechenikhela: The ritual of collecting offerings while singing and dancing by Rajbanshi women for worshipping Mecheni

<sup>4</sup>Mareyani: a woman who vows a ritual to a deity

<sup>5</sup>Chhati: an umbrella used in Mecheni ritual

<sup>6</sup>Tel-Sindur: a mixture of Mustard oil and vermilion powder, used as an auspicious sign in both Hindu and Rajbanshi rituals

Mecheni Puja is performed on the last day of Baishakh<sup>7</sup>, when they take the Chhati to the Jalpesh temple<sup>8</sup> and worship Lord Shiva<sup>9</sup>. In the temple ground, the Mareyani and her team make a Donga<sup>10</sup>, a small alter shaped structure with plantain stems and mark it with Tel- Sindur. They place a bunch of bananas, a pair of eggs, flowers and sweets on that Donga and keep it under the Chhati as an offering to Tista Buri<sup>11</sup>. The Mareyani prays to the sun god and immerses the Donga in the water and takes a dip in the pond. The flowers and rice bag on the Chhati are also immersed in the water.

In this ritual, Prasad has multiple ingredients. Firstly, the rice, which is tied in a cloth bag and given to the devotees as a blessing of Tista Buri, is a sacred constituent of the ritual. It is believed by the Rajbanshis that this rice as Prasad has the potential to solve the problems when consumed. Though it is uncooked, yet it is consumed without any inhibition since it is considered sacred. The second type of Prasad in this ritual are the items which are offered to Tista buri in the Donga. Those items are not consumed by the devotees, rather they are immersed in the water.

### **Prasad in Panchapuja**

Panchadebata<sup>12</sup> Puja or Panchapuja is a ritual where four other deities along with Mecheni are worshipped. The Puja of Panchadebata takes place few days

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<sup>7</sup> Baishakh: the first month in Bengali Hindu calendar when the Mecheni Khela is performed

<sup>8</sup> A Shiva temple located in Moynaguri town of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal

<sup>9</sup> Shiva: The God of creation and destruction in Hindu mythology

<sup>10</sup> Donga: a small alter shape structure made with plantain stems

<sup>11</sup> Tista buri: the deity attributed to Tista River, a Himalayan river which flows through North Bengal

<sup>12</sup> Panchapuja: a ritual of worshipping five deities including Mecheni; performed after a few days of Mecheni puja. The five deities are Mecheni, Kuchuni, Natkiburi, Dhola and Shib

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after the immersion of Mecheni separate mandap<sup>13</sup> outside Mareyani's house. where the priest places Prasad or offerings for the five gods (Panchadebata). This Prasad consists of a bunch of bananas, a pair of beetle nuts, beetle leaves, flowers, and sweets on a plantain leaf. Mareyani and other women devotees also make a donga with plantain stems and keep a bunch of bananas along with a pair of beetle nits and two pairs of eggs. They place this donga under Tistaburi's Chhati. In a separate plate, they put sweets and rice flakes, and a bowl of milk. They also keep a pair of hens in a bamboo cage near the Chhati. While performing the ritual, the priest is said to be possessed with the divine spirit and he offers solutions to the problems of the devotees. He also offers them a pinch of soil and flowers as Prasad. The devotees consume that pinch of soil considering it as the blessing of the God.

As we read the ritual of Panchapuja, there are different types of Prasads offered in it, including edible and inedible. The edible Prasad includes bananas, beetle nuts, beetle leaves, sweets, rice flakes, milk, eggs and hens. Though the last two items are not consumed by the devotees, yet their sanctification and offering to the deities categorise them as Prasad. The rest of the items are distributed among the devotees after the Puja for consumption. The inedible items include flowers and soil which are partially consumed by the devotees.

### **Prasad in Dharam Puja**

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<sup>13</sup> Mandap: a sacred place constructed outside the house for doing puja

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The ritual of Dharam<sup>14</sup> puja in Rajbanshi community is performed by women. As Girajashankar Roy observes, the women take a bath early morning to perform the Puja. The ritual of Dharam Puja is performed for worshipping the Sun-God and hence, it is performed either early morning before the sun rises or in the evening before it sets. In this Puja, a duck is required to sacrifice which is released by the devotee while performing the ritual.

The Prasad in this ritual include dozen of banana is placed in a Kula<sup>15</sup> along with some flowers on a plantain leaf. An offering of Noibedyo<sup>16</sup> is made in three small pieces of a plantain leaf. After worshipping the Sun, the devotee sets the duck free and one of the family member catches it for feasting on it later.

In this ritual, the Noibedyo is served as a Prasad to the devotees who are performing and observing the Puja. Though the duck offered to the deity is also a Prasad in this ritual, but it is not consumed by the ritual performers. The family member who catches it, may feast on it with others but the women who follow the ritual do not eat it. Dharam Puja is an exemplary ritual where the non-vegetarian items in Prasad are included for human consumption.

### **Prasad in Bishua**

On the day of Bishua<sup>17</sup>, the Rajbanshis avoid eating rice during lunch. Instead they practice the eating of Bhajabhujja<sup>18</sup>. The Bhajabhujja is made of beaten-

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<sup>14</sup> Dharam Puja: worshipping the Sun-God

<sup>15</sup> Kula: a winnowing tray which is also used in the rituals

<sup>16</sup> Noibedyo: offering of rice, banana and sweets made to deities

<sup>17</sup> Bishua, the Rajbanshi ritual celebrated on last date of Chaitra

rice, grams, peas, moong, lentils fried in oil or ghee. The children follow the practice of gathering in a group and hunting on this day. Earlier the hunted animal was sacrificed and feasted upon but nowadays the animal or the bird is released after being trapped. The Rajbanshis prepare rice at night and some leftover rice are kept to be eaten on the next day, i.e. the first day of the New Year. The phrase used for this practice is called 'Choitrer Ponta boishakhe khay, which literally means "eating the stale rice of month Chaitra<sup>19</sup> in the month of Baishakh".

The Prasad in Bishua is also inclusive of fruits and Noibedyos. A puja is conducted for the household deities. But the significance of this ritual lies on the tradition of eating Bhajabhujja on the day of Bishua and eating the stale rice on the next day. However, feasting on the hunted animal has become obsolete now since the act of hunting has been prohibited.

#### **Prasad in Barama Shanti<sup>20</sup>:**

The ritual is performed at the day time in the temple space of the household. The particular household in which the researcher observed Noya Khoya<sup>21</sup> and Barama Shanti<sup>22</sup> consisted of the thaans<sup>23</sup> of Baidyanath and Tulsi Debi. Noibedyos are offered in plantain leaves. Guwapaan<sup>24</sup> is also offered to the

<sup>18</sup>Bhajabhujja: a snack made of beaten rice, grams, peas, lentil, dal

<sup>19</sup>The last month in Bengali Hindu calendar

<sup>20</sup>Barama Shanti: Barama Shanti is the colloquial term for Brahma Shanti. Brahma is the creator God in Hinduism. Brahma Shanti is a ritual to pacify Brahma and pray him for a better harvest.

<sup>21</sup>Noya Khoya: the ritual of celebrating with the harvesting of new rice and other crops

<sup>22</sup>Baroma Shanti: a ritual dedicated to Lord Brahma

<sup>23</sup>Thaan: a sacred place in village or within home for worshipping

<sup>24</sup>GuwaPaan: a variety of betel leaves

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deities in a separate plate. The Adhikari performs a Yajna<sup>25</sup> in this ritual where he offers the Noibedyo in the fire, praying to Agni, i.e, the fire and the sky. The devotee serves Prasad to the guests or attendees of the ritual.

The ritual of Barama Shanti is performed by the Rajbanshis to satisfy the deity Barama or Brahma, who is believed to be the creator God in Hinduism. The representation of Brahma/ Barama is the sky and the Yajna is performed to devote the offerings to Him by putting them on the Yajna fire. The ingredients offered in Yajna fire are Sattvic, which hints the inclusion of mainstream Hinduism in the community's cultural practices.

### **Prasad in Noya Khoya<sup>26</sup>:**

The women in Rajbanshi household cook and offer the first crops of the season to the deities. The crops include green leafy vegetables and dal. Once the food is cooked, the devotee places the food in seven separate dongas, five of which are kept on a kula along with an earthen lamp and the rest of the two are left on the ground. The first five dongaas are offered to Panchadebata, while the other two are offered to Mahabari<sup>27</sup>. The devotees who have kept fast during the entire day have their first meal only after this and they feast on the new rice and other vegetables grown in their own farms.

The ritual of Noya Khoya is performed to celebrate the first yield of the season in the month of November. In this ritual, the food offering or Prasad is meant

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<sup>25</sup> Yajna: a religious sacrifice by burning the offerings

<sup>26</sup> Noya Knoya is the festival of eating the new harvest. Noya in Rajbanshi means new and khoya is the term used for eating.

<sup>27</sup> Mahabari: owl/a bird which is offered food on the day of Noya Khoya

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for the animals. Once they are kept in the open space, they are not consumed again by human beings. The tradition of Noya Khoya derives its conception of returning a part of harvest to the nature from where it has been yielded. There are no animal sacrifices or animal products in this ritual.

### **Prasad in Bhandani Puja**

The custom of sacrificing animals like goat or pigeon is still prevalent in this ritual. Bhandani<sup>28</sup> puja is usually performed by a Deusi<sup>29</sup>, who fasts the entire day and eats only curd and flaked rice after the puja gets completed. The devotees offer fruits, sweets etc. in a plate to the deity and the priest keeps a part of it in the temple and returns the rest. He also provides the devotee with some Prasad, i.e., some flowers, wood-apple leaves, rice grains, sweets etc. as a blessing from the altar which the devotee keeps under his/her bed or pillow for three days and each of those days eats a part of it before having anything else in the morning.

The Prasad in Bhandani Puja includes both vegetarian and non-vegetarian products as understood from the ritual description. Bhandani is considered as the goddess of jungle as well as the protector of the crops by the Rajbanshis.

### **Observations and Analysis**

Having read the primary and secondary sources, the researchers have made observation on the tendency of the people who belonged to Rajbanshi community to be a part of mainstream Hindu Bengalis. According to their

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<sup>28</sup>Bhandani: the deity attributed to the protector of forests as well as granary.

<sup>29</sup>Deusi: a Rajbanshi priest

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observation, this tendency is a manifestation of the ‘othering’ of Rajbanshis that was practiced by mainstream Hindus.

Bengali Hindu rituals are more dominant in North Bengal. At such circumstances, the inclusion of non-vegetarian items in the Prasad establishes an identity of Rajbanshi community. The practice of their indigenous habits in Rajbanshi rituals and their belief-system and life style find a limited space in the households and community gatherings.

An interesting fact to observe in the ritual spaces are the transformation of common objects into holy entities by marking them with tel-sindur, i.e., oil and vermilion paste. It includes the food items as well, like the sacrificial duck in Dharam Puja or the eggs in Mecheni Puja. This transformation separates them from the similar items which are not sacred. The discourse of Prasad hence depends on the purification of the items, and their inclusion in the ritual spaces. Anything within the boundaries of sacred space are either made sacred by marking them or they are disallowed since they do not correspond to the equal magnitude of purity. This shows that the concept of sacredness or purity itself is a relative term. In the Rajbanshi rituals, egg is not only seen as an animal product. It is also a symbol of procreation. The prayers in Dharam Puja and Mecheni Puja are for fertility which transcends from nature and simultaneously perceived through human needs.

However, in the spectrum of cultural studies, the acceptance of egg in the ritual space is a way of refuting the mainstream Hindu practices. This not only presents the indigenous culture of Rajbanshi but also questions the concept of

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purity and pollution imposed on them by Hinduism. According to Dina Simoes Guha, the concept of food imbibes in it both the properties of food being sacred and social (Guha, 1985). The discourse of sacred is also not static, therefore. It changes according to the society that it caters to. The Rajbanshis, until the conversion into Hinduism, were a part of the Koch tribe. It is worthwhile to see how a major Rajbanshi population adopted Hinduism. According to Charu Chandra Sanyal (1965), who takes his idea from Hunter's document, Visva-Sinha who was the grandson of fifteenth century Koch King Hajo, had adopted Hinduism along with his officers and his people. However, as Sanyal observes:

Their religious practices are in common, in a great measure, with those of the Upper-Caste Hindus in East and North Bengal, the Kacharis, the Mechs, and the Anams. The more and backward illiterate members of the Rajbanshi caste still maintain practices inconsistent with orthodox Hindu beliefs (Sanyal, 1965, p. 134).

Similar observations regarding the fluidity of pure and impure food can be found in the tribal and Hindu mainstream contact zones in India. As Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi observes (1975), the tribes and the caste-Hindu enter into agreements on what food needs to be accepted and avoided. According to him,

Differences usually only appear when deciding what item should be included in the disgusting and impure category and what item might still be tolerated as food. Often such differences of opinion divide the stricter and the laxer

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sections of a community, the stricter usually agreeing with the Hindus. (Ferro-Luzzi, 1975, p.401)

Though the status of Rajbanshis is not restricted to a tribe in the social structure, yet an association of their lineage to the Koch tribe is dominant in many places. Also, as a community, they are not socially uplifted to a strong dominant position. Hence, a general tendency of this community is likely to follow the practices of mainstream culture and follow their rules. Thus, many ritual practices like hunting or sacrificing has become obsolete in their culture nowadays.

The boundaries of purity and pollution are stricter in the mainstream Hindu communities of Bengal if compared to the Rajbanshis. The mainstream Hindu Bengali rituals follow the gunas or virtues attributed to the food items and marked the purity of the food.

“The triple attributes of food took on a magico-religious concept in the intricate hierarchies of Vedic society. The gunas soon produced a psychology of purity and pollution. The laws that governed what was polluted were not rational, even though food and water had the magical health-giving sustenance qualities. What made them pollution-prone was governed by status, as understood by the higher castes of the Vedic hide-bound structure. This dimension of social attitudes went against the feelings of general hospitality. Taboos were erected, so that lower castes or outcastes by virtue of heredity and occupation became pollutants. Their presence, their shadow or touch on cooked foods, or use of water source was held to be contaminated. Hence it

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was easier for the high-caste Hindu Brahmins to receive only perhaps the uncooked foods, such as grains, vegetables and fruits, or in clay cooking vessels made by the outcaste potters or sold by the vendors, but never food once it was "cooked". Cooking over fire always purified and dispelled the contamination. The mind of the high-caste Hindus actually believed that the laws of karma chose to give people birth in the outcaste structures of society" (Guha, 1985, pp. 148-149).

The concept of non-vegetarian items, thus, derives its impurity from the structure of the Vedic society that has continued to spread in Bengal. The influence of Vaishnavism was an added reformatory change that contributed largely to this practice. The animal sacrifices were limited to the Shaktas or the worshippers of Shakti or Kali. The animals sacrificed mostly include goats or buffaloes. Sacrificing birds or bird products are not popularly observed in such cases. Hence, the ritual practices of Rajbanshis signify that their rituals are not same with the mainstream Hindu rituals. The ritual texts, in a sense, construct an identity for the Rajbanshi community. Their rituals on the one hand projects their belief systems and cultural values which are different from the mainstream communities.

The animal sacrifices in the above mentioned Rajbanshi rituals also mark the intersection of sects in Hinduism. The animal sacrifices are more evident in Tantrism, and therefore the rituals which are inspired or derived from Tantrism include the animal sacrifices. On the other hand, the rituals which have closer association with Vaishnavism abstain from inclusion of any non-

vegetarian items in the ritual spaces. The intersection of these two beliefs in the community's socio-religious identity posit a hybrid worldview. While they are still observing the practice of offering eggs, or duck in the Pujas, yet the consumption is limited to only a few rituals. Prasad hence becomes an entity of juxtaposition of these two belief-system, two worldviews and two religious traditions.

Modernism had its own effect in the food culture of Bengal and as observed by Utsa Ray (2012), from nineteenth century onwards, Bengal was also creating its own discourse of taste, which was predominantly regional, but also liberal and cosmopolitan. However, the identification of food on the basis of purity was simultaneously existing in Bengal, which derived its stimulus from the caste identity within the Bengali community. The caste divisions were apparent and as Ray observes in the writing of Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, "Shudras considered rice served at a Brahmin's place as Prasad (sacred food that is offered to the gods) and not merely food. Caste thus became an element of the past that was to be cherished." (Ray, 2012, p. 720). Therefore, the inclusion and exclusion within the Hindu community of Bengal was already existing, and their reflections were visible in the food practices. At this backdrop, the definition of Prasad also does not remain static. It is no longer associated only with deities, but also the assumption of power by certain castes, or individuals belonging to certain castes, who are dominant. The priests in Bengali Hindu community belong to the Brahmin caste and the food touched by them are believed to be sacred, possessing the qualities of Prasad.

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Similarly, the food touched by Adhikaris in Rajbanshi rituals, like Pancha Puja and Bhandani Puja, are also bestowed with such power.

The changing ingredients of Prasad in Rajbanshi rituals are signs of their ethnographic changes as well. The exclusion of non-vegetarian items on the ritual days, withdrawal from ritualistic hunting and setting the animal free, and abstaining from eating non-vegetarian items as Prasad by the devotees are the markers of their cultural transformation. It also establishes the political homogenization of the communities as a larger Hindu Bengali group, eliminating the differences between mainstream Hindu practices and peripheral Rajbanshi practices. However, it also asserts a calculative inclusion within the larger Hindu community where the Hindu hierarchy still remains and Rajbanshis are given a subordinate status. Though the process of unification by homogenizing the Prasad in the rituals allows the Rajbanshi to experience the position of being a part of the Bengali Hindu community, yet the changing components of the Prasad ingredients also reduce the impact of their traditional items, and thereby, also question the significance of their rituals. As observed by the researchers, many of the Rajbanshi rituals have become extinct now due to the assimilation of the community with the mainstream. The changing pattern of Prasad also reassures the changes in the rituals and thereby, a major shift in their ethnographic identity also gets demonstrated.

The altering ingredients of Prasad, rituals and food practices in Rajbanshi community can be categorised as the cultural foreignization. This

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transformation, unlike a conflict, is not direct but occurs in a slow and subtle manner. Abstaining from hunting, for example, is not only excluding meat from Prasad but also ascertaining a philosophy of vegetarianism in their world-view. It is unfeasible to alter the practice of non-hunting and reverting back to previous tradition now. The concept of understanding the world in the mainstream way seizes their thoughts and assists in creation of new memories. Since the ritual practices of the community primarily relied on listening and performing, it is not very difficult to include new beliefs and change the forthcoming memory of the community. The ritual performers embody the new changes and transfer them to their successors who would carry them further. Hence, a set of beliefs once created are carried on unless there are stronger resistance or attempts of assimilation by further superior community. Thus, the identity of Prasad is susceptible to further modifications even if the Rajbanshi community assimilate completely into the mainstream Hindu Bengali culture.

**Significance of Translation in this Project:**

Translation in this project is threefold. Firstly, it looks into the narratives of 'Prasad' as an act of translation. The narratives of Prasad tell us the story of a community's beliefs, worldviews, changes, acceptance of other communities etc. The narratives of the 'Prasad' are formed due to the repetition of sacred practices which the community learns through generations of oral and performative tradition. The memorization is done by the members of the community, including the devotees and the priests, orally. And as Ong writes,

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“Oral memorization is subject to variation from direct social pressure... When the market for an oral genealogy disappears, so does the genealogy itself, utterly” (Ong, 2002, p.65). Therefore, through this process of translation, a reader can track how the community is sustaining their tradition of Prasad and if they are incorporating any changes. As we can observe in case of Bishua, the social pressure has changed the tradition of hunting animals and offering them to the deities for Prasad. The oral memorization of the community in the last four to five decades have included the fact the animals should not be hunted and killed for offering to the deities. Similarly, in case of an economic pressure from a dominant culture to change the variety of crops they yield, the narratives of the Prasad will also alter.

Secondly, it is seen as the changes that occur within the narratives due to time, space and other contextual factors. For example, the tradition of Naya Khaya documented by Charu Chandra Sanyal says that, in this ritual “some new paddy is husked and the new rice eaten... some rice is boiled and offered to the sacred basil, and then all the members of the house eat the new rice” (Sanyal, 1965, p.143). The researchers have observed in their field work that the rice is not boiled with milk. They are boiled and offered with some saag or green leafy vegetables grown in their farmlands. The rice and saag are offered to the animals like Mahabarik, foxes and dogs. The later documentation suggests a close relationship that the community has built with the nature in the past and have carried them in their memories. The difference in the two narratives also postulate a probability of availability of milk in the first case (which probably could have been a household that owned cows). The

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ownership of cows also indicates a sign of wealth. According to the researchers' field study, very few Rajbanshi families owned cows in the area that was surveyed, and the household where they documented the ritual of Noya Khoya, had no cattle.

Lastly, the work of documentation is itself seen as a part of translation. G N Devy conceptualizes translation as "an attempted revitalisation of the original in another verbal space and temporal span" (Devy, 2009, p.166). Here, too, the work of documentation enables the readers to know the tradition of Prasad in Rajbanshi community in another verbal space and temporal span.

**Ethnography as translation:**

Christian J. Churchill (2005) suggests three levels of ethnographic translation. The direct communication between the researcher and the primary informant occur at the first level. In the second level, the researcher socializes with rest of the community through the primary informant. And lastly, the researcher connects with the reader through translation of the data (Churchill, 2005, pp.14-16). In this paper, the data has been collected by the researchers not only from translated secondary resources but also by directly communicating with the primary informants and simultaneously, reaching out to a larger section of the community through the primary informants.

The documentation of 'Prasad' in Rajbanshi rituals is attempted through the reading of narratives. The narratives of Prasad in Rajbanshi rituals discussed

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in this paper are oral and performative. Therefore, the knowledge associated with are also oral and performative in nature. The purification of Prasad, for example, is not just limited to the ingredients but also in the act of chanting the mantras on those ingredients by the priests. Hence, the object of Prasad before and after chanting the mantras do not remain the same. Its relevance, significance, sanctity etc. go through a transformation. The identity of the food itself undergoes a change in its semantic form. For example, the duck before its sacrifice to the deity is a bird whose meat is consumable for everyone. But after it has been offered to the God, it becomes a sacred animal, and its meat cannot be consumed by the devotees. This change of meaning is embedded in the beliefs or worldviews perceived by the Rajbanshi community. The meaning itself becomes a contextual understanding of cultural differences and hence the definition of meaning posited by J.R. Firth finds its relevance here. “Firth defines meaning as ‘a complex of relations of various kinds between the component terms of a context of situation’” (Bassnett, 2002, p. 29).

**Transformation of Narratives:**

In this paper, translation is also understood “as a form of re-narration” (Baker, 2014, p. 159) because it helps in construction of a world-view of the Rajbanshi community. The ritual performers, who are engaged in the making, distribution and consumption of the Prasad also act as translators who transfer this world view, and as Mona Baker (2014) writes, “they are embedded in the narratives that circulate in the context in which they produce a translation and simultaneously contribute to the elaboration, mutation, transformation and

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dissemination of these narratives through their translation choices” (Baker, 2014, p. 159). As mentioned earlier, the narratives are oral and performative in nature and as a result of this, they are susceptible to changes with time. The concept of hunting, for example, in Bishua ritual has changed. While the meat of the hunted animal was consumed earlier, nowadays it is released. Hence, the narrative of Parashurama<sup>30</sup> is not foregrounded anymore and it is replaced by a joyful hunting experience enjoyed by the children. Except for older generation, the narrative of Parashurama has almost been forgotten and memory of hunting is being reconstructed here as a new form of narrative.

#### **Documentation of the narratives of Prasad as an ethnographic work:**

The work of documentation itself is a process of translation. Firstly, it engages the researchers into translation the key terms of Rjabanshi rituals into English and thereby, encoding the cultural nuances of Rjabanshi rituals in English. This entails a delimitation of knowledge from Rjabanshi to English, thereby, increasing the readership and placing it in a global context of cultural studies. Secondly, it also ensures a linguistic transfer of the words from Rjabanshi to English. This process also incorporates the translators’ subjective politics of choosing a piece of information, interpreting it and keeping a record of it comes into visibility. The act of documentation also faces the challenges of

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<sup>30</sup> The Rjabanshis believe that being Kshatriyas, they had fled from the wrath of Parasurama and migrated to different places. The act of hunting is a symbol of protecting themselves from any external danger like assassination of the community by Parasurama.

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choosing the appropriate or closely related terms to convey the meanings properly.

**Conclusion:**

This paper is an informed reading of an indigenous community's identity through the lens of food items they offer to the deities in the rituals. The reading is done by the researchers from a multilingual and multicultural perspective where they are observing the data on Rajbanshi Prasad, comparing them to the Prasad in mainstream Hindu culture and also bringing them in a larger space through documentation. This is a microstudy of a minor South Asian community from the angle of cultural translation and it is also an opportunity to understand the worldview of a community. The attempt of the researchers has been to bring forward the cultural nuances of Rajbanshis to the mainstream world and thereby, making an 'othered' community visible and heard. Translation is an act of reading from the memories, re-constructing them and also documenting them.

Prasad is not merely a collection of food items offered to the deities for their blessings. It entails a deeper sense of community's world-views, position, acceptance towards other culture, and therefore, a spectacle of the societal norms. The Rajbanshi community is an indigenous community which had sustained their ritual practices along with their traditional offerings to deities for a considerable period of time. Though the knowledge of Prasad ingredients and the method of offering were transferred through oral speeches and performances, a consistency could be found in their tradition of food eating

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and offering. The line of difference between vegetarian items as pure and non-vegetarian items as impure did not exist until they came in close contact with mainstream Bengali Hindus.

The hierarchy in terms of food and Prasad found in mainstream Hindu Bengalis have extensively changed the cultural markers of Rajbanshi community as well. The Rajbanshis have slowly started the offering of Prasad similar to that of mainstream Hindu Bengalis. Not only this, they have also started including the Hindu deities in their rituals, thereby, slowly replacing their conventional practices. With the inclusion of Hindu deities, the norms of making and offering Prasad are also varying.

The changing identity of Prasad posits a question of future existence of the community since the trend is more directive towards assimilation of the entire community within larger Bengali Hindu culture. A cultural map of the Rajbanshi community's changes on the basis of their eating habits and ritual practices can be traced through the Prasad offered to their deities along the time-space dimension. Further studies can also be made on the same parameters for understanding the relations between communities and their adaptation. Critical cultural readings on food studies can be done further to access knowledge on different communities like Rajbanshis. This study is relevant for endangered communities who have accumulated the traditions of hierarchy and gradually forgotten their own rituals.

This paper outlines a possibility of knowledge enhancement through documentation of sacred food practices in Rajbanshi community. Translation

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is seen here as documentation through memory keeping. The paper opens up an opportunity for the readers to access the knowledge of a minor community in one of the remotest corner of the world. The convergence of cultures and their worldviews is a consequence of the globalization and shrinking of the world. The cultural assimilation also necessitates the documentation of food practices and the essentiality of translating them. However, the documentation done in this paper is only a tip of the lingua-cultural iceberg. The fluid societies, in a diverse multilingual country like India, have blurred borders. Therefore, their cultural documentation also includes the influence of different cultures. Hence the cultural components like food, sacred food, food offered in religious practices, beliefs associated with the foods etc. also construct/ re-construct the identity of the communities they belong to. The writings on such practices of food contribute to the chronicles of food history. They establish a foodscape for the community and also traces the changes in language. Food does not remain an edible product but a structured sign which implies choices that are beyond their pre-conceived meanings. These writings also develop a conceptual meaning between food and language on the one hand, and societies and culture on the other. The paper is also a political statement on keeping a minority community in the forefront, thereby, making their unheard narratives known to the world.

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Article: *Hashtag Student Politics: a Digital Ethnography of Digital Activism amid the Covid-19 Pandemic*

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## ***Hashtag Student Politics: a Digital Ethnography of Digital Activism amid the Covid-19 Pandemic***

Soumodip Sinha

**Abstract:** Using cues from a study of student political activism that was conducted in the University of Delhi (DU) amid the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020, this paper examines the significance of digital ethnography. By relying on content analysis of online material and semi-structured in-depth interviews with student activists that were conducted between March 2020 and July 2021, it shows that these activists preferred to operate in a hybrid mode where digital activism harmonized with street activism. It further argues that the virtual field has not only become a field of competition in the Bourdieusian sense but also a principal site for doing fieldwork. The paper concludes with two ideas: one, that hybrid methods of campus activism can lead to the formations of political capital for student organizations or its activists and, two, hybrid methods of doing ethnography can prove useful in communicating research especially in extraordinarily uncertain times, forging pathways for doing research in the ‘new normal’.

**Keywords:** *Digital ethnography, Digital activism, Pierre Bourdieu, Social media, Covid-19 pandemic, University of Delhi*

### **Background and Approach**

Every day, the world’s ethnographic archive increases, as everyone from anthropology graduate students to field elders orchestrate interviews, write up notes from a conversation or experience, photograph or video an encounter with a new person, place, or thing, in any of thousands of places around the planet, concerning anything from a virus to “neoliberalism” (Fortun et al., 2017: 15).

Social media, especially Facebook and Twitter has opened up interesting possibilities and ‘exciting opportunities’ for researching political participation,

leading to ‘opening up a new era’ of social science research (McCormick et al., 2015: 2). Further, it is also argued that “the ability to aggregate vast amounts of digital traces of human behaviour through social media platforms represents a new data collection paradigm for social science research” (ibid.).

The power and potential of social media for student political activism in University of Delhi (DU) as well as for doing research was realized with the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Strategies had to be altered by student parties in relation to expressing dissent, petitioning demands to university authorities or to institutions of the state at large. Online platforms became absolutely necessary for the organizations to register protests; discuss issues of student welfare that included examination patterns or promotions; showcase aid and relief distribution and finally, construct public opinion by creating awareness regarding the novel Coronavirus. As lockdowns, university shutdowns and extraordinary laws were in effect—the virtual field not only became a field of competition in the Bourdieusian sense but also helped in fostering visibility, sustaining recognition and most importantly enabled the attainment of political capital (Bourdieu, 1991; 2005).<sup>i</sup>

Scholars have argued that Bourdieu’s theoretical framework has offered and can further offer several pathways to conceptualize social movements or everyday politics (Ancelovici, 2019; Crossley, 2002). While Bourdieu has not discussed much about democratic politics; his theoretical framework has grown in prominence in such discussions (Jeffrey, 2012; Wacquant, 2005). It has also been argued that Bourdieu’s framework carries significant potential for studying youth socialities and sociabilities globally (Bessant et al., 2019). Also, in gauging the importance of social networks as social capital or for underlining the prominence of digital capital, digital habitus and digital field in mapping digital inequalities—this approach has attained significance (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017; Savage et al., 2004).<sup>ii</sup>

Talking about student activism using the Bourdieusian framework, Crossley (2008: 33) has shown that campus networks and student circles enable a

repertoire of collective activities enabling the formations of social capital and mechanisms of mobilization, ‘unusual outside of it’. Along a similar vein, it has also been argued that social media has been effectively used as a tool to facilitate instantaneous communication—enabling access to cultural and social capital and thereby moulding the political habitus of students (Loader et al., 2015: 826).<sup>iii</sup> Therefore, social media has been understood to either create or shape new kinds of communicative political action among young people via the means of: broadcasting information; using it as a means to access information via bypassing mainstream media; engaging in everyday political discussions and doing politics online (Vromen et al., 2015: 90). Further, the intersections between the fields of media and political participation have witnessed the mushrooming of a multifaceted field of ‘hybrid research’ and such a multidisciplinary scholarship explores the comparisons and contrasts between older and newer media in order to better grasp the contemporary dynamics of political participation (Treré, 2019: 34).

### **From the Street to Digital Ethnography**

Lupton (2015: 43-44) has argued that techniques of ‘video-conferencing, Skype, chat rooms, internet discussion groups and social media platforms can be employed for conducting interviews or group discussions’. She has further argued that ethnographers participate in reconfiguring the virtual ethnographic place by following, recording and archiving or even contributing to social media posts and updates of participants. However, she contends that the ethnographic field of the digital is messy and constantly changing (ibid, 50-51). Similarly, talking about cyber-ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) have also argued that,

Digital technology has expanded our very notion of what constitutes a ‘field’. Virtual fields and virtual fieldwork are now possible, and are assuming increasing significance in a social world that is simultaneously global and digital for some populations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 137).

However, such a methodological advancement has had its share of strengths as well as its limitations. In her field of blogging in Lebanon, Jurkiewicz (2018) has argued that conducting ethnography of the internet purely online entails the risk of privileging the textual over other modes of analysis. Also, Pink et al. (2016: 160-61) believe that the online-offline relationship needs to be re-worked in a context wherein, “mobility becomes part of the research process as the participants and the researcher might be involved in moving through various material environments while engaging with social media”. Hence, akin to qualitative methods, network research also places emphasis on contextuality and embeddedness of social action and are appropriate in investigating network perceptions and interpretations (Hollstein, 2014: 9-10). Such a form of doing (digital urban) ethnography is also seen as a methodological upgrade that can boost data quality in order to enhance accuracy of research (Lane, 2019: 170). It can have several takeaways for digital sociology wherein the ‘digital’ primarily refers to the phenomenon of social enquiry; the instruments and methods used or the medium/platforms used to engage with informants (Marres, 2017). Talking about the efficacy of digital platforms and tools for ethnographers and for doing anthropology, Fortun et al. (2017) have argued that,

Digital anthropology provides opportunities to reiterate and transform all of these threads of the Writing Cultural Critique of ethnographic form, and thus extend the tradition of experimentation they have engendered. The critical and experimental promise of digital anthropology, in our view, lies largely in the potential to enable more collaborative and open-ended ethnographic work/writing—across time, space, generations, and “cultures” (Fortun et al. 2017: 13).

With the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic and subsequent lockdowns that it brought about, data collection for this research study was abruptly discontinued. Since mobilization, movement and social gathering of people had been restricted via the imposition of the Disaster Management Act, 2005 by the Union Government of India, this research work had to be continued via altered mechanisms. Using these frames, data collection for this study ranged

between March 2020 and July 2021 by closely observing, participating in as well as analyzing content and online exchanges from social media forums (Twitter accounts or Facebook pages) of various student organizations operating in DU (Lobe et al., 2020; Tremblay et al. (2021). With time, tweets were assembled; screenshots of posts taken and data was archived. In this regard, Marzi (2021) has argued that,

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted face-to-face research projects worldwide, with restrictions on travel and social contact introduced to avoid further health risks. Research using qualitative methodologies had to stop either immediately before or during fieldwork activities, leaving researchers not knowing when they would be able to resume their research.....One solution in this new fieldwork landscape, and which still permits the co-production of knowledge at a time of upheaval, is the use of smartphones to collect and share audio and visual material as well as written data (Marzi, 2021: 2).

It was followed up via in-depth interviews with student activists from those groups. The interviews were conducted either via telephone, video communication applications such as Zoom and Google Meet or even in-person as and when lockdowns were relaxed and the situation deemed feasible for doing so. In this context, Archibald et al. (2019) have argued that,

The possibility that VoIP technologies like Zoom can improve researchers' and participants' experiences of qualitative data collection is yet to be validated. The merits and shortcomings of VoIP technologies, as well as comparisons with in-person data collection, are typically based on researchers' subjective assessments of the quality of interview data (Archibald et al. 2019, 2).

Media messenger applications such as WhatsApp also assisted activists' pursuits in mediating aid, facilitating communication as well as enabled the task of data collection. Inasmuch, digital ethnography was combined with activists' narratives and in doing so—the digital world was used as a site to extend offline data collection and complement ethnographic research.<sup>iv</sup> The idea was to triangulate data in a holistic sense and a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography was utilized in order to provide an array of methods to tell social stories as well as de-marginalize the voice of respondents (Murthy, 2008: 839).

The paper thereby relies heavily on digital ethnography as a way of knowing and uses the digital world as a place to extend offline data collection to complement the on-ground ethnographic research. In fact, while the online field substituted the physical field, it also became a forum to continue with the same methods—observe student activists, occasionally participate with them in online protests, take (field) notes and thereafter analyze textual as well as visual content (images and videos). Rapport-building was mixed as a handful of the informants were known from earlier (research) engagements in the university prior to the entry into the digital field. As most of these individuals and student parties were on social media and were keenly followed (with me being a *Top Fan* of some of them on Facebook), active participant observation within the virtual field was effected rather than merely lurking or passively skimming through online content.<sup>v</sup>

Further, immersion within these online forums also helped in the process of identifying new informants who were interviewed in due course via telephone, online platforms or even face to face when it was possible. In the course of this data gathering process, as and when I happened to come across these activists unfamiliar to me—I connected with them on Facebook Messenger or Twitter Direct Messenger; discussed my research topic and expressed my desire to interview them; exchanged phone numbers, shared the interview schedule and then got their interviews. In my case, people unknown to me earlier either responded enthusiastically, have developed friendships over time and have kept in touch. At the same time, many others did not respond, refused to accept my invitation for an interview, or committed themselves on WhatsApp but refused to take calls or meet at a later date. Further, with Covid-19 related restrictions, there was little to no scope of following up with respondents (in-person) on many occasions.

Thereon, content analysis of online exchanges became an useful mode of data collection. Content ranged from Facebook posts on and about the Pandemic; Twitterstorms against decisions and policies of the University; memes and graphics that included information about the global response to the Virus; photographs of activists aiding the needy on Instagram and even videos carrying study material for the benefit of students that were prepared under the

aegis of student organizations. A wealth of material began to float around and I made it a point to download, note as well as archive all of them. Thus, the first step was to collect the material and data online. The second step lay in classifying and analysing the material. Nevertheless, digital methods of doing research proved to be a useful approach especially at an extraordinary time when student political activism itself went online and weighed heavily on social media. That the accumulation of political capital is effectively induced by social media activism in simultaneity with on-ground activism, is empirically demonstrated in the following paragraphs.

### **Digital Mobilizations and Hashtag Activism**

But it is as a social rather than physical space that the college or university campus plays a critical role (Deshpande, 2020).

Since its inception, universities have not only been visualised as spaces of critical thought and critical reflection; they have also been understood as significant ‘political ecologies’. In the Indian context, recent times have witnessed heightened levels of political activism within such spaces. Whether such activism pertained to micro campus-based issues or macro issues of national importance, student organizations have been pro-active in highlighting the viability of those matters—appreciative, or critical of them, or both at the same time. Over the years, the young have championed processes of mobilization across the globe via the internet with informal, non-institutionalized and non-hierarchical political participation with the aim of changing existing power relations (Jenkins, 2016: 8–9). Such ‘redefined’ forms of participation have attributed in the making of ‘active’, ‘digital citizens’ (Biju, 2017: 186).

Together with Twitter and Facebook, instant messenger applications such as WhatsApp have also been extensively used by these parties in order to initiate delivery of aid and service and thereby facilitate political communication. While the ubiquitous nature of WhatsApp and its feature of relative anonymity has been used ‘to spread inflammatory content and target social cohesion’

(India Today, 2018); such attributes also make this application well suited for politically oriented activities and is especially attractive to those perceiving their views as extreme or minority and to those using these channels to mobilize their networks for political activism which include demonstrations, protests and boycotts leading to enhanced levels of conventional and activist participation (Zúñiga et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, this section highlights the trajectories that student organizations adopted in the aftermath of the Pandemic in the case of DU and how they continued to mobilize on matters concerning ‘*chhatra hith*’ (student welfare)—first via hashtags online and thereon on-site, thereby aiding in the makings of ‘hybrid activism’. All of the aforementioned student organizations maintain active presence in social media, each one having their Facebook pages or Twitter accounts.<sup>vi</sup> Instagram is attaining popularity among them too.

The onset of the Pandemic significantly disrupted normalcy and subsequent lockdowns imposed by various agencies of the state brought life in the University to a complete halt since the middle of March 2020. Strategies had to be altered by one and all with regard to how to protest, petition or convey their demands to the University administration or other state-led institutions. While protests such as *#BlackLivesMatter* played out on the streets of the United States of America (USA) involving violent clashes and demonstrations between the people and state-led agencies; social media was also used to channelize the protests. Such resonances were felt here too and at that juncture, online activism appeared as the only viable alternative and reliance on social media reached a different magnitude altogether.

Zeeshan is an activist from a prominent student organization in the University, the National Students Union of India (NSUI). He asserts that after 2014 social media has played a major role in national politics as well as campus students’ activism per se. He states, ‘the Modi government has precisely come to power because social media has had a big role in it’. He thinks that whether it be their IT cell, or their social media handlers—they organized such a campaign that

even people who never had any faith in them, began to repose it. He further states that,

If the students of today's generation have an attachment for politics, then it is only through the social media and due to the medium per se. If the social media pages that one handles are good, s/he will be able to connect with students a lot. I am very active on Twitter, so I saw that a few years ago BJP people had a lot of influence. But now that unemployment or price rise has become big issues, the opposition is able to capture more space for debates. Students have also played a big role here as now NSUI also works very actively on Twitter (Zeeshan, interviewed on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

Similarly, Robin, an independent activist in the Campus also apprises about the vitality of Facebook Live. He tells me that if one looks at the Anna Hazare movement, that too emerged through the medium of social networking. But he feels that if on-site ground activism is prohibited and no matter how much one gets it trending on the Twitter handle, the government will not bother. So, in his experience, on-site gathering becomes very important and it is also necessary to maintain a balance between the two. Talking about their protest, he cites that,

When we were sitting in the morning raising our demands for protest, no one was listening. Then we started going live on Facebook, tagging everyone on Twitter and started tweeting and by then it was night, around 11-12 pm. The Dean of the Faculty of Law felt that if this continues then the matter would blow out of proportion could disturb the atmosphere in the campus too. So, she sent her representative who asked us to retreat, talk in the morning and that our demands would be given a patient hearing. But we said it doesn't matter, you come in the morning itself, we will talk but we will but not go home at midnight (Robin, interviewed on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2021).

In myriad ways, the internet has become the site for protest movements in order to attain visibility and direct connect with supporters (Cammaerts et al., 2013: 10). Further, group ties are arguably being replaced by 'fluid social networks' that can operate through social media, furthering the emergence of the less familiar logic of connective action as against the more familiar one of collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). As a consequence, such a

‘paradigmatically turbulent’, yet ‘interesting’ moment has also led to the emergence of new categories and vocabularies in the study of social movements, driven by new forms of communication and technology (Bakardjieva, 2015: 983).

Praveen, an activist of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) is also a member of its Delhi Unit social media team. He describes the ways in which social media teams operate. Being a student of Delhi School of Journalism, he feels that it certainly lends him an advantage. He has observed that irrespective of the medium used—Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, the youth are devoting a substantial amount of time on social media and argues that it is because of such a shift from “*paarampaarik roop*” (customary form) to “*takneek*” (modern technology) that student organizations have changed their traditional modes of operating and have started drifting towards contemporary and viable modes. Labelling the same as an integral ‘*aayam*’ (dimension) of every student organization, he believes that he is doing his part for the organization through the social media team. He further describes that,

We have our social media team via which we are connecting people with each and every (college) unit. In doing so, we pass on information from the national level to colleges and then to respective units and vice-versa.....In today’s context, whenever there is a particular event or issue, we trend the same on Twitter as social media has become a medium to give an instant response on any matter (Praveen, interviewed on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2021).

Individual activists who belong to these groups are also very active in the digital realm and are entrusted to like, share, retweet or repost their organizational messages, effectively serving as facilitators of political communication. Together, these organizations have also helmed on-ground activism in the form of protest rallies, demonstrations, admission helpdesks or other cultural activities.

When a *Janata Curfew* (public curfew) was announced by the Prime Minister of India, members of the ABVP relayed the message extensively via social

media—individually as well as via the organization’s Facebook page(s) or Twitter account(s). On the contrary, when he made a few public addresses to the people of the nation, ideologically oppositional organizations such as NSUI made it a point to highlight the fallacies of governmental policies—again via social media. For instance, one such tweet critical of the Government read as follows:

BJP Government is still not taking the Corona threat seriously. PM Modi made a moral science lecture while addressing the nation but said absolutely nothing about the Govt’s plan to deal with the disease (Tweet dated 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020; retrieved from @nsui).

Such verbal exchanges were commonplace during this phase. The initial months also witnessed maximum digital activism—to waive off students’ fees; students directing ire at the governments in power at the Centre or the state of Delhi; on making contributions to the PM Cares Fund or even, a discussion on the University Grants Commission (UGC) proposed revised academic calendar. These were some of the issues deliberated (read trended) upon by the aforementioned student organizations, who also made sincere attempts at creating awareness on precautionary measures that were needed to be taken from the Corona virus. Discussing the strategies of the same, Vivek, an activist of the NSUI contends that,

Social media has a lot of importance and has had a huge impact in student politics because one can only show the effect of convoy politics in the outer campus or South campus via such a medium, even if it be through YouTube. People put up short video clips, share it in their WhatsApp story, post in Facebook. There have been many issues in the recent past which have gotten trended by our NSUI especially relating to the ones affected by Covid-19. Now people could not agitate on the street, so they raised their voice on social media. There have been many issues in the recent past which have gotten trended by our NSUI especially relating to the ones affected by Covid-19. So, the strategy is prepared in advance for trending and the content is also decided; WhatsApp groups are created.....so somehow or the other our voices reach the government. If seen, this government has emerged via the medium of social media and this is a government that operates on social media per se (Vivek, interviewed on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

## Webinars, Whatsapp Groups and Google Forms

‘Politics’ it has been said, ‘is a practical art’. In the early years of the 21st century, it is also a technological one (Harvey, 2014: xxxiii).

One of the ways via which student outfits take forward the ideas and policies of the regime is either by supporting or opposing governmental programmes, especially the ones related to the field of education. A similar thing was witnessed across quarters with the promulgation of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020) albeit largely in the virtual space or online medium. The ABVP was quick enough to appreciate the components of the NEP and deemed it as long overdue for the education system of the country. They hailed its coming into effect via congratulatory and salutary messages on social media, especially their Twitter handles and Facebook pages through posts and messages. Many of these posts attempted at dissecting the contents of the New Policy Document and they sought to take the message forward to the public by demonstrating that such ‘newness’ was needed for the withering system of education that existed so far.

On a routine basis, tweets containing snippets from the policy document would be shared by respective *ikaais* (units) or zonal units of the ABVP for the general information of the public, at least two weeks into its publication. Furthermore, webinars and talks were organized by respective college units of the ABVP in the University, wherein their mentors were invited to enlighten the cadres and students with regard to the NEP. Regular sessions were held in order to mobilize public opinion in this regard as well as seek some kind of approval for the same from them. A webinar organized by the Delhi School of Journalism (DU) on Facebook had a prominent office bearer of the ABVP as the keynote speaker who had the following things to say: the discussion was in Hindi. In a nutshell, the contents of his speech asserted that a major change was going to come about in the country via the NEP and was opposed to

colonial systems of education which according to them was embedded on ‘Lord Macaulay’s policy of making clerks’.

This was largely in contrast to the NSUI that even went up to protest in front of the Ministry of Education (then MHRD) in August 2020 condemning the policies laid out in the document as well as seeking fee waivers or fee subsidies for the duration of the Pandemic. Opposition student organizations kept directing their ire at respective governments. The NSUI remained constantly critical of the BJP-led Government at the Union whereas, the ABVP continued to be vocal in pressurising the AAP-led Delhi Government. A ‘digital protest’ conducted by the ABVP against the Delhi State Government where activists were asked to send an e-mail to the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister of Delhi, click a screenshot of the same and upload it on various platforms of social media.

During this timeframe, a membership drive was also conducted by the ABVP and it was done completely online unlike other years when on-ground campaigns were more popular. It lasted for three days in the middle of September 2020. One of my informants got in touch with me on WhatsApp. He not only shared the details about the online membership process but also shared a few videos which contained speeches by prominent leaders that included—Venkaiah Naidu former Vice President of India and Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. The speeches (video clips) were taken from ABVP conclaves and *adhiveshans* (conferences) held in the years prior to the Pandemic. While Venkaiah Naidu’s clipping stated the difficulties he faced in becoming what he is today and how being a member of the outfit was instrumental for the same; the clipping that featured Yogi Adityanath described the significant role played by the ABVP in their campaigns against the Article 370 in the early 1990s in Kashmir and how it was abrogated due to concerted efforts made by the student group.

All in all, these clippings were circulated in order to arouse sentiments of nationalism and patriotism among new recruits and to woo them in order to

join their clarion call for *Rashtriya Punarnirman* (nation building). In other years, while the admission sessions to DU used to be very busy, hectic and more importantly, crowded; since the process was transformed to a largely online one, the numbers of people coming to the campus for counselling and gathering information physically declined. However, *Open Day* sessions organized by the University for the benefit of new entrants witnessed quite significant numbers in the years following the online transition and this aspect has been mentioned in this thesis earlier. This is one time when student organizations make it a point to vocally address issues of recruitment into their folds by attracting new entrants—either by wooing them via ideological affiliations, forms of loyalties and identities or by offering pragmatic hopes and aspirations. Nevertheless, it was quite effective in spite of that.

With the advent of the Pandemic in 2020 and with the process of new admissions getting delayed, a lot of things were affected. There were little to no people who frequented the University amid fear and anxiety over the dreaded Coronavirus. While other years still witnessed people making it to the Campus, this particular year witnessed the University remaining officially closed till late September 2020. Not only did the organizations lose out on new entrants and thereby members into their fold; the DUSU Elections—the primary medium via which the expressions of politics are exhibited in the University was delayed indefinitely and majorly cancelled. On account of the Pandemic, it had not been held since 2019 and the existing body had continued to operate. It was held after a gap of three years in 2023.

However, the efforts made by organizations and their activists doubled amid such a crisis. For instance, some of the key informants for this study were engaged in ‘Online Membership Drives’ on two occasions: one before heading into the admission season and the other, during the admission process itself. Leaders and members of the organization were tasked to gather as many new members as possible and they did the process largely online. They used to share messages for on WhatsApp (something that I kept receiving frequently)

as well as on other social media platforms. Google Forms for purposes of (student) party membership replaced pen and paper versions of the same.

During that timeline, I also received an electronic copy of a booklet, printed by the ABVP (Delhi Unit), one that listed out its objectives and achievements over the years, and was supposed to be forwarded as a “complete guide” for freshers and entrants to the University. The idea, again, was to ensure that aspiring students of the University also become aspirers of the student wing or the party by stating aspects that the organization, “is the world’s largest student organization and believes in the idea of Nation First”. It also stated that the organization, “works with students on their campus throughout the year” and that its activities are primarily social, cultural and struggle for student rights—aimed at reconstruction of the nation (ABVP-DUSU Delhi University Information Booklet, 2020). The booklet particularly laid out information on the University and the eligibility criterion required for various courses into the University. Significantly, it also mentioned, ‘to join ABVP register at.....’, thereby attaching a link or uniform resource locator (URL).

### **Conclusion**

With the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic and subsequent lockdowns that it brought about, impediments on mobility and mobilizations have been witnessed across the globe. In a nutshell, the idea had become to live online—work, teach-learn or even engage in multifarious forms of activism. That the category ‘online’ had become an immensely intricate part and parcel of everyday life to an extent much more than was prior to the Pandemic is what is broadly represented here. This paper has largely relied on digital ethnography to demonstrate that the virtual field has not only become a field of competition among student groups in DU, but also a principal site for doing fieldwork. It has broadly discussed the makings of political capital, the significance of doing digital ethnography and the relevance of digital activism for student politics in the University.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has indeed been a game-changer. It has had a direct bearing on the methods of doing research. With this global phenomenon, new and interesting ways of collecting data have been complemented with the traditional and existing ones. At the onset of its outbreak, conventional methods of anthropological research that involve direct participation of the researcher with their respondents and informants became insufficient, if not completely redundant.

Researchers across the globe have pondered on the existing possibilities as well as new innovations on the question of ‘how to do research amid the Pandemic’. Within such uncertain and dilemmatic times, this paper has explored the possibilities and limitations of incorporating of digital methods of data collection; something that was not originally envisioned as intricate to the original research project. The paper is a brief reflection on the strategies that were used in order to complete the process of data collection and has made attempts to discuss the possibilities for doing research that was abruptly halted in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

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i Here, field is understood not (only) as a physical field but as a site of actions or reactions of social agents endowed with such dispositions (see Bourdieu, 2005: 30).

ii The Bourdieusian framework has much to offer to the field of ‘digital sociology’, a terminology that can refer to the doing of research on the social aspects and impacts of digital communication technologies as well as to the application of digital technologies to research methodologies across the social sciences (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017).

iii Loader et al. (2015: 821) also highlight that student societies have enabled students to develop a ‘habitus of the young citizen’. However, it is also pointed out that differential access to social and cultural capital is often used to ensure unequal social distinctions between citizens and in the context of growing social inequality, social networking may reinforce divisions that are detrimental to democracy (Loader et al., 2014: 149).

iv Only the interviews that fit into the ambit of this paper, have been incorporated. They have been conducted both in Hindi and English. Names of interviewees and public figures have been changed for purposes of establishing and retaining anonymity.

v While Kozinets (2010: 56) has championed the idea of ‘netnography’ arguing that it is far less time consuming and resource intensive in terms of spending time making choices about field-sites, rapport-building, travelling to and from sites, transcribing interviews and handwritten fieldnote data; this paper uses the frame of digital ethnography (not netnography) as it enabled for an extension of these aforementioned activities undertaken prior to the Pandemic.

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**Article: Stigma and covid-19: contextualising Goffman's ideas**

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## Stigma and covid-19: contextualising Goffman's ideas

--Corrine Rita War & Prof. D. V. Kumar

### Abstract:

One of the commonly experienced phenomena, stigma remains poorly theorised with few exceptions. Of the few scholars who paid attention to stigma in explaining its nature and dynamics was Erving Goffman. This paper, using Goffman's theory as well as secondary sources of data like newspaper articles and journals seeks to make use of his understanding of stigma in explaining the covid-related experiences. Covid- 19 which proved to be a paradigmatic-changing event could be understood better using Goffman's conceptualisation of stigma. As he argued, ignorance is one of the main factors causing stigma and this could be seen clearly in the context of covid – 19 where myths reigned supreme stigmatising helpless patients who were afflicted with the Coronavirus disease.

*Keywords: Stigma, covid-19, discredited, discreditable, social distance*

### Introduction:

Stigma despite being a powerful socio-psychological experience remains relatively theoretically unexplored. It was Erving Goffman (1963) who gave considerable attention to the phenomenon of stigma. What does he say about stigma? To begin with, he made an important analytical distinction between 'virtual social identity' (what a person should be as per the societal standards agreed upon) and 'actual social identity' (what a person really is). When there is a gap between the two, the person gets stigmatised. For example, a homosexual knows that the society expects people to be 'normal', that is heterosexual, but s/he is not what the society expects her/him to be. S/He is actually different from what s/he is expected to be by the society. In this context, Goffman makes a distinction between 'discredited stigma' and 'discreditable stigma'. The former refers to a situation where the actor knows that the 'audience members' are aware of the difference (for example, the case of a differently abled person). The latter is the situation where differences are not immediately noticed or perceived by the 'audience members' (for example, the case of a homosexual). Further, in the former case, the actor has an enviable task of managing the tension produced by the knowledge of 'audience members' about the difference. A differently abled person has this typical tension. In the latter case, the actor has an equally, perhaps even more,

tedious task of hiding the information from the members. The homosexual, for example, faces this challenge.

To further understand the difference between ‘discredited’ and ‘discreditable’ individuals, examples from Goffman’s *Stigma* may be illustrated; the discredited, for instance may experience feelings of insecurity and inferiority, as in this case:

‘Before her disfigurement [amputation of the distal half of her nose] Mrs Dover, who lived with one of her two married daughters, had been an independent, warm, and friendly woman who enjoyed travelling, shopping, and visiting her many relatives. The disfigurement of her face, however, resulted in a definite alteration in her way of living. The first two or three years she seldom left her daughter’s home, preferring to remain in her room or to sit in the backyard. ‘I was heartsick,’ she said, ‘the door had been shut on my life.’ (Goffman, 1986, p.23)

While a person who is deemed ‘discreditable’ may go through similar situations like so:

‘Although it is usual for a homosexual to protest that his deviation is not a disease, it is noteworthy that if he consults anyone at all, it is more likely to be a doctor than anyone else. But it is not likely to be his own family doctor. Most of the contacts were anxious to keep their homosexuality hidden from their family. Even some of those who behave fairly openly in public are most careful to avoid arousing suspicions in the family circle.’ (Goffman, 1986, p. 71)

Goffman (1963) argues that stigma is an almost universal experience as most of us have to face this in one situation or the other at one point of time in our life. He defines stigma as ‘bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier.’ (Goffman, 1963, p. 11)

When human beings interact with one another, first impressions are key to establishing one’s understanding of how and where they rank among the group they may be interacting with. This rank subsequently determines the individuals’ next steps and how they converse with the people around them. Imagine a situation where individuals are constantly made to feel that they are devalued, ignored, and excluded – ‘they may have difficulty establishing an accurate, stable and clear self-concept, especially with regard to domains that are relevant to stereotypes about their group.’ (Levin & Laar, 2004 p. 2) All their life, they may be made to feel inferior to those around them and this too, would have an impact on their children’s generations to come and when

repeated instances of stigmatised behaviour occur, they begin to associate with those feelings and treat them as naturally occurring.

In the past, sociology as a subject dealt with stigma only in the form of diseases and mental health issues, over the years however, ‘those lines have blurred and now the studies on social stigma have broadened to so many other aspects.’ (Link & Phelan, 2001 p. 365). Studies on stigma now focus on jobs, relationships people have, their sexual orientation and also marriages, divorce, and the effects they have on families. Slowly, but surely, ‘stigma has become a way of seeing, describing and understanding a vast array of discriminatory social attitudes and practices.’ (Tyler, 2020 p. 242)

Social identities are revealed by signs and certain marks that set individuals apart from one another. These marks and qualities also determined an individual’s rank in society – how beautiful, charismatic, or even wealthy they may be. In his book, Goffman (1963) denotes three types of frameworks – public identities which are the way one conducts oneself with others, personal identities, or the signs or symbols tied to one’s biography and ego identities, which refer to the way in which an individual sees themselves as a result of various past experiences.

The stigma process is never stagnant, as individuals go through life, there may be situations where they go through certain experiences together – as people may share these experiences over time, they tend to accumulate and may even have a detrimental effect on their mental capacity. It may be mentioned here that those individuals who have had those same experiences may even have shared traumas. Stigma can never be singular. Have we ever considered the possibility that stigma may be on multiple levels, a so-called, multi-level stigma, and this too can have negative effects? For instance, consider a situation where person ‘A’ may be a drug addict, this is already something that is deemed as stigmatic, yet over and above this he may have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS which, once again people are still fighting to de-stigmatise, the person who is harbouring these two stigma signs then would weigh very heavily on their mental capacity. The level of devaluation that the individual would have to face would be quite high – unless of course, he has a strong connection with his in-group or people who are in the same condition as him and seeking recovery. In many cases however, these individuals do not seek help and ultimately circle around the same behaviour, as there may be seldom any support from ‘normals’, as termed by Goffman who are people who have no such stigma attached to them.

Features and examples of stigma:

As a concept, one may associate a few characteristics with the term stigma, as mentioned by Link & Phelan (2006 p. 367):

- i) Distinguishing features – something that may be regarded as visible or obvious to the naked eye.
- ii) Associating human features to negative attributes or stereotypes – if a certain feature is looked at as displeasing or unacceptable to the ‘normals’
- iii) Separating ‘us’ from ‘them’ – or ‘normal’ from ‘abnormal’
- iv) Experiencing status loss or discrimination

As a phenomenon, stigma has always been associated with humans, we see or hear of people being shunned out or ostracised from a community due to certain actions of theirs. There may even be a situation, where, through no fault of the individual involved, they may be treated with some form of stigmatised behaviour by the ‘normals’. This may be referred to as courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963 p. 44) or stigma by association. For instance, an individual who volunteers to help at a hospital where the patients harbour an infectious disease, although the volunteer may exercise precaution when within the hospital premises, yet the mere fact that they work at such an institution gives them that label of being associated with the stigmatised. There are, however, certain distinguishing features that people have, either through congenital or permanent means that may be overlooked by others, but there are other features that are immediately noticed and hence become a source of stigma. Humans, thus decide what is deemed stigma-worthy and what is not from person to person based on certain social situations, ‘the meaning of stigma is often difficult to pin down, because what is stigmatised is bound by culture and epoch.’ (Ainlay, Becker & Coleman 1986 p. 3)

Where, then, the question arises, did the concept of stigma originate from? ‘The modern word ‘stigma’ originates in a clutch of ancient Greek words, derived from the root stig-, meaning to prick or to puncture.’ (Tyler, 2020 p. 34). Stigma may or may not arise from a person’s ignorance over something. In situations where the individual might have some idea about an illness or behaviour, but not entirely so, may warp their notion about the signifier and thus come to rash conclusions about the subject. Even in situations where the ailment may be treatable, people tend to have a negative outlook on the individual who suffers from the illness. A classic example of this is a person who is diagnosed with HIV, although there is no absolute cure for the disease yet, there are various medications that keep the viral load in control, therefore protecting the individual and their family. Yet, we still find awareness

programmes being conducted to educate the ‘others’ or as Goffman calls them, the ‘normals’ about the disease and those who carry it.

If one considers young children however, the possibility of curiosity and inquisitiveness about stigmatising features arises. There is evidence, moreover, indicating that young children are curious about human differences and often stare at novel stimuli (Brooks & Lewis, 1976 p. 323). The predisposition to stigmatise is passed from one generation to the next through social learning (Martin, 1984 p. 20) or possibly even through the very process of socialisation, therefore, if children are never exposed to the idea that someone may be ‘lesser’ than them, then one may even wonder whether the whole concept of stigma would ever even exist.

A left-handed individual in today’s world, for instance need not have to worry about the stigma attached to him or her using their left hand to write, whereas in earlier centuries, they were looked upon as evil beings that needed correction. Due to the fact that many cultures believed that the left hand was used for personal hygiene and the right – dominant hand was meant for social interaction and eating, many left-handed individuals were encouraged, or rather forced to use their right hand. There were even stigmas attached to one’s skin colour subsequently determining who was allowed to converse with who as the blacks were deemed as inferior to whites, as there was a reluctance of the majority groups from interacting with members of a devalued racial or ethnic group. (Bogardus, 1959) It is even more interesting to note that at one point of time, homosexuals were referred to as ‘left-handed’ individuals.

Today, the notion of online dating is now becoming an acceptable norm among millennials. However, in the past, if two individuals met online, they would not mention this as it was never regarded as the ‘acceptable’ way of meeting your soul mate. People of the LGBTQ community are no strangers to stigmata, for as a community of people they have always been subject to treatment that made them feel discriminated from the ‘normals’.

Stigma and covid – 19:

The onset of covid – 19 in the early part of 2020 in India brought with it many changes and what we once thought of as normal ceased to be so. Covid-19 or the coronavirus disease is an infectious disease that is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Infection by the virus led people to have flu like symptoms and mild to moderate respiratory illnesses. Because the disease is highly communicable, people were made to wear masks and frequently sanitise their hands in an attempt to limit the spread of the virus which could be passed on through an infected individual’s cough, sneeze or breath.

Staying negative was the most encouraged trend of 2020. By doing so, people were able to not only save themselves, but those they loved. Everything once thought to be normal prior to that changed once and for all. It was a case of staying six feet apart or the fear of going six feet under. Stigma, much like social change, is a dynamic phenomenon. What may have been looked at as something stigmatic in the past may well be an accepted feature of today's world, once again, we can recall the example of stigma attached to left-handed individuals at one point in time – now, however, it is simply overlooked. With human nature, what may be deemed 'discriminatable' changes over time.

The interesting thing about covid-19 however, was that the stigma attached to this disease could not be placed into any of the two categories mentioned earlier (discredited and discreditable) – if one had symptoms they could be the 'discredited' yet those who were asymptomatic, were part of the 'discreditable' so they would have had far more control over when, where and to whom they could reveal this ailment to. There were also cases where the 'distinguishing features' as Link & Phelan (2006) mention were not quite blatant, as not all who had covid showed symptoms of the same. This may have some benefits to it, yet after initial interaction with people, there comes a point in time where they may have to disclose the stigma. 'If revealed too soon, the stigmatised person may worry and be concerned that the other person will break the confidentiality around the stigma.' (Levin & Laar, 2004 p. 84) and yet, if revealed much later in the relationship, the relationship may suffer a break as the individual may be deemed dishonest which once again, brings us back to Link & Phelan's characteristics of stigma – leads to a 'loss of status or discrimination' subsequently labelling them as 'abnormal' from the undiagnosed 'normals'.

For many, the idea of 'catching covid' was out of the question, every country went into lockdown and stringent quarantine measures were brought into place to keep the disease and those infected at bay. Media blew everything out of proportion and soon the anticipation of catching covid and subsequently being stigmatised among fellow beings was the new horror for citizens. In smaller towns, where word spread fast, people were talking about who caught the disease and who they were to keep 'social distance' from. The fear of anticipated stigma began doing the rounds, where individuals were consumed by multiple 'what ifs' with 'expectations that others will devalue and discriminate against them.'" (Pecosolido & Martin, 2015 p. 94)

For those of us who have had and survived covid, many a time we would have faced a situation where we were confronted with the 'disclosure carryover' (Pecosolido & Martin, 2015 p. 98) – would it have been better, perhaps to

inform people about the disease, or as many people did, back then in fear - stay silent on the matter and let the disease pass? The stigma that the disease carried with it, made so many individuals afraid of revealing when they tested positive, they would simply lock themselves up at home and remain under quarantine, as there was a fear of having people treat them and their near and dear ones with the same respect as one. 'The problems faced by stigmatised persons spread out in waves, but of diminishing intensity.' (Goffman, 1963 p. 43) This sentence breathes truth in the era of covid, the virus brought with it a world of unexpected trials and tribulations. As the famous saying goes, when it rains – it pours. Many people found themselves not only ill but having to mourn the loss of their near and dear ones alone. Something no one should ever have to go through.

The use of the term 'social distance' was in fact, a very wrong use of the terminology. According to Merriam- Webster, 'social distance may be defined as the degree of acceptance or rejection of social interaction between individuals and especially those belonging to different social groups (such as those based on race, ethnicity, class, or gender).' According to Kumar, 'Two persons could be within the distance of one metre (this is what is to be avoided) and yet maintain social distance. Conversely, two persons could be miles away from each other and yet do not maintain any social distance. For example, a Tamil and a Mizo, for all we know, could be within the distance of one metre and yet differ drastically on a number of issues such as food habits, which is what could be called social distancing. Similarly, two Tamils could be miles away from each other and yet share a number of things which amounts to the absence of any social distancing. It is remarkable how the world has come to use this term so uncritically. Perhaps the only explanation for this semantic confusion is that social distancing is a more respectable term than physical distancing.' (Kumar, 2020 p.6) Why then was the same terminology used to encourage people to stay six feet apart from one another? The correct use of term, technically, should have been physical distance, and not social.

In order to make effective the plans to maintain six feet of physical distance, those who were infected by the disease, were made to quarantine for twenty-eight days to ensure that the virus completely left them before they were allowed to socialise once again. Thus, homes and several institutions which were once used for educational and training purposes were now made into containment zones, and in the process turned into 'total institutions'. To Goffman, a total institution may be defined as 'a place of residence or work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the larger

society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.' (Goffman, 1961 p.11)

It may be mentioned here that total institutions have four distinctive elements:

- 1) Where all aspects of life are conducted under a single authority;
- 2) Activities are conducted in the company of a batch of others, all of whom are treated alike;
- 3) There is a rigid timetable of events;
- 4) All activities are designed to fulfil the overall, official aims of the institution.

(Goffman, 1961, pp. 5-6)

Although Goffman does specifically mention boarding schools, monasteries and mental hospitals as examples of total institutions, with the pandemic, each 'inmate' or infected individual was subjected to strict monitoring measures for their safety. Their social life as they knew it to exist prior to infection was snatched away in totality for the containment period, the patient is treated almost like a convict in jail, whereby all his rights and freedoms are now taken away from him and he is treated as an outcast. 'Extrusion from the wider society also means inclusion in a stable community composed of abnormals'. (Burns, 1992 p.169) During this period of 'extrusion' doctors or health-care givers would frequently visit and monitor the ailing individual. The treatment and management of physically ill or injured patient is seen by doctors typically as a matter of repairing a damaged part, correcting some malfunction, or expelling some organic invasion. This 'service-relationship', as Goffman labels it, is reflected not only in the physician's approach but in the patient's attitude too; the illness, the injured part, or the malfunction tends to be referred to as extrinsic to the inner, the real, self. (Burns, 1992 p. 169)

The question then arises, how does one treat a discredited person? Is the correct way of behaving that of rightly acknowledging their shortcomings or by ignoring it and treating them the same way we treat 'normals'? Many of the discredited go through these situations on a daily basis, if their signs are not immediately apparent, it's a question of 'to display or not to display, tell or not to tell...and in each case, to whom, how, when or where.' (Goffman, 1963 p.57)

Readers of Goffman would know that his work deals mostly with social interaction and how individuals handle social situations and the way they put themselves out for the world to see. In this regard, the author talks about how one's social identity may be determined by preconceived notions that

individuals may have of each other. There may be individuals who are knowing or unknowing of the social actor, and as is the case with human nature, many individuals who are in the know, may have some ill-fated knowledge of the person without having met them personally. This may lead to a special form of stigmatisation, ‘those with whom the individual has routine dealings is likely to be dwarfed and spoiled.’ (Goffman, 1963 p. 91) For anyone who has faced discrimination in society, or even have connections with those who are discredited will be able to empathise with this point made by Goffman. Individuals, through conversation with each other are made aware of many shortcomings of people and this may lead to a biased or tainted opinion on the individual.

What was once regarded as something of no meaning prior to the pandemic may now carry a double meaning, for instance, when coughing or sneezing. How many times would a person sneeze or cough earlier to 2020 and no one would bat an eye, but with the coming of the pandemic, if a person were to sneeze or cough, the sign was taken to mean that the individual was carrying something deadly and could infect those around him. Thereby further reinforcing the prior statement that stigmas are determined based on social situations and changing times. An interesting concept introduced by Inzlicht & Good (2004) in the context of stigma is that of threatening environments – described as settings where a stigmatised person would feel devalued or unwelcomed in. This type of environment brings to light all that may be wrong in an individual and encouraging a negative sense of feeling for them. For the most part of 2020-2021 if one were to display symptoms similar to that of covid, but even if it was not, were never allowed to enter a public place. Soon, people who displayed any symptoms like a cold, cough or even a common flu were looked at a possible carrier of the virus and made to feel as though they were infecting others. What may have been a normal common cold, in that ‘threatening environment’ was made to look like a deadly disease.

Within India itself, people on the frontline were beginning to face a lot of hatred and fear among the local people that they tried to assist. Even though they were recognised as ‘covid warriors’, yet many people believed them to be the carriers and ‘super-spreaders’ of the virus. For instance, this doctor stated:

‘They recognise us with our lab coats and stethoscopes. Many doctors have been asked to vacate their rented homes by their landlords as they believe that doctors staying at their houses may make them more susceptible to Covid-19.’ (Sharma, 2020)

The story of migrant workers walking hundreds of kilometres is a poignant story. Before the lockdown was announced on 23rd March, 2020, many workers were present in different parts of the country and were forced to travel back home since they could no longer continue their work. This migrant worker speaks of his predicament:

‘All of us got tested multiple times before reaching here. I got tested thrice...I can’t move freely or walk freely. However, the villagers are scared. They think that I have brought the virus along with me. I am telling them that I have been tested three times, but they won’t listen. Just moments ago, as I stepped out of the house to speak with you, at least 15 people surrounded me and asked me to get a check-up. Won’t they get the virus if they stand so close to one other?... This feels like life imprisonment...’ (Ghosh, 2020)

Once again, the case of a multi-level stigma arises – with those who are unvaccinated and may have then caught the disease, being now looked at as those who could have potentially spreaders of the virus that gripped multiple people in fear.

### **Conclusion:**

A couple of concluding remarks may be made in this context.

First, stigma as a social fact continues to be present in modern society, as we have experienced and continue to experience in the wake of the covid -19 outbreak. Ignorance or possibly a lack of proper knowledge on a particular subject tends to lead to misconceived notions. Media does play a role in accentuating such misconceived notions. McGinty, Kennedy-Hendricks & Barry (2019) state that the primary way in which media content can influence the attitudes of public on various stigmatised behaviour is through a process called agenda setting – ‘topics receiving high levels of attention in the media are likely to be perceived by the public as priorities for intervention.’ (McGinty et.al, 2019 p. 202). Therefore, because more coverage is made on illicit drug use rather than alcohol and tobacco, viewers are made to believe that illicit drug use is a more pressing matter than the former. While framing ‘emphasises certain aspects of an issue over others can influence how the public views that issue.’ (McGinty et. al, 2019 p. 203). In a similar way, the fourth estate, using this agenda sensationalised covid-19 and drilled the idea into their viewer’s minds about the impact of the virus. Due to the overreporting, viewers were left fatigued on the figures of those affected by the same. What started off as a health issue and concern left a bitter taste in the mouth of many as it ultimately became a politicised affair.

Secondly, it may seem prescriptive, by the need of the hour is that members of stigmatised groups may be encouraged to speak out against their unjust treatment. By not speaking out, we are only encouraging an environment where people are made to believe that what they are doing is not wrong. As we all witnessed over the years, even more so recently with the pandemic, there is no solution in segregating and belittling people for harbouring a disease or any trauma – encouraging voices from those voiceless is key, this form of encouragement may then also help to reduce the secrecy around those diagnosed with any disease, let alone covid-19. The stigma that surrounded those infected with the virus was at its worst when individuals knew very little about it. Eventually, however, through the proper use of media as a means to sensitise people and going about preventing the disease in a civilised manner, the stigma that was once attached to covid began to fade away. It would be reasonable to suppose that the intensity of stigma would vary depending on the intensity of the consequences of the pandemic. It only begs the question, if the government, media, and the citizens handled the outbreak in a better manner, would the figures have been as alarming as they were when the virus was at its peak? One can perhaps learn from these mistakes.

To sum it up, the article aims to critically engage with Goffman's work on stigma in the context of covid-19 which wreaked havoc in the lives of people around the world. Stigma which is essentially a product of ignorance among individuals would increasingly become weaker with growing awareness and education, as Erving Goffman would have argued. This is what the article focuses on. Though the article is largely concerned with experiences in India, it would not be wrong to conclude that they would also hold true across different societies. However, confirmation of the same is required through further studies by more competent scholars.

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**Article: 'Urbanising' a River: Twin tales of Yamuna and Delhi**

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**‘Urbanising’ a River: Twin tales of Yamuna and Delhi**

--Reema Bhatia &amp; Meeta Kumar

**Abstract**

The plight of the Yamuna in Delhi is not independent of the narrative that frames the city itself. The river has, very aptly, been described as a ‘non-place’ (Baviskar, 2011). Within the city it remains an urban common, albeit without common access. The 200-odd kilometers that the river traverses before it enters Delhi alters its anatomy as much as its journey through Delhi does. Equally undeniably, the survival of Delhi as a megacity is contingent on the survival of the river. We use insights from the commons literature to review the changing equation of the river and the city. While there are several institutions involved in the administration of the Yamuna, there is a paucity of institutional structures that can manage the river sustainably- in the National Capital Territory (NCT) Delhi and at the national level. We view this paucity using a historical lens and how it has impacted the communities that traditionally transacted with the river. Governance structures that prioritised the rights of the individual over the community have led to the commodification of the floodplains and the distancing of riparian communities from the river (Bhatia and Kumar, 2016). In this paper, we focus on the forces that vex the ‘supply’ of suitable policies. We argue that river management needs to be reinvented with a holistic view of the river that includes the water channels, the floodplains, and the riparian communities.

*Keywords: Riparian communities, Urbanisation, Commons, River, Yamuna, Delhi*

## Introduction

Can a tropical river be tamed to fit an urban milieu? The plight of rivers that flow through metropolises in South Asia suggests that there is a pattern to the interaction between large cities and their rivers. The Yamuna in Delhi, the Ganga in Kanpur, the Bagmati in Kathmandu, or the Raavi in Lahore, all leave these cities severely depleted and polluted. While governments are cognisant of the problem, and policy actively addresses the issue (at least in India: the ‘Namami Gange’ project is a case in point), our rivers continue to flow much abated. In this paper we attempt to unpack the reasons for the limited success in sustaining rivers through large cities by focusing on the Yamuna in Delhi. We do so using an institutional approach, and a historical perspective.

Environmental policy is typically governed by national political processes, which are in turn shaped by the international approach to the environment. Changes in environmental policy necessarily impact the management of natural resources, including rivers. During the last couple of centuries, the process of policy implementation has often disrupted long established local-based resource management practices. The impact of development on the environment has been shaped by these policies - and in so far as urbanisation is an intrinsic part of development, this has informed the interaction between cities and their rivers.

Well into the twentieth century, the approach to the environment was instrumentalist - i.e. the environment was viewed as an instrument in development. Thus the first five-year plan (1951 to 1956) in India emphasised the need to harness unexplored natural resources for the country’s growth (D’Souza, 2012).

The question of nature and development began to be reviewed in the 1970s. The realisation that nature needed to be preserved and conserved gained traction. The Club of Rome Report, published in 1972, *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et.al, 1972) is an example of this view. Development, it argued,

could not be at the cost of nature, rather it had to be in tandem with preservation of nature, and keep in mind ecological vulnerabilities. Simultaneously, industrial agriculture and modern urbanisation also began to be critiqued as development strategies. At the heart of this debate was the question of development itself on the one hand, and on the other, the optimism that development, done right, could be sustainable. The idea of sustainability was first presented at the World Conservation Strategy (IUCN, 1980). Development was now seen as a plausible means for conservation of the environment, as much as it had been a cause of environmental degradation. The Brundtland Report of 1987, also known as the World Commission on Environment and Development Report, detailed the idea of sustainability, and the role that development could play therein (WCED, 1987).

These changes found an echo in India, where the 1970s were the heyday of the Green Revolution. Food production and consequently the availability of food per capita went up. However, the Green Revolution also began to be recognised as the cause for environmental pollution and degradation (Shiva, 1991; 2015). The impact of environmental degradation on specific communities began to draw increasing attention as well. The Centre for Science and Environment (Agarwal & Narain, 1996 (1985)) brought out a report which argued that environment transformations directly impacted people who lived on sites close to nature. By the 1990s developmental policies and their impact on the environment were being re-evaluated in a historical perspective (see for instance Guha, 1988; Escobar 1995). In particular, Escobar (1995) argued that development and modernisation were understood in a hegemonic western context, thereby eliminating all indigenous narratives and approaches towards the environment, thus marginalising the community. In the Indian context, a growing unease with the invisibility (even suppression) of alternative voices and narratives has generated a large literature that critiques colonial policies and their impact on the environment (for instance Guha, 1988; Rangarajan, 1996; Singh, 1988; Saberwal, 1999; Vasan 2006; Saikia 2011).

Colonial structures and institutions were created by processes that largely disregarded the human ecology of India, and as we discuss in the succeeding sections, Imperial Delhi is a manifestation of this. These processes were set in a discourse that viewed man as a being superior to nature. Thus, nature was viewed as a force to be tamed to the will of man, placing technology on a high altar (Latour, 1993, 2017; Höfele, P., Müller, O., & Hühn, L. 2022).

However, ‘nature’ and ‘technology’ are not stable categories, and the categorisation has often been contested and debated nationally and internationally (see for example D’Souza, 2012; Latour, 1993, 2017; Schatzki, 2003). This paper focuses on how the macro-level discourse on policy and its outcomes shaped resource management at the level of the community (and vice versa), to understand the twin tales of ‘development’ of the river Yamuna and the city of Delhi from the pre-British era to the present.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We situate our analysis in the literature on the commons. A river may be considered a common pool resource because the ‘consumption’ of the river is rival, but (generally) non-excludable. It is rival in the following sense: the draining of water into irrigation canals by upstream users leaves less water for downstream users; fishing by some will leave less fish available for others; pollution by upstream users reduces the capacity of the river to act as an environmental sink downstream; and so on. However, it is difficult to limit access to a river given its very nature. Even where access is restricted (for example by mandate or by barricading) implementation and monitoring are too expensive to enforce these restrictions. Once we accept this characterisation of the river, sustaining the river becomes a matter of preventing the tragedy of the commons from occurring.

In the fifty-odd years that have elapsed since Hardin (1968, 1978) drew attention to the inevitable over-exploitation of commonly held property, the literature has evolved to understand that the tragedy can, in fact, be averted

under specific conditions. Hardin's own solution to the aversion of the tragedy was a partitioning of the commons into private property, where possible. Clearly in the case of a river, establishing private property is neither feasible nor desirable. In such a case, Hardin advocated 'a coercive force...a Leviathan' (Hardin, 1978, 314).

Underpinning Hardin's characterisation of the (over)use of the commons is a one-shot prisoner's dilemma game (See Appendix 1). As is well known, players acting in their own best interest in such a game, end up with a collectively inferior outcome. The seminal contribution made by Elinor Ostrom to this literature was twofold. Firstly, she showed that in the presence of imperfect information, a central authority (the Leviathan) could as easily perpetrate a tragedy of the commons as no authority. Secondly, she showed that in the real world, human interactions could approximate an infinitely repeated game - in which case the theoretically predicted outcome is one where agents will cooperate to protect and sustain the commons rather than plunder them (Ostrom, 1990). This became the basis for the Institutional Analysis and Development framework (IAD) developed by Ostrom and later extended by Robert Hoffman and Derek Ireland (Hoffman and Ireland, 2013) and Agarwal (Agarwal, A., 2015). A key insight from this literature is that multi-layered polycentric governance systems afford a flexible and adaptable system that works better for common property resources like rivers which have a shifting boundary and that exists on a large spatial scale and have heterogeneous communities that live on the banks.

Cooperation among stakeholders is fundamental to the sustenance of common property. What would induce individuals to prioritise community interest over self-interest? Will individuals with a common interest always cooperate to further that interest? An early contribution to this literature was Olson (1965). Olson showed that such cooperation was by no means automatic. Insights from game theory (See Appendix 1), tell us that cooperation is likely to occur if the number of players is small enough to allow monitoring at relatively low

costs, and if deviance from cooperative agreements can be easily detected and punished. In the real world, trust and norms are important determinants of how people interact mutually. Baland and Platteau (1997) model the tragedy of the commons as a Coordination game rather than a Prisoner's Dilemma. In this class of games, actions of an individual depend on how many others behave in a particular way. In short, people like to do what others are doing. In the context of the commons, these games predict that people will cooperate to conserve, provided a sufficiently large number of others do so (or vice versa!).

A survey of the empirical evidence on commons management emphasises the role of monitoring, leadership and clearly defined rules backed by social sanction against rule breaking (Agarwal, 2002). Ostrom (Ostrom et al., 2003) gives a summary of the various issues that affect the management of the commons. We use insights from this literature to understand the interaction between the Yamuna and Delhi.

### **Methodology**

We situate the Yamuna in the commons. We use secondary literature to analyse the historical institutions that encouraged the sustainable use of common property resources, including water and riverine floodplains, in North India. We discuss how modernity and development altered or replaced these institutions, particularly in Delhi. These changes are discussed from the commons perspective. Specifically, we examine whether or not the new institutional arrangements facilitated the cooperation between stakeholders, that is key to the successful management of a common property resource.

Accordingly, this paper has three main sections that follow. Section 4 outlines the changes in the communities that managed the river as a common resource. Section 5 deals with the implications of these changes for the river. Section 6 situates these changes in the 'modern' imagining of the river and the city.

### **Tales of Delhi**

It may be argued that agriculture in pre-British North India conformed to a large-scale system that, in the words of Elinor Ostrom, 'facilitated the sustainable use of environmental resources under specific conditions.' (Ostrom, 2008). Resource use regulation and contract enforcement was conducted through systems of customary rights. In the hinterlands of Delhi, these rights were based on cooperation and reciprocity that allowed for the sustainable use of natural resources: land, forests, and rivers (Sharan, 2016). They governed the use of resources, leaving the questions of ownership largely undefined (and debated) (Chaudhry, 2016).

Uncertainty was a prominent feature of this system. Geographically it was dependent on rivers that drained the area and formed part of a river system. These tropical rivers, including the Yamuna, are fed by glacier-melt in the Himalaya and the runoff that drains into them in their catchment areas. This gives the rivers a seasonal character with peak monsoonal discharges being 40-50 times greater than the non-monsoon months. (Latrubesse, Stevax & Sinha 2005). The monsoon greatly amplifies this inherent uncertainty. Politically, communities indigenous to this part of the subcontinent had to negotiate potentially disruptive regime changes whenever extant state power atrophied. Thus, uncertainty arose from multiple sources.

At the heart of this system was the village. The traditional land holding pattern in Delhi, as in much of Punjab, both East and West (before the Partition in 1947), was coparcenary. These coparcenary property rights were recognized by successive political regimes that ruled the Doab - including the Mughals, Sikhs, and later the British. Coparcenary ownership was central to the system of risk pooling over the community, which may be viewed as an institutional response to the uncertainty that marked the ecology of these villages. It was also fundamental to systems of reciprocity and cooperation for political and social resilience in an uncertain socio-political environment. Coparceners belonged to the same caste, and often claimed descent from a common ancestor. Local kinship was reinforced by notions of '*bhaichara*'

(brotherhood) and '*bhumibhai*' (earth brothers). Cooperation was strengthened by pooling other resources as well: pastures, residential sites, water bodies and forests. (Chakravorty-Kaul, 2015).

The sustainable use of these common property resources was governed by customary rules.ii Collective decisions were based on consensus, rather than majority. Custom also limited access to the commons by specifying user rights over them for different communities. While cultivable land was collectively held, cultivation was individual in these villages. This prevented the free-riding inherent in systems of collective production. Cultivation was carried out on scattered, non-contiguous open fields. Residences, on the other hand, were densely packed into a (commonly held) area called the *abadi-deh*. This made mutual monitoring easy and low cost (Chakravorty-Kaul, 2015).

The right to mete out punitive action was vested in the 'elders' of the village. Social sanctions would bite if exclusion in any form from the kin-group left an agent substantially worse off and acted as a deterrent to deviant behaviour. Thus, social conformity was essential and was an important ingredient in the economic management of village life. This intertwining of the social and the economic had a predictably pervasive impact on the structure of village society. Chakravorty-Kaul (1996, 2015) has shown how this set-up allowed a sustainable 'management' of the commons in much of north India, including Delhi. It also allowed for a symbiotic relationship between nomadic herding communities (such as the Gaddis) and sedentarised agrarian communities (such as the Jats) until the early 20th century.

In the terminology of Eleanor Ostrom discussed above, this was a community that managed its commons without recourse to either their partitioning into private property or recourse to 'the Leviathan'. The community's existence allowed for equity in resource use over space (upstream users of river-water vis-à-vis downstream users) and over time (wet season and dry; also, over generations). This was also a system that, by and large, satisfied the list of conditions for sustainable resource management and use drawn up in Ostrom

et.al (2003). To paraphrase, the rates at which resources change, resource-user populations, technology, and economic and social conditions were moderate. Communities did maintain frequent face-to-face communication, through dense social networks, that increased the likelihood for trust, allowed people to express and see emotional reactions to distrust, and lowered the cost of monitoring behaviour and inducing rule compliance. Outsiders could be excluded at relatively low cost from using the resource. (Laws of inheritance, for example, were designed to exclude outsiders). Users supported effective monitoring and rule enforcement (Chakravorty-Kaul, 1996).

Pre-British administrations were largely dependent on the surpluses generated by the agrarian economy to sustain themselves. Therefore, they had little incentive to disrupt the very systems that generated these surpluses. Delhi was located firmly within this system in more ways than one. Socially, communities that inhabited Delhi ‘indigenously’ were part of the agrarian networks of North India that formed its human ecology (Sharan, 2016).

Geographically, Delhi lies in a hollow just below the Ridge. This gave Delhi strategic and locational advantages. For a long time, the Yamuna was an eastern boundary to the city. The Ridge was a porous area that allowed groundwater recharge during brief Indian monsoons, and surface run-off could naturally drain into the Yamuna through several stormwater drains. Mediaeval rulers of Delhi took advantage of these hydrological features to urbanise the area sustainably.: During the Tughlaq period, surface runoff during the brief North Indian monsoon was effectively collected into catchment areas by a network of embankments along the Central and South-Central Ridge, and eventually drained into the Yamuna through a hierarchical network of *bandh-hauz-qasr-bagh-shahr* (dam-lake-fortified village-orchard-city) (Suri and Janu, 2012).

The Mughals shifted the hub of the city from the Ridge to the riverfront when they built the Red Fort on the western bank of the Yamuna. High walls of enclosed gardens ‘separated’ the riverfront from the city, even as the elite

claimed it for imperial spectacle. The river, however, remained an important transportation artery. 'Nullahs' and rivulets from the ridge continued to drain into the Yamuna. The Mughals built masonry bridges over these - one of which (the '*athpullah*' meaning a bridge with eight piers) can still be found in the Lodhi Gardens in New Delhi.

The creation of New Delhi as the Imperial capital started the process of rupture in the geomorphology and the human ecology of the area. Several of the streams and rivulets that had drained run-off from the Ridge into the river were built over to create the grand tree-lined avenues of central Delhi. Many of the 'nullahs' that drained runoff into the river would eventually turn into sewers. The river became largely a sink for sewage. (Suri and Janu, 2012).

New Delhi's expansion has been a saga of acquired agricultural land converted to non-agricultural uses.<sup>iii</sup> Imperial Delhi was created by 'acquiring' 150 villages. The best known of these are perhaps Raisina, where the Rashtrapati Bhavan stands, and Malcha, where the Diplomatic Enclave is located. During the initial acquisitions, village populations were dislocated. (Sing & Islamuddin, 2018, 158). Currently, 'urban' villages comprise largely the *lal-dora* <sup>iv</sup> areas of villages whose land have been acquired to create 'New' Delhi. Urban Delhi is fringed by several 'rural' villages whose mainstay continues to be agriculture and/or animal husbandry. An 'urban' village may sound as oxymoronic as a 'rural' village in a megacity, but therein lies the essential nature of the city. The interplay of change and continuity in Delhi's village set-up makes interesting telling in the context of urbanisation. Post-Independence, certain fundamental changes were introduced by the government. First, under the East Punjab Holdings (Consolidation and Prevention of Fragmentation) Act, 1948, the scattering of cultivated strips was sought to be consolidated under '*chakbandi*'. Among other things, *chakbandi* made the mutual monitoring of resource use, particularly water, more difficult. Effectively, it also allocated superior rights to those nearer the water source than those further away.

Secondly, the rights of the village proprietary body, particularly over the commons, were seriously challenged when the 'village body' or the Gaon Sabha was legally defined as all voters registered in the electoral rolls as residents of the village, (i.e., extended to non-cultivating communities in the village) as per the Delhi Panchayati Raj Act of 1954. Customary restrictions on access to these commons became ineffective as the structures of power that could enforce these customs and penalise their breach became weaker. This rendered the village commons, perhaps except for the *abadi-deh*, open access, and therefore subject to the tragedy of the commons. However, common property (again except for the *abadi-deh*) became 'public' property. Ownership was appropriated by the state. By doing so, the state also claimed the right to determine the use of these resources (Chakravorty-Kaul, 2015).

In 1989, all panchayats in Delhi were dissolved, and all villages were brought under the ambit of the Municipal Council of Delhi. In the urban reading, the commons became 'waste' that could be put to other uses and were no longer being effectively managed by the village. The commons became grazing lands redistributed among the 'landless' or acquired to settle displaced squatters. *Johads* (ponds) and *jheels* (lakes) that were a part of the commons became garbage dumps or were filled to create real estate. Ironically the very processes of democratic representation and the creation of the modern nation state destroyed the institutional arrangements that had existed traditionally for the management of the ecosystem (Chakravorty-Kaul, 2015).

The floodplains of the Yamuna have also become the location of informal settlements by migrants to Delhi. The khadar or the floodplains along the twenty-two-kilometre urban stretch from Wazirabad to Okhla were traditionally cultivated by villages on the banks of the Yamuna. Jagatpur is one such village (Bhatia and Kumar, 2016). They continue to be farmed today but often by cultivators who are migrants. Some of these cultivators claim hereditary occupancy status going back to 1857 but are de jure squatters on public lands because these urban farming zones have been declared illegal as

per the Master Plan of Delhi 2041 (Farooq, 2023). This zone has been designated for recreation and biodiversity parks (PRC, 2022). Interestingly, they live on the floodplains, and move their dwellings according to the ebb and flow of the river, and thus may be said to constitute a riparian community. But because they are squatters, they are constantly under threat with their dwellings being demolished and their crops destroyed (Pradhan and Chetan, 2020).

We argue that the growth of New Delhi, physically, politically, and metaphorically, was part of processes that disrupted the large-scale system that sustained the ecology of North India. The plight of the Yamuna today cannot be understood without understanding this disruption, or the role played in it by New Delhi, physically and metaphorically.

### **Tales of the Yamuna**

The Yamuna, the largest tributary of the Ganga originates from the Yamunotri glacier near Bandar Punch (38° 59' N 78° 27' E). A little over three percent of the river basin of the Yamuna lies in the Himalayan region. The catchment of the river system cuts across the states of Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Delhi. For approximately 200 kilometres, it travels through Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal where it is fed by several streams (Misra, 2015). Once the river enters the plains at Dak Pathar in Uttaranchal it is regulated through a barrage and water is diverted into a canal for power generation. It then reaches Hathnikund near Yamuna Nagar in Haryana. Here, the Tajewala barrage (created in 1870) diverts Yamuna waters into the Western and Eastern Yamuna Canal for irrigation. The flow of water downstream from this barrage is severely restricted. Table 1 describes the abstraction of water from the Yamuna (Rai, et.al., 2012).

Table 1: Water Abstraction from the Yamuna

	<b>Locatio n</b>	<b>River Water Abstrac tion  (MLD)</b>	<b>Abstrac tion Use</b>
1	Hathnik und	20,000	Irrigatio n, Drinking Water Use and Others
2	Wazira bad	1,100	Drinking Water Use
3	Wazira bad to Okhla	5,000	Irrigatio n and Others
4	Okhla to	400	Irrigatio n,

	Etawah stretch		Drinking Water Use and Others
5	Etawah to Allahabad stretch	475	Irrigation, Drinking Water Use and Others

Source: Reproduced from Rai, Upadhyay and Ojha (2012). p. 21.

Contemporary river management regimes implicitly prioritise upstream users over downstream ones. The Western and Eastern Yamuna Canals drain most of the river water before it reaches Delhi. After travelling over 224 kilometres across the northern part of India it enters Delhi near Palla village. Whatever remains of the river water is barraged at Wazirabad, ITO and Okhla. The major abstraction from the river in Delhi is between Wazirabad and Okhla (approximately 6000 MLD). Abstractions downstream of Okhla are comparatively very small. In dry seasons, what flows down from Wazirabad is not river water, but mainly sewage that is fed into the river through the Najafgarh drain, and thirty or so more drains that pour into the river downstream from the Najafgarh drain (Dixit, 2019).

Several other hydraulic structures, such as bridges, barrages, weirs etc. exist across the river. Of these, the Indraprastha Bridge, Nizamuddin Railway

Bridge and Nizamuddin Road Bridge are closely located on the river, within three kilometres of each other. The river flow between these structures is confined to a width of 550 m.

In Delhi, Hardin's Leviathan is like a multi-headed hydra, each head operating with little regard for the other. The Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan lists more than sixteen agencies involved in the management of Yamuna. These are listed in Appendix 2. The administrative challenges of coordinating the decisions and actions of multiple 'authorities' are virtually insurmountable.

We have already mentioned that river management is the responsibility of several government agencies. The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) looks after land use and enforces land use norms on the floodplains on the west bank of the river. It also looks after the development of the riverside stretch demarcated 'Zone O' under the Delhi Master Plan (DDA, 2006, 2020 a; Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan, 2012 a). The east bank is under the jurisdiction of Uttar Pradesh. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) is responsible for testing and monitoring the water quality. The Irrigation & Flood Control departments monitor water flow and flood control. The Industries Department seeks to regulate the flow of industrial effluents into the river. The Delhi Jal Board (DJB) manages domestic water and the use of raw water. Local bodies Municipal Corporations of Delhi and the New Delhi Municipal Council investigate the management of stormwater drains. The ITO barrage is under the jurisdiction of the Government of Haryana. The Okhla Barrage is under the jurisdiction of the Government of Uttar Pradesh. Each of these agencies have their own priorities and constraints. So, the river becomes the responsibility of many - and thus of none. This is the classic tragedy of the commons. To add to the tragedy, since the 1970s the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) and private developers have been channelising the river. The Central government under section 12 (1) of the Delhi Development Act 1989 declared the riverbed as a development area which the DDA can legally 'develop' (Follman, 2015).

The very fact that the river is managed by so many different authorities impart inconsistency to the way that the river is managed. Follman (2015) argues that the state follows an ‘informal’ approach to the river deliberately. This gives the state the leeway to act arbitrarily or worse - in a rent-seeking manner. Manoj Misra of the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan points out that thirty per cent of the existing floodplains from Palla to Jaitpur are already rezoned. In 2016, the World Cultural Festival 2016 was permitted on the floodplains of the riverbed. The National Green Tribunal severely criticised the damage this caused to biodiversity in the floodplains (Nagarajan, 2016).

The state’s approach to the river is ridden with contradictions. At one level, it recognises the ecologically sensitive nature of the river and the riverbed. In fact, the report submitted to the NGT makes several recommendations: the restriction of use of chemicals in the agriculture on the banks of the river; the restriction of the solid waste dumping, cattle farming and dumping of cow dung on the active floodplains of Jagatpur; curtailing the proliferation of nurseries (common in the Hiranki area) on the river banks as the use of chemicals in the cultivation of plants is a source of pollution to the river (Press Trust of India, 2023). The effective implementation of these recommendations would require substantive monitoring by the state. Effective implementation of these recommendations would also bring the state in conflict with village communities such as those of Jagatpur and Hiranki.

The report submitted to the NGT suggests the removal of structures constructed by the DDA like the Millennium Bus Depot and some residential colonies, but the DDA is finding it impossible to relocate these structures given the space crunch in Delhi. (Babu, et.al., 2013).

To further ‘cleanse’ the Yamuna, the High Court of Delhi from 2004-2006 had ordered the demolition of the slums on the riverbanks. These slums, which had been in existence for close to forty years, were deemed illegal since they were on the riverbed and were ‘unplanned’. The slums were demolished, and the people were evicted and relocated. Instead, a ‘planned’ and ‘legal’

commonwealth games village was constructed (Baviskar, 2011).

### **Imagining the River and the City**

We can view the impact of the growth of New Delhi on the Yamuna in two ways. The first of these is the disruption the city has caused in a geomorphological context. This is manifested in the disappearance of the systems of *bandh-hauz-qasr-bagh-shahr* mentioned above, that allowed rainwater to replenish the river. This has been replaced by nullahs that carry untreated sewage into the river. The second is a set of broader socio-political and institutional changes that have transformed communities in North India. Villages in Delhi, especially those on the banks of the Yamuna, were very much part of a larger system designed to pool risk and use natural resources sustainably. The expansion of New Delhi swallowed several of these villages. It transformed the remaining. The capacity of the community to manage the river was completely eroded by the institutional changes outlined in section 4. Bhatia and Kumar (2016) document the social and cultural distancing of these communities from the Yamuna. The erosion of traditional management structures over a time has left these communities with no memories of river management practices. On the other hand, communities such as the migrant farmers who cultivate the floodplains (albeit illegally) have a far more intimate understanding of the river but have no political voice in the city. This has weakened the demand for public action to sustain the river.

As far as the river is concerned, the state is at once custodian, user, appellate authority. The framing of the river and the approach to the river is dominated by the government and its various agencies. The state frames the river as a public good that is shared with the public as a largesse of the state. This is problematic at two levels. First, it ignores the common good nature of the river, specifically rivalry in consumption. Second, the public is missing from decisions regarding the public good. The voice that gets privileged is the state's. So, the Yamuna is lost from view. It becomes, depending upon the perspective, an 'in-between' place, or worse, a no-place (for more see

Agrawal, 2005; Sharan, 2016; Baviskar, 2011). In other words, the river is a common resource appropriated by the state (ostensibly for common good). Neither Supreme Court judgements, nor NGT pronouncements have seriously contested ‘use’ of the river by the state.v

The state’s imagination of the river appears to be a single-channel current of water, completely oblivious to the substantial seasonal variation in the volume of water that flows in the channel. This is revealed by its focus on developing the riverfront along the lines of rivers in Europe as an attempt to project Delhi as a world class city. This imagination of the river by the state is simultaneously threatening for both, the river as well as the city. It impacts the solutions that are sought for the problems of both, the burgeoning city, and its dying river. An example of this is the drinking-water supply to Delhi. Despite being a city on the banks of one of North India’s largest rivers, Delhi has insufficient drinking water; water from the Ganga is transported to Delhi through pipelines. (The irony is inescapable – the Yamuna being the largest tributary of the Ganga.) Another example is the highway on the floodplains of the river, from Jaitpur to Maharani Bagh being constructed to decongest Delhi’s roads. (The Hindustan Times, 2017).

A more serious problem lies in the model of management itself. Firstly, the river is viewed in pieces both geographically and functionally. This fracture in perspective is contrary to the very essence of the river and has grave consequences. Thus, viewing the river as ‘divided’ between states results in state governments competing for use of water, rather than cooperating to conserve it. For example, there is an MOU signed in 1994 by the Chief Ministers of Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and the NCT Delhi to ensure that Delhi has an additional surface flow of 10 cmt/sec. But this has not been possible in practice. (Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan, 2012 b). Such contradictions abound. The Delhi Jal Board draws drinking water upstream from a river (at Wazirabad) that it discharges sewage into downstream; the DDA, hard-pressed to find space elsewhere in the city, builds

roads and residential complexes in the floodplains of the river.

Taking cognizance of the inadequate management of the river, several legislative measures around the right to life and a healthy environment have been implemented at the behest of the Supreme Court of India. Not just the Court but also several non-governmental organisations and activists have staked a claim to the river. They in some ways constitute the new 'riparian communities' of Delhi.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional arrangements for sustainable and equitable use of common resources, in particular land and water were disrupted by governance structures based on private property that prioritised the rights of the individual over those of the community. These very same processes resulted in the commodification of land and the breakdown of communities that had managed the commons. The Yamuna was transformed into a public good that the state appropriated the right to allocate. Unfortunately, the state was unable to 'allocate' it in a socially optimal manner. For one the state, in its various manifestations, has multiplied the agency issues involved in this allocation. The state also lacks both the information and the resources required for an allocation that would be optimal both spatially and over time, and result in a sustainable use of the river. State policy towards the river, in treating it like a public good, fails to accommodate its 'commons' nature, i.e., while 'consumption' of the river may be difficult to exclude, it is essentially rival.

Harking back to the days of yore is clearly not the solution to the problem. Our contention is that any effective set of measures to revive the river must view it as a whole system - one that includes the water channels, the floodplains and drainage basin of the river. It also must accommodate the fact that the river performs multiple functions. Success stories of revived rivers, like the Arvari

in Rajasthan, recognise this fact (Rapid Transition Alliance, 2020). For a 'large-scale' river like the Yamuna this calls for a reinvention of river management. The solutions offered to be effective must be synergistic and consensual with the riparian states. Solutions will have to recognise the rights of downstream users, as well as those of future generations and will have to go beyond rhetoric. This is no small task. It will call into question existing rights and responsibilities of states, for example, on irrigation.

In short, our contention is two-fold. First a tropical river cannot be 'urbanised'. What works for the Thames in London cannot be a solution for the Yamuna. Urban planning in Delhi will have to consider the seasonal ebb and flow of water in the river. Second, the state of Yamuna in Delhi derives as much from what happens before it reaches Wazirabad as much as it does from what happens to it downstream from Wazirabad. Policies adopted so far have not taken these basic aspects into account. The state of the Yamuna is testimony to that. The river must be viewed as an organic whole. The river and the riparian communities together must be treated as an ecosystem for any solution to be effective. The approach of forcing alien solutions without the involvement of the stakeholders living closest to the river will not work. Urban planning for Delhi as a world class city with a developed and a beautiful waterfront is bound to be environmentally short-sighted and short term. Any such development of the river and the riverfront will only be cosmetic. For a truly sustainable solution we must go beyond the rhetoric.

### **Appendix 1**

#### Brief Note on Game Theory

Game theory seeks to understand human interactions. A central assumption in Economics is that individuals when faced with a menu of choices, always pick the one that gives them the maximum return (which could be satisfaction, or

profits or whatever the menu is about). This rule for individual decision-making is called rationality. All economics agents - be they consumers or businesses or governments, are assumed to behave rationally. Traditional economic analyses assume that when agents are rational, markets lead to unique, efficient outcomes. Game theory demonstrates that, even with rational behaviour, multiple outcomes are possible, some of which may be very poor outcomes. Because it deals with human interactions, game theory has very wide applications across social sciences, environmental sciences, and also evolutionary biology.

A game has three elements. The first is the 'players' or 'agents'. These could be consumers, businesses, governments and so on. As mentioned above, all that is required of them is that they be rational. Each player in the game has a defined set of actions she may take: in the context of this paper, broadly speaking, this could be to 'conserve' the environment, or 'plunder' it. (Players can have several strategies - in fact, a continuum of strategies is possible). The strategies available to the players are the second element of a game. The third element is the 'payoff' - or the return to the player from choosing a particular strategy. Each player's payoff depends not just on what she chooses, but also what the other players choose. (An excellent, non-technical exposition is Binmore (2007))

The Prisoner's Dilemma is a two-player, non-cooperative game in which each player has two strategies: to cooperate (i.e., to stick to an agreed-upon course of action) or to default. Each player evaluates which choice would give her a

higher payoff, given the strategy chosen by the other player and plays it. The payoffs are ranked thus: if both choose to cooperate, the commons are sustained; if both choose to default the commons get plundered. If one chooses to cooperate, while the other chooses default, the returns to the defaulter are greater. It turns out that each player, acting rationally, and deciding separately from the other, will choose to default (See Ostrom, 1990; Binmore, 2007).

The Prisoner's Dilemma is a special kind of a game with a single outcome or 'equilibrium'. Several games allow for more than one possible outcome, some of which may be better than others. Players may have landed in a bad equilibrium (for historic reasons, perhaps) - but they landed there because they made rational decisions, each in their own self-interest, given what others were deciding. The problem often is that switching from a 'bad' equilibrium to a 'good' one is not easy. People behave in a particular way because others behave that way. Left to themselves, no one will change their strategy unless everyone else changes theirs. But everyone won't change because no one (or at least a minimum critical number) has changed! Coordination games are widely used to analyse conventions and norms. (See Binmore, 2007).

## Appendix 2

List of Government Agencies 'Managing' the Yamuna in Delhi

- Central Pollution Control Board, Govt. of India (<http://cpcb.nic.in/>)
- Delhi Jal Board, Govt. of Delhi (<http://www.delhijalboard.nic.in>)

- Department of Environment, Govt. of NCT Delhi  
(<http://environment.delhigovt.nic.in>)
- Department of Land & Building, Govt. of NCT Delhi  
(<http://land.delhigovt.nic.in>)
- Department of Urban Development, Govt. of NCT Delhi  
(<http://delhigovt.nic.in>)
- Irrigation and Flood Control Department, Govt. of NCT Delhi  
(<http://ifc.delhigovt.nic.in>)
- Ministry of Environment & Forests, Govt. of India  
(<http://envfor.nic.in>)
- Ministry of Urban Development, Govt. of India  
(<http://www.urbanindia.nic.in>)
- Ministry of Water Resources, Govt. of India (<http://wrmin.nic.in>)
- Central Ground Water Board, Govt. of India (<http://cgwb.gov.in>)
- Upper Yamuna River Board, Govt. of India (<http://uyrb.nic.in>)
- Delhi Development Authority, Govt. of India
- Central Water Commission, Govt. of India
- Governments of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Delhi

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<sup>i</sup> The Namami Gange programme is a Government of India Flagship programme started in 2014 to clean, conserve and rejuvenate the National River Ganga (NMCG, 2020).

<sup>ii</sup> 'First, there were rules for equity by an open field system of two or three field rotations of the long and short fallows for cultivation and grazing. Second, there were customs for economy in water use in the villages: by intricate rules for the sharing and repairing of field channels (*dhanas*) and grazing on the ridges or *dhauls* and by water harvesting through collecting water in ponds (*johads*) and rules of conservation of well water and repair of small channels (*suas*) in the semi-desert regions. Third, there were measures of risk-sharing brought on by river action by rules of alluvion and diluvion (*sailaba*) in place for land thrown up by rivers or washed away from villages. Fourth, there was a saving in transaction costs by surrogate use of pasture outside the villages in the wetlands, like marshes known as *chhamb*s which were shared for pastoral purposes by the cattle of both settled and nomadic communities, and similarly there were rules of water sharing between village communities

for irrigation from hill torrents and from rivers like the *wara-bandi* and *osra-bandi* systems (Chakravorty-Kaul, 2015).

<sup>iii</sup> The rural area of Delhi has shrunk from 53.79 percent in 1991 to 24.9 percent in 2011 and the urban area has gone up from 46.21 per cent to 62.35 per cent in these two decades (Government of Delhi, 2022). Delhi Land Reforms Rules, 1954 lists 358 villages in the UT of Delhi, the Tejendra Khanna Committee Report has put the number of villages at 362. In 2005-6, 135 of these villages were designated ‘urban’ villages and 227 remained ‘rural’ (Government of Delhi, 2007, p. 12).

<sup>iv</sup> Traditionally, village residences (called the *abadi-deh*) were held in common and clustered into an area marked on revenue maps in red ink – hence the name *lal-dora*. Common ownership has resulted in these areas escaping several municipal byelaws. Laws and bylaws predicated on private ownership either cannot be applied, or, more typically, are administratively and politically difficult to enforce in these commonly owned lands. Political and administrative convenience has ensured that enforcement of municipal rules and norms, weak as it is in all parts of Delhi, is virtually absent from these areas. Equally, most *lal-dora* areas have minimal civic amenities, but tend to be congested hubs of enterprise.

<sup>v</sup> In any case, the judiciary can only push for implementation of existing laws. It is our contention that laws based on fractured notions of the river are unlikely to be successful in reviving it. For instance, in the case of the Commonwealth Games Village (CGV), the DDA sanctioned the construction of a residential complex on the floodplains of the Yamuna next to the already controversial Akshardham Temple complex. The *Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan* sought

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judicial intervention to prevent the DDA from doing so. Eventually the Supreme Court allowed the construction of the CGV, mandating that the site of the CGV was no longer on the floodplains after the construction of a new bund for the Akshardham Temple. A Supreme Court mandate, however, was no protection against flooding, and the CGV site was flooded that very year (Sharan, 2016). This suggests that the state is myopic at best and rent seeking at worst. (See, for example, Mathur, 2004).

**Article: Market Economy and Farmers' Movement in India:  
Contextualizing Farmers' Resistance of 2020-21**

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**Market Economy and Farmers' Movement in India: Contextualizing  
Farmers' Resistance of 2020-21**

--VenkateshVaditya

**Abstract**

From the outset, various sections of society are expected to protest when their grievances are left unheard. Such protest movements are a familiar occurrence in any democratic nation. As the Indian state is built upon constitutional governance and democratic principles, protests of all political nature are justifiable. For, the political process in the democratic government is inclusive of all such protests that abjure violence to achieve any popular demand. The recent farmers' movement in India concerning farm bills serves as a prime example. The farmers were pursuing comprehensive solutions to address the prevailing issues and concerns faced by a large population. It was not a spontaneous agitation, but a long-simmering dissatisfaction that has been brewing since India chose the path of the neoliberal market economic model, which has held the country in its grip since the 1990s. It was an agrarian resurgence amid the backdrop of the marketization of the Indian economy. In this background, the article seeks to understand the current farmers' agitation and its contradictions in the larger context of structural changes that have taken place in the Indian economy since India adopted the neoliberal economic model of development.

*Key Words: market economy, neoliberal reforms, farmer's movements, farmer's bill, liberalization, agrarian distress*

**Introduction**

The historic farmers' movement that persisted throughout the critical COVID-19 pandemic in India between August 2020 to December 2021 has raised the confidence level among farmers of all states at once. Despite its spread being restricted to proximate areas of India's national capital Delhi, it has affected

the erstwhile 'green revolution' areas like the Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh. Started as a response to the deliberate move of the union government on corporatizing the agriculture sector, and raising other demands, several farmers' movements and groups had come together as part of the SamyuktKisanMorcha (SKM). This protest highlighted the shift in regulatory power and its resistance from states to the union government, and, farmers rather than traders are forefront of the agitation (Krishnamurthy 2021). Having faced the wrath of the union government and its paramilitary forces for months since the Republic Day celebrations of 2020, the movement reached its climax when Prime Minister NarendraModi made a regretting announcement on the issue. He backtracked on it and thereby, withdrew the three farmer bills. The Farm Laws Repeal Bill, 2021 was introduced on 29 November 2021 and unanimously passed on the first day of the winter session of the Indian Parliament. Despite the factors that led to Modi's change of direction, Indian farmers experienced an unprecedented occurrence in recent political history. In Jodhka's opinion (2021a: 15) there exists 'the 'Resurgent' Rural: Nearly 30 years after it began to recede from the national imagination'. After independence in 1947, India faced severe food shortage, it was during the third five-year plan (1961-66) that food grains were imported from the United States of America (USA) but it came with some conditionalities. The import of food grains not only strained foreign exchange but also felt humiliating as it undermined the national goal of autarky. The government decided to adopt the policy of self-sufficiency in terms of food production. The country had the option to embrace the proliferation of high-yielding varieties (HYV) of wheat and rice seeds, which were developed by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). Economists expressed concerns about becoming dependent on commercial inputs supplied by multinational companies. Despite these concerns, the government chose to import the HYV seeds. At the same time, to establish a favourable pricing environment for agricultural production, two new institutions were established: the Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) and the Food

Corporation of India (FCI). Both institutions have played a prominent role in India's food administration ever since (Chand, 2005, p. 2).

During this period, there was an increase in agriculture input subsidies. The adoption of HYV technology and its remarkable success were celebrated as 'The Green Revolution'. Interestingly, the regions that experienced the most impact from the green revolution are now at the forefront of agitation against the new farm laws. This paper aims to explore the historical roots of various aspects of the farmers' movement that culminated in farmers' resistance in 2020-21.

### **Market economy in the Indian agriculture sector**

Postcolonial India wished to have a break with the inherited colonial economic policy of *Laissez-faire*. With its colonial legacy of economic underdevelopment, it chose economic nationalism to achieve both political and economic sovereignty. In Nayar's (2001, p. 50) opinion, the planning was an assertion of economic nationalism, ultimate control and direction of the national economy. That is why it followed the import-substitute strategy over the export-led growth. It has remarkably displayed resilience, adaptability and finesse while moving away from import substitution to export-oriented development (Shalendra, 2007). Rudolph and Rudolph's (1987, p.1) formulation, also reflected India as a political and economic paradox: 'a rich-poor nation with a weak strong state'. In Frankel's (2005, p.3) opinion, this economic process 'sought to combine the goal of growth and reduction of disparities, while avoiding the violence and regimentation of revolutionary change'. At that time, agriculture was the predominant sector both in terms of its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and in providing agrarian employment. Agriculture has had approximately 55 per cent share of the GDP and about 70 per cent share of the workforce. Therefore, the fortunes of a large majority of people were linked with that of agriculture performance (Bhalla, 2007, p.1). Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister, preferred the strategic institutional approach in the agrarian sector as part of his

commitment to equality, and socialism along with tackling the issue of constraint in productivity (Bhalla, 2007, p. 15). Eventually, this approach was abandoned when the green revolution strategy was adopted to raise productivity, as this strategy was based on the technocratic approach. A significant paradigm shift occurred when India decisively embraced the path of a market economy through extensive economic reforms, starting in 1991. The institutions of state and market have profoundly influenced in shaping the trajectories in the modern world. The mutual interaction of state and market creates a political economy. In other words, political economy is 'the reciprocal and dynamic interaction ....of the pursuit of wealth and pursuit of power' (Gilpin, 1987, p. 11). McNeil (1984) suggests that without a market, capitalism forfeits its creativity and vitality. The market economy is one in which goods and services are exchanged based on the principle of relative price. In this scenario role of the state is to operate in the worst case of 'market failure' (Olisan, 1965). The market economy was introduced in India to reduce the role of the state in the process of economic development and to rely on market forces.

### **Context of New Farmers' Movement: Emergence of Rural Power**

In the agriculture sector, the state attempted to circumvent the early accumulation of capital during the initial decades after independence. However, the withdrawal of state involvement became notably apparent with the reduction of supportive structures following liberalization. Nonetheless, state intervention remained crucial in various other aspects, including land regulations, connecting local markets with the global market, and fostering a prosperous peasantry capable of participating in capitalist development. The latter case becomes an important reference point in the context of the introduction of the green revolution strategy during the 1960s. With this approach, the global market permeated India's agriculture sector, particularly in the realm of agrarian inputs like seeds, fertilizers, and HYV crops. Additionally, despite their limited success, land reforms gave rise to a fresh segment of farmers from dominant *Shudra* castes who later exhibited a strong

interest in expanding into agriculture through agrarian capitalism. In other words, the green revolution strategy set forth a class, crop and area-biased path of development (Assadi, 2006, p. 794). The process of globalization reshapes the normative expectations of a state's fundamental responsibilities. The "passive revolution" of corporate capital within the framework of electoral democracy renders it unacceptable and illegitimate for the government to continue marginalizing peasants, as doing so runs the risk of transforming them into what is referred to as "the dangerous class" (Chatterjee 2008, p.62). Even though farmer's movements in India have the potential to influence and bring structural changes in the economy favouring the agriculture sector. It has been greatly hampered, due to farmers' multiple identities and interests.

According to Jodhka's perspective (2021c, p. 6), the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the rise of influential farmers' movements throughout the nation, especially in areas where agriculture had undergone substantial progress since the post-independence era. Besides, Punjab, such movements emerged in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Coastal Andhra, western Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Haryana. Substantial landholders mostly led them from the locally dominant castes. In the 1980s, the peasantry rallying behind the Bharat-India divides rhetoric 'started flexing their political muscles' as part of the 'New Farmers' Movements'. The rhetoric of 'suffering Bharat and shining India' was invoked in the context of growing disparities between rural and urban India. It was a result of the nationalization of rural politics and rural political mobilization during the second half of the 1970s. This newly emerged agrarianism was not only 'revolutionary' but also innovative because it was not carried out by the landless-exploited labourers against the landlords, but it was viewed more as a pressure interest on the government for more agrarian subsidies, remunerative output prices, loan waiver and ultimately a better rural-urban balance in resource allocation. These mobilizations were a response to the exigencies of globalized neo-liberal capitalism (Brass 1995). The protest march that was organized by the farmers demanding more subsidies and higher output prices caught the imagination of the nation. The

strength of peasants seemed invincible as reflecting the mood of peasants, in 1987, an editorial of the Times of India mentioned it as, 'a new spectre of peasant power likely to haunt' the country for years to come (Varshney, 1995, p. 11). This was the peak stage of the phenomenon of 'realization' of Indian politics. This new agrarianism was based on populist ideology, captured by the compelling imagery of the Bharat-India divide, propagated by political leaders. Notable leaders of this new agrarianism were Sharad Joshi of ShetkariSanghatan in Maharashtra and Mahender Singh Tikayat of BharatiyaKisan Union (BKU) from Uttar Pradesh. They could transcend their caste and class cleavages because the movement's appeal was sectoral (Varshney, 1995, p. 18). In Lindberg's opinion (1994, 95) this movement was 'to struggle for better economic conditions in an increasingly commoditized agrarian economy' (Lindberg 1994, 95). Despite their lack of engagement in electoral politics, all political parties found themselves obligated to create policies and programs that aligned with their demands. The political action of this class of farmers concerning the state was a result of the democratic system introduced before a powerful industrial revolution, which led to a rise in farmer's political power (Varshney, 1998). It is imperative to assess the role of farmers' movements in this context; especially the appraisal of the political legacy of the green revolution strategy that enabled the peasantry to further their political power, by the mid-1960s, especially at the state level. Even this strategy, which was based on a 'betting on the strong' approach steered the new technology towards areas in which rich peasantry was dominant (like Punjab, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh, Coastal Andhra etc.). It resulted in further consolidation of rich peasantry both economically and politically (Corbridge& Harris, 2000). The increase in the political power of the peasantry was evident when ChaudhuryCharan Singh, a powerful rural ideologue became a very important political player in the Janata Party coalition in 1977 with his political party BharatiyaLok Dal. Their voice entered directly into the higher strata of policy-making with Charan Singh in power. The budget presented during his tenure was labelled a 'Kulak budget'.

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According to Varshney (1995, p.18), it was remarked to have a connection with the people and a genuine essence of the land.

Instead of being limited to a narrow class of surplus-producing wealthy peasants, 'the new farmers' could successfully garner support from all segments of the landed peasantry. Hence, it cannot be argued that the capitalist farmers are trying to build a hegemonic project, which includes some consensus to a non-hegemonic fraction of the landed and agrarian labourers. The class and caste question within the farming community further deconstructs the rural universe. Marx remarked disparagingly on the collective docility of peasants, by saying that they were like potatoes in a sack, too heterogeneous to be able to organize politically for class action (Suri, 2006, p.22). Rather than viewing private property as the foundation of exploitation, the new farmers' movement has identified force and domination as the underlying mechanisms for extracting surplus through exchange relations (Omvedt 2008). This was the case with the Indian farmers' movement. Many times, they may have united as a distinct class, yet an inevitable result within the movement was a class that consistently advocated for its interests. For example, the class within the movement always selectively promoted the rich class's interest by selectively prioritizing demands like lower input prices, higher food prices and demanding lower minimum agriculture wages for agriculture labourers and a rise in rural development. These selective demands within the larger farmers' movement blurred the universal claims of the sectoral discourse of the movement.

Varshney (1995) argued that the rise of rural political power was not completely transformed into a favourable situation because of countervailing constraints in the economy that served as a limit to farmer's gains. It was not converted into rising income *ad infinitum* because it would run against some countervailing economic factors. If the momentum of technology significantly influences crop yield, then the levelling off or plateauing of technological advancements could serve as a restraint on farming profits. If the government were to raise the prices of agricultural commodities to ensure higher

agriculture returns to farmers, then the low purchasing power of the rural poor would create a demand constraint as the state would have to keep agrarian consumer prices low by keeping in mind the rural poor (Posani, 2009). This rural power transformation would require a collective action; however, that collectivity breaks down with the other competing identities among the farmers. At the same time, the universality of the 'rise of rural power' may not hold longer because the farmers' movement may have after all served the interest of rich farmers. In addition to that, the marginalization of agrarian policies since the 1990s happened because of the changing global political economy that has shrunk the policy space of farmers. The electoral potency of 'agrarian interest' to influence the policy outcomes was curtailed in the country with the rise of political discourses of religion and ethnicity. The voting preferences of Indian farmers were influenced by heterogeneous identity considerations. Over time, it became practically challenging to contend solely with the 'economic exclusivist' perspective, as other factors came into play. The determining factor is no longer solely the shared occupational identity of being farmers. This changing social and political structure in the contemporary rural society has weakened the rural identities of 'village' and 'farmers'.

In recent decades, India has taken right-wing turns, economically 'neoliberal' and politically 'communal'. The right-wing does not prefer to even acknowledge that 'rural' India is suffering due to a policy of neglect. Hasan (1995) in her study of BKU in Western Uttar Pradesh found that the economic interests of surplus-producing farmers dominated the movement and the principal mobilizing factor was on caste and religious lines. According to her, the dominant Jat farmers mobilized lower caste farmers by using Hindu communal ideology. The caste contradictions erupted when the Jats backed the anti-Mandal agitation and it alienated backward caste farmers from its ranks. The decline is also owed to BKU's active affiliation with the Hindutva politics that propagates Hindu supremacy. This ideology is central to the current ruling party BharatiyaJanata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister NarendraModi since 2014. Marginal farmers supported these types of

movements for non-economic reasons like the betterment of government bureaucracy. In this way, the movement was progressive in a limited sense. It is a problematic proposition to claim a singular rise of rural power. Further, the post-green revolution economic change brought villages near urban areas. Many farmers started sending their children to educational institutes and there emerged a distinct salaried class straddled between rural and urban divide. Farmers' households are gradually becoming plural-active i.e. diversifying their economic activities more and more in non-agriculture sectors.

### **Introduction of Market Economy and Farmer's Autonomy**

Even though the farmers' movement was marked by several structural constraints within and without the political class in the country felt its presence. Such powerful rural political power came under pressure since the 1990s due to the economic reforms agenda that has been carried out in the name of liberalization. Since then, the agrarian interest has been marginalized in the national policy agenda. Contrary to Gandhian visualization of life in the village as a superior alternative to Western materialistic life, there is denunciation in the opinion of Jodhka (2021a, p. 13) 'much of its denunciation in contemporary times has come from increasingly dominant and hegemonic elite and the urban middle classes'. In Ghosh's (2005), opinion the policy changes were brought on the presumptions of freeing agriculture markets and liberalizing external trade in agriculture commodities that would provide price incentives leading to enhanced investment and output in that sector. Thus, since the 1990s, in Jodhka's opinion (2021a, p.15) 'the rural has increasingly been marginalized in the national imagination'. The neoliberal economic reforms affected rural society adversely. There was a decline in central government revenue expenditure on rural development. There were cuts in subsidies in the agriculture sector and an overall decline in per capita government expenditure on rural areas. Besides, the decline in public investment in agriculture, including extension, public infrastructure and energy investment diminished irrigation in rural areas. The reduction of the public distribution system (PDS) spread and rising prices of food items had

affected rural household food consumption. The implementation of financial liberalization measures led to a redefinition of lending priorities by banks, resulting in a decreased availability of rural credit. Internal trade in agriculture commodities was liberalized across the states within India. External trade in agricultural commodities was liberalized and restrictions were removed. Many scholars argued that the agrarian crisis in the country was rooted in the present economic regime of liberalization. In the opinion of Patnaik (2005, p.246) 'Indian agrarian crisis is the product of misguided public policy, ill-thought-out neo-liberal reforms induced the crisis by hitting farmers with the high credit and input costs'.

Traditionally, agrarian capitalism has intensified the commercialization in the agriculture sector, which demands heavy monetized inputs and investments. It added technology and credit risks to the traditional weather risks that the sector was already facing. To this, liberalization added market risks that were accentuated by receding state support by the 1990s. Thus, everything has been interlinked; change in one sector would affect all other sectors like a chain reaction. With the changing market conditions, the farmers are increasingly being exposed to the uncertainties of the product as well as factor markets (Mishra, 2007). Agrarian liberalization is evident in key areas like agriculture trade as India removed quantitative limits on 470 agriculture products and it was further liberalized to 1400 agriculture products in 1999. It reflects the inability of Indian farmers to compete with the agri-market controlled by powerful foreign companies. For instance, ever since, the seeds input industry was liberalized the farmers have been forced to depend upon the corporate seeds (see for details Vamsi, 2005). Public expenditure in this sector has significantly decreased over time. For instance, the overall allocation of budget in this sector, in five-year plans has gone down. Five-year plans have been a main characteristic of the Indian economy that envisaged a systemic transformation. If one has a cursory look at the statistics of expenditure on agriculture, one would see a declining trend over plans. In percentage terms, during the first five-year plan, 37.0 per cent was allotted to this sector; it has

declined to less than 16.5 during the tenth five-year plan (Bhalla, 2007, p. 46). One of the extreme manifestations of these policy changes that have adversely affected farmers is the farmers' suicides, which have plagued the country as an epidemic since the early 1990s. This is due to policy changes that were brought in areas like fiscal policy; financial reforms, external trade and institutional development (see Vadiya, 2017). While studying farmers' suicides phenomena in Maharashtra Mohanty (2005) observed that, the lower middle caste peasants and smallholders in the state are caught trapped by the green revolution strategies on one side and the reality of neo-liberalism on the other side.

### **Diminishing Rural Political Power and Farmers' Agitations**

It seems that the farmers' movement in the post-liberalization period has lost its earlier dynamism. The hegemonic hold of capitalist farmers was broken with the emergence of identity politics during this period. Nevertheless, the momentum was not lost completely as the agitation continued against the unfavourable structural changes affecting the sector. There have been several successful protests against the ongoing liberalization process and agriculture corporatization. For instance, a huge protest march was witnessed in Delhi on March 7, 1996, as the farmers gathered in New Delhi at KisanGhat a "DeshBachao" (save the country) Mahapanchayat. The rally was organized under the banner of BKU. It was attended by, BKU leader late Mahendra Singh Tikait, Vineet Narayan and Vandana Shiva, a leading scientist. The main agenda before the panchayat was to make a demand on the political class through their own elected representatives while agitating simultaneously outside of politics. In the proceedings, it was decided to have a political committee of nine representatives of farmers' organizations to oversee the political process, and to bring accountability in the political class. The Panchayat condemned the government for its failure in land reforms and for handing over the lands of poor and hapless farmers to the corporate agriculture of the big agro-corporations. It was also decided to fight against the World Bank's (WB) conditionality of privatization of water resources. It was declared

that water rights are common rights and not market rights. In Jodhka's opinion (2021b, p. 195) 'The growing size and power of the urban and corporate economy marginalized its agrarian economy in the national imagination, the effects of which began to be felt by those working in the sector'. The farmers in India have been resisting corporatization and monopolization of the seeds industry through Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) regimes. The farmers committed themselves to fighting for their rights against any unjust laws aimed at undermining their rights. They also announced the farmer's debt is illegitimate since it was linked to a disproportionate increase in the cost of agricultural commodities, by creating profits for agri-business. In the Panchayat, the farmers' charter was issued and the charter condemned the illegitimate debt burden imposed on the poor farmers through government policies that favoured corporatization. It also criticized the government's lack of will to carry out land reforms successfully and selling land to corporations at throwaway prices. It condemned the privatization of water resources through WB dictates. They gave one slogan in this regard "Save water-save country." The interests of farmers were further marginalized when the current BJP government passed three legislations without consulting the stakeholders and farmers in 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic.

### **The movement against three farm bills: efforts to regain the lost power**

The BJP government at the centre took the farmers for granted, as several farmers' associations supported them in several previous elections. However, the introduction of three farm bills in 2020 was viewed as authoritarian as these organizations were not taken into confidence while formulating the bills. The resistance against these bills came from three significant fronts. Initially, it stemmed from farmers' organizations, concerned about their continued existence and independence as a farming community, as these bills were widely perceived to be benefiting agribusiness corporations. Subsequently, various state governments voiced their opposition due to their apprehension that the bills could undermine their autonomy, as the central government appeared to encroach upon the states' rights concerning the agricultural sector.

Moreover, regional political parties expressed their dissent, interpreting the bills as an assault on their distinct regional identities and aspirations. Interestingly these political parties owe their origin to farming and around their regional identities (Singh 2020). Out of these three legislations, one legislation was an amendment to the earlier existing legislation and the rest of the two were newly drafted legislations. The first legislation was, 'The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020', which was formulated to liberalize agricultural output, especially food grains. The initial and immediate concern raised was that this law could weaken the current marketing structure that might enable trade beyond the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMC) or the mandis. Consequently, it was noted that the Minimum Support Price (MSP), which has been a critical support for farmers' limited autonomy in the output market, might potentially vanish. The second legislation, the 'Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance, Farm Services Act, 2020', provided a blueprint for contract farming. According to this legislation, now the farmers can enter into a direct agreement with one or more buyers to produce a specific crop at a prefixed prior determined rate. However, this legislation did not say anything about the price security for the farmers. The third legislation involved an amendment to the 'The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, of 2020'. This amendment raised additional suspicion due to its elimination of the existing storage limits for agricultural commodities. Moreover, certain essential commodities were removed from the list, creating the potential for stockpiling of agricultural commodities by entities that have corporate-level storage facilities and resources. It was feared that this amendment would expose farmers to the vagaries of market forces dominated by big corporations. The suspicion arose when the Union government enacted legislation related to the subject of 'farming', which falls under the 'state list', using the 'ordinance route'. This was done without consulting stakeholders, all during an ongoing pandemic situation. The main agenda of the BJP government seems to be deepening the 'agribusiness capitalism' and increasing centralized control of agriculture in the country (Singh 2020, 14). Whatever

little autonomy Indian farmers had over marketing their output produce in the form of MSP, the three legislations were perceived as an attack on their autonomy as the corporate sector was given free hands in purchasing, storing, and establishing contractual agreements with farmers as decisions primarily made by the corporate business houses coercively. The immediate demand of farmers was to offer legal surety to MSP and repeal the new legislation. The protest was intense in states like Haryana and Punjab where government agencies primarily procure farm produce at MSP (Ohlan, 2021). The farmers in several parts of the country started to protest against these bills in late 2020. According to Jodhka (2021b), this extensive and prolonged protest triggered various analytical perspectives, including the concept of the 'moral economy' struggle, which entails a demand for ongoing state support. Additionally, the protest represented an assertion led by dominant rural castes who were anxious about relinquishing their regional influence. Indian planners envisaged in their agriculture policy formulations to make the tiller of soil also the owner of holding. That means creating a large number of owner cultivators and helping them in agriculture input on an institutional basis. As discussed earlier, the land reforms assumed an important institutional change. However, during the liberalization, the operative forces have changed. These forces tend to treat smallholdings as unremunerative and advocate for converting small farmers into tenants or agriculture labourers. The retreat of the state from supporting the sector due to ideological reasons and resource limitations has paved the way for the propagation of such arguments. Consequently, a distinct trend has emerged in the sector that favours agri-business. Currently, private investment is on the ascendancy naturally leading to an increased demand for a consistent supply of commodities, agricultural labour, and large land holdings. In this context, agri-business companies are evolving into a new kind of farmers. These enterprises are guaranteed sufficient credit flow, benefiting from their scale, and employing manipulative strategies, in contrast to the less educated small and marginal farmers in India (Krishnaswamy, 1994, p.70).

The protest against these three farm laws was pan-Indian in nature; however, it was concentrated in the north-Indian states of Punjab, Haryana, Parts of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh and mostly driven by Jat farmers who were earlier referred to as capitalist farmers. Much of the growth-led development is driven by private capital, and the social origin of it is in the institution of caste. In the southern and western regions of the country, the influential castes that own land have transitioned away from agriculture and adopted the role of capitalists. Conversely, in northern India, agricultural capitalists have struggled to transition into industrial capitalists. This dominant group perceives themselves as being in a disadvantaged position compared to industrial capitalism, which garners a significant portion of state policy focus following the implementation of a market-driven economy (Damodaran, 2018). The opposition to the farms bill united the farmers in Punjab. However, agriculture in Punjab is losing its importance as an all-encompassing way of life and identity. The proportion of cultivators declined from 46.5 per cent in 1971 to 22.6 per cent by 2001. The state known for its vibrant agrarian economy and the 'food basket of India', changed when the farmers ended their lives in thousands. In Bosh's words(2000, p. 3375), 'the glitter of the green revolution has disappeared. There are cracks in Punjab's prosperity'. Punjab is passing through a phase of stagnation squeezing of agrarian economy due to saturation in technology and low levels of yields. In Gill and Singh's opinion, (2006, p. 2762) 'the agriculture sector in Punjab not only has been moving towards stagnation of yields, but also a squeeze on income as well'. Much celebrated so-called Punjabi ethos, including 'hard work on the farm, self-dignity, pride in himself, the family *izzat*, the love for modernization, desire for one-up etc. which made Punjabi farmers most dynamic in the country, is crumbling down. The local dominant Jats, are particularly known for the pride they take in their rural identities. The state still occupies the leading position in several statistical indicators but it has been witnessing perpetual crisis. In Jodhka's (2001) opinion, the Punjab crisis consists of the Khalistan militant movement during the 1980s to cotton crop failure in the 1990s. This is a well-documented trend where, in the aftermath of the green revolution, the

attractiveness of agriculture as both an occupation and a means of livelihood has been steadily declining from its earlier celebrated status. The success of the green revolution approach in the state resulted in the modernization of even the average farmer through the adoption of contemporary agricultural inputs. Consequently, the status of farming communities experienced a considerable enhancement. To assess one's status in society, owning a tractor became an important symbol, it was because of the general prosperity generated by the green revolution strategy and easy availability of credit. The tractors were acquired through loans from scheduled banks or rural cooperatives, often facilitated by paying a bribe of at least Rs. 10,000 to officials, a practice that had become very common. After that, the farmer has to throw a celebration party for the arrival of the tractor. In the present situation, such celebrations in the backdrop of cotton crop failure became a serious burden. When the farmer who had acquired the tractor is required to repay the loan the following years, they may face challenges if the crop fails due to factors like untimely rains, water logging, and increased moisture that led to pest infestations. In such circumstances, the farmers are unable to meet their loan obligations and default on this front. No institutional credit would be available when the farmers become defaulters. Then they run to the '*aratiyas*' (commission agents) to run their household expenses and purchase fresh agriculture inputs in the hope of having better crops next year. When the same cycle repeats the following year; crop failure, again going for new loans etc. debt piles up. This time the farmer is worried about the maintenance of the family and the loss of '*izzat*' (respect and prestige) in the society. He becomes extremely depressed and then thinks about ending his life. They usually buy some poison (mostly rat poison) and end their life (Jodhka, 2001). The suicides are confined to some pockets of the state. Many farmers believe that the root cause of crop failure is 'The HYV of 'American seeds' which was replaced by the '*desi*'(indigenous) seeds during the green revolution phase. The causes of indebtedness in Punjab are the failure of cotton crops; high cost of pesticides, overuse of pesticides and use of fake pesticides supplied by dealers and over mechanization of agriculture like the needless purchase of tractors as

a source of prestige. Presently in the state, a broader social alliance was stitched against these farm laws. However, analyzing this struggle through a class-caste perspective Lerche argued (2021, p. 1381) that 'while the farm laws struggle is indeed politically progressive, there is little space for the radical interests of exploited and oppressed classes and groups who are part of the present movement to shape its future'.

In Jodhka's opinion (2021c, p. 12) the farm leaders of the current movement, who are still all from the dominant Jat community, have come to recognize these divisions of caste and class while articulating their politics. The satyagraha (peaceful agitation) was carried out under the banner of SKM, a coalition of forty farmers' organizations that was formed on 7 November 2020. In this agitation, BKU's Rakesh Tikait became the most articulate leader. Earlier in 2013, Tikait mobilized Jats in various khap panchayat that bred the communal polarization that helped the BJP electorally. This polarization broke the unity among Jats and Muslims that helped the BJP to win considerable Lok Sabha seats in the western part of UP. Afterwards, he extended support to the BJP in the 2017 Assembly elections and 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The stubborn and authoritarian attitude of the BJP government in retracting these three farm laws made Naresh Tikait emerge as one of the prominent leaders. Eventually, he realized the mistake that he committed by supporting the BJP. He said,

It's a fact that the BKU supported the BJP in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, the 2017 UP assembly polls, and the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. But we did not like what came out of it. BJP didn't stand true to its promises and only exploited the support of farmers for their politics. (The Quint, 2022)

The government of India withdrew the three bills; Prime Minister Modi announced the repeal of three farm laws with an apology in a dramatically televised live address to the farmers on 18 November 2021 a few months before the assembly elections to the agitating states of Punjab and U P. He said, 'I apologise to the people of the country with true and pure heart... we

were not able to convince farmers. There must have been some deficiency in our efforts that we could not convince some farmers (Datta, 2001). Nonetheless, the initial request of farmers for institutional assistance to enhance the profitability of agriculture is still being pursued, indicating a potential resurgence of waning rural political influence. Farmers' agitation is a long-drawn battle not only against the government but also against the system that promotes such a market economy. In Jodhka's opinion (2021b, 203) 'The movement is thus also a refusal and resistance to subjection and subjugation of regional culture to a view of market-driven national culture'. Contemporary India is marked by a fusion of communal politics and a neoliberal market economy; in the coming days, this marriage of convenience might continue to have repercussions in the form of an attack on the rights of marginalized sections including farmers. This brings our attention to the issue of change in ideological politics towards the left to the center politics. Such politics with a broader social alliance has the potential to solve some of the structural issues that were raised by this agitation. Even though Prime Minister Modi apologized publicly, however the structural problem of the agrarian economy i.e. squeezing of the farmers is far away from over.

The fact in development economics is that the process of economic development involves the structural transformation of the economy. In this transformation, there is a shift in terms of the value of output and employment from the primary sector (agriculture) to the secondary (industrial) and tertiary (service) sectors. This is because of inherent limitations within the agriculture sector such as limits in output, employment and demand for the outputs. As the economy expands and agriculture modernizes, there is the transfer of resources from agriculture towards other sectors. There has to be careful differentiation between the process of transferring resources and squeezing agriculture. The terms of agrarian transfer are the agrarian question i.e., how to transfer resources to other sectors of the economy without disturbing the livelihoods, supply of raw materials and food. This agrarian question is the centre of the 'town-country' debate (Cobridge and Harris, 2000, p. 14). The

liberalization policies such as the devaluation of currency and ending protection to industries in the 1990s were expected to benefit agriculture and improve its relative Terms of Trade (ToT). However, this has not taken place. There is erosion of the real income of farmers. For instance, the prices received by the farmers for their crops are compared with the prices they pay for consumer goods i.e., Consumer Price Index for Agriculture Labour-Capital. It has been observed that farmers' real incomes have been eroding because the growth in the aggregate price index for consumer goods has been higher than the growth in the price index for agricultural commodities (Mishra, 2007). This has led to a decline in the relative living standards of farmers, particularly small and marginal farmers, whose incomes are inadequate to meet consumption expenditure. One could assess the squeeze of agriculture by comparing the gap between income and consumption of agriculture households. In the initial three decades of post-independence India, notwithstanding the 'urban bias' argument, there was a net transfer of resources into the agriculture sector. The erosion of agrarian interest in national policy imagination might continue in the coming years so will the farmers' agitations. The remarkable aspect lies in the fact that despite facing numerous challenges, including the sacrifice of thousands of farmers, as well as police cases and oppressive actions from the ruling regime, the yearlong struggle in UP, Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi persisted. As the elections are approaching and attracting the political parties, whose electoral prospects are under threat, the farmers' movement seems to be having an edge over it for some time. While the apologetic address of Prime Minister Modi on the farmers' movement and withdrawal of the three contentious farm laws in the parliament in December 2021 is an indication of farmers' upbeat, none of the major issues like the MSP that concerned the advantage of agriculture sector is resolved to the satisfaction of agitating farmers. However, the successful agitation of farmers against these three farm laws was looked at as 'a dent in India's authoritarian regime' of Modi (Gudavarthy, 2023).

## Conclusion

Overall, the agrarian distress and protest are continuing in various parts of the country, more so in the green revolution areas of North India. Despite many attempts, farmers have not been getting organized under single platforms. Already the farmers are divided along caste and community lines and geographically their interests change as per the prevalent conditions on the ground in different states. There are political parties that have always tried to politicize the farmers along with political ideologies. Hence, there are a few farmer 'cells' or 'wings' being attached to one or the other political parties, as part of organizing politically. Besides, there are a few non-political groups and leaders that farmers and their associations are hardly organized at the national level like the Trade unions. The issues and concerns are different in different parts of the country. They are not alike as their interests vary across borders. Besides, some common dissimilarities, a few similar issues would bind them together. Even though the recent farmers' movements appear to be effective, their achievement in terms of the original demands charter is very limited. In addition to that, several false cases have been filed against farmers in various parts of the country that could not be revoked in any serious way. Hence, the issue is back to square one where the new farmers' movement had to focus on the withdrawal of false cases, to begin with. In a certain sense, even the activists within the recent farmers' movement find it difficult to fully grasp the culmination or climax of the movement. Unless the farmers' movement reaches its logical endpoint, it might not be able to attain the anticipated advantages. The primary objective of the resistance, which was to secure the 'legalization of MSP' is yet to be achieved. This is an ongoing story...

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**Article: Preparing for Future: The Influence of Coaching  
Institutes in Hyderabad on Global Higher Education**

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**Preparing for Future:**

**The Influence of Coaching Institutes in Hyderabad on Global Higher  
Education**

**--Rajender Bugga**

**Abstract**

The process of international higher education has been significantly impacted by globalization and privatization, resulting in a significant increase in student enrollment from non-western and Asian countries; India is not an exception. To gain admission into Western universities, Indian students often seek assistance from coaching centers to navigate the admission tests and other technical procedures. The objectives of the paper are to critically examine the role of International higher education coaching institutes in facilitating the admission process abroad. These coaching institutes are crucial in guiding students throughout the application and admission process. The paper relied on mixed methodological protocols to understand the role of coaching institutes based in Hyderabad. The paper found that coaching centres play a significant role in choosing a country and selection of an university. These centres also guide the students in exploring funding opportunities, selection of courses and familiarizing students with the cultural practices of the host country. The coaching centres also play a significant role in training students for clearing the competitive international entrance exams and visa process.

*Keywords: International students, Higher education, Globalization, Coaching institutes, United States of America.*

## Introduction

In the era of globalization, the landscape of higher education has witnessed profound transformations, transcending national boundaries and fostering the growth of cross-cultural exchange. The case of India exemplifies the significant impact of internationalization in the higher education domain. International higher education in India holds immense significance as it not only shapes the lives of individual students but also contributes to broader social transformations and economic development. Over the past few decades, the pursuit of knowledge has transcended geographical limits; the increasing interest in international higher education has given rise to a host of academic collaborations, joint-degree programs, and cross-cultural learning environments that bridge the gap between nations and foster a globalized approach to education. However, globalization in the late 20th century encouraged a renewed focus on internationalization. One of the primary functions of international coaching institutes is to assist students in selecting a suitable country for their higher education endeavors. This process involves understanding the student's academic background, career goals, and personal preferences and matching them with the various academic, social, and cultural opportunities offered by different countries. This selection process is not just a rational assessment of education systems and rankings; it also involves perceptions and stereotypes associated with particular countries that can influence students' choices. Sociologically, this decision-making process reflects the intersection of global perceptions, national identities, and individual aspirations.

Once the choice of country is made, international higher education coaching institutes play a role in the selection of an appropriate university. Here, they navigate the intricate landscape of university rankings, program offerings, faculty expertise, and infrastructure. Additionally, they mediate the complex web of financial considerations, including tuition fees, scholarships, and cost of living. In doing so, these institutes become intermediaries between students

and institutions, contributing to shaping academic trajectories and career aspirations.

Furthermore, international coaching institutes aid in exploring funding opportunities for students, recognizing that financial constraints often determine the feasibility of studying abroad. They help students identify scholarships, grants, loans, and part-time job prospects that can alleviate the financial burden. This aspect of their role reflects the interplay between socioeconomic disparities and educational mobility, with the institutes addressing disparities by making education accessible to a broader spectrum of students.

The selection of courses is another pivotal aspect guided by these institutes. They assist students in aligning their academic interests with available courses, while also considering future career prospects. This process is intertwined with cultural factors, as certain courses may be more relevant or desirable in specific cultural contexts. For instance, courses in cultural studies or languages might be favored by students seeking a more profound engagement with the host country's culture.

The cultural practices of the host country represent a critical dimension in the experience of international students. International coaching institutes offer insights into these practices, preparing students for potential cultural shocks and helping them navigate social norms and customs. Understanding cultural nuances becomes crucial for successful integration and building cross-cultural competencies that are increasingly valued in today's globalized world.

### **The context for the emergence coaching institutes in India**

Historically the coaching institute culture in India can be traced back to the late 20th century. With economic liberalization in the early 1990s, the country shifted towards a knowledge-driven economy. This led to increased awareness among Indians about the significance of global education and its potential benefits in terms of career opportunities and social status (Deshpande, 2001).

The surge in coaching institutes catering to international higher education can be linked to various socio-economic factors. Firstly, India's hyper-competitive education system places immense pressure on students to excel academically and gain admission to prestigious universities (Gupta, 2014). In response to this pressure, coaching institutes emerged as a means to supplement traditional education and provide specialized training for standardized tests like SAT, GRE, GMAT, and TOEFL. Secondly, with increased disposable income, the rising middle class in India seeks to invest in quality education for their children. These families view studying abroad as a pathway to upward social mobility, global exposure, and better career prospects (Kaur, 2018).

India's cultural values are pivotal in shaping the preference for international education and coaching institutes. The country's collectivist culture emphasizes the importance of family honor and prestige (Singh, 2004). Pursuing higher education abroad is often seen as a reflection of a family's success and a source of pride within the community. The coaching industry, in turn, capitalizes on this cultural mindset by promoting success stories of students who have gained admission to prestigious foreign universities. The growth of coaching institutes for international higher education has had several social implications in India. On the one hand, these institutes have facilitated access to information about foreign universities and the application process, leveling the playing field for students from diverse backgrounds (Agarwal, 2019). On the other hand, they have reinforced the perception that studying abroad is the most desirable educational path, potentially undermining the value of local institutions.

Furthermore, the reliance on coaching institutes may inadvertently perpetuate a narrow focus on standardized test scores rather than fostering a well-rounded and holistic approach to education (Kumar, 2017). This shift in educational priorities may affect the broader development of student's critical thinking and creativity.

### **History of Coaching Institutes in Hyderabad and it as an educational city**

The rise of international higher education coaching institutes in Hyderabad represents a fascinating sociological phenomenon that has significantly influenced the academic landscape of this cosmopolitan city. These institutes have played a pivotal role in facilitating the aspirations of students to pursue higher education abroad. The establishment of international higher education coaching institutes in Hyderabad can be traced back to the late 20th century when global economic changes and geopolitical shifts sparked an increasing demand for international education. As the Indian economy liberalized in the early 1990s, the aspirations of Indian students to access quality education abroad grew substantially (Biswal, 2010). Hyderabad, a central educational hub in India, saw a surge in the number of students seeking guidance to navigate the complex international admissions process.

### **Globalization and Global Education:**

Globalization has played a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of international higher education coaching institutes in Hyderabad. As the world became more interconnected, students and families became increasingly aware of the benefits of international education, such as exposure to diverse cultures, better career prospects, and access to cutting-edge research facilities. This trend led to a growing interest in coaching institutes that could help students prepare for standardized tests like SAT, GRE, TOEFL, and IELTS, which are often prerequisites for admission to foreign universities (Kapur, 2004).

This Coaching institutes emerged as a response to the increasing demand for specialized training in entrance examinations that could ensure access to prestigious educational institutions (Kamat, 1999). The growing demand for international higher education coaching institutes in Hyderabad led to the emergence of a highly competitive industry. Numerous coaching centers sprouted across the city, each competing to attract students by promising

personalized training, up-to-date study materials, and a high success rate in securing admissions (Bhattacharyya, 2015). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Hyderabad experienced rapid growth in the coaching industry. Kamat notes that the increasing popularity of engineering and medical professions, coupled with the limited number of seats in top-notch institutions, fueled the demand for coaching services (Kamat, 1999). This led to the diversification of coaching institutes, with new players entering the market, offering courses for various competitive exams ranging from civil services to management and law.

The turn of the millennium witnessed the integration of technology into the coaching sector. Online coaching platforms and distance learning programs gained traction, expanding access to coaching facilities for students from remote areas. SangeetaKamat's research indicates that this shift contributed to a more democratized approach to education, breaking geographical barriers and creating a more inclusive learning environment (Kamat, 2005). The proliferation of coaching institutes in Hyderabad profoundly impacted the education system. SangeetaKamat argues that the emergence of these institutes resulted in an increasing emphasis on exam-centric learning rather than a holistic understanding of subjects (Kamat, 2005). This phenomenon also gave rise to concerns regarding the commodification of education, where education became a transactional service rather than a transformative process.

As a result, these coaching institutes became an integral part of the educational landscape in Hyderabad. The prevalence of international higher education coaching institutes in Hyderabad has had significant societal implications. On the one hand, they have helped bridge the information gap for students who lack access to resources and guidance on foreign admissions (Mukherjee, 2017). On the other hand, their rise has fueled concerns about the commodification of education, with coaching centers capitalizing on the aspirations of students and their families (Altbach, 2018). Kamat's writings highlight the societal implications of the coaching culture in Hyderabad. The mushrooming of coaching institutes contributed to the phenomenon of "brain

drain" as students often preferred to pursue education and career opportunities outside the city and country. Additionally, the intensifying competition and pressure to succeed in entrance exams led to issues related to mental health among students (Kamat, 1999).

### **Role of Coaching Institutes in the selection of the courses/ universities/ processing visa**

The coaching institutes play a vital role in facilitating the 'students' necessities to get admission in abroad for higher education. The process of selecting the right course and university in a foreign country can be overwhelming, given the multitude of options available. IHECIs (International Higher education Coaching Institutes) play a pivotal role in assisting students in this complex decision-making process. They provide personalized guidance, access to information databases, and employ experienced counselors to aid students in evaluating their academic aspirations, strengths, and interests (Kong, 2019). Sociologically, this support helps students align their educational goals with their personal and professional aspirations, leading to better decision-making and higher satisfaction rates in their chosen courses and universities (Kapur, 2018).

Moreover, IHECIs act as intermediaries between students and universities, fostering connections that facilitate easier access to foreign institutions (Kaur, 2019). It is particularly relevant for underprivileged students who might not have access to extensive networks or information on global education opportunities. Consequently, IHECIs contribute to a more inclusive and diverse student body within foreign universities.

### **Influence on Visa Processing**

Visa processing is critical to international education, often causing anxiety and uncertainty among students. IHECIs provide indispensable support in navigating the intricate visa application procedures (Yan & Alzubi, 2020). They help students compile essential documents, prepare for visa interviews,

and offer insights into potential challenges they might face. This assistance significantly reduces visa application errors, thereby increasing the likelihood of visa approval.

Sociologically, the impact of IHECIs on visa processing extends beyond individual students. The efficient visa processing facilitated by these institutes enhances the reputation of both the host and sending countries as desirable destinations for international students (Kong, 2019). Moreover, smoother visa procedures attract a more diverse and talented pool of international students, leading to increased cultural exchange and mutual understanding between nations (Shah, 2018).

### **Factors Influencing the Popularity of IHECIs**

Several factors have contributed to the growing popularity of IHECIs. (International Higher Educational Coaching Institutes) First, globalization has heightened awareness among students and parents of the benefits of international education (Kapur, 2018). As a result, there is a greater demand for professional guidance to navigate the complexities of studying abroad.

Second, the increasing competitiveness of the international education market necessitates strategic planning and decision-making. IHECIs offer a competitive advantage by providing students with valuable insights into various institutions' and courses' strengths and weaknesses (Kaur, 2019). This advantage attracts students seeking personalized and data-driven advice to maximize their chances of academic and career success.

### **Role of Coaching Institutes in arranging bank loans**

International education has become increasingly sought-after by students across the globe due to the growing recognition of the benefits of diverse educational experiences and global exposure. However, funding the cost of studying abroad poses a significant challenge for many students and their families. To address this issue, International Higher Education Coaching

Institutes (IHECIs) have emerged as important players in assisting students in obtaining bank loans for their overseas education.

The Role of International Higher Education Coaching Institutes: International Higher Education Coaching Institutes serve as intermediaries that connect students aspiring to study abroad with financial institutions willing to provide educational loans. These coaching institutes offer guidance on the entire loan application process, documentation, and eligibility criteria, easing the burden on students and their families in navigating the complex financial landscape. According to a report by the British Council (2019), IHECIs have become crucial facilitators in assisting students in developing countries to access education loans. This is particularly significant, given that many financial institutions in students' home countries may hesitate to provide loans for foreign education due to concerns about repayment and limited collateral.

Furthermore, the influence of IHECIs may contribute to a shift in the choice of destination countries for international education. For instance, countries with a more established network of coaching institutes might attract a higher proportion of international students. In contrast, others may receive fewer applications due to limited access to such facilitators.

Additionally, the lack of regulation and oversight in the operations of IHECIs can create challenges in ensuring transparent and fair practices. There is a need for better scrutiny and governance to ensure that students are not misled or exploited during the loan application process. Watch (2021).

### **Role of Coaching Institutes in providing English training**

In the era of globalization, English has emerged as the dominant lingua franca, facilitating communication and knowledge exchange across international borders. For students aspiring to pursue higher education in foreign countries, proficiency in English has become a prerequisite. Recognizing this demand, International Higher Education Coaching Institutes have emerged as

prominent institutions that provide specialized English language training to students seeking academic and professional opportunities abroad.

According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, linguistic capital refers to the knowledge and proficiency of a language that confers social advantages upon individuals. International Higher Education Coaching Institutes play a crucial role in cultivating linguistic capital by equipping students with the necessary English language skills to engage effectively within the global academic community. This enhanced linguistic capital increases their employability prospects and opens doors to social mobility, enabling access to better educational and economic opportunities. The use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education has been linked to the concept of soft power, as proposed by Joseph Nye. By promoting English language training, International Higher Education Coaching Institutes contribute to the soft power of English-speaking countries by attracting international students, scholars, and professionals. This influx enhances the internationalization of education, enriching host countries' cultural and intellectual landscape. The British Council, an organization dedicated to cultural relations and educational opportunities, has been at the forefront of English language training for decades. Through its network of language centers, it has facilitated the linguistic development of countless students, making them competitive candidates for higher education and professional roles worldwide.

### **Methodological Protocols**

The study used qualitative and quantitative methodological tools to understand the role of coaching institutes in facilitating students' admission process to abroad. Data was collected from the international educational coaching institutes based in Hyderabad city. The study identified 16 major coaching institutes that demonstrate different subjective knowledge for aspiring students. The prospective students were identified as preparing for exams required for higher study abroad admission. In this research, the prospective students who intended to go overseas were selected as research participants as

the near proxy of international students. This study has identified 220 respondents who are very much keen to move for higher education abroad particularly to the United States of America. Formal and informal Interviews were used for conducting personal face-to-face, in-depth interviews with the students. In-depth interviews consist of 44 student respondents, which is 20 percent. The main focus of the study is to explore the rationale behind the selection of coaching institutes. The following section discusses the findings of the study.

**Table 1: Do you aware of funding opportunities in the host country?**

S. N	Awar e of Fundi ng	Number of Responde nts	Percent age
1	Yes	125	57
2	No	95	43
To tal		220	100

Source: Computed data from the field

The sample of respondents consists of 220, of which 57% of students are aware of funding opportunities overseas. Moreover, 43% have stated they are not aware of the funding opportunities in host countries. It indicates that many respondents know about funding opportunities like fellowships and cross-cultural fellowships between countries and universities. The reasons could be the rise of technology and communications. Moreover, many of the respondents have relatives and friends in overseas countries. The above-

mentioned factors always help them to know about overseas funding opportunities.

The following personal narratives have been conducted in Hyderabad city to understand the students' perceptions about funding opportunities in abroad Universities.

*Ms. Aakansha Reddy, aged 21, enrolled in a B.Tech course at Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University (JNTU) in Hyderabad. She secured a first-class percentage in her B.Tech. She learned about funding opportunities through her friends during her college days. She constantly visits the university websites to learn about funding possibilities. She had attended a few educational fairs conducted jointly by foreign universities and private coaching agencies in Hyderabad. The funding opportunities are high for higher education and research abroad. She said funding opportunities would decrease the disparities between high and low-income students. If a lower-income student gets the fellowship, they will be able to finish their studies without any trouble. The U.S. gives priority to research and innovations. She insists that funding is a significant component.*

*Nonetheless, many of the students are particular about the funding opportunities of host nations. It can provide confidence to the students to finish their academic goals without any hassle. The host country institutions follow criteria for granting international students fellowships. Moreover, getting a fellowship from the host institution is prestigious in students' academic careers. The funding opportunities are better for Master's compared to undergraduate students. She is planning to apply for M.S. at U.S. University. Since the University is a better place to get a particular institutional grant for the students, she hopes the best hopes will get a good amount of fellowship from the host country institutions.*

*Mr. Vishal, aged 21, He has chosen B.Tech in MLR Institute of Technology.*

*His relatives and friends are working as software professionals in the U.S. Initially; he was unaware of funding opportunities in the U.S. Still, he learned about it through his friends and foreign educational awareness programs in the city. The U.S. government spends a considerable amount on higher education institutions and is a place for research and innovations globally. He said funding opportunities would increase broader access to higher education and research. But, getting a fellowship for a master's is more complex than the graduate programs.*

*Moreover, the American degree is expensive. I plan to apply for higher studies at some of the American Universities. Vishal says that many host countries offer international students better funding opportunities. The United States is a Centre of many engineering educational institutions with better quality lab facilities. Many of the institutions have collaborated with private companies. If I get admission to any university in the United States, I could undoubtedly get a fellowship. It, indeed, materializes the expectations of my family members. He finally says that if he doesn't get a fellowship, he will be bearing personally.*

The foregoing case study reveals that funding opportunities also encourage students to get an international education. Their relatives and friends are making them aware of funding chances in host countries. Moreover, they felt that getting a U.S. fellowship is difficult for master's Students. It will create self-confidence to pursue education. The funding will help them to smoothly complete their studies. The technology has been helping students learn about multiple funding opportunities from governmental and private agencies. Many students depend on private agencies which provide information about funding chances in the United States. Table 2 demonstrates the role of IHEs in facilitating education loans.

Table 2: Role of IHE coaching centres in education loans

S · N	Role of IHEs in edu cati on loa ns	Num ber of Resp onde nts	Perc enta ge
1	Yes	53	24
2	No	167	76
T o t a l		220	100

Source: Computed data from the field

Table 2 demonstrates the role of International higher education coaching centres in assisting with student education loans. The table consists of 220 respondents, of which 167 respondents represent 76% and 53 respondents

have 24%. Almost 76% of the students are not facing any financial hindrances to studying abroad. It implies that 76% of the respondents hail from financially well-established families. Remain 24% of the students are facing financial difficulties getting overseas education. Moreover; the coaching centres play a vital role in facilitating the students to get educational loans. The 24 percent of respondents hail from lower income backgrounds. In order to materialise their academic aspirations, the coaching centres have become intermediaries between banks and students. International higher education is largely a socioeconomic phenomenon in the Indian context. Table 3 discusses the respondents' English language training program.

Table 3: Role of IHE coaching centres in English language training program?

S. N	Attended any English language training program	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Yes	68	31
2	No	152	69

To tal	220	100
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Source: Computed data from the field

The table consists of 220 respondents, of which 152 respondents signify 69% and 68 respondents comprise 31%. The highest number of respondents, 69%, are not appearing for English language training classes. A large number of students 94.1% have revealed that they consider English a primary communication source. Many students are studying in private colleges with the medium of instruction of English. Table 3 emphasizes that 69% of the students are not attending any language training programs. But, the students comprised 31% who studied in the vernacular medium of languages attended English language training programs before they applied for education abroad.

The countries like the UK, Canada and Australia are attracting skilled professionals from developing nations. The United States has reformed its foreign policy and visa regulations to attract skilled labour from developing countries in general and international students in particular. The students who come to study in the United States are generating huge revenue. According to Marcus Lu, (2020), throughout 2018-19 "International students contributed \$41 billion to the U.S. economy", clearly emphasizes that it has become a reality because of changing of its foreign policy and Visa regulation for International students. Table 4 analyses the possibilities of visa opportunities.

Table 4: Is getting a student visa to the USA and Canada is easier than in other countries?

S · N	Re spo nse	Num ber of Resp onde nts	Perc enta ge
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1	Yes	161	73
2	No	59	27
Total		220	100

Source: Computed data from the field

The study consists of 220 respondents, of which 161 respondents represent 73% and 59 respondents comprise 27%. The highest number, 73% of respondents, felt that getting a student visa is more accessible than in other countries. Remain 27% of the students have said that acquiring a student visa is problematic in the United States. Thus, many students have opined that getting a student visa is more accessible than in other countries. The students opined that getting a student visa is an entry for accessing higher education. Moreover, it works as an identity for employment and citizenship opportunities. Table 5 illustrates the consciousness of the cultural practices of the host country.

Table 5: Role of IHEs in creating awareness about the cultural practices of the host country.

S. N	Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
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1	Yes	133	61
2	No	87	39
To tal		220	100

Source: Computed data from the field

The 133 respondents symbolize 61% and 87 respondents imply 39%. The data indicates that many students know the host country's cultural practices. Moreover, changing technological paradigm shifts have addressed diverse cultural settings in many countries worldwide. Additionally, International coaching centres are helping to create the awrness among students who hail from rural backgrounds. Thus, many of the students acquire knowledge about overseas countriestable6 analyses consciousness about the host country's food habits.

### **The role of International higher education coaching centres in the application process**

Agents and students associate in various ways through educational fairs and workshops, responding to promoting and social media campaigns and endorsing friends and family. Agents can use marketing resources provided by their representative agencies or create their own (another possible area of concern for institutions from a monitoring perspective). In few cases, students are not the primary clients' parents who can take a careful and critical decision to hire and negotiate to consult with an agent on their behalf. The level, nature, and experience of agent services vary widely.

Higher agencies may have a team of experts who support a single student client. Services include recognizing educational institutions that meet student needs, degree levels, degree program identification, collection and submission of various grades and test scores transcripts, document translation, and visa interview preparation. It also serves as a connection between educational institutions and students and parents. This relationship often lasts long after the student enrolls, especially if the language barrier restricts direct communication. The agencies do marketing by the name of students who have joined and completed their courses in overseas institutions. In one sense, the agencies provide information about host institutions in other contexts, gratifying their financial necessities.

The Internet has massively created informal access to information concerning higher education institutions across the world. Moreover, many fraud institutions have emerged in the name of prominent institutions advertising false information and damaging the students' academic careers and the institution's eminences. Even a glance at the websites of many universities has revealed that the lack of transparency leads to the making of false advertising. But, the students must be able to distinguish the fake and standard institutions carefully.

At the same time, "The United States often decreases the budgets for overseas libraries and information centers without considering the effects, and now reopens the centers and libraries, naming one of the most valuable" exports "in the United States. As the number of overseas students increased, the qualification level of applicants declined. In the past, some publicly funded programs placed students in less authoritative institutions, but there were few applicants from top universities abroad in most cases. However, many students who do not understand higher education prospects may wish to study abroad because they do not have access to higher education at home for multiple reasons. In addition, they believe that education qualifications abroad can

improve their employment opportunities, which is considered a major step to migrating abroad.

Many academic institutions are competitors for international students. Most of these new applicants do not apply to the best ranking higher education institutions. But, they are applying to low level or quality schools in all fields. "These schools evolved as recruiters of international students. Interestingly, some of the prestigious American universities have become agents and recruiters. Leading universities remain the favorite educational destination for most of the finest and world's best students. However, they could only accommodate a few students applying for higher education abroad".

Study abroad agencies play an important role in students' application process to get admission into overseas institutions. Earlier, the access of International higher education was limited to traditional educational classes and the ruling elite. But, with the growth of technological developments, more opportunities have emerged for all society sections. A large number of people are aiming high for educational aspirations. The emergence of study abroad agencies is a 21st-century phenomenon in the Indian context. These agencies are primarily shaping the aspirations of the students. The study abroad agencies assist the student from the application process to the admission procedure in abroad institutions. Table 6 analyses the number of students who have had assistance from study abroad agencies.

Table 6: Have you applied through a study-abroad agency or yourself?

S. N	Respo nse	Number of  Respond ents	Percent age
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1	Yes	141	64
2	No	79	36
To tal		220	100

Source: Computed data from the field

The table consists of 220 respondents, of which 141 respondents comprise 64% and 79 respondents comprise 36%. A large number of students, 64.1% are applying through agencies; only 36% of respondents use their mechanisms. Even accessing and availing the facility of a study abroad agency depends on the financial circumstances of the respondents. Table 7 illustrates the role of language while applying for overseas education.

Table 7: Do you think that language is the primary barrier to your communication while applying to study abroad?

S. N	Respo nse	Number of  Respond ents	Percent age
1	Yes	59	27
2	No	161	73
To tal		220	100

Source: Computed data from the field

The 161 respondents comprise 73% and 59 respondents consist of 27%. The highest number of respondents felt that they did not consider language as a barrier to communication while applying to universities abroad. A large number of students are studying in private colleges where the medium of language is English. So, It would not be a problem for the majority of the students. However, the data demonstrates that students who studied in the vernacular language are facing trouble in communicating in English while applying to study in overseas countries. But, the majority of the students are from an upper-class background. The socio-economic and cultural capital plays an important role in the student's educational journey. It could enable them to attain academic skills during their studies.

For international students who are officially considered temporary migrants, many international students change their visa status after graduation and settle in the host country (Rizvi, 2000; Collins, 2008). According to U.S. statistics, between 2002 and 2005, 74% of foreign-born scientists and engineers received their PhDs. The beneficiaries did not return to their home countries after graduation (National Science Foundation, 2008). This issue is widely known as the incapability of developing countries to compete with the high wages accompanying employment opportunities in developed countries (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007; Angel Urdinola et al., 2008). Accordingly, strategies to justify the effects of "brain drain" have focused on improving internal work employment chances and emerging a competitive salary scale for highly skilled experts.

Developing countries face diverse forms of social and economic disparities, which always encourage students to go for higher education abroad. Many students are migrating abroad for better education and better life prospects. These two major aspects could provide a better way of leading life in the future. It immensely supports any individual to differentiate from their peer groups. There could be other reasons that always push students to move from

home to host nations. Such as a better quality of life, better employment prospects, an advanced way of leading life, and getting permanent residency. Table 8 analyses interest in staying in the host country after completing studies.

Table 8 would you like to settle in the host country or  
 Return after the completion of your studies?

S. N	Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Yes	206	94
2	No	14	6
Total		220	100

Source: Computed data from the field

Table 8 demonstrates respondents' views on settling in the host country after completing their studies. Almost 94% of respondents opined that they wanted to settle in the host country even after finishing their studies. But, very few respondents have stated that they want to return to their home country after completing their studies in the host nation.

Several reasons could encourage students to move from their home countries, such as better education quality, better employment opportunities, advanced living conditions, and permanent residency. Moreover, the United States

permanent status could give home and host countries social status. Acquiring citizenship in developed countries is a new phenomenon in developing countries.

### Conclusions

In an increasingly interconnected world, the pursuit of higher education transcends national boundaries. The students are faced with a multitude of choices when selecting a country, university and courses. International coaching institutes have emerged as key players in guiding and shaping the decision-making process. Moreover, International coaching institutes play a pivotal role in shaping the global higher education landscape. By assisting the students in selecting a country and university, exploring funding opportunities, choosing courses, and adapting to host-country cultural practices, they contribute to the internationalization of education. The students are getting diverse forms of experiences while applying to study abroad. They are particularly choosing the country of destination and selecting the institution. Many students depend on study abroad agencies, ensuring admission to all the applicants in abroad institutions. Most students spend more than 2.5 to 3 lakhs on study abroad agencies to process the application procedure.

The significance of these coaching institutes lies in their ability to bridge information gaps and mitigate challenges that international students might face when embarking on educational journeys abroad. They assist in identifying suitable destinations based on individual preferences, academic aspirations, and financial considerations. By imparting knowledge about funding avenues and scholarship opportunities, these institutes empower students to pursue higher education without being deterred by financial constraints.

Furthermore, these coaching institutes play an instrumental role in helping students identify the most appropriate courses of study, aligning their interests and career goals with available academic programs. By offering guidance on the compatibility of courses with the prevailing job market, they contribute to

international students' holistic development and employability upon graduation.

Cultural adjustment is another pivotal dimension addressed by these coaching institutes. Navigating cultural practices and social norms can be a formidable challenge for students in a foreign land. Coaching institutes offer insights into local customs and traditions, thus fostering cross-cultural competence and facilitating smoother integration into the host society. This enriching experience expands students' perspectives and cultivates a sense of global citizenship.

Earlier, international higher education was confined to a few sections of society because of the cost issues and other technicalities. With the rise of the "internationalization of higher education", most private government banks provide financial assistance to students whose economic condition is low. Many students were not in a position to materialize their dreams of studying abroad. But, to overcome the financial constraints, government and private banks provide students financial assistance (loans) to pursue their studies. It led to a massive phenomenon in the Indian context. But, It is interesting to know that students socio-economic status primarily facilitates them to move abroad with self-funding. Still, very few of them are trying to get government-funded fellowships for which they are facing multiple kinds of competitive procedures. Getting a government-sponsored fellowship is considered prestigious in Indian society.

Few students are attending English language training programs to enhance their language skills and communication in a better way. Many of them felt that English is not a communication barrier before admission. Furthermore, many students are not facing any difficulty completing the application process because the study abroad agencies are facilitating them to apply. Students felt that changing visa policy and regulations could help them access visas in wishful countries. The rise of technology, communication sources,

advertisement programs, and education fairs creates awareness about host countries.

In a sociological context, the emergence and proliferation of international coaching institutes reflect the growing globalization of education. These institutions underscore the transformative power of education as a vehicle for cross-border mobility and knowledge dissemination. However, it is essential to critically understand potential disparities in access to such guidance, as trust on coaching may inadvertently privilege certain socio-economic groups.

The role of international coaching institutes intertwines with economic, social, and cultural dynamics, contributing to the intricate process of transnational educational migration. As students embark on their academic journeys, these coaching institutes offer a guiding light, illuminating the path towards a more interconnected world where education transcends boundaries and fosters mutual understanding.

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**Article: The Problems of Elderly: A Sociological Study of the Aged in Cuttack City of Odisha**

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**The Problems of Elderly: A Sociological Study of the Aged in Cuttack  
City of Odisha**

**--Harapriya Barik & Dinabandhu Sahoo**

**Abstract**

The paper attempts to understand the problem of elderly people in Cuttack, Odisha. The study assesses the socio-economic problems, health problems, psychological wellness, and abuse and neglect of elderly members in Cuttack city, Odisha. The study applied simple random sampling to collect data from the field. 100 sample households were chosen for the purpose. The study also used interview and case study methods to explore the perceptions of elderly people regarding their problems. The paper is based on intersectional approach. It argues that low literacy, technological ignorance, and physical constraints among the elderly lead to depression. It also found that advanced age creates a barrier to fulfilling unfinished tasks like education and marriage for their children. The dual status of limited income and living in slums increase the challenges of accessing affordable food for elderly individuals. The paper highlights societal issues impacting elders, including financial crises, psychological wellbeing, and abuse and neglect by family members and caretakers, some of which are enduring and unresolved.

***Key words:* Elderly People, Psychological, Health, Abuse, Neglect & Cuttack.**

**Introduction**

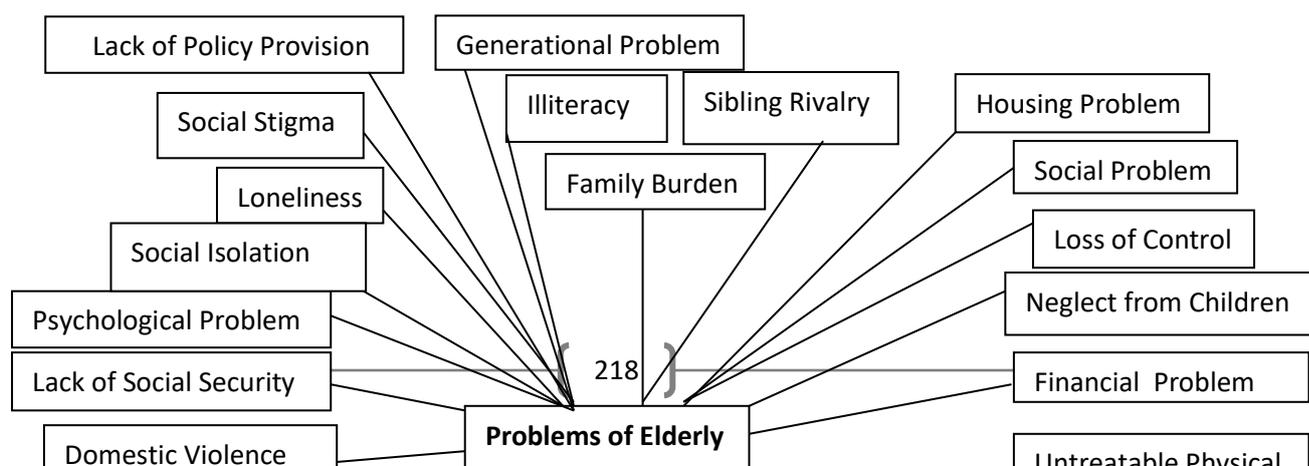
Productive aging is a universal phenomenon that is not uniform across different age groups and varies from person to person. Some people experience a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction in old age, while others feel bitter about the changes that come with being older and regret the decline of their physical activities (Banjare et al., 2015). Old age is the closing period in a person's life. It is a move away from more desirable periods or times of

usefulness (Udhayakumar & Ilango, 2012). Aging is also a natural process. In the words of Seneca, "old age is an incurable disease," but James Sterling commented that you do not heal old age; you protect it; you promote it; you extend it (Prakash et al., 2004). Aging can also be defined as a state of mind that does not always keep pace with time (Wason & Baid, 2012). Growing older is an inevitable, normal, and biological phenomenon. The elderly population in the world is increasing. It is expected that by the year 2025, the world population will include more than 830 million people over the age of 65 (Udhayakumar & Ilango, 2012). It is indeed a difficult task to determine when we will grow old. According to the UN, an elder person is anyone who is older than 60. It is very difficult to decide the boundary of old age because it does not have the same meaning in all societies. In demographic terms, a population is considered to be aging when the number of elderly individuals rises and the proportion of youth and children reduces. The elderly population in the world is increasing. However, it is likely that the beginning of the senior stage of life begins at the age when one's productive outputs start to decline and one tends to become economically reliant. Sociologically, aging marks a form of transition from one set of social roles to another, and such roles are difficult (Prasad, 2017). Just like childhood, puberty, youth, and middle age, old age is a stage of life. Every element of the earth ages, and all living things are impacted by the phenomenon of aging. Ageing is a process, not a thing that just happens. The concept of aging acquired new prominence at this time. The elderly, who were the core of the previous social order, were gradually phased out and became the families' appendix (Nair, 2014).

Traditionally, Indian society has always appreciated and admired the elderly. The younger generation revered the elderly as a treasure house of care, wisdom, and authority. If there is even one elderly member in the family, it is considered complete. The elderly were consulted, and their opinions were taken into account when performing any religious rituals on the occasions of births, marriages, and even deaths. In fact, urbanization and industrialization

have disturbed the extended family structure for purely economic reasons, forcing the state and community to consider elderly care (Rao, 2006). The aging population is a worldwide trend because of the decline in mortality rate (OECD, 1988). Hence, the increase in the aging population is a major concern for both the family and the government (Udhayakumar and Ilango, 2012). The elderly are an essential part of any nation's population and deserve the same respect and care as other population segments. Due to the shifting of family structure and modernization, it will always be difficult for the elderly to live with dignity (Kumar & Bhargava, 2014). There is no doubt that aging is universal for men and women. But the issue of aging needs special concern because gender always influences the aging experience. Women in developing nations like India confront three risks: being a woman in a patriarchal society, being elderly in a society that is changing, and being poorer because they are more likely to work in domestic agricultural and informal settings (Dubey et al., 2011). Most of the elderly women in India are illiterate and unemployed. And widowhood further accentuates their problems. Elderly women live longer, suffer greater effects of loss, and are more often widows (Udhayakumar, 2012). Such a rapid increase in the size and proportion of the elderly population brings about several challenges for the country. Some of the severe issues that older people in India experience, such as lack of social security or insurance, lack of sufficient income, losing their social standing, and recognition and persistence of ill health, are some of the highlighted problems faced by older people in India (Panigrahi, 2010). The study matrix below presents the problems of elderly.

**Study Matrix**



Older people are more prone to physical and mental health problems (Rath et al., 2017). There are several problems that older people in contemporary society confront, such as social problems, financial crises, psychological disturbances, abuse, and neglect, all of which are briefly covered below.

### **Social Problems**

Older people suffer social losses due to age. Their social life is narrowed down by the loss of work associated with it, the deaths of relatives, friends, and spouses, and weak health conditions that restrict their participation in social activities (Prasad, 2017). In a globalized world, technology has advanced to the point where people of all ages, backgrounds, and categories use it to complete their day-to-day functions. While most elderly people simply use technology for talking on the phone, watching television, listening to music, and listening to religious programming on the radio and phones, their inability to use technology may make it difficult for elderly individuals to communicate messages, images, and videos to loved ones who live far away. One of the things that prevents elderly individuals from interacting with their

peers is their lack of technological awareness. Rural people migrate to urban areas for better employment opportunities, often leaving their parents behind. High living costs and rent make it difficult for elderly individuals to care for themselves, and the aging population struggles to adjust. The elderly's traditional values and beliefs are undercut by the difficulties of modern existence. They have their own traditional views and viewpoints, which the young and middle-aged typically do not accept because they are used to contemporary ideas and attitudes. Consequently, in this way, the wisdom and belief of the elderly are diminished (Patil, 2007).

The older people may not appreciate attending events or rituals that are organized among their families, friends, or neighbours. It is critical for people to communicate with family, friends, caretakers, and neighbours in order to build strong friendships and solve social problems. The attitudes and behaviours of younger family members towards the elderly varied depending on the aged people's caste group, sex, and employment level (Yadava et al., 1996). Compared to their male counterparts, elderly females typically depend on their families more. The family members' literacy and economic levels have a big impact on how they behave with their elderly relatives (Nayak, 2014).

### **Economic Problems**

Elderly members of underprivileged, marginalized, and socio-economically underdeveloped portions of society often struggle financially (Patil, 2007). Income is the most important asset to lead a life at a later age. Adequate income support is crucial for older people to maintain independence. For many elderly individuals, particularly in less developed regions, the greatest issue is poverty. The issue of poverty or having less financial independence is more acute for women due to their increasing numerical predominance and societal disadvantages in predominantly patriarchal societies. The large number of women, particularly single, widowed, or divorced women, are more

vulnerable, often receiving few or no men's entitlements and lacking comparable community status (Lakshmansamy, 2012). Article 41 of the Indian Constitution states that: "The State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education, and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness, and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want." The majority of elderly people in India struggle financially since they are unable to support themselves. Financial difficulties arise when a person's fund is insufficient to cover his or her household obligations. When they are financially secure and wealthy, their family members frequently take advantage of them. Age-related financial independence is directly correlated with a person's financial situation (Agewell Foundation, 2011). People do not have monetary issues while they are employed in well-paying jobs and professions. However, when people are unable to save money for their later years, they face serious financial difficulties. Aged individuals face economic problems due to family exploitation, who monitor their finances and steal money for personal gain. The other major areas that create economic problems for the elderly include: Ageing causes health issues requiring regular check-ups, medication, and treatment; financial stability is crucial in healthcare. Court cases cause financial stress, especially for elderly individuals. The education of children is crucial for parents and grandparents, especially when parents are absent. It creates an economic burden for elderly people. In order to manage household chores, elderly individuals often need helpers and caregivers to manage everything. Financial stability allows them to pay their salaries, while economic problems prevent them from hiring helpers. Older people often have strong religious beliefs and enjoy visiting religious places. They plan visits when financially secure, but may visit nearby temples when faced with an economic problem. Financial stability allows for transportation, diet, and necessary materials, but economic problems hinder their ability to sustain living conditions (Devi, 2012). Retirement, as a phase of life, has several social, psychological, and economic implications for the individual.

Retirement means a loss of income by way of a monetary salary. But retirement is not only based on a loss of regular income but also on a loss of work to keep one engaged. A loss of work means a loss of social relationships at work. This problem specifically arises in the case of a job holder or an elderly male who normally works away from home, in an office, or in other sectors. Retirement can lead to a loss of authority and a fear of being taken for granted within the family due to the loss of regular occupation and economic dependence. He may feel that instead of being a decision-maker, decisions are now being made for them (Gore, 1997).

### **Health Problems**

Health problems among the elderly are a common phenomenon. They experience common health problems like visual, hearing, speech, and joint pain, leading to increased susceptibility to illness and diseases. WHO defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing; it is not merely the absence of diseases. The Constitution of India aims to establish a new social order based on equality, freedom, justice, and dignity for individuals. It aims to eliminate poverty, ignorance, and ill health and directs the state to improve education, nutrition, and living standards. Health care improvements are prioritized, and well-organized facilities are provided to maintain the health and strength of workers, men, women, children, and the elderly (Patil, 2007).

Aged people's health is influenced by environmental and biological factors. Environmental conditions such as conflicts and disputes within the home can cause stress and negatively impact mental health. These conditions can lead to poor diets, poor sleep, and health decline. Biological conditions such as visual and hearing impairment, joint pain, nervous disorders, heart problems, asthma, tuberculosis, and skin diseases also impact health. Women often report more health problems than men (Balamurugan & Ramathirtham, 2012). Some of the causes that lead to health problems are: neglect from family members and

caregivers; irregularity in medical check-ups; inadequate dietary intake; accidents; financial conditions, etc. In order to maintain a good health condition, the elderly should maintain a good dietary intake, be in need of medical assistance, and have a positive social circle. Aged men and women should engage in physical activities like yoga, meditation and walking in parks every morning. These activities are crucial for maintaining good health and preventing depression (Kapur, 2018). Elderly people experience a variety of health issues, including diseases, disabilities, debility, neglect, indifference, and loneliness. The outcome of the study demonstrates that the family is responsible to a very large extent for substandard health and medical services (Singh, 2015). Older age is linked to a higher incidence of disease, disability, and many other chronic conditions. The current medical system and its facilities are more expensive and only accessible to families who can afford them. Of course, families who are struggling financially have a hard time giving elderly people the care they need. The majority of the younger generation believes that the money spent on their parents' health has been wasted (Ramamurti, 2002). Arthritis, rheumatism, heart issues, high blood pressure, and diabetes are reported to be the most common chronic diseases impacting people in their later years (Siva, 2002).

### **Psychological Problems**

Psychological issues are also prevalent in older adults. For some people, the primary cause of psychological depression is losing their job. The elderly person's mental state is beyond the understanding of family members. The primary issues are loneliness and a sense of being alone (Bangari & Tamaragundi, 2014). The frequent psychological problems that the majority of elderly people deal with include a sense of helplessness, a sense of inferiority, sadness, a sense of usefulness, loneliness, and diminished competence. Elderly people go through different structural and psychological changes as they age (Prasad, 2017). Dementia is a psychological problem causing short-term memory loss, difficulty in finding words, and difficulty in handling daily

tasks. It affects consciousness, orientation, memory, thinking, attention, and behaviour. Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, somatization, and dementia have been identified as prevalent among older adults, particularly those over the age of 80 (Biswal, 2021). Among the elderly, depression is more prevalent as compared to youth and middle-aged people. When elderly people experience depression, they typically adopt an antagonistic outlook on life. At that time, the elderly people receive assistance from family members, caregivers, and other community members in order to reduce their depressive symptoms and lead a productive life. Social exclusion affects elderly people due to job loss, family absence, and a lack of social interaction, causing psychological and health problems. Anxiety, phobia, and stress contribute to psychological problems in older individuals. Loneliness is a chronic and distressing state that negatively impacts individuals' mental and physical health. Aged people seek ways to alleviate loneliness by forming close relationships with family members, visiting distant family members, and forming a good social circle (Kapur, 2018). Apart from that, now-a-days the elderly individuals deal with issues like a lack of attention, emotional support, and financial support from the family, among others. Our society acknowledges that parents have a divine status. The children have a moral obligation to look after their parents. However, what we see in our society today is that children do not want to care for their parents, do not want to spend money on them, treat their parents like strangers, and do not want to have an emotional connection with them (Prasad, 2017).

### **Abuse and Neglect of elderly people**

The mistreatment of elderly people is becoming more prevalent in the modern world. There are various forms of abuse experienced by the elderly, like: the most common form of abuse among the elderly is verbal abuse involving obscene language and harsh words. The verbal abuse does not cause any physical harm, but it negatively impacts individuals' mindsets. Physical abuse

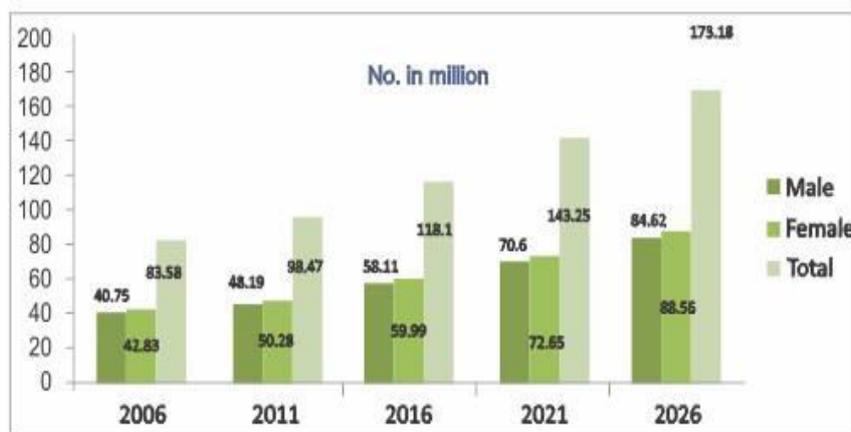
is another form of abuse; it involves repetitive and enduring acts that cause pain or bodily harm. The major acts that include physical harm, like heating, shaking, grabbing, and hurting with objects, restraint to perform tasks, and behaviours. Abuse that interferes with a person's mindset and mental capabilities is referred to as psychological abuse. The emotions that cause psychological abuse include fear, oppression, depression, stress, pressure, anxiety, and frustration. Elderly people frequently suffer psychological abuse at the hands of their family members or caretakers. Financial exploitation occurs when someone attempts to use an elderly person's finances without their consent, causing harm to their property and finances. Aged people feel neglected in food, medicine, assistive devices, clothing, and health care. Depression is a common aspect of self-neglect, which is a form of abuse where the elderly person neglects their basic needs and refuses assistance from others (United Nations, 2013). The other form of abuse, known as sexual abuse, is a physical form of abuse affecting individuals, ranging from rape to assault and harassment by caregivers. Spousal abuse refers to mistreatment or abuse by spouses, often affecting women. Women often suffer from verbal, physical, psychological, and financial abuse. Medication abuse refers to the misuse of medications or prescriptions, either intentionally or accidentally. To prevent abuse, elderly people should have knowledge about what medicines to consume and when to consume them (Kapur, 2018).

### **Current Status of Elderly in India**

According to the 2011 population census, there are nearly 104 million elderly people (aged 60 years or older) in India: 53 million females and 51 million males. A report released by the United Nations Population Fund and HelpAge India suggests that the number of elderly people is expected to grow to 173 million by 2026. According to the report of the technical group on population projection for India, there will be nearly 138 million elderly people in India in 2021 (67 million males and 71 million females), and that number is further

expected to increase by 56 million elderly people in 2031. Both the share and size of the elderly population are increasing over time. The share of the elderly population has increased from 5.6 percent in 1961 to 8.6 percent in 2011. The proportion increased by 10.1 percent in 2021 and is further likely to increase to 13.1 percent in 2031. For males, it was marginally lower at 8.2 percent, while for females, it was 9.0 percent. As regards rural and urban areas, as per the 2011 census, 71 percent of the elderly population resides in rural areas, while 29 percent resides in urban areas. The old age dependency ratio climbed from 10.9 percent in 1961 to 14.2 percent in 2011 and is further projected to increase to 15.7 percent and 20.1 percent in 2021 and 2031, respectively, for India as a whole. For female and male, the ratio was 14.9 percent and 13.6 percent in 2011, and the projected dependency ratio for female and male is 14.8 percent and 16.7 percent, respectively, in 2021 (Elderly in India 2021). According to the 2011 census, 9.5 percent of Odisha’s population consists of people over 60, compared with 8.6 percent in India.

The Ageing India



- ≥ 60 aged have increased from 83.6 m in 2006 to 98.47 m in 2011
  - Projected increase by 2016 is 118.1 m, by 2021 143.25 to 173.18 m by 2026.
- Population India Chapter-2.Census of India 2010. Vital statistics ,SRS report.

N.B: Statistics indicating the aged people in India

### **Need of the study**

We all know that age is an ascribed status because it cannot be freely chosen and is therefore unchangeable. It changes over time and as one gets older. Over time, it undergoes changes that lead to altered behavioural expectations, modifications in mental and physical abilities, and a decline in financial independence as an individual ages. Because of this, the younger generation views the elderly as a social and financial burden and treats them as a waste product. It is important to highlight that this segment of the Indian population has grown over the past several decades and is expected to continue to increase. It is a known fact that older people are vulnerable to abuse, whether emotional, verbal, physical, or neglect. These are reported in common in Odisha. A survey conducted by the United Nations Population Fund reported that one out of 10 people over the age of 60 experience abuse in Odisha (Rath et al., 2017). So, to initiate effective policy programs for the elderly population, there is a need for a study of the elderly population in various aspects and to initiate a conversation on social, economic, and health policies related to aging in India (Reddy, 1996). Hence, there is an immediate demand for sociologists, economists, and policymakers to focus on this issue and gain a thorough understanding of all its facets.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The present study applies an intersectional approach. Intersectionality describes the interconnected nature of various categorizations, including gender, race, age, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability, and how they

overlap and impact discrimination or privilege for individuals or groups. The concept was first used by Kimberle Crenshaw. When age discrimination intersects with other biases, disadvantages increase, worsening the impact on health and wellbeing (Crenshaw, 1991).

<p><b>Intersection of age, gender &amp; sexual orientation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are disproportionately affected by Age discrimination.</li> <li>• Women have a longer life expectancy as compared to men. Therefore, a higher proportion of uncertain older persons are women. So, they are more prone to elder abuse.</li> <li>• As the life expectancy increases, financial instability among women is a major concern; which has a direct implication for decisions related to health.</li> <li>• Female elderly as compared to their male counter parts suffered more functional impairments.</li> <li>• Elderly women also face sexual problems, which is considered as a taboo in many cultures including India. Older women are at increased risk of being victims of sexual violence because of their socio-economic dependency.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Intersection of Age and disability</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disability can aggravate workplace discrimination amongst old people.</li> <li>• Older people with disabilities may have additional obstacles to fully engaging in society, worsening the effect of social isolation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Intersection of Age and caste</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower-caste people over the age of 65 are severely discriminated against at the hands of upper-caste people.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Intersection of age and education</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of education and advanced age are two key barriers for older adults.</li> <li>• Illiteracy restrains older people from using technological things in order to converse with relatives.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Slum dweller vs City dweller</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The elderly people living in slum mostly are illiterate, ignorant and dependent on children. Many of them have not enough money to meet their basic needs. Health wise also they are suffering with many ailments. Depression and abuse are higher among elderly, who are inhabited in slum.</li> <li>• The elderly living in urban region are facing the problem of loneliness.</li> <li>• The elderly in urban areas face the problem of air pollution, which ultimately causes chronic respiratory conditions, heart disease, and stroke, all of which can lead to premature death.</li> <li>• Urban settings lacking in green space, that promote unhealthy eating habits, and that discourage physical activity among the elderly.</li> <li>• The development of age-friendly programs has been restricted by financial constraints.</li> </ul>

The study of elderly people is large in number across the world. The topic has its own significance because it represents a major segment of our population. Most of the studies focus on the living arrangements of the elderly, problems, abuse and neglect, nutritional status, morbidity profiles, problems of widows, mental illness, and mostly on the health status of the elderly. But this study has a little difference on the grounds that it was conducted in the Cuttack city of Odisha, and the study used an intersectional approach to analyze the data.

**Objectives**

This paper examines some of the social, economic, health, and other problems faced by the elderly. The main objectives of the study are as below:

- To analyze the major problems facing the elderly.
- To study the forms of abuse and neglect experienced by elderly people in the study area.

### **Methodology**

The present study is an attempt to contribute new ideas based on field data and analysis to have a better understanding of the problems of the elderly. For the conduct of the study, Cuttack city in the state of Odisha (India) was selected as a research site. This study was carried out on the local elderly population during 2018–2019. The major areas covered under this study include *Shaikh Bazar*, *Buxibazar (Kumbhara Sahi)*, *Mohamadia Bazar*, *Khatbin Sahi*, and *Thoria Sahi*. The study applied simple random sampling to collect data from the field. 100 sample households were chosen for the purpose. The study also used interview and case study methods to explore the perceptions of elderly people regarding their problems. The study is both descriptive and analytical, and it is based on both primary and secondary sources. The study used an intersectional approach. Data collection was carried out by visiting the houses in that particular area. The questions were designed to explore the socio-economic background, psychological wellbeing, abuse and neglect, and

health status of the sample respondents. The data collected from the primary sources was analyzed using simple statistics.



Map indicating the study area of Cuttack city of Odisha.

### Result and discussion

**Table: -1 Demographic Profile of elderly people.**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>No. of Elderly (%)</b>
<b>Age in Years</b>	
60-65	39(39%)
66-70	22(22%)
71-75	18(18%)

75-above 21(21%)

**Gender**

Male 40(40%)

Female 60(60%)

**Caste**

General & OBC 62(62%)

SC 28(28%)

ST 10(10%)

**Marital Status**

Married 63(63%)

Unmarried 7(7%)

Widow/Widower 30(30%)

**Income Per Month**

500-2000 37(37%)

2000-4000 12(12%)

4000-6000 4(4%)

6000-8000 3(3%)

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Above 8000	33(33%)
Nothing	11(11%)
<b>Educational Level</b>	
Primary	47(47%)
Matriculation	15(15%)
Intermediate	8(8%)
Graduation	8(8%)
Higher Education	7(7%)
Illiterate	15(15%)

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**Source: Primary data from field**

Table 1 depicts the socio-economic background of the elderly population in Cuttack City, focusing on urban and slum areas. The study population ranged from 60 to 82 years old. The problem of age is directly related to marital or companionship. The lack of a spouse in the later part of life is the worst experience, which results in a sense of alienation and ultimately leads to psychological strain. It expresses a feeling of loneliness and insecurity (Shekhar, 2006). It is found that 30 percent of the respondents are widows or widowers. The caste-wise distribution of the study sample shows that a large number of respondents (62 percent) are from general and OBC followed by SC and ST. The schedule caste and scheduled tribe together constitute 38 percent of the sample. It shows that only 33 percent of respondents have an independent family income of Rs 8,000 or more. In all, 47 percent of the respondents did not reach even the high school level; 15 percent of them have

not got any schooling at all, and 7 percent of them received higher education. The concept of single, nuclear families living in cities has emerged due to migration and limited living space. The nuclear and single-family systems are becoming more popular day by day. This nuclear family creates problems among elderly individuals. The nuclear family is a strong predictor of depression among the elderly. The old people were habitually living in joint families, but today it has become difficult to maintain joint families, which disturbs family life (Devi, 2012). The study found that, due to a lack of literacy, the elderly are facing various problems in their day-to-day lives. The unawareness of the usage of technology creates problems among elderly individuals. They encounter problems like sending messages, pictures, and videos. And, it is also found that physical challenges are one of the most common challenges faced by elderly people with disabilities. Mobility issues, chronic pain, and fatigue can make it difficult for elderly people to perform daily activities such as walking, dressing, and bathing.

**Table: - 2 Social problems of elderly population in the study area.**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>No. of Elderly (%)</b>
<b>Types of Houses</b>	
Owned by children	34(34%)
Owned by Spouse	16(16%)
Owned by Relatives	7(7%)
Self-Owned	29(29%)

Parental Home 14(14%)

**Most interaction in Family**

No one in particular 65(65%)

Spouse **5(5%)**

Son/Daughter 17(17%)

Grand children 13(13%)

**Present unfinished task**

Marriage and education of Children 34(34%)

Treatment of illness 14(14%)

Loan/Debt 4(4%)

Home 6(6%)

Nothing 42(42%)

**Expectation from children and relative at this stage**

Financial aid 9(9%)

Affection, Respect and care from them 89(89%)

Nothing 2(2%)

**Need of Material comfort at old age**

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Walking Stick	9(9%)
Hearing aid	3(3%)
Wheel chair	1(1%)
Use of spectacles	46(46%)
Any other	1(1%)
Nothing needed	40(40%)
<b>Main care giver in family</b>	
Nobody in Particular	18(18%)
Spouse	29(29%)
Son/Daughter	14(14%)
In-laws	15(15%)
Self	15(15%)
Relatives/Neighbours	9(9%)

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**Source: Primary data from field**

Table 2 reveals social issues among the elderly population. Housing is an important dimension of lifestyle and quality of life for all sections of society.

The information reveals that 34 percent of elderly people depend on children for their livelihood, and 14 percent live in their parents' homes. 29 percent of elderly people have their own homes. Good family interaction is crucial for passing one's last phase of life, as without it, living becomes difficult. The data shows that the majority of the elderly have not interacted with any members of their family. 13 percent of the elderly interact with their grandchildren. 5 percent of the elderly interact with their spouses; perhaps they find that nobody other than the elderly can understand them. The survey shows that 42 percent of respondents have no unfinished tasks; 34 percent of them reveal that marriage and education of children are the major unfinished tasks for them; 4 percent of them face debt burdens; and 14 percent consider illness treatment an unfinished task. It reveals that 89 percent of elderly respondents expect affection, respect, and care from their children. The majority of caregivers are spouses (29 percent), followed by sons and daughters. A small percentage of elderly respondents are looked after by relatives and neighbours. The condition of housing has a positive relationship with the function and health status of the elderly (Windle et al., 2006). It is found that a little percentage of elderly respondents are living in thatched house, due to some financial constraints. Also, it was found that without access to affordable housing options, elderly people are at risk for homelessness, social isolation, and a lack of medical care. When there is low income, the house is in deteriorating condition, and being elderly multiplies the challenges of having affordable and adequate housing. The study found that low-income older people often face financial barriers to healthcare services, hindering timely medical attention and transportation access, thereby limiting their ability to access healthcare facilities and also creating barriers to the fulfilment of unfinished tasks like marriage and the education of their children. Being a woman of old age living in a slum area creates a problem in the life of Fatima. She said that she had long been suffering from an eye problem but could not afford to consult a doctor. She also stated that she has been forced into begging for survival because no one is around to take care her. Another old

man, Sunil, was found in an unhygienic condition in a slum. His only daughter got married three years ago and went to distant places with her husband. Also, he stated that, at this ripe age, people are unwilling to give him work. Health-wise, the slum dwellers suffer from many ailments. Depression and abuse are high among the slum elderly.

**Table: - 3 Economic Problems of elderly Population.**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>No of Elderly (%)</b>
<b>Current Occupation</b>	
Housewife	41(41%)
Daily wage earner	9(9%)
Skilled worker	17(17%)
Retired	24(24%)
Professional	9(9%)
<b>Reason for not working anymore</b>	
Ill Health	31(31%)
Inability to cope with working conditions	15(15%)
Employment of children	19(19%)

Fulfilment of liabilities 28(28%)

Adequate saving 1(1%)

No response 6(6%)

**Who decides expenditure of your family**

Son 53(53%)

Spouse 15(15%)

Daughter in law 18(18%)

Self 14(14%)

**Present Financial position**

Present earning 37(37%)

Pension From earlier occupation 23(23%)

Dependent 35(35%)

Aid From children 5(5%)

**Financial Contribution to Family**

Yes 55(55%)

No 43(43%)

Occasionally

2(2%)

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**Source: Primary data from field**

Table 3 delineates the idea of the current occupation of the elderly people. It shows that 41 percent of elderly respondents are not working now; some are housewives among them; 24 percent reported that they are now living a retired life from work; 9 percent among them are daily wage earners; 17 percent among them are skilled workers; and 9 percent of the elderly sample are performing their professional occupations. A higher number of elderly people (31 percent) report that they don't work in later life due to health issues; 15 percent report that they are unable to cope with working conditions. While 19 percent said that their children's income prevented them from working, 28 percent said that they fulfilled their liabilities as they aspired to fulfil them. The information reveals that mainly the elderly (14 percent) take decisions about their family expenditures and that a large number of elderly (53 percent) have handed over their charge to their son. The data reveals that most of the elderly (55 percent) do contribute financially to their families, and 43 percent report that they do not contribute financially to their families. Economic problems are the center of every problem among elderly individuals. The study noticed that the lower-income group had many or increased health problems. The poor elderly had greater vulnerability to infection. Educational factors also play a major role in the act of economic status influencing health status. Sita Mukherjee, 70 years old, was staying in Buxi Bazaar, Cuttack. She informed that because of her financial situation, she finds her life frustrating. She struggles to afford treatment due to financial constraints, despite receiving relief from regular medicine. However, discontinuing treatment leads to numerous issues. It was also found that older adults are susceptible to financial fraud.

**Table: - 4 Health Problems of the elderly population in the study area.**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>No. Of Elderly (%)</b>
<b>Present Health condition</b>	
Good	27(27%)
Average	27(27%)
Poor health	34(34%)
Excellent	12(12%)
<b>Type of health care centre you visit</b>	
Govt Hospital	58(58%)
Private Hospital	42(42%)
<b>Who bears consultation fee with the Doctors and Medicines</b>	
Yourself	41(41%)
Son	38(38%)

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Mutual Fund	19(19%)
Other means	2(2%)
<b>Diet Rate</b>	
Poor	3(3%)
Average	31(31%)
Good	66(66%)
<b>Opinion regarding good health</b>	
Be Active	17(17%)
Proper Diet	42(42%)
Maintain Proper Schedule	17(17%)
Exercise	10(10%)
Have regular checkup	4(4%)
No Response	17(17%)
<b>Major Physical Ailments</b>	
Poor sight	31(31%)
Blood Pressure	32(32%)
Cold and cough	8(8%)

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Constipation	5(5%)
Diabetes	25(25%)
Gastric	25(25%)
Hearing Problem	5(5%)
Piles	1(1%)
Rheumatism	27(27%)
Tuberculosis	2(2%)
Urinary Problem	4(4%)
Heart Problem	4(4%)
Stomach Problem	1(1%)
Exima	1(1%)
No Physical Problem	16(16%)
Others	2(2%)

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**Source: Primary data from field**

Table 4 suggests that the respondents do not have a single ailment at a time. They have multiple ailments. Out of 100 respondents, 34 percent of them reported that they are in a situation of poor health, while some of them experienced extreme health conditions such as being bedridden, and the very least percentage of the elderly sample (12 percent) reported that their health condition is in good condition (excellent). 58 percent of elderly individuals

typically seek treatment at government hospitals, while 42 percent prefer private hospitals. The elderly tend to prefer hospitals located near their residences, whether they are private or government-run. The data indicates that 41 percent of the elderly self-pay consultation fees, while 38 percent rely on their husbands and sons due to financial constraints. 66 percent of elderly individuals have a good diet, with less than 3 percent of the sample elderly experiencing illness due to a poor diet. A survey revealed that 17 percent of respondents believe that active participation, a proper diet, a schedule, and exercise are key to good health, while 4 percent suggest regular medical check-ups, and 17 percent remain silent on this matter. It was observed that 31 percent of the respondents were suffering from poor sight and 32 percent were suffering from high blood pressure. Diabetics and gastroenteritis also suffered in the same number; 27 percent reported that rheumatism is the major problem due to which they are unable to move properly. These are the major problems faced by elderly people, and there are other problems from which they are suffering. The study found that better health facilities were an issue for several people, but the issue was greater for those who lived in the slum area. However, by combining low income with living in a slum, access to better services is limited. Older adults living in slum areas face unique challenges and limited access to resources that non-slum residents do not face. It also reveals that adequate food is necessary for keeping the body intact. Having the dual status of limited income and living in a slum area multiplies the challenges of accessing affordable food for elderly people.

**Table: - 5 Psychological disturbances of Elderly Population.**

Characteristics	No. of Elderly (%)
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**Feeling of sad without any reason**

Very Much	48(48%)
To some Extent	33(33%)
Not so much	19(19%)

**Achieved standard of living as they expected**

Very much	22(22%)
To some extent	26(26%)
Not so much	52(52%)

**Troubled by disturbed sleep**

Most of the times	19(19%)
Sometimes	23(23%)
Hardly ever	58(58%)

**Comparison of past life with present life**

Very happy	19(19%)
Quite happy	21(21%)
Not so happy	58(58%)
Adjustment with every situation	2(2%)

**Source: Primary data from field**

Table 5 discusses the psychological well-being of elderly people. Psychological happiness is very essential for a person to be happy in life. In all, 48 percent of respondents feel sad without reason, 33 percent reported that they experience sadness to some extent, and 19 percent don't feel sad because they are accepting the stages they are going through, which is the latter life of an individual (old age). It was found that 22 percent of respondents achieved the standard of living they expected to live, 26 percent achieved it to some extent, and 52 percent did not achieve the expected standard of living. The study found that 19 percent of respondents experienced disturbances in sleep, and 58 percent of respondents were not found to be troubled by sleep. 19 percent of respondents are very happy with their present lives, 21 percent are quite happy with their present lives, and 58 percent are not so happy with their present lives, but 2 percent said that they can adjust to every situation. This study found that mental health has an impact on physical health and vice versa; older people with physical health conditions such as heart disease have higher rates than those who are healthy. Its outcome can also be adversely affected by an elderly individual with cardiac issues. And the study also found that psychological unfitness creates many problems among elderly individuals, like loneliness, isolation, powerlessness, and meaninglessness.

**Table: - 6 Experience of Abuse and neglect by the Older Population in the Study area.**

Characteristics	No. of elderly (%)
<b>Abuser in daily life</b>	
Son	7(7%)

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Daughter in law	25(25%)
Neighbours	4(4%)
No one	64(64%)

**Feeling of neglect when family members are busy with their work**

Strongly Disagree	39(39%)
Disagree	29(29%)
Agree	7(7%)
Strongly agree	25(25%)

**Reaction of family members when they forgot to do some work**

Ignore your Mistake	46(46%)
Show Aggression	19(19%)
Use Abusive Language	20(20%)
Shout at you/Scold you	15(15%)

**Experience of any kind of neglect**

Yes	29(29%)
No	71(71%)

**Experience of emotional, verbal abuse**

**and physical harm**

Yes	25(25%)
No	75(75%)

**Source: Primary data from field**

Table 6 depicts the data on abuse and neglect towards the elderly population. The mistreatment of the elderly is growing day by day. This section reveals the abuser in daily life. The study found that 7 percent of elderly individuals reported that their son was the abuser, 25 percent reported being daily abused by their daughter-in-law, and the least percent reported being abused by neighbours. 25 percent strongly agree with the feeling of neglect when family members are busy with their work, while the rest disagree, indicating a lack of neglect. The reaction of the family member section reveals that 46 percent of respondents said that their family members ignore their mistakes when they forget to do some work, 19 percent said that their family members showed aggression toward them, 20 percent said that their family members use abusive language towards them, and 15 percent opined that they are scolded by their family members when they forget to do work. 25 percent reported that they experienced emotional, verbal, and physical harm, and the rest of the elderly denied that fact. It reveals that elderly widows frequently suffer physical abuse from their sons, daughters, and sons-in-law, affecting both physical and psychological aspects of their lives. It was found that an elderly widow who was a government servant experienced a sense of physical abuse while she denied giving money from her pension to her son, who was unemployed and an alcoholic and was partially dependent on her pension for his household expenses. Elderly women also face sexual problems, which are considered taboo in many cultures, including India. Older women are at increased risk of being victims of sexual violence because of their socio-economic dependency. It also found that the elderly women were restricted in many things. Daughter-

in-laws restrict and deny the freedom of choice of elderly women in terms of food, medication, visiting outside homes, places of worship, and friends' homes.

### **Case Study 1**

Priti Sahoo, 72 years old, is staying in Shaikh Bazar, and her husband died 20 years ago. She lives with her son, her daughter-in-law, and her grandchildren. Her son works in a shop that is near her home. The source of income is very limited, so it is very difficult for him to provide the basic necessities their family needs. During the study, it was learned that she was physically and mentally harassed by her son and daughter-in-law. They are not providing proper meals in time or medicine either. It got to know that she was praying to God to pick the soul. She did not want to stay with her son anymore. Being a woman, widow, and elderly when these three problems intersected created a larger issue in the life of an individual.

### **Case Study 2**

Minati Dei is 83 years old and has been living in Mohamadia Bazar since her marriage. Her husband had expired 17 years ago. She had two sons and one daughter. All are married. Unfortunately, her younger son had expired due to a long-term disease. Her elder son has four children, and her younger son has two children. She feels lonely and depressed due to her husband's and son's deaths. She was not in a state to decide anything. According to her, she lost everything. Minati was suffering from poor sight, diabetes, and rheumatism. Due to the unavailability of sufficient money, she could not afford her treatment. According to her, when she uses regular medicine, she gets relief, but when she discontinues the treatment, she faces many problems. In this case, age and physical disability intersected, which created many problems in the life of Minati Dei.

### Conclusion

In order to initiate different policy programs for the elderly population, there is a need for a study of elderly people in various aspects and to initiate a conversation on social, economic, and health policies related to aging in India (Reddy, 1996). In our culture, elderly people are respected as the most significant segments of society, yet when it comes to actual interactions with older people, we treat them differently. Everybody eventually reaches old age, which is an inevitable period of life. India has recently seen a tremendous increase in the population of older people. The breakdown of the joint family arrangement, the effects of economic development, rapid industrialization, and urbanization, in addition to the rapid decline of social order, have multiplied the peculiar elderly issues that our country's elderly population are currently facing. Due to the rising proportion of senior citizens in the population, care and assistance for the elderly population in India is becoming a crucial concern. Hence, old age is the period in which most of the elderly get retired, remain jobless, and often depend on other family members for their financial support (Udhayakumar & Ilango, 2012). The study primarily used the intersectionality approach to explore how several disadvantaged statuses intersect to generate problems and restrict the power of an individuals. The study found that nuclear families are a strong predictor of depression among the elderly. It reveals that elderly individuals face various challenges due to a lack of literacy, technological ignorance, and physical limitations. Low income leads to the deterioration of housing conditions. Advanced age creates a barrier to fulfilling unfinished tasks, and dependency on children also increases. The study reveals that aging intersects with financial issues, causing stress and vulnerability to financial fraud. Older adults living in slums face greater challenges in accessing better health facilities and adequate food. The dual status of limited income and living in slums increases the challenges of accessing affordable food for elderly individuals. The study reveals that aging and psychological unfitness can lead to problems like loneliness,

powerlessness, and meaninglessness in the elderly, particularly when combined with age, gender, and lower caste. The daughter-in-law is limiting the freedom of choice for elderly women regarding food, medication, visiting outside homes, places of worship, and friends' homes. The study also highlights societal issues affecting elders, financial crises, psychological wellbeing, and abuse and neglect by family members and caretakers. The elderly confront a variety of issues; some of these issues are enduring and do not have solutions.

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**Article: Does School Choice Exist? Insights from an Urban  
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## Does School Choice Exist? Insights from an Urban Slum in Delhi

--Bhuvaneshwari Subramanian

### Abstract

Though the idea of school choice originated in developed countries such as the US, UK, etc., it has gained considerable traction in India over the last few decades. This paper aims to examine the various international and national debates surrounding the issue of school choice, and analyse how school choice is understood in the Indian context. Further, through the fieldwork conducted by the author in an urban slum in Delhi, this paper aims to show that despite the vast expansion of schooling options in India, especially in urban areas, the urban poor do not actually have much of a 'choice' when it comes to selecting a school for their children. In fact, due to the prevalence of caste-based discrimination in some schools, several parents from lower caste communities consciously choose not to take advantage of government policies that can get their children admission in well-resourced private schools.

*Keywords: school choice, urban poor, Delhi, EWS/DG quota, caste*

### Introduction

According to the United Nations' report on World Urbanization Prospects, 30 per cent of the world's population was urban in 1950. This increased to 54 per cent in 2014, and the urban population of the world is projected to be 66 per cent of the total world population by 2050 (United Nations, 2014). The same UN Report also points out that since the 1980s and 1990s, poverty too, has become increasingly concentrated in urban settlements. India, too has been witnessing a trend of rapid urbanisation (Mehra, 2018). In such a context, it becomes important to reflect upon different aspects of the lives of the urban poor, and the ways in which those living in urban poverty interact with the city and the various facilities it seems to offer.

One important domain in this regard is that of education, and it is relevant to understand the different avenues for schooling available to the urban poor. This is because formal education through schooling, along with being meaningful on its own, is also a crucial means of upward social and economic mobility (Psacharopoulos, 1994; Showalter & Eide, 2010; Tilak, 2002). Moreover, one of the primary ways in which the urban poor, working largely in the informal sector and living on the margins of legality (Appadurai, 2002; Chatterjee, 2004), interact with the formal structure of city life, is through the schooling of their children. It is thus important to understand how parents, especially those living in urban poverty and belonging to economically and socially disadvantaged groups, make schooling decisions for their children.

In this regard, a lot of the work, in terms of both research and practice, on improving educational access and educational outcomes has centered around what has come to be known as ‘school choice.’ Though the idea of school choice originated in developed countries such as the US, UK, etc. it has gained considerable traction in India over the last few decades. This paper aims to throw light on the various international and national debates surrounding the issue of school choice, and analyse how school choice is understood in the Indian context. Further, through the fieldwork that was conducted by the author in an urban slum (or JJ Cluster<sup>1</sup>) in Delhi, this paper aims to show that despite the vast expansion of schooling options in India, especially in urban areas, the urban poor do not actually have much of a ‘choice’ at all when it comes to selecting a school for their children.

### **A Brief Background**

In developed countries such as the US, UK, etc., the public education system has for long operated by assigning students to specific public schools based on the geographical area they live in. Due to this, the need for choice for parents has been expressed both in terms of more public school choice, wherein students are not just assigned to one particular public school; and also public-private school choice, wherein the government funds vouchers which can be used by parents to access private schools which would otherwise be

unaffordable (Goldhaber, 1999). As stated by Walter Feinberg and Christopher Lubienski,

“Unlike traditional public schooling arrangements that are based almost exclusively on residency, school choice essentially positions parents as consumers empowered to select from different options—thereby injecting a degree of consumer-driven, market-style competition into the system as schools seek to attract those families.”

(Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008)

The movement advocating for more choice for parents to be able to choose the schools in which their children study has a long history and gathered momentum in the US in the 1950s, with popular proponents such as the free-market economist Milton Friedman. Friedman believed strongly in the virtues of market forces and in curtailing the role of the government in all sectors, including the case of public services such as education. He proposed a universal voucher system, which would involve the use of government resources to give vouchers to parents to fund the education of their children in a public or private school of the parents' choice (Friedman, 1955, 1962; Logan, 2018). Such voices further strengthened the demand for more school choice and in the coming decades, school choice programs in the US took various forms including voucher programmes, magnet schools, freedom schools, and charter schools (Goldhaber, 1999).

However, along with the strong support for more school choice, there were also persistent voices that opposed school choice programmes. Even now, the area of school choice remains a highly contested domain with strong positions being held both in favour of and against the idea (Musset, 2012). The proponents of school choice models believe that more choice promotes competition among schools vying for greater enrolments, thereby leading to higher productivity and provision of better services to students. The existence of choice is believed to be akin to a ‘tide that lifts all boats’ (Hastings, Kane & Steiger, 2005) as intense competition will cause all schools to improve their academic quality (Bosetti, 2004; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Goldhaber, 1999;

Levin, 2002). On the other hand, opponents of school choice believe that it leads to social fragmentation and benefits only those who have the cultural, social, and economic capital to use the education market to maintain their own class privilege (Ball, 2003; Bosetti, 2004). It is also believed that school choice would lead to a 'vertical separation' of students by causing better performing students to move out of low quality schools, leaving these schools only with low performing students who would not exert much pressure on them to improve their academic quality (Archbald, 2004; Carnoy, 2000; Goldhaber, 1999; Hastings, Kane & Steiger, 2005).

Pauline Musset has analysed whether school choice exists in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries and finds that there is a very limited form of choice in most countries. She finds that in 27 of the 33 countries analysed, the geographic residence of a student's family and how close it is to a school are the main criteria used while assigning schools (Musset, 2012). Some degree of public school choice in the form of the ability to choose a different public school than the one assigned, at least at the primary level, was found to exist in 23 countries. Further, in countries such as Belgium, Italy, Chile, New Zealand and the Netherlands, there was no geographical school assignment system and parents had full freedom to choose any public school for their children. The situation was different when it came to public-private school choice, which was not found to be very common in the OECD countries. However, different forms of universal and targeted voucher programmes were found to exist in countries such as the Netherlands, Chile, Australia and the USA (Musset, 2012).

### **The Indian Context**

A key dissimilarity between the overall context of the idea of school choice in developed countries and in India is that a mandated school assignment system based on specific school catchment areas does not exist for government schools in India (Srivastava, 2007). While the ability to choose private schools has always been available to upper middle class and privileged parents in both developing and developed countries, the notion of school choice is mainly

intended towards providing this option to those who would not be able to afford private schooling by themselves.

In India, however, the widening of choice for those belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged communities, has occurred through the growth of private schools that are aimed particularly at low income families. This is different from the situation in most developed countries where an expansion of choice is called for through a relaxation of the rules concerning the geographical allotment of government schools and through voucher programmes funded by the government. Also, as most government schools in India cannot turn down any student seeking admission, all parents, in principle, do have the ability to choose which school to send their children to (Srivastava, 2007). Thus, the debates concerning 'school choice' in India revolve largely around the proliferation of low fee private (LFP) schools.

The popularity of LFP schools and the promotion of the idea that more of them are required can be traced to the work of British researcher James Tooley (Nambissan, 2012). Through his research in the urban slums of Hyderabad, and subsequently in many African countries, he finds that across the board, a large number of poor families choose to send their children to private schools instead of free government schools. Tooley finds that private schools for the poor, or low fee private (LFP) schools, outperform government schools by having smaller class sizes, greater teacher commitment, better academic achievement, and lower operational costs (Tooley, 2009). It has further been argued that since LFP schools operate at a low cost as they pay low salaries to their teachers, they are able to operate by charging low tuition fees from students, thereby satisfying the needs of the poorest of families who demand good quality education in English medium at a low cost (Tooley & Dixon, 2006; Tooley, 2009). It is believed that having more LFP schools will create more competition in the education market, thereby forcing even low performing government schools to improve their quality in order to attract students.

On the other side of the debate, those who disagree with this analysis and are unhappy with the steady proliferation of LFP schools, continue to advocate for better government schools. They point out that it is those who are relatively more privileged, in terms of belonging to higher castes or economically better off households who are found to be exiting government schools, leaving behind in these schools mostly those from traditionally disadvantaged castes and classes. In the absence of committed state action to improve the quality of government schools, such a scenario leaves the children from some of the most marginalised communities to access only the lowest quality of education, thereby further engendering the reproduction of social inequalities in society (Gurney, 2017; Hill et al., 2011;).

Further, a number of studies (Galab et al., 2013; Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2015; Singh, 2015) reveal the lack of concrete evidence to support the argument that private schools actually provide better quality education to students. In fact, in the study conducted by Muralidharan & Sundararaman (2015) in collaboration with the government of Andhra Pradesh, an experimental school choice programme in the form of vouchers to parents was initiated, covering 180 villages across 5 districts in the state. After dividing the villages into treatment and control groups, vouchers were offered to some families in the treatment villages through a lottery, to send their children to private schools. After two and four years of the programme, the authors found that there was no significant difference between the test scores of the children who won the lottery and those who lost, in Telugu and Maths, and very small positive effects of winning the lottery in English and EVS (Science and Social Studies). Large positive effects of winning the lottery were found to exist only for Hindi, which is not the main language spoken in the state. The authors suggest that human capital formation can be increased in developing countries through more private schooling since the per student expenditure involved is much lower. However, they could not conclusively state that private schools offered better value for parents as compared to government schools, especially when comparing the test scores in Telugu (the

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native language of the state) and Maths, of lottery winners and losers (Muralidharan & Sundaram, 2015).

Further, a review of the literature surrounding questions of school choice and parental perceptions regarding government and private schooling in India reveals the existence of a vibrant discourse dealing with a variety of aspects concerning education. A number of studies conducted across different locations in India show that choosing any particular school for children is a complex process for parents which entails a consideration of a number of factors such as cost of schooling; medium of instruction; perceptions and beliefs regarding education in general; teaching-learning activities, safety, discipline and other characteristics of different schools; level of parental engagement with the school; parents' own experience of education and the understanding of what it means to be a "good" parent; social barriers to entry; and even the gender of the child (Gurney, 2017; Hill, et al, 2011; Lahoti & Mukhopadhyay, 2009; Sahoo, 2015; Srivastava, 2007).

A common thread running through many of these studies is the existence of a strong negative perception among parents regarding the education provided by government schools, which also translates into the understanding that private schools would provide a better education to their children and fulfil their aspirations for cultural capital. At the same time, studies such as those by Lahoti & Mukhopadhyay (2009) conducted in 10 districts across 4 states in India, find that in fact, a large disparity exists between the perceptions and beliefs of parents on the one hand, and the actual reality of low fee private schools on the other. The authors find this to be true especially in terms of the perception of children being taught in English and the belief that teachers in these private schools are highly qualified (Lahoti & Mukhopadhyay, 2009).

Thus, the school choice debate in India continues to revolve around the pros and cons of LFP schools, the positive and negative effects of LFP schools on the education of those belonging to poor households, and whether or not LFP schools provide more choice to poor parents. Further, the literature surrounding the issues of school choice in India exists largely in the context of

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poorly funded, administratively neglected, and academically deficient government schools. In such a context, having more choice invariably tends to mean having the ability to choose a private school. Moreover, a majority of the studies on school choice in India (Lahoti & Mukhopadhyay, 2009; Sahoo, 2015; Srivastava, 2007) focus on parents who consider a number of factors before actively making a choice based on financial and other reasons. While this has added to the understanding of the choice making processes that many parents engage in, it overlooks the question of whether there exists any choice at all for some parents, and whether having more schooling options always means having more ‘choice.’

### **Methodology**

The city of Delhi was chosen as the site for fieldwork for this study because the state government of Delhi, which is officially known as the Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD), has significantly increased its involvement in the education sector since 2015 (PRS Legislative Research, 2016). In terms of budget allocations, the GNCTD assigned as much as 24 per cent of the state’s annual planned outlay towards education (comprising of general education, technical education, art and culture, and sports and youth services) in the year 2015 (GNCTD, 2015). This was a significant increase from the budgets of previous years, and this high share of the education sector has continued to be allocated in all subsequent budgets of the state government as well.

Moreover, apart from increased financial support, the Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi and its supporters have publicised various other reforms that they have brought about in the government schools under their jurisdiction. These include significant upgradation of school infrastructure such as classrooms, playgrounds, toilets, etc.; the initiation of mentor-teacher programmes; increasing the participation of parents in school activities by putting life into School Management Committees (SMCs) and reviving parent-teacher meetings; and even undertaking unique reforms in curriculum by

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starting ‘Happiness Classes’ and developing an ‘Entrepreneurship Mindset Curriculum’ (Sisodia, 2019; Boston Consulting Group [BCG], 2020).

Thus, it is relevant to understand how the schooling decisions and choices of parents living in urban poverty are affected when significant improvements are made in government schools. Given that private school enrolment numbers continue to remain high in Delhi, it is important to understand whether there is a real expansion in the choices available to the urban poor when there are several LFP schools in their neighbourhood along with improving government schools as well.

In order to delve deeper into these issues, fieldwork was conducted in an urban slum (or JJ Cluster) in Delhi, where several different types of private and government schools were located (discussed in detail in the next section). This research study is primarily qualitative in nature and data was collected mainly through semi-structured interviews with the parents of school-going children studying in Standard 1–8. Parents and other family members were interviewed from a total of 55 households from July 2021 to April 2022, along with several informal interactions with other residents of the JJ cluster. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed with the help of the qualitative analysis software QDA Miner Lite.

### **The Available Schooling Options**

The schools available to the residents of the JJ cluster can broadly be divided into the two categories of government schools and private schools. However, there was considerable heterogeneity among the different schools under each of these broad categories. Within government schools, there were schools that were run by the local municipal body—the East Delhi Municipal Corporation (EDMC)<sup>2</sup>, in this case; those run by the state government of Delhi—the Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD); and those run by the central government or the Government of India (GoI).

As the municipal corporations in Delhi are only authorised to run primary schools, the EDMC schools in the area were only up to Standard 5. There were

2 such schools in the area. Among the schools run by the Delhi state government or GNCTD, were a Rajkiya Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya (RSKV) for girls and a Rajkiya Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya (RSBV) for boys, operating from the same building. Here, the girls' school operated in the morning session and the boys' school in the evening session, and both had classes from Nursery to Standard 12. Though these were technically two different schools, they were both referred to as the 'JJ Colony school', with girls attending the morning shift and boys attending the evening shift. Other secondary (up to Standard 10) and senior secondary (up to Standard 12) schools run by the Delhi government, which were also known as RSKV/RSBV, in the neighbouring areas of Kalyanvas and Ghazipur were also attended by some of the students in the JJ Cluster.

Another school run by the Delhi government, right across the road from the JJ Colony school, was the Delhi government's flagship School of Excellence (SoE), which was converted in 2021 into a School of Specialized Excellence<sup>3</sup> (SoSE). While new admissions for students in Standard 1-8 were stopped in 2021, those who were already admitted to the SoE in primary classes before its conversion to SoSE, could continue to be in the same school till they passed Standard 8.

The third category of government schools in the area was that of schools run by the central government of the country. In this case, the school was a Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV), which is run by the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Education, Government of India. Kendriya Vidyalayas across the country are run by the central government and are meant primarily for the children of transferable central government employees, including defense and paramilitary personnel. However, with the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, Kendriya Vidyalaya schools now reserve 25 per cent of their seats in the 1st standard for children belonging to the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) or Disadvantaged Group (DG) categories. This has allowed the Kendriya

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Vidyalaya to be accessed by the residents of the JJ cluster in the area, as almost all the residents belong to either the EWS or the DG category (or both).

Along with these different types of government schools, there were also different types of private schools which were accessed by the residents of the JJ cluster. The closest to the JJ cluster were three low fee private (LFP) primary schools, all of which had classes only up to Standard 5 and charged a fee of Rs. 1000 per month. Apart from these, a few other private schools which charged much higher fees and had classes up to Standard 12 were also accessed by some residents of the JJ cluster. Since they could not otherwise afford the high fees of these schools, they took admission by applying under the Economically Weaker Section/Disadvantaged Groups (EWS/DG) category, as mandated by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009.

Out of the eighty eight children (studying in Classes 1–8) belonging to the fifty five interviewed households, forty seven were studying in the government schools run by the Delhi government, including forty students in one of the RSKV/RSBV schools and seven in the SoE. Within the larger domain of government schools, twenty three students were studying in EDMC primary schools and five were studying in the KV. The number of students studying in private schools was eleven, out of which eight were enrolled in low-fee private primary schools, and three were enrolled in high fee charging private schools under the EWS/DG quota.

### **Making Choices**

Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser (1977) differentiate between the concepts of ‘picking’ and ‘choosing’ by stating that the former involves making a selection between alternatives that a person is indifferent to, whereas the latter, i.e., ‘choosing’ implies making a selection for a particular reason, which presupposes preference. Similarly, Carter (2004) differentiates between having freedom and having choice, and states that while having freedom requires the lack of constraints on performing one or more actions, having

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choice requires the lack of constraints on the ‘reasoned selection and performance of one or more of the items on an action menu.’ Thus, conceptually, exercising choice necessarily involves a reason for making a particular selection, based on an individual’s preferences. However, a person ‘has choice’ only if there are no constraints on this reasoned selection and performance of an action associated with it.

In the context of the current study, while the number and types of schools available to the residents of the JJ cluster are many, it is important to note that not all of them are equally available for parents to ‘choose’ from. Many of the respondents have clear preferences regarding schools, especially in terms of the broad categorisation of government and private schools. However, not all of them effectively ‘have choice’ as defined by Carter (2004).

While government schools are usually thought to be accessible by anyone who wants admission, this is not the case with special or so-called ‘elite’ government schools such as the School of Excellence (SoE) and Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV). As mentioned earlier, admission in the KV for those living in the JJ cluster is possible only through the EWS/DG quota. This requires, apart from information regarding the quota itself, the ability (or access to a person with the ability) to fill up an online form. However, admission is not guaranteed to everyone who fills the form. A lucky draw is conducted to fill up the fixed number of EWS/DG quota seats (25 per cent of the strength of the 1st standard batch), making the admission procedure almost completely dependent on luck.

A similar procedure took place for admission in the SoE as well, as long as the school was accepting students in primary classes, before being converted into a SoSE. While there was no separate 25 per cent quota for the EWS/DG category in the SoE, the entire batch getting admission into the Nursery class was selected based on a lucky draw. This, once again, made the process of getting admission into the school dependent completely on luck, and admission was not guaranteed even when parents ‘chose’ to get their child admitted to the SoE.

While this was the case in special or 'elite' government schools, there were also some cases where students were denied admission in the two EDMC primary schools and the JJ Colony school on the grounds that there were no more vacant seats left. The parents of these students were left with no other option but to seek admission in other EDMC or RSKV/RSBV schools which were farther away from their area of residence. Thus, even with an expansion in government schooling and there being large, well-resourced government schools close to the settlements of the urban poor, there has been no real expansion in the 'choice' that exists for parents living in the JJ cluster.

The situation is not very different when it comes to private schools as well, especially in the case of well-established private schools that charge a high amount of fees. Admission to these schools, for the residents of the JJ cluster, is again possible only through the EWS/DG quota, which operates through a lucky draw. However, by many accounts, the admission process in these private schools was far more opaque than the lucky draw process in government schools such as the SoE and KV. According to Srijan (name changed), a parent of two children studying in one of the LFP schools in the area, some of the high fee charging schools often rigged their admission process and gave seats to those who paid them large amounts of money in the form of 'donations'. While such narratives could not be proven, a few other parents who were aware of the existence of EWS/DG category admissions, also spoke about the lack of clarity regarding the lucky draw process and the formation of the final admission lists.

The other category of private schools available in the area were the low fee private (LFP) schools. Even though these schools are usually targeted towards those belonging to low income groups such as the residents of the JJ cluster, the 'choice' to send their children to them exists only up to a certain extent. Such schools were definitely not an option for those whose income was too low to afford even the low fees charged by these schools, which was around Rs. 1000 per month in the area. However, even those who could afford them could only send their children there up to Standard 5 since all three low fee

private schools in the area were primary schools. Of all the interviewed parents, almost all of those who sent their children to these LFP schools, had plans to shift their children to government schools after Standard 5. This was primarily because of financial reasons, as they worried about not being able to afford the higher fees that would be charged in other private schools beyond Standard 5. Thus, it was the non-availability of LFP schools with grades beyond the primary classes that made parents shift their children to government schools in Standard 6 despite private schooling being their first 'choice'.

Due to these reasons, a large number of the interviewed households had their children enrolled in either the local RSKV/RSBV (the JJ Colony school) or one of the two EDMC schools. Moreover, since the EDMC schools were also only primary schools up to Standard 5, the students studying there were automatically transferred to a secondary or senior secondary school run by the Delhi government to continue their education. For the students in the two EDMC schools that were closest to the JJ Cluster, the school that they were transferred to was the JJ Colony school. Thus, many of the students in the JJ Colony school were transferred there in 6th standard after finishing schooling till 5th standard in the EDMC school. At the same time, many students who were studying in both EDMC schools and the JJ Colony school had previously been in one of the private primary schools and then shifted to a government school. Thus, despite the vast variety of schools present close to the JJ cluster, for those who could not afford private schools, the only options where admission was not dependent on a matter of chance were the two EDMC schools and the JJ Colony school, with some parents being denied admission even in these schools.

As Kajal (name changed), a mother of two children studying in the JJ Colony school said, she wished that both her children could study in private schools just like 'bade log' (affluent people), referring to those who sent their children to high fee private schools. However, her husband was unemployed and an alcoholic, and she worked as a house maid and was the only earning member

in the family. Thus, she could not afford private schooling and said, 'jitni aukaat hai, utna hi pair phailaate hain' (a rough version of 'cutting your coat according to your cloth'), implying that she knew her limits and so had never considered private schooling as an option that was available to her. Sanjay (name changed), a father with three children who had been through the government school system and one daughter currently in 6th standard in the RSKV in Kalyanvas (transferred there after completing 5th standard in the EDMC school), believed that children are 'guided better' in private schools. But being a daily wage labourer, he said that he could not pay the fees charged by private schools and so the EDMC schools were his only option.

It thus becomes clear that the schools in which children were enrolled do not necessarily reflect the 'choice' of their parents. Talking about school choice and the need to expand school choice, in such a situation, misses out on the understanding that despite living in a large city and in an area with a large number and variety of schools, some parents hardly have any real 'choice' in the matter of deciding which schools to send their children to. Therefore, in the context of the JJ cluster where this research is based, it is worthwhile to use terms such as 'school aspirations' or 'school preferences' to more accurately reflect the situation on the ground. While the literature on school choice in India covers various concerns which overlap with issues related to aspirations and preferences, the term 'choice' can be misleading in certain contexts. Moreover, given that debates on the issue of school choice originated in an education system and socio-economic environment very different from India, it is reasonable to consider using terminology that more suitably fits different local contexts.

### **No choice-making behaviour**

It is clear that the parents in the JJ cluster in question hardly have any real 'choice' in deciding which school their children attend, and have only their own individual preferences and aspirations, which may or may not be realised. However, it is relevant to note that there were also certain parents who

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demonstrated a complete lack of active choice-making or even preference-forming behaviour.

One such person was Sarita (name changed), a daily wage labourer, with one daughter in Standard 6 and two sons in Standard 9 in the JJ Colony school. Her husband had been living in the JJ cluster since childhood and studied till Standard 8 in an RSBV in the neighbourhood. He was a daily wage labourer as well, and also an alcoholic who did not bother much with his children's education. Sarita came to Delhi after marriage and being from a village in UP where she technically studied till Standard 5 but did not learn much, she did not have much of an idea about schools in the city. She said it was her children, when they were about five years old, who started insisting that they wanted to go to school just like the other children in the area. Not knowing what to do about it or how to get admission in a school, Sarita asked her neighbour for help. It was this neighbour who took her children to the nearest EDMC school and got them admitted there. Sarita herself had no real opinion on which school to send her children to or any particular reasons for having any schooling preferences.

Another parent who did not have to think about schooling options at all was Aashi (name changed), who worked as a cook in the neighbouring middle class housing societies. Aashi first sent her elder daughter (in Standard 10 at the time of the interview) to the Anganwadi (a child care centre providing basic health and education related services for children below six years of age) next to her house. She said her daughter was smart and it was the lady managing the Anganwadi who decided to get her admitted in the EDMC school in the area. After studying there till Standard 5, she was automatically shifted to the JJ Colony school. Aashi's younger daughter went through a similar process and was currently in Standard 4 in the same EDMC school. Aashi's husband had studied till Standard 10 and was a worker in a factory that made electrical meters. Since he had long working hours, he left schooling decisions to his wife. However, Aashi had no real opinion in the matter of the school attended by her children, and did not have much of a say in the final

outcome either, as it was the Anganwadi lady, and later the EDMC school itself, which decided where her daughter should study.

It can thus be seen that though in many cases, the parents who were more educated had more opinions and preferences regarding their children's schooling, this was not always the case. The parents who lacked much formal education, as well as those who had passed Standard 10, in some instances, had hardly given any thought to the question of which school their children should go to. On the other hand, some parents who never went to school at all, realised their mistake in not getting formal education and put in extra effort to gather information about schooling options and articulate their opinions, preferences and aspirations. An analysis of parental background in terms of their own education, employment, and other social and economic characteristics, and its effect on their schooling preferences has not been undertaken in this paper. However, one other important aspect of the decision-making process with regard to schooling, is the caste to which the family belongs, which has been discussed briefly in the following section.

### **Caste and school choice**

The JJ Cluster in which this study is based is an area where a majority of the families belong to the Valmiki community. This is a community which comes under the list of Scheduled Castes (SC) in the Indian Constitution and hence is specially protected against discrimination by several legal measures. However, as has been noted by several scholars (Borooah et al., 2015; Gorringer & Karthiyan, 2014; Narula, 2008; Thorat & Neuman, 2012), caste-based discrimination continues to thrive in India, and those belonging to the Valmiki community continue to face social and cultural ostracisation in several forms. While a detailed discussion of the issue of caste and caste-based discrimination is beyond the scope of this paper, some instances require to be highlighted where parents took a conscious decision to avoid certain types of schools, particularly because of their lower caste or SC status.

Regarding school admissions, the RTE Act 2009 mandates that all private unaided schools must admit children from economically weaker sections (EWS) and disadvantaged groups (DG) in the neighbourhood, up to at least 25 per cent of the strength of Class 1, or pre-school if the school provides pre-school education (The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009). Despite the fact that this provision had been in existence for more than a decade at the time when the interviews for this research were conducted, not many of the interviewed parents knew about it. Only a handful of respondents knew that they could avail of this quota, and only 3 of the interviewed parents had been able to secure admission for their children in private schools under this quota.

While the parents who applied for EWS/DG quota admissions desperately hoped that they could get their children admitted into a private school, there were also some who consciously chose to stay away from the process altogether. Shashi (name changed), a parent with two children studying in the JJ Colony school, said that he was aware of this quota and the admission process involved, but chose not to even try for it. The reason for this was the experience of a close friend, whose child had got admission in an otherwise unaffordable private school through the EWS/DG quota. Shashi stated that his friend's child often complained about EWS/DG quota students being teased and harassed by other students in school. Even the teachers would not intervene when this was brought to their attention because, according to Shashi, the teachers also differentiated among students based on whether they were regular, fee-paying students or those who came through the 'SC quota'. While he refused to name the school where this happened, he said it was a prominent and well-known school. Due to this reason, Shashi did not even try to get his children admitted to a private school, where the students are all 'bade gharon ke bacche' (children from well-to-do families). He did mention, however, that if he got the opportunity to get his children admitted either to the KV or SoE through the lucky draw system, he would definitely take it up as these were government-run schools.

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Another parent, who preferred private schools over government schools but could only afford to send his children to LFP schools, had similar thoughts about the EWS/DG quota. Gagan's (name changed) daughter was in Standard 1 in an LFP school in their neighbourhood and he was aware of the EWS/DG quota, through which he could have got his daughter admission into a 'high level' private school. However, he too had seen the case of a neighbour, whose children had got admission into a school through this quota. According to Gagan, it was much better to send your children to government schools rather than making use of this quota. He said that while books and notebooks were free and no school fees was charged, in terms of studies, the students admitted through the quota were treated 'third-class se bhi battar' (received worse than 'third-class' treatment). He went on to say,

"Other students, who got admitted by paying the fees, there was some kind of discrimination between them and those admitted through the quota... Otherwise, being in such a good place, those children [the ones admitted under EWS/DG quota] would have learnt at least something? But those children couldn't even study till Standard 5 and are working at odd jobs here and there today... Everyone was taught together in one class, but these students did not receive adequate attention."

It becomes clear that parents such as Shashi and Gagan had well thought out reasons for their decisions. They might not have had the choice to send their children to the school they wanted to, but they nevertheless made an active choice to not even try for EWS/DG quota admissions in private schools. Moreover, their experiences highlight the stigma that continues to be associated with the SC caste status. Despite years of anti-caste movements across the country and stringent laws prohibiting any sort of discrimination, rampant instances of open partisanship between fee-paying students and 'free' or 'SC quota' students continue to exist.

Thus, the heightened awareness of caste and class based discrimination in private schools actually keeps many parents belonging to lower castes and classes from accessing the benefits and quotas that were put in place especially

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for them. At the same time, a lack of awareness of provisions such as EWS/DG quota admissions excludes many others who would have wanted to make use of them, from even trying to take part in the admission process.

### **Conclusion**

In the context of poorly functioning government schools and a crumbling public education system, the demand for more 'school choice' or more schooling options for parents in the form of private schools has been growing in India. This is especially so with regard to socially and economically marginalised sections of society, who more often than not, send their children to government schools. Moreover, with the rapid proliferation of private schools for the poor or low-fee private (LFP) schools, many parents from poor households have started sending their children to these schools in the hope for a better education.

While the debates surrounding these developments and the future direction of education policies continue to remain conflicted, this paper situates the issues surrounding the question of school choice within the context of an urban slum or JJ Cluster in Delhi. The study finds that while there are several factors that shape the preferences of parents living in the JJ Cluster, the ability to make a choice based on those preferences is actually very limited. Even in the case of government schools, the presence of certain 'elite' schools with lottery based admission mechanisms, have made school admissions largely dependent on luck, rather than choice.

Moreover, there are also instances where some parents do not engage in any choice-making behaviour at all regarding their child's schooling. In these cases, children are admitted to the nearest government school, sometimes by neighbours, and they simply continue to go through the education system, without any active engagement with the schooling process. At the same time, there are also examples of parents who are aware that their actual choices are greatly restricted, but they nevertheless choose not to engage with specific types of schooling options based on social and political reasons. These include

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cases where parents do not even try to get their children admission in high fee private schools through the EWS/DG quota because they have heard of the discrimination that ‘quota students’ face in these schools.

Thus, the discourse surrounding school choice in India needs to be looked at from a much more nuanced lens, which highlights the vast diversity of the poor, especially in urban areas. Further, the availability of a large number of schools, both government and private, does not in itself provide more choice to parents, even if parents are not required to pay fees in private schools. This is most visible in the interactions of caste and class with the schooling process, which further complicate the ways in which choices are made, if and when available.

#### Notes

1. A settlement is officially considered as a Slum Designated Area only if it is notified under the Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, 1956. However, no new settlement has been identified as a Slum Designated Area in Delhi since 1994. Thus, as slum settlements continued to proliferate in and around the city, the term Jhuggi Jhopri (JJ) Cluster has been used to identify such non-notified slum areas. These are defined as settlements which are built as encroachments on land owned by the government, or a department or agency of the government (CPR, 2015).
2. The Delhi Municipal Corporation (Amendment) Act, 2011 had officially trifurcated Delhi’s municipal corporation into the North, South and East Delhi Municipal Corporations. However, this Act was further amended by the Indian parliament in April 2022, once again unifying the corporations into a single body, the MCD, i.e., the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (Jha, 2022). Since this unification occurred after the fieldwork for this research concluded, the term EDMC is used in this paper instead of MCD while referring to the schools run by the municipal corporation of the area.

3. Schools of Specialized Excellence (SOSE) are schools meant for classes 9 to 12 that allow students to specialise in their chosen fields of study (STEM, Humanities, Performing and Visual Arts, and High-end 21st Century Skills). The Delhi government had initially started Schools of Excellence (SoE) as holistic learning, English medium schools running from Nursery to Class 12. The SoE schools are now being phased out.

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**Conversation: B.K. Nagla in conversation with Gundemeda  
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**B.K. Nagla in conversation with Gundemeda Nagaraju**

[Transcript of the interview held on April 30, 2024]

**Introduction**

Prof. Nagla is an eminent sociologist whose doctoral thesis at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Factionalism, Politics and Social Structure is a pioneering work in political sociology. He has published 22 books and 70 research papers in national and international journals. The main books are Factionalism, Politics and Social Structure (1984); Women Crime and Law (1991); Development and Transformation (1993); Political Sociology (1999); Introducing Sociology (2002, 2019); Indian Sociological Thought (2008,2013,2023); Themes in Social Stratification and Social Mobility (2009); Sociology of Sanitation (2015), Globalization, Leisure and Social Change (2017), Issues and Themes in Contemporary Society (2019), Diversity, Democracy and Development (2021), Sociology and Sociologist in India (2022), Indian Sociologist (2024) etc. He has been the editor of the Indian Sociological Society (ISS) Hindi Journal entitled, 'Bhartiya Samajshastra Samiksha' from 2014 to 2021.

Interview of Prof. Bhupendra Kumar Nagla (B. K. Nagla henceforth BKN) was taken by Prof. Gundemeda Nagaraju (henceforth GNR)

**GNR:** Dear sir, thanks for agreeing to share your experiences and encounters with sociology. Firstly, could you please share your family history?

**BKN:** I was born on January 30, 1946, in Bassi village, Chittorgarh district, Rajasthan, at my maternal uncle's home, where I spent my early childhood. My parental home is in Jawad, Neemuch district (formerly part of Mandsaur district), Madhya Pradesh, where I completed my schooling. My hometown, Jawad, is located on the border of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Although it is geographically in Madhya Pradesh, my family is culturally influenced by Mewar (now in Rajasthan), from where they migrated long ago. My father, Ramchandra, was a businessman, and my mother, Sohanbai, was a housewife. My father had one brother, Badrilal, a freedom fighter, and one sister, Nanibai. My father received his pre-university education in Ajmer, Rajasthan, and my mother had primary education in her hometown of Bassi. I am the eldest son, with one brother and two sisters. My wife, Madhu Nagla, a sociology professor, hails from Kota, Rajasthan. We have one son, Gaurav, and one daughter, Radhika, who are settled in Canada and the USA, respectively, and

both are IT professionals. Both My son and daughter are married: Gaurav to Archana and Radhika to Rohit. Each couple has one son: Abhigyan and Abhay, respectively.

**GNR:** When did you first come into contact with sociology?

**BKN:** I opted for Sociology as one of my optional papers, along with Economics and Sanskrit, for my undergraduate studies at Udaipur University, Udaipur (Rajasthan). My brother-in-law, Mr. Natwarlal Sukhawal, suggested this choice. He mentioned that sociology is a relatively easy subject and helpful in understanding societal structures such as village life, caste, family, and kinship. At that time, I did not intend to become a sociologist; I shifted from natural science to social science due to health issues. My health problems hindered my concentration on my studies. However, my father was especially interested in my higher education and encouraged me to pursue it, regardless of whether I chose to go into business or any other profession. He believed that education was essential.

**GNR:** When did you know that you wanted to be a sociologist?

**BKN:** I decided to become a teacher while I was doing an M.A. in sociology at Udaipur University. In 1972, I passed M.A. with first division and also got second rank in the subject. I wanted to do a Ph. D. with a fellowship. It was not possible to do doctoral research in the Department of Sociology, as the department had only one fellowship, which was generally given to the first-rank holder. Therefore, I thought of doing a PhD from another place where I could get the fellowship. I tried for two places: Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi and the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur. I chose JNU as the first choice and was accepted for admission there. One of my classmates, Mr. Shyamlal Menaria, introduced me to Prof. S.L. Doshi, who was also my teacher. Prof. Doshi inspired me to do a Ph. D. from JNU and told me not to worry as Dr. K. L. Sharma is there to help me. Dr. Sharma also taught me sociological theory in the final year of my M.A. at Udaipur. After leaving the Sociology department of Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, Dr. Sharma came to Udaipur and stayed only one year at Udaipur. He joined JNU the same year as an assistant professor when I was admitted to the MPhil/Ph.D. programme at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems in JNU in 1972.

**GNR:** Can you tell us about your college experience while doing B.A. and M.A.?

**BKN:** I was a student at the M. B. College of Udaipur University, as the university didn't have a separate campus. It was a new university; therefore, all the classes ran in the M. B. College. The classes in the sociology department were in the morning due to a shortage of space. We were free after 10 or 10.30 a.m. to go either to the library or home. B.A. was a three-year course, and I had one paper in sociology every year, taught by K.L. Bhatia, Giriraj Gupta and Rajendra Singh. Bhatia was my NCC instructor, also. Later, Bhatia and Gupta joined US universities, and Rajendra Singh joined the Delhi School of Social Work. I took sociology in M.A. as motivated by my brother-in-law, though I was interested in Sanskrit. The Sanskrit teacher, particularly Dr Nagar, used to narrate excerpts of novels in a romantic style while explaining Kālidāsa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* (play), *Raghuvamśa* (epic poem) *Meghadūta* (lyric poem) and *Kumar sambhav* (epic poem) etc. Anyway, I had good teachers in M.A., mainly O.P. Sharma, S.L. Doshi, and B.K. Lavania, etc. In the final year, K.L. Sharma also taught me sociological theory to develop critical thinking. Uday Pareek (Psychologist) also taught social psychology in a motivating style. Doshi had a conventional style, first delivering lectures on classical thinkers and then dictation as readymade notes, but it was a lucid style, which students generally liked. Lavania had freestyle but had command over Hindi and English. He used to converse in local dialect. O.P. Sharma was a modest American-trained teacher.

**GNR:** How would you recall your experiences with your classmates?

**BKN:** I became interested in sociology and concentrated on my studies, preparing and discussing notes with friends. In my class, I had two classmates who were in service and senior in the age. One was Shyamlal Menaria, who was in the service of the Tribal Research Institute (TRI), Udaipur, and the other was Mandovara, who was in the Agriculture University of Udaipur. Both were helpful to me. TRI library was specific for sociology books and journals and was best in Rajasthan. N. N. Vyas was the director of the institute. My friend Menaria used to issue books every day, whatever I wanted. I used to read all classical original books by Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Merton, and Parsons and other textbooks like Raymond Aron, Kingsley Davis, Irving

Zeitlin, Wilbert Moore, Amitai Etzioni, etc. Besides theory and thought, books were also available for other papers.

I used to read during the daytime, as I was free. My friends Menaria and Mandovara decided that we should meet in the evening at the tuck shop located in Chetak Circle. There, I would narrate and discuss whatever I had read during the day. They would take notes as they knew shorthand, and later, they would type them up, bringing several carbon copies to the classroom. We would distribute these notes to our other friends and discuss them in the college canteen. The female students were particularly pleased to receive such ready-made notes and often offered tea, snacks, and sometimes homemade treats in gratitude. This practice helped everyone score good marks in the examinations. However, our two so-called elite friends did not appreciate this and asked why I engaged in such activities. I expressed to them that I felt happy helping others who did not have access to the books.

**GNR:** You worked for your Ph. D under the guidance of Prof. Yogendra Singh. Can you share your experiences of working with him?

**BKN:** Prof. Yogendra Singh was not my supervisor. He was the guide of Madhu Nagla, my wife, who did her Ph. D. under him. Though he was not my guide, he taught me at the M.Phil. level (JNU) and inspired me not only during my doctoral research work but also throughout my academic life. I always found him to be up to date in readings and with refreshingly new ideas. He kindled my interest in sociology and made me understand that sociology should always include both theory and empirical research. I interacted with him on many occasions and used to converse about sociological interpretations of different situations even though we used to see movies in English and Hindi together. He used to conceptualize the sociological significance of the film that we watched together and similarly for other issues and events. I enjoyed his professional visibility and affection towards me, which made me fearless and confident whenever I consulted him.

**GNR:** Then, who was your supervisor?

**BKN:** Prof. Partha Nath Mukherji was my supervisor, and Prof. K. L. Sharma was my co-supervisor during my M.Phil. program. Initially, Prof. Mukherji supervised me for my Ph.D. for around three years. Later, Prof. K. L. Sharma

supervised me until the PhD was submitted when Prof. Mukherji left JNU and joined the Indian Statistical Institute Calcutta (now Kolkata).

**GNR:** What was your experience in JNU?

**BKN:** JNU is quite different from other universities in India in terms of teaching and campus life. One student, who came from a Hindi-speaking state and had a first-class degree from his previous university, experienced a cultural shock at JNU and found the teaching style akin to that of Oxford. He decided to leave JNU and informed his teacher that he could not cope with his studies. Although his teacher tried to persuade him, he eventually left. I did not face such a situation because Dr. K.L. Sharma invited me to stay with him at his house until his wife arrived from the village. She came around December after the birth of their daughter, Rachna. I lived with Dr. Sharma like a family member at his Safdarjung residence. After six months, he also secured on-campus accommodation. He cooked, and I washed the utensils since I did not know how to cook. We often had dinner outside at a dhaba or a restaurant in Green Park, Hauz Khas, etc. Generally, we had lunch on campus.

I came to JNU in 1972 after completing my M.A. from Udaipur. The teaching of Sociology at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, JNU, began in 1971 with the MPhil-Ph.D. program. The M.A. program was introduced in 1972 when I joined the MPhil-Ph.D. program. Partha Sarthi, the Vice-Chancellor, invited Yogendra Singh (Y. Singh) to establish the centre and recruit faculty. Initially, there were six faculty members, including Y. Singh, T.K. Oommen, P.N. Mukherji, K.L. Sharma, Venugopal, and P.N. Panini. Later, R.K. Jain (from Oxford), Nirmal Singh, Sudhir Kakar (from Vienna), and a few others joined the centre.

Although fifteen students were admitted, only five remained: J.S. Gandhi, Mukul Dube, Jagannath Pathy, Anand Kumar, and myself. Our methodology class, attended by fifteen science policy students, was taught by Oommen. The five of us attended all the other classes. Y. Singh taught sociological theory and thought. Other classes were co-taught by pairs of teachers: P.N. Mukherji and M.N. Panini, and K.L. Sharma and Venugopal for the MPhil classes. Our classes were interactive, not just conventional lectures. It's not one-way communication but its two ways communication between teachers and students. Both students and teachers prepared lectures for common

discussions. JNU has an interdisciplinary approach to teaching, allowing students to opt for courses in other centres as well.

J.S. Gandhi came directly for a PhD under Y. Singh's supervision but was asked to complete MPhil coursework first. Before coming to JNU, he taught at Delhi University and IIM Ahmedabad. He was senior to all of us, married, and had two children. He was very intelligent and fluent in English, Punjabi, and Hindi and had some knowledge of Urdu and Sanskrit. Mukul Dube was the son of Prof. S.C. Dube. Mukul and Pathy both came from Sagar University, while Anand Kumar came from BHU, Varanasi. Anand Kumar was an intelligent and articulate orator and a former student president at BHU. Anand Kumar and Mukul Dube later went on to pursue their PhDs at Chicago and Oxford, respectively.

**GNR:** Okay. Tell us about JNU campus life.

**BKN:** There is no comparison between JNU and any other university in India or elsewhere. It is the best university and ranked first in the country. JNU offers a wonderful life for teachers and students, providing a conducive environment for learning and the all-round personality development of students. JNU provides inclusive space. Everyone interacts with everyone, irrespective of their discipline. JNU's nightlife is unique compared to any other university. The campus is as lively at night as it is during the day. After dinner, students interact with their teachers to discuss research. Students also interact with each other at tea dhabas, discussing national and international issues. Girls feel secure and move freely on campus at night, participating equally in discussions.

While JNU is dominated by Marxist ideology, there are friendly interactions with teachers and students of other ideologies. I am not a Marxist, but I have Marxian friends without any ill feelings. The atmosphere is devoid of hostility, unpleasantness, and unfriendliness. Anand Kumar and our friends formed a free thinker group to contest the student union elections. Anand Kumar (free thinker) contested the election for the post of president against Karat Prakash (Marxist). Although Anand Kumar was defeated in the first year, he won the election the following year, and Karat Prakash was beaten. The relationships did not change based on election outcomes. Elections are organized by the students themselves, not by university officials. Debates between contesting

candidates are typically held at night in the mess after meals and at other locations in a democratic manner.

Students lead disciplined lives and are very punctual, whether attending classes, going to the library, or participating in seminars. Students from rich and poor backgrounds live together like Krishna and Sudama, learning alongside each other. Both groups have equal opportunities for education at JNU. If the government decided to establish more such institutions that provide free and quality education without political interference, there would be no need for reservations and employment concerns. This approach would eliminate the gap between rich and poor. I recall an incident where students encircled Vice-Chancellor Partha Sarthi, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suggested sending police for his security. Partha Sarthi refused, stating that it was an internal matter that could be resolved without external intervention.

There is no need for the privatization of education if we provide free and quality education. This is the only way to bridge the gap between rich and poor. The impact of JNU is extensive, contributing significantly to our nation. Its alums are visible in various fields in India and abroad, including teaching, administration, politics, media, and more. Notably, S. Jaishankar (Minister of External Affairs) and Nirmala Sitharaman (Minister of Finance) are JNU alumni.

**GNR:** When did your journey as a teacher begin?

**BKN:** I began my teaching career in 1976 at the Department of Sociology, M.S. University, Vadodara (Baroda) in Gujarat. I also taught at the Institute of Criminology and Forensic Science, New Delhi, for a short period. Later, in 1978, I joined M.D. University, Rohtak in Haryana, where I taught until my retirement in 2006. After retiring from M.D. University, Rohtak, I worked as a consultant at Kota Open University and also served as a Professor at the Babu Jagjivan Ram Chair at Banaras Hindu University.

**GNR:** What is the best thing about being a sociologist?

**BKN:** I believe I have a noble profession in teaching and research, which provides me with a great deal of autonomy, status, and self-esteem. Although I am a sociologist by training, I have always felt a desire to travel within India and around the world to interact with family, friends, and diverse people. I

have the privilege of thinking about, discussing, and writing about sociology every day. I get to read new books regularly—often for free—and then discuss them with others who share the same interests. Being a sociologist, I can say that sociologists' thoughts and ideas are highly valued as they provide insights, perceptions, and a deeper understanding of human beings in society, enabling the pursuit of countless interests. Engaging in sociology with an understanding of social life allows a person to have a fulfilling existence in any field of society.

**GNR:** You have established yourself as a deeply concerned teacher of sociology. Can you take us through the trajectory of the pedagogical practices you have adopted in the 40+ years of your teaching and research journey?

**BKN:** My academic journey started first at Baroda University, and then I moved to NICFS, New Delhi. Finally, I joined Rohtak University, where I taught until my retirement. After retirement, I received an offer for the Babu Jagjivanram Chair at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi. I reluctantly joined but did not stay long, as I no longer wished to serve in a formal capacity and preferred to focus on independent academic reading and writing. Now, I would like to share my experiences at these institutions one by one if you are interested.

**GNR:** Okay.

**BKN:** Let me start with my first appointment as a lecturer in sociology at M.S. University, Baroda (Vadodara), in Gujarat, in 1976. Prof. K. C. Panchanadikar was the head of the Department of Sociology. Mrs. Jaloo Panchanadikar, Bharti Ben, P.J. Patel, and Madam Dansingani were among the teachers in the department. Interestingly, the department had a sufficient number of teachers but an insignificant number of students—around fifteen students in the previous class and one or two students in the final sociology class. There were some PhD scholars, including our colleague Mr Patel and two or three Buddhist monks, who were conducting research under the supervision of Panchanadikar. I asked Panchanadikar about the low number of students and mentioned that I did not enjoy teaching in the absence of students. He assured me, "Don't worry! Students will join when you teach. Meanwhile, you can do research; we have a small group laboratory."

Panchanadikar was an authoritative and mechanical man, but he respected us and provided all the facilities in the department. His wife, Jaloo Panchanadikar, treated me like a mother and occasionally invited me to lunch and dinner. Patel was very friendly, as he was the only other male teacher. Despite this, I left Baroda after some time when I got another job at the National Institute of Criminology and Forensic Science (NICFS), New Delhi, as I was interested in completing my PhD. When I handed my resignation to Prof. Panchanadikar, he told me, "You are leaving such a good university. It looks like you do not realize the difficulty of getting a job. However, I will keep your resignation in my drawer so that you may rejoin if you change your mind."

**GNR:** What was the nature of the job at NICFS, and why did you leave the institute?

**BKN:** The teaching job at NICFS involved either delivering lectures or arranging lectures by specialist scholars in the field of criminology for the training of IPS officers, judges, CBI, and IB personnel. I found that most trainees were not interested in theoretical knowledge as they were accustomed to their conventional methods of dealing with crime and deviance. The Director of the Institute, Mr. Rai (IG), was also not happy with the directorship as he enjoyed field job more. Here, he had to deliver lectures or handle administrative work. Besides teaching, I had various responsibilities, such as visiting prisons, SOS Villages, and juvenile delinquent homes. Despite having all the facilities, I wouldn't say I liked this job as much as I was interested in university teaching. I joined NICFS while I was working on my PhD at JNU. I had written the complete draft of my thesis, but my supervisor left JNU and joined the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata. I asked Prof. Yogendra Singh to assign me a new supervisor, and Prof. K. L. Sharma was assigned to supervise my thesis, given his familiarity with Rajasthan, which was related to my work. I was pleased as I knew him well. However, Prof. Sharma asked me to conduct fieldwork again to meet the needs of the research.

Therefore, I resigned from NICFS, though the director, Mr. Rai, accepted my resignation reluctantly. He asked me why I was leaving this respectable service. I explained that I needed to conduct fieldwork for a year or more. He offered to arrange for police inspectors to collect data from the respective

areas. I expressed my difficulty, stating that it was not possible to rely on police inspectors as the nature of the thesis required people to respond appropriately, which they would not do with police involvement. Ultimately, I left NICFS, though I have visited the institute to deliver lectures whenever invited after leaving.

**GNR:** After leaving NICFS, how did you complete your thesis?

**BKN:** I went to Udaipur again and conducted fieldwork by interviewing village, district, and state leaders of political parties, then returned to JNU. Prof. Sharma would either provide comments or modify my write-ups whenever I submitted the chapters of my thesis. During this process, I became mentally stressed and fell ill. However, Prof. Sharma helped and took care of me. He encouraged me and thoroughly reviewed my thesis, enabling me to submit it successfully. I was the first PhD student of Prof. Sharma, who himself was the first PhD student of Prof. Yogendra Singh. Prof. Sharma is intelligent and hardworking, and I do not possess that level of acumen. He must have had high expectations for producing quality research in a desirable form.

After the awarding of my thesis, Prof. Sharma told me that my thesis was one of the best among the three-four theses submitted to the Centre. I used to think there might be some shortcomings in my write-up. As I had great faith in Sharmaji, I never felt any annoyance with him while pursuing my PhD. In those days, every teacher expected their students to submit a presentable thesis that would later be referred to as quality research. J. S. Gandhi and I. P. Modi also felt confusing situations like mine during their Ph.D. Prof. Sharma always stood behind me in my ventures and new initiatives throughout my academic journey and personal life.

**GNR:** What is your experience with Rohtak University?

**BKN:** After submitting my Ph.D. thesis, I married Madhu on May 24, 1978. She had appeared for her B.A. examination from Kota College of Rajasthan University, where she passed with first class, and then she came to Delhi with me. I was now thinking of exploring job opportunities. One day, my old friend Mr. Gati Krishna Kar met me at the Sapru House Library canteen. He informed me that Rohtak University had advertised lectureship positions, and he was already teaching political science there. He urged me to apply, even

though the last date had passed, suggesting that it was up to the vice-chancellor to waive the deadline. I took a plain piece of paper from the canteen and applied. Within 15 days, I received an interview call. The interview was held in Delhi, and I went home after giving the interview. Just a week later, I received a call to join Rohtak University. I went to Rohtak with my wife and joined the Department of Sociology on July 24, 1978. K. S. Sangwan also joined as a lecturer, but I became in charge of the new department based on seniority in the selection. S. K. Chauhan was selected as a reader, and he joined Rohtak University a few months later, having been a reader at Dibrugarh University. I prepared the syllabus, handled student admissions, and started teaching alongside K. S. Sangwan. Chauhan became the head of the department. Initially, we were three teachers. The following year, Mr. Hare Ram Tiwari, who came from The Hague, and U.K. Awasthi, a JNU student, joined the department. Subsequently, Mr. Balgovind Baboo, Jitendra Prasad (both JNU students), and P. S. Chundawat (PhD, Udaipur) joined the department. In this way, the department developed an excellent faculty to teach the M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. programs.

**GNR:** How did you develop your department of sociology with your colleagues at Rohtak University?

**BKN:** We followed the pattern of JNU in teaching and research sociology in our department for M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. Besides classroom teaching, we had weekly seminars where teachers and students presented their papers. We also conducted fieldwork for both M.A. and M.Phil. students. Teachers and students visited places, preferably in other states, for ten to fifteen days. After returning, students gave seminars based on their fieldwork under the supervision of their respective teachers. Every year, we buy the latest books from the library. Today, our university library has an excellent collection of books, historical documents, various encyclopedias, and the Census of India. Our university was renamed Maharshi Dayanand University (M.D. University), replacing Rohtak University. We used to invite well-known scholars to the board of studies and extension lectures. Many scholars participated and delivered lectures in our national seminars and conferences organized by the department. These scholars included Yogendra Singh, B. R. Chauhan, S. M. Dube, S. L. Sharma, André Béteille, P. N. Pimple, K.L. Sharma, P.C. Joshi, T.K. Oommen, N. K. Singhi, J. S. Gandhi, Anand Kumar, Paramjit Singh Judge, Satish K. Sharma, R.S. Sandhu, Birinder Pal Singh,

M.L. Sharma, S.L. Doshi, and S.R. Mehta. I also edited a volume of the seminar I organized on "Development and Social Transformation" (1993) and published textbooks on "Introducing Sociology" (2002) and "Indian Sociological Thought" (2002), which are reprinted annually by Rawat Publications. I completed numerous projects sponsored by ICSSR, NGOs, and state and central governments.

**GNR:** Who motivated you to explore criminology studies as a field of knowledge, and what have you done?

**BKN:** During my stay at NICFS, I was associated with Prof. K. S. Shukla, a sociologist and criminologist, who inspired me to write in the areas of sociology of deviance and crime. Shukla motivated me to join NICFS. I started writing and participating in seminars and conferences in criminology and related areas and continued until Shukla was alive. I published several articles on different issues in the Journal of Criminology, Social Work, Indian Journal of Criminology and Criminalistics, Social Defence, and a book on "Women, Crime and Law" (1991), published by Rawat. I participated in and presented papers at several national conferences. During this period, I got an opportunity to attend an international conference in Homberg (Germany) and was invited to deliver talks in Hong Kong University. I delivered talks at NICFS whenever invited by the Institute. I also attended the Department of Criminology at Madras University, where Prof. Chockalingum (Victimologist) invited me to the Development of Criminology workshop. Consequently, I was awarded the ISC Fellow Award for the growth and development of the Indian Society of Criminology, given by the Council of the Indian Society of Criminology, affiliated with the International Society of Criminology, Paris. Later, I left academic activities in criminology after the demise of Shukla.

**GNR:** Besides criminology, what are your academic contributions in other areas of the discipline? What did you do in Paris and the Netherlands?

**BKN:** In fact, I did my PhD on factional politics in Rajasthan, which was published in 1984, and I continued my interest in this area by editing a book on Political Sociology in 1999, with its second edition recently appearing in 2023. I also worked on the Dynamics of Politics in France as a visiting professor at La Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (MSH) in Paris in 1993. While there, I delivered talks at Sorbonne University and The University of

Bordeaux. I had the opportunity to meet and interact with distinguished sociologists and anthropologists such as Levi Strauss, Alain Touraine, Raymond Boudon, and Maurice Godelier in Paris, who also gave me their books. Subsequently, I visited The International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, Netherlands. I visited several universities besides The Hague, including Amsterdam, Leiden, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Groningen, where I also delivered talks. One of my talks was published in the occasional lecture series on the topic “Sociology of Professions: A Theoretical Analysis of Conceptual Issues” by the Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education, The Hague, in 1995. Similarly, I visited other European universities in Germany, Spain, the UK, and others.

**GNR:** Given the fact that market-driven forces mainly control education today, do you think that sociology teaching in the state and at the national level is responding to the need?

**BKN:** In this context, there is a need to reconstruct courses in sociology to face the challenges of modern society without compromising the basic courses related to universal concepts, theories, and methods. This is an era of competition, specialization, and micro-specialization. We can prepare sociology students to meet these challenges if we construct and teach courses based on specialization. For example, we should frame a course on the sociology of management, and a student should opt for this course from the first semester to the last semester. This could include one paper each semester on topics such as the sociology of management, industrial sociology, sociology of organization, and research methodology. Similar efforts can be made in other fields like the sociology of health, sociology of communication, sociology of law, etc., according to societal needs. This type of teaching would provide a cognitive understanding of both theoretical and applied knowledge of sociology. Students will be more employable when they graduate with such an understanding of micro-specialized fields. I highlighted this idea in my book "Sociology and Sociologists in India: Perspectives from the North-West."

**GNR:** Besides reconstructing sociology courses, what should be done by Indian sociologists in today's changing times?

**BKN:** There is a need to make improvements and innovate to analyze changing realities with new perspectives, concepts, methods, and cognitive understanding. Regional sociologies in India have been overlooked by those who focus on expanding global and national sociology. Therefore, empirical studies are needed to understand the dynamics of regional reality, which can then be linked to national and global sociology. This will help generate new concepts, theories, and methods relevant to the context. Moreover, looking at the needs of the present society, for example, more infrastructure projects in the country mean more work for sociologists as they are needed to carry out feasibility and impact studies. The corporate sector depends on market surveys. It wants to understand people's needs and then develop and market its products. Sociology is a field which will fill the gap between planners, administrators, government, the corporate sector, non-government organizations (NGOs), philanthropists and the people.

**GNR:** Teaching sociology in the mother tongue has become the need of the hour. What is your take on this?

**BKN:** This issue may be seen at two levels: one at the policy level and the other at the higher professional learning level. At the policy level, NEP 2020 also ensured that no single language is made a compulsion for multilingualism and that Indian languages should be promoted, even as the 1986 policy gave the "three-language formula" to be implemented in secondary education. Students will be allowed to study in their mother tongue or the language they wish to work on. As earlier, we could see that bilingual languages were mostly seen in the education system, but for now, this policy will be promoting multilingualism to promote national unity. Teaching all languages will be enhanced through innovative and experimental methods. Students can learn Indian languages, English, and foreign languages such as Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Russian, etc.

Regarding teaching sociology, there are two sociologies in India, identified as the English medium elitist and the vernacular, where local languages are used for teaching. Those who teach in their mother tongue always suffer from the nonavailability of literature in the vernacular language and the lack of teachers for the local language. Sociology may be taught in the mother tongue at the school level for all sorts of students who may or may not continue with higher education in sociology. However, sociology should be taught in English for

higher education, the world language at a broader level. There are two main reasons: one, as mentioned above, there is a paucity of literature in the local language. We cannot strengthen our language without learning other languages. Second, today is a time of hope, and there is a generation full of aspirations. One may find their enthusiasm not only in teaching and research but also in participating and contributing papers in national and international seminars and conferences and getting a place in the academic activities of regional, national, and international associations and institutions. Therefore, if we want to be relevant, then all we need to do is understand and pursue these hopes and aspirations through teaching in the international language. Nowadays, we are living in a competitive era of globalization. In this context, those who want to pursue higher education learn French, German, English, Spanish, etc. Those engaged in the export-import business learn Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Russian, etc. This is the reality, and efforts should be made contextually. Moreover, one may learn three languages very easily from childhood. Looking at the cultural diversity, India deserves multilanguage teaching and learning in higher education.

**GNR:** You have been writing extensively in English and Hindi medium, bringing sociology into public focus. I see in you a public sociologist who sets readers thinking about how sociological perspectives can give a holistic understanding of issues. When did you start writing in Hindi, and what was your inspiration?

**BKN:** Public Sociology is an attempt to explore what a truly committed, engaged sociology should look like in the twenty-first century. Having studied in my mother tongue Hindi, I realized it is difficult to communicate or articulate the original writings available in English and other Western languages to the Hindi readers. Responding to the growing gap between sociological writings in Hindi, I started writing in Hindi. First, I was asked by NCERT to write a textbook for class XI. I have written a book on *Introducing Sociology* both in English and Hindi, whose co-author was S. B. Singh. Recently, Rawat Publications released its new edition, including twelve new chapters, which I exclusively wrote. Later, I published a very significant textbook on *Indian Sociological Thought* again in both Hindi and English. Similarly, Haryana Sahitya Academy published *Samaj Shastra Parichay* (in Hindi), and books on the sociology of sanitation were also published in both English and Hindi. Generally, students of Hindi/Punjabi, etc. regional

languages, misunderstand and fail to express themselves properly in the absence of relevant books in their languages. We could not make sense of such failures. In this context, we should make public sociology a visible and legitimate enterprise by writing in regional languages to engage multiple publics in multiple ways in the diversity of culture in India and, thereby, strengthen the discipline as a whole in the local languages. This is what Michael Burawoy highlights in his writings, which have helped to reshape the theory and practice of sociology across the Western world.

**GNR:** It is more than ten years since you formally retired from university service. But I have seen that you have been so busy during this period, travelling widely, being invited by many institutions to take on new responsibilities, and continuously working in academic capacities. How do you feel about this?

**BKN:** I love my discipline, family, friends, and colleagues and much more meeting with them. Therefore, I travel widely in India and abroad on my academic and personal visits. It gives me great satisfaction and happiness. I learn a lot not only by visiting the places but also by interacting with them, like doing sociology. Many scholars of the academic institutions invite me, but during my visit, they like my stay with their family instead of staying in the guest house or the hotel. Prof. R.S. Sandhu invited me as a visiting professor at GND University Amritsar as soon as he learned that I was retired. All my colleagues, like my friends Paramjit Singh, Jasmit Sandhu, Gurprit Bal, and others in the department, treated me like a family member. It continues till now with my several visits to different places, and I am receiving love and affection from everywhere. Though I left the editorship of the ISS Hindi Journal, I have taken the responsibility to bring out volumes of the papers published in the journal, and I coordinated seven edited books, including my edited volume on *Indian sociologists*. These volumes were edited by Anand Kumar, Paramjit Singh, Rajiv Gupta, Vivek Kumar, Naresh Bhargav (co-editor Jyoti Sidana), and Asheesh Kumar, whose all-series editor was ISS former president Abha Chauhan.

**GNR:** Tell us about your experience with the Indian Sociological Society (ISS), one of the country's oldest societies.

I have never been formally associated with the Indian Sociological Society (ISS), although many of its Presidents, Secretaries, MC members and Editors

of the Sociological Bulletin, have been my personal friends. However, I have been close to the ISS since my JNU days. Prof. Y. Singh asked all the research scholars to join ISS. J. S. Gandhi, Anand Kumar, myself and all became members of the society and also attended the All-India Sociological Conference held at the BHU Varanasi in 1974 and continue till today. I have been involved in ISS activities all the time whenever society needs me. I made several members of the society in the pursuance of Prof. B. S Baviskar of Delhi University who used to give me books for the review in the Sociological Bulletin. Similarly, I have been keenly involved in the activities of the All-India Sociological conferences held at Jaipur, Udaipur, Gorakhpur, Jammu, Amritsar, Hisar, Delhi (JNU), Chennai, Srinagar etc. and also, World Congress of Sociology at Delhi. Once in 1989, ISS could not get the venue for the All-India Sociological Conference when Prof. B.R. Chauhan was president and Partha N. Mukherji was Secretary. Prof. M. N. Panini (treasurer of ISS) asked me to hold the conference in Haryana. At that time, Rohtak University was new and didn't have the infrastructure. Therefore, I convinced Prof. M.L. Sharma to hold the conference at Hisar. He agreed and organized the conference. Similarly, I have been committed in one way or the other in the activities of the ISS. I was unanimously elected president of the North-West Indian Sociological Association (NWISA). I published a book on Sociology and Sociologists in India: Perspectives from North-West (2022). My two books are in the process of publication which cover perspectives from Indian Sociology. These are Sociology in India: Regions and Histories (Vol. I) and Sociology in India: Theories and Themes (Vol. II). I was also the editor of ISS Hindi Journal *Bhartiya Samajshastra Sameeksha* from 2014 to 2021. Recently, I have coordinated to bring out 7 ISS Hindi volumes based on papers published in ISS Hindi Journal *Bhartiya Samajshastra Sameeksha*. In 2019, ISS honoured me to present the Life-Time Achievement Award.

**GNR:** That is why, even after retirement, you are still working...

**BKN:** True. I am still engaged in reading and writing even after retirement. I edited the ISS Hindi journal *Bhartiya Samajshastra Sameeksha* from 2014 to 2021. I published books on Sociology and Sociologists in India: Perspectives from the North-West (2022) and edited a volume on Indian Sociologists: Conversations (2024). Recently, I have published three edited volumes (co-edited with Kameshwar Choudhary), namely Indian Sociology (Springer: 2023), Culture Change in India (Routledge: 2024) and Modernity, Globalization and Social Stratification (Rawat:2024).

**GNR:** What challenges do sociologists in India envisage in the era of globalization? What are the current issues in sociology now? What is the current scene in India and the world?

**BKN:** The hegemonizing tendency of globalization leads to a loss of meaning and an erosion of identity for non-Western societies. This results in a resurrection of roots and a search for identity, reflecting a process of traditionalization accompanied by a revivalist syndrome. However, this tendency is not confined to the non-West. Americanization is resisted even by Europeans, particularly the French. Sometimes, the response to modernity takes the form of cultural revival, which also results in the reinvention of tradition. This phenomenon leads not only to religious fundamentalism but also to the pursuit of religious freedom. Above all, religion has become an instrument of politics to gain power.

Western ideals are falsely established as universal, overriding a local tradition, which reflects “cultural imperialism.” We have been mentally and psychologically colonized by “cultural imperialism,” particularly regarding products such as medicine. This poses a significant challenge in the face of increasing aspirations in the competitive world of globalization. Therefore, there are several current issues in sociology now that focus on the challenges to our composite culture and democratic values, including issues of rural-urban migration within the nation and abroad, corporate domination, and more. Additionally, the dominance of the state is shifting as market forces increase. Social sciences frequently took the perspective of society’s poor and disadvantaged in the past, but this has changed recently with the increasing dominance of capitalism. For example, Europe and North America are under pressure to remove welfare programs, and India is also moving in the same direction. Consequently, the state is moving towards privatization. International relations, such as those between India and the USA, and India and Canada, are changing. Overall, there are challenges to enlightenment thinking and exploring the possibility of achieving peace and development in a competitive world. Otherwise, we will face situations of war and unrest in public life.

**GNR:** Before we conclude, I have one last question. What future do you visualize for sociology in India?

**BKN:** Sociology helps us to imagine alternative futures that can change the world for the better. It provides an illuminating look at topics of concern to everyone at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in times of globalization and internationalization. In his book *Sociology of Giving*, Helmuth Berking questions the view that our societies are dominated by individualism and explores the contemporary interplay between self-interest and the common good. In my view, the sociology of giving helps people understand the consequences and applications of new technologies, such as Digital Innovation, Information Technology (IT), Artificial Intelligence (AI), etc. Overall, sociology offers multiple perspectives on society, informs social policy, and supports us in holding our politicians and media accountable. This depends upon the concentrated and committed efforts of sociologists in practising and expanding the disciplinary boundaries of sociology to the public to engage with non-academic audiences. In his book *Public Sociology*, Michael Burawoy argued that sociology should speak beyond the university, engaging with social movements and deepening the understanding of the historical and social contexts in which they exist. Therefore, sociology has a very bright future in India and elsewhere, given the relevance and practical utility of the discipline. Hence, sociology does matter as we move forward.

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**Book Review: *Sociology of Food***

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**Madhu Nagla, *Sociology of Food*. New Delhi: Rawat publications, 2020, 288 pp., Rs.1195 (Hardcover). ISBN: 978-81-316-1122-7.**

--Kalla Naga Aditya

Madhu Nagla (2020)'s book 'Sociology of Food' has dealt with a range of issues related to food: theoretical orientations, emerging trends, food and dietary practices in India, food consumption, relation of food with women, food and family issues, food habits and culture, food, health and nutrition, food and its relation with disease, genetically modified seeds, technological interventions in food sector, food safety and labelling, globalization of food practices and a critical analysis of food and nutrition policies. The author has deftly addressed the central themes of sociology of food in 16 chapters of this book. This work reflects how our basic aspects of life such as health, identity and status are inherently linked with our practices centred around food.

This work explores the profound connections between food and fundamental aspects of life, including health, identity, and status. It argues that the field of sociology has neglected the study of food and emphasizes the importance of shifting this focus. Through the lens of power, the author reveals how food shapes and reflects identities. Using George Simmel's work, the author highlights the ceremonial role of food in religion, emphasizing the inherent structure within the act of sharing a meal. Simmel's insightful perspective on individualized actions within a communal setting further underscores the unique nature of sharing a dining table.

The author delves into the commodification of food, examining the intricate interplay of language, symbols, and food within capitalist structures. Concepts like appropriation, structural changes driven by technological advancements, and the fragmentation of produce into processed foods illustrate the pervasive influence of capitalism on our understanding of food.

Identity construction through food is another key theme, as the author explores how individuals navigate their place within dominant societal views. Notably,

the book highlights the significant global contribution of women in agriculture despite their low wages.

The relationship between food and health is examined, with a focus on public distribution systems and food adulteration. Additionally, the discussion extends to processed and globalized food, addressing food labelling and its implications. In India, out of twenty famines which occurred, the Bengal famine of 1943, caused by WWII and administrative failures, killed 1.5 million people despite adequate overall food production (Nagla.M,2020, p.238). The author traces history of famines in India briefly and how mismanagement of food by governments directly created artificial famines in India. However, unlike K.T.Achaya, who traces history of Indian food specifically in his work 'The story of our food', this work does not focus its attention on how food travelled across the globe. Tracing identities through food, taste and cultural history have not been given emphasis because of the diverse aspects with which the book engages.

The book draws from Bourdieu's work *La Distinction* (1979), subtitled *A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* and uses it to address the theoretical aspects in sociology of food (Nagla.M, 2020, p.33). The author's attempt to address the various dimensions of Sociology of food in a systematic manner is interesting and informative. The sociology of food and eating is gaining traction due to several factors. Firstly, the growing awareness of nutrition and media portrayals of global poverty have highlighted the importance of healthy food choices and the dangers of eating disorders and obesity. Secondly, the professionalization of nutrition and dietetics, combined with the focus on preventive medicine, has led to increased interest in the social aspects of food and eating. Additionally, globalization and the merging of different cuisines have sparked renewed interest in ethnic food. Concerns about 'fast food's' negative impact on health and food security, along with the rising prevalence of lifestyle diseases linked to excessive sugar and salt consumption, further emphasize the need for a sociological understanding of food and eating. This field examines various theoretical perspectives, including anthropology,

history, and postmodernism, to analyse food from cultural, semiotic, historical, and social identity viewpoints. It also considers critiques and presents alternative approaches to studying the sociology of food in light of scientific advancements that have revolutionized food consumption and our understanding of food and diet's cultural roots.

Food habits are deeply connected to culture and social structure. The "circuit of culture" framework helps analyse food's meaning within a cultural context, considering production, regulation, representation, identity, and consumption. People often use food to connect with their cultural or ethnic identity, and immigrant communities commonly use food practices to retain their heritage. The chapter 'Food, Food Habits, and Culture' covers cultural and geographical factors which influence food preferences, leading to distinct patterns within different groups. Food taboos and preferences are explored in relation to social structures, highlighting the cultural meanings and beliefs that shape these practices. The chapter on 'Food, Health, and Nutrition: The Interface' raises concerns about the rise of pre-cooked and processed food, which contribute to malnutrition, under-nutrition, and various health disorders like obesity. The imbalance between food intake and energy expenditure leads to either starvation or obesity, with both having severe consequences for health. Deficiencies in vitamins and minerals due to poor dietary choices can cause various diseases, while excessive junk food consumption can trigger lifestyle diseases. The chapter emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex relationship between food, culture, and health.

The surge of genetically modified (GM) food has ignited global debate. Despite its contribution to increased food production, concerns regarding potential health and environmental risks remain. This has led to a surge in demand for organic food, perceived as both safer and more sustainable. The chapter "Organic and Genetically Modified Food in India" examines both food types, highlighting the trade-offs and ethical considerations surrounding each. Preference for organic food often stems from its perceived health benefits, sustainability, and lack of harmful chemicals. However, the debate

surrounding GM food continues, encompassing concerns ranging from health risks to economic and ecological impacts. This chapter scrutinizes both sides of the issue, providing a nuanced perspective on the intricate relationship between food, technology, and our health.

While briefly mentioning tribal food patterns by Shah and Dwivedi in Srikakulam, the book refrains from a detailed exploration of food and tribal communities. Similarly, the complex relationship between food and land and its inherent debates are not addressed due to the work's broad scope encompassing various aspects of the sociology of food. Also, the work does not focus much of its attention on consumerism. While traditional views attribute consumerism solely to status and conspicuous consumption, some argue that Romanticism, with its emphasis on dreams and fantasy, plays a crucial role in motivating consumer behaviour. Though not consciously designed to promote consumerism, Romanticism instilled values like empathy, dreams, and fantasy that evolved into major motivators for consumption. Marketers exploit these desires by linking products to idealized lifestyles, creating a bridge between the consumer's reality and their imagined ideal, an idea which is similar to Theodor Adorno's Culture industry. Products like vacations, beers, and weight-loss products become gateways to desired fantasy worlds. Advertisements often reinforce this connection through dramatic before-and-after portrayals, appealing to the desire to escape reality and achieve an idealized self. Ultimately, consumerism is driven not just by status and conspicuous consumption, but also by the romanticized dreams and fantasies that the market cleverly exploits (Mcintosh,1996, p.51). The author has not explored this dimension of consumption in her work. Also, the author has not explored much on how foods which are made inferior by the dominant classes are again appropriated and presented in an aesthetic way which suits the tastes of dominant classes. This aspect, what Michael Symons calls 'Reflexive cuisine' would have been even more interesting.

Food technology ensures our food is safe, flavourful, and nutritious by analysing its physical, microbiological, and chemical makeup. Technological

advancements have revolutionized food production, impacting everything from mass production to delivery, fuelling the industry's growth. This chapter 'Food and Technology' explores the critical role technology plays in food production, processing, preservation, and distribution.

Food safety is a complex and multifaceted issue with significant economic and social implications. To guarantee consumer health, stricter implementation and revision of food safety parameters and labelling are essential. In developing countries, adulteration is a significant concern, and food safety regulations are becoming increasingly complex internationally, including more stringent record-keeping and labelling requirements. The chapter "Food Safety and Food Labelling" offers a comprehensive examination of these issues, delving into the current state of information dissemination via labelling policies in developing countries and addressing the challenges posed by risk and food hazards. Although, the author does not stress on the ongoing movement of Farm to Table, one can understand about the form of capitalism which happens through processed foods.

The chapter 'Food and Nutrition Policy: A Critical Analysis' analyses the history and effectiveness of food management policies in India, critically evaluating their impact on various communities facing hunger, malnutrition, and other food-related challenges. It explores policies that aim to increase food availability, improve access and distribution, enhance market participation, and tackle child malnutrition through school programs. Focusing specifically on marginalized populations who rely heavily on efficient food distribution for their basic needs, the chapter analyses the challenges of reaching them and critiques India's current food and nutrition policies, highlighting both their strengths and weaknesses. This comprehensive and critical analysis offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for improving food security and nutrition in India, making it particularly interesting for anyone interested in food policy, development, and social justice in the context of India.

Finally, the author ends the work with the last chapter which focuses on the constant conditioning of taste by social media and the ever-increasing influence of internet. The author analyses the impact of globalisation on food and how the Food, now a global commodity, transcends national borders through international trade systems and the movement of people and ideas. This globalization has fuelled a new culinary consciousness, blurring local and national identities. Examining food at a global level reveals its profound impact on our world, connecting the global and local, mind and body, and beyond. Overall, this work provides a comprehensive overview of the field, offering a valuable foundation for further research and scholarship in the sociology of food. This work explores the profound connections between food and fundamental aspects of life, including health, identity, and status. It argues that the field of sociology has neglected the study of food and emphasizes the importance of shifting this focus.

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