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Editor's report December 2025

It is with great pleasure that we present the 21st issue of Explorations, which brings together a diverse and thought-provoking collection of ten research articles, one reflective conversation, and two book reviews. This issue engages with critical themes in contemporary Indian sociology, spanning gender, caste, tribal studies, digital inequality, customary law, social movements, and governance. The contributions in this volume reflect a strong interdisciplinary orientation, drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, policy analysis, and theoretical critique to examine the complex social realities of India and its diaspora. A reflective conversation between Indira Munshi and Manisha Rao traverses the academic-policy interface, facilitating a dialogical interrogation of how sociological epistemologies can inform, and be reshaped by, the practical imperatives and institutional logics of public policy formulation.

This issue of Explorations presents a compelling and cohesive collection of articles that interrogate the complex interplay between structural inequalities, cultural norms, individual agency, and transnational solidarities across diverse Indian and diasporic contexts. Thematically, the issue coheres around a central theme: the navigation of dignity is termed prestige, honour, self-respect, autonomy, agency, or justice within and against systems of caste, patriarchy, colonialism, and development. The article by Kumar & Das provides a powerful conceptual anchor. Their critique of the Arya Samaj, framed through the lived experience of Dalits in Jammu, establishes "prestige, honour and self-respect" as the critical analytical lens. This framework resonates powerfully throughout the

subsequent papers, each exploring what happens when these principles are denied, negotiated, or reclaimed.

Several contributions delve into the enduring and adaptable architecture of caste. Ambewadikar extends the analysis beyond India's borders, applying an Ambedkarian perspective to the urgent political and legal debate in the United Kingdom. This transnational view complements Chennur's examination of the promises and pitfalls of decentralised power through Panchayati Raj Institutions within India. Both papers critically assess institutional mechanisms designed to combat discrimination, questioning their efficacy in the face of deeply embedded social hierarchies. A robust and interlinked cluster of papers engages with gendered realities. The paper by Niumai & Rajora, "Bridging the Digital Divide," introduces the pivotal concept of "digital learning disability," a structural condition that systematically disables access. This work forms a critical bridge with other gender-focused studies: It directly complements Biswas's work on "invisibilised labour," as the pandemic-era burden of household chores is a primary mechanism that creates the "digital absence" of girls. It contrasts with Rahman's findings on women entrepreneurs, who negotiate the domestic sphere for professional space, highlighting how the same sphere can be a barrier or a platform. It adds a layer of technological specificity to the deep-seated cultural norms observed by Kichu among Ao Naga women.

The inclusion of Shaji & Panda's article on the "Solar Mamas" program introduces a vital counter-narrative and expands the issue's scope into the realm of transnational solidarity and state-facilitated empowerment. This paper provides a crucial dialectic: It stands in productive tension with many of the other studies. While papers like Kichu's and Niumai & Rajora's detail how women internalise or are constrained by local patriarchal norms, "Solar Mamas" presents a model where semi-literate, elderly women are positioned as agents of technological change and international collaboration. It connects with Singh's and Prasad & Karla's focus on resources (land, forest, energy) and community sovereignty, but

from a state-sponsored, developmentalist perspective that seeks to empower through skill transfer rather than resist dispossession. It raises critical questions about the nature of "empowerment," "agency," and "capacity". Issues of land, autonomy, and environmental justice are powerfully addressed by Prasad & Karla (Bhumkāl rebellion) and Singh (Mizoram land policies). Two book reviews by Muhammed E. K. and Mridugunjan Deka engage critically with recent scholarly publications, offering analytical assessments that situate the texts within broader disciplinary debates and contemporary socio-political contexts.

This issue of Explorations offers a rich tapestry of scholarly insights into the pressing social issues of our time. It underscores the importance of grounded, interdisciplinary research in understanding and addressing inequalities, marginalization, and social change in India and beyond. We extend our gratitude to all contributors for sharing their work with us, and to our readers for their continued engagement. We welcome future submissions and feedback to further enrich the journal's discourse.

Thank you for your continued support.

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Conversation: Indra Munshi in conversation with Manisha Rao

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Indra Munshi in Conversation with Manisha Rao

[Transcript of Interview held in August 2025]

MR: Thank you Prof. Indra Munshi for agreeing to this Conversation initiated by Prof. Maitrayee Chaudhuri, President of the Indian Sociological Society, to record the experiences of senior scholars across India.

Brief Introduction: Professor Indra Munshi, was former professor and faculty at the Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai. She joined the department in 1981 and retired in 2010, spanning over three decades. She taught courses on Agrarian society in India, sociology of environment, sociology of development, Sociology of Karl Marx, Methodology of social research, sociology of Tourism and so on at the department. She also taught courses in universities abroad. She worked as director of a team for the UGC-EPW project on academic writing and publication during 2010 to 2011. Her major book publications include Patrick Geddes Contribution to Sociology and Urban Planning: Vision of a City, published in 2022 by Routledge, Taylor Francis UK, The Adivasi Question: Issues of Land, Forest and Livelihood (edited). On the Waterfront, Reclaiming Mumbai's Open Spaces jointly with architect P.K. Das (2011). And Adivasi Life Stories: Context, Constraints, Choices (2007). She has contributed a number of seminal articles as well. She has been awarded research scholarships by the ICSSR as well as a fellowship under the German academic exchange program DAAD for her research at Hamburg on the role of Sir Dietrich Brandis in India. She has been on visiting fellowships across the country as well as abroad. She has been on academic bodies such as the executive editor of the Indian Journal of Secularism, former chairperson of the Institutional Review Board at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, former member of the Management Council and the Senate of the University of Mumbai, former member of the Governing Board of Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

MR: Welcome, Professor Munshi, to this conversation and thank you for accepting our invitation.

IM: Thank you, Professor Maitrayee Chaudhuri and thanks to the ISS for initiating these interviews. and thank you, Manisha. It's good to.talk to a friend, a colleague about my journey in sociology. Yes, it has been a long one and it continues. So, I am glad to speak with you about how it has been both in the department and outside. Yes, I joined the department in 1981.

MR: Would you like to tell us what brought you into sociology? Who and what influenced you into Sociology after having done English literature, I believe, at the undergrad level in Calcutta?

IM: Yes, I did. In a way, both the city and the subject really prepared me for taking up sociology more seriously. Calcutta was a very, very vibrant, happening city. When I was there, which was around 1968 to 1971 before I came here. Calcutta had always been extremely vibrant, you know, from morchas and protests to Greek tragedies being staged and Bertolt Brecht and Vietnam happening in such a big way that all of us were drawn into that experience. It was extremely lively and thought-provoking. It was not just entertainment and enjoyment, it was serious thinking, and we were all drawn into it. I was extremely happy to do English literature, which I will come to later, which actually, in a way, prepared me, which has very positively shaped my work and the manner in which I look at and practice sociology. The other big reason for joining sociology in Bombay was my brother, Professor Surendra Munshi whom sociologists know. At that time there was no sociology department in Calcutta. I don't know how he heard about sociology, it was a new subject, so he went to Agra, was extremely appreciative of his teachers there, and was very enthused about sociology. English literature sensitized me to many things, but it didn't quite answer the questions I was confronted with. You know, the society was sort of expressing itself, various sections were actually becoming very active and raising issues and questions to which I didn't find a direct answer in English literature. And he suggested that I come to Bombay and join the department of sociology because he had met Professor Desai in one of the Indian sociological conferences early on. Dr. Desai was a much loved and popular sociologist at that time. So, I decided to come to the department in Bombay and just walked into Dr. Desai's office and I said, Dr. Desai, I am Surendra Munshi's sister. He has met you, and has sent me to you and I want to study sociology. He said, oh, you do. Here take this one book, read it and come back to me after seven days. Okay. What is sociology? by Alex Inkles. So I read it and it was easy. He chatted with me in his very friendly and nice way and he said okay go to the office and get yourself admitted and there I was and little did I realize that I would spend my entire academic life there. I joined as an MA student and I retired as a teacher there. It was wonderful. I didn't move out. I just couldn't leave that department. I didn't want to move out.

MR: Prof. Munshi, the substantive body of your research, has been on the Adivasi question and it was probably also part of your PhD research. So would you share with us what were the methods that you used and what are the sources that you used in your research work?

IM: Yes, that experience was something that never left me.. I still go back and I still write short pieces. But anyway, to that later, I went because one of our seniors, my teachers, Dr. Manorama Savur, did a very small project on the Warlis, just for a 15-day field trip, and she took some of us there with no special agenda. She said, let's just go and see what an Adivasi region looks like. I had never been to one. So there we were. I mean, I had seen urban poverty because I had worked in Dharavi during my MA days. I think for a whole year we would go charged with Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich and teach them. They wanted to learn English. So we went there, a friend of mine, Dr. Dossal, a colleague at that time in the history department and I. We went there and we, well, I don't know what we taught them. But anyway, we learnt a lot. So I'd seen urban poverty but this was something else. This was fear and silence and poverty and stories of oppression and exploitation that one had never heard or seen. So those 15 days obviously left a very deep impression on me, and I decided that I would go back and I would study this whole situation much more closely.

I came back and I requested Dr. Desai to guide me. He said yes, he would do that. I was his last PhD student. He loved his students. He called us his young friends. Yes, I did combine many sources and I think that shaped the work that I continued with. I went there, lived all together for about six to seven months and I had my questionnaire and I had the usual paraphernalia of research and taped interviews. But these interviews became longer and longer and more in-depth and I began to learn to do research. I was familiar with the kind of anthropological work that had been done. Observation was just so important. So I kept, of course, a journal, I would note down everything. I recorded, you know, those days you had those tapes. Half the time they worked, they didn't work, you were petrified and all that and it scared them a little bit, but assuring them and all that, I interviewed some 200 families. So that was part of the field work that I did. One knows how one works in the field, but one is never prepared for it. One is never prepared for it and somehow, maybe we'll talk about it later, maybe all of us should have prepared ourselves better.

That was a great learning for me, I collected material. I tried to keep a distance, which I did.

But you know, all that one reads in books about no feelings and no emotions, objectivity and all that, a lot has been written and said about it by other scholars. What I experienced very much was, of course, empathy for the people I was working with and fear. My fear was just so great because it was a situation where, you know, I chose a village which was known for its very strong land lordism. People had come from U.P. acquired hundreds of acres

of land and the kind of oppression and exploitation that had happened was unthinkable. Films like Ankur and others we had just seen and I was literally terrified every evening of being killed or whatever chased away and worse. So, it was a very powerful experience. I stuck it out. From time to time one would hear things like, write, write about us, tell everybody who lives in palaces and who lives in hearts, tell people we are starving. So that was a tremendous encouragement to write.

I didn't want to see them as though they had no history. I was aware of what had happened to the forest and therefore, had happened to the tribals. I was aware of that and I did for a whole year. I would go once in 8 days, 10 days, whenever I could, to the Maharashtra state archives. I spent a whole year there, I taught myself to do archival work. And we have a gold mine here.They have kept it extremely badly, by now I think it has almost disintegrated, at least a lot of the documents. So the so-called native newspapers and every collector who had been in that district, their reports, weekly reports, so all that was available to me. I started looking at the history of forests and so on.

MR: I think that sort of links to your work on the environment and the colonial forest policies. I think in 1994, you were awarded a German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD Fellowship to work on Dietrich Brandis?

IM: Yes. I got into the colonial forest policy and of course post-independence the same policy which by and large continued. It had a very negative impact and I read this day after day when I read these reports. They were deprived of this right, that right. I would come down, this is in Elphinstone College, sit in the canteen and feel desperate. I said, my God, how long will this go on? Why don't people protest? And lo and behold, after some weeks, I find there is a major tribal protest. At last, people have asserted themselves. You know, that is what research does to you. One is so immersed in what one is doing. In the '90s, I remember there was this expansion in the kind of work that was being done on environmental histories. I got the fellowship. And there was this whole cupboard full and I had three months to work like crazy. People would ask me, you are a sociologist, why are you studying a German forester? Dietrich Brandis was a great man. Anyway, then I wrote about him and of course studies had started appearing. Several people wrote about forests and what was happening to tribal communities. I wanted to go back. I did go back, I knew the region, I knew the people, I knew some of the non-political organizations working there and they all helped and I then tried a method- life history method.

MR: So that led to your work on the Adivasi question? You've brought out two volumes, right? One is the Adivasi Life Stories and the other is the edited volume on Adivasi.

IM: The Adivasi question. Yes, yes. Maybe when we talk about the EPW experience, I will tell you how the Adivasi question materialized. But my own study was, I don't know, I was trying out this method of life stories. Again, I was very impressed by the work that was being done in Germany on collecting life stories because they were looking for people who had been sympathetic and active in the Nazi times and they were beginning to collect orally the histories of people's lives and I was very impressed by that. I don't know how successful I was, but I was very satisfied that at least some lives had been recorded. Under great constraints, people make some choices, but I mean, these choices are very limited and extremely difficult, very difficult. However, just to tell you one little thing which gladdened my heart very much, is when an Adivasi woman whom I had interviewed, was a very active and courageous woman. When I showed her the book, she said, okay, I'm glad. So this book is about me. I said you are there. I was told she'd keep it under her pillow and whoever she thought was important enough came to meet her, she would say, you know, this book is about me. A person came from the city and wrote this book about it. So that's very gratifying. I learnt a lot from that whole experience.

MR: Your other area of work has been on Patrick Geddes, the first professor and head of the Department of Sociology in 1919. You got an ICSSR fellowship in 2013. Could you tell us a bit about that? How did you get interested in Patrick Geddes' work?

IM: Yes, considering nobody was talking about it, nobody ever even mentioned his name. Except for that painting in the Department. We had three very lovely portraits in our seminar room. and I was very impressed by them… have you seen that face closely? It's a very intense expression, very sharp penetrating eyes and such a sensitive face. A very handsome man. I said, who is he and what has he done and why don't we know about him because others we knew about. I just looked around in the library, there was one volume, which Professor Ferreira and Professor Jha had brought out, quite a good volume. But beyond that, I never heard his name mentioned in the department, I didn't see him included in the syllabus, by then I was already teaching. So I just started looking out, and there was really a huge world of work and writing, waiting to be explored. So I wrote that article in EPW and I must say the response I got was just wonderful, it's just an article for which I had done a fair amount of work, but really, just on the surface. So when that article was so appreciated and here I must mention, apart from the volume,

the two persons who had actually mentioned and written about Patrick Geddes were Ramachandra Guha and Shiv Vishwanathan. They had written articles. So these are the only two sociologists.When I saw that he was the head of the department, I said, he certainly must be given the place he deserves. I don't know. I still don't know Manisha why he just didn't appear on the sociological scene. He was a difficult person, but that doesn't matter. He worked on many things. He seems to have studied sociology, economics, geography, and urban planning. He seemed to have done so much. But it was worth exploring and in India, not much had been done. Then I got this scholarship for two years. I worked very hard on collecting material, and I went to Edinburgh, and that was wonderful. In the archives there was a gold mine, which was well preserved, well looked after, and it was a pleasure to work there. They did everything, and I'm very grateful to them. So, I collected, and these are also unpublished material. Letters, for example, his personal letters, his communications with Tagore with JC Bose and Professor Radha Kamal Mukherjee. The only man who really wrote and gave Patrick Gedde's his due on the sociological scene was Professor Radha Kamal Mukherjee. He was talking about ecology and subsequently his work was planning cities with people and nature as the focus. That was missing. And in fact, I wish we had taken Patrick Geddes more seriously. Actually, we would have been pioneers in both environmental studies, ecology and urban ecology.

Living in Mumbai, I mean, we really could have, but we missed that. Mine was just an effort to revive him. What was so surprising was architects knew about him, geographers knew about him. They wrote to me, discussed the book wherever they were. But sociologists did not show the kind of enthusiasm that even urban planners or architects or as I said, geographers did. Well, this was an effort and I hope it has borne some fruit. I found him central to an ecological perspective on urban planning and he placed it at the core of sociology. What for example universities could do to actually prepare citizens for urban regeneration, restoration, how were we to improve our cities? Everybody had a role in it, in making healthy, livable, beautiful cities. I contacted people who knew him well and that was primary material. It was fascinating how much he did. He wrote some 30 reports, detailed reports for whoever invited him-the Maharajas or the governments, wherever the authorities invited him, he would go and prepare voluminous reports on what was wrong and what could be improved. I liked this approach. I was myself going through a very difficult time in my personal life, very low and Covid came. So that was another horrible experience and there was Patrick Geddes, giving me all the support and encouragement by his own example. He was in India when his wife died, when he heard about his son's death during the war. Research is not what you do from, you know, 10 to 4 and then you live your

life. Research becomes part of your life. Just as I learned from Adivasis and it became me. So I learnt from Geddes and so many others who went along with him. So it enriches you in so many different ways.

MR: Your current area of research seems now to have tended towards tourism, right? Can you elaborate on that?

IM: Yes, I could. I had also initiated a course on it. We were the first department to introduce a full-fledged MA course on Sociology of Environment. It was very popular. Many colleges would approach me and we would plan their syllabi and teaching and things like that. And of course the external situation was where the environment was becoming a hot topic, an important topic and everybody was in a way pushed to recognize it. People had been talking about it.When few people were talking about it, Darryl D'Monte would tell us, how scary the scene was, what was going on at the global level.

OK, so why tourism?, because in a way it all ties up - the environment, human beings, communities, if these are central to our concern, nature, the whole ecosystem, environment and communities, people, so that's what we are engaged with. And I began to realize that mass tourism was doing great harm, to both, to communities, although it seems and it is, of course, a source of financial benefits to governments, to communities. Everyone wants tourists, but the manner in which it has been developed, this industry has now come to be so destructive that we have to take note of it. It is part of this very consumerist society where everything is marketed, marketable, everything is a commodity whether that is nature, fragile ecosystems or communities, their social norms, practices, everything cannot become commodity, everything is not for sale.

It was not so visible. We thought, tourists go, they are not always responsible and governments promote tourism and it's a good thing. I mean, you know, it's like an inroad into both nature and people's lives in the long run. So short term, long run, responsibility, ethics, some principles, some boundaries, some checks. All that was what I wanted to explore and see. Where can it be controlled, restored to a healthy interaction between people from different regions and cultures. It has opened up so much, sometimes with great awareness, sometimes with no awareness I have paid for it so I must get it, we all want instant gratification. As John Urry said, constant stimulation and instant gratification. Travelling provides that.

MR: Professor Munshi, you've been at the department for many years, first as a master's student, then as a research scholar, and then as faculty member of

the department. So could you tell us something about your experiences of the institutional space of the Department of Sociology in the University of Mumbai? What kind of interactions were there between different departments? Any memories and anecdotes that you would like to share with us?

IM: A lot, Manisha. A lot. Happy memories. Looking back, of course, I think of things we could have done better, more, but all in all good memories, when I was a student and subsequently. I think I just feel very grateful for what the department offered. When I joined, the department had teachers whom you came to know. Professor Narain was there, Professor Ferreira was there, Professor Desai was there, Dr. Savur was there, Professor Mohanty, Prof. Jha, Professor Nair was there for a little while and then he joined IIM, Ahmedabad. Prof. Momin of course. He was first a student. When I was a student I must say the environment, the atmosphere in the department was very happy. It was welcoming.

It was open. The Sociology department was an open space. Our own teachers, whom I mentioned, the senior ones, and later on some of us tried to follow that tradition. You know, their doors were never closed. They were open and here you heard people in America and Germany and Europe where you had to go through two secretaries to meet the professor. Here you just knocked, and said, could I see you? Yes. Come, sit down. We were welcome to come and discuss. For example, we had a little Friday group where Professor Ferreira would ask those who wanted to discuss things to sit and discuss issues that interested us, his specialization was integral anthropology. He belonged to the Vienna school and so he would often say, you know, the central concern of anthropology is man and we would say and woman. He said, of course, woman.

Dr. Desai's room was always full. Whichever scholar came to Bombay would come to visit him. I believe it was even nicer when the university was in Fort, because it was the city centre. The teaching departments were at Fort. Yes, yes. Mine was the first batch of students to study in Kalina. They had just shifted the teaching departments to Kalina. The department was known, Professor Ghurye, [I never met him] , Dr Desai and others also. Professor Desai's room was always full, both scholars and activists and that was wonderful, because even though we were not always part of these little group meetings, one kind of heard, so and so has come and they are talking and if you needed to go to his room, then you could be sure he would ask you to sit down there and you would be there for that one hour when Dr. Desai was discussing the world situation with this scholar and then you had to drink the tea that went around. So while you may be worried about which village to

choose and how to do my field work there, you were hearing about the world system and unequal development. But a great education.

Prof. Savor's room was a meeting place for all of us. We would go there and we were very engaged with what was happening around. It was the time of tremendous turmoil in the society and there was women's movement, student movements happening all over and feminism and Marxism and Dalit's assertion and Dalit literature. People were really influenced and impressed by this. Well, our professors had their own orientations, perspective. That was all right. But believe me, it never came in the way of their wanting to teach us and to treat us as their students. No, we just belonged to everybody and everybody belonged to us and we learnt from that. Not only that, uh we had very close interaction with the history department, with economics, with English, with physics, with geography, with Urdu. Everyone came to the department and I am sure our teachers also visited them. And there was so much interaction. We knew all these people.. We know Prof. Srinivasan from the politics department, Prof. Dastur and Usha Mehta, you know, they were part of the freedom struggle. They had worked with Gandhiji.

I still remember when my article on Patrick Geddes came out in EPW, Professor Srinivasan of the politics department sent me a note congratulating and offering his comments. It was like that. I am still in touch with Professor Dalvi who must be nearing 90, a very respected professor of Urdu. He was part of our life on the campus.

Dr. Sayyed invited the best scholars, well-known historians I mean Romila Thapar and E.P.Thompson and you know it really nurtured us. Those were very exciting, showed us what good research was all about, what concern was all about, what being engaged with one's subject and with society that you study, groups that you are looking at, what it means to engage, understand, write. We were really groomed. It was like that. I still know many of them who are there.

There were problems, there was no library, at that time they had shifted to the campus, but they didn't have a proper library, so just one floor of our own building, a block, was converted into a library. So there were just some books there, and occasionally you would have to be ready that if you wanted to pull out a book, you may actually pull out a snake.

And that actually happened. The whole campus was extremely badly planned. It was just wilderness. We also protested against that. There was a full fledged student protest demanding, we wanted the syllabus to be changed, the examination system, but it was always matters of serious concern. And I

must say this, Manisha, our teachers were never critical of that. They spoke with us, we tried to arrive at some solution, never ever has any teacher complained .They were very friendly.I think they realized and they appreciated that we were seriously concerned. We used to have debating groups, we used to have study groups. We even had a Marxist Social Science Association where we invited scholars. Many of them, of course, were Marxist but many of them not, but doing excellent work in economics, history and so on. There was a lot of thinking not just, you know, disillusionment, pessimism and rejection. We wanted to make a difference. We were in touch with street theatre groups who would come and perform on the campus. They took up issues whether it was molestation of women or it was Dalit women, working class, any issue could be discussed and understood that carried on for a long time. Gradually that kind of faded out. We all live in the larger social context, the larger society, the system, that became much less. But our department was certainly open to ideas and to people. Anyone could come and discuss. It doesn't matter what orientation, perspective, politics, it just didn't matter. So long as you were open for a dialogue, a reasonable dialogue, it was very energizing. I was very happy that I was here those days. And that continued for a very long time, till I retired.

MR: So another thing I wanted to ask you was when you were the director of the UGC, EPW, academic writing and publications program, what were your experiences? I think you were one of the pioneers in developing that and training workshops.You took workshops across the country, I believe ? The area of academic writing is a need of the hour now, right?

IM: Yes, we have all these small two credit courses on that. But Yes, Manisha, you must realize that when we were growing up in academics, you know, you actually dreamt of publishing in EPW. Krishnaraj was someone you thought of, and there was this journal and it was in our city. So EPW had this place in our lives. One respected it very much. Then of course, after Krishnaraj, Dr. Reddy took over. I had retired and I got a phone call and I was asked if I would like to take up this assignment. I immediately said yes.

Number one, working with EPW and number two, the subject itself. I had wanted to do it. Having gone through this fairly challenging situation of where you don't know how to do the nitty-gritty of research and then writing. We really weren't trained for it. Some of us knew English, but we didn't know what academic writing was all about. I had wanted to do it as part of a course. wasn't enough at all. And I would have liked to have it with our students, especially PhD, but even from MA onwards. And that didn't happen. And here I must say, I feel a deep sense of gratitude to Professor Surendra Munshi, who actually taught me the nitty-gritty of research. What it means to

have a problem, a methodology, method, what field work means. It seems in Agra, they had really trained them, but somehow we didn't train our students here as well, he guided me in this respect. Prof. Desai provided this great vision of the larger society and the world system, and of course his commitment, his very persona, his everything, his work…But the nitty-gritty of research was what Prof. Munshi provided for me.

So when Dr Reddy told me, I was delighted and I must add that this project was offered to several universities and universities did not take it up. So it came to EPW. They are supposed to publish. Now they are going back and teaching us how to write. I know how Dr. Reddy used to sit with the hard copy and I mean it was literally rewritten. They read pen marks everywhere and I would sometimes say, why don't you write the article? would be easier.

It was a team that worked. There were people from Hyderabad who were working with EPW. Then there were people from Bombay and of course Dr. Reddy and myself. I was in charge but we always worked together as in the spirit of EPW and then worked out a program. And you know that was a 6 day long program 10 to 6. These were meant for young lecturers, some readers also came, and those who had sort of somewhat advanced into their PhDs, who had gone through the first few initials. And it was wonderful, a lot of work. We gave them background reading, then we even had a sort of practice, writing an abstract, literature review, all that. And you know the comments we heard in the end was, it's like a revelation. We didn't even know that all this was involved in doing Ph.D. and writing. How to make it academic? We went to eight different universities in Bombay, in Karnataka, in Kerala, in Hyderabad, Delhi, Chandigarh, where I couldn't go but the team went. So, eight different cities, very welcome and very well organized, came back. We were exhausted, but with a great sense of satisfaction. I also learnt. There were many things which I didn't know which others were talking about, you know, since they were in the business of publishing. The team was wonderful and we had a very nice fulfilling time. So that was EPW. And after two years they also brought out eight volumes like the volume on the Adivasi Question. We selected editors, a senior scholar to bring out a volume but from the archive of the EPW, articles that were already published in the EPW. You know, we must have all gone through at least 200 to 300 articles to choose for each of these volumes. Wonderful experience. Working with EPW, working with Dr. Reddy and the whole team.

MR: So, Professor Munshi, your work is not something that is kept isolated, in the academic ivory towers. You have been very actively involved with civil society groups and NGOs in the city of Mumbai- Like Aseema, CSSS, the

Question of Cities [QOC] more recently. Can you tell us more about your work with civil society groups? How did you get involved?

IM: Yes, I have. I sort of could not treat my work as purely academic. I see a purpose in what I have studied or what I have learnt. It was strengthened in my study of Patrick Geddes, when I was working with the tribal communities, I could see how many organizations were actually making and putting themselves to just make life better for them- better wages, better education, better living. Patrick Geddes talks about what we owe to our cities, our society, and that sociology has a practical part. He actually called it sociology and civics. And civics was to prepare you for your role as a citizen. This is what the university was supposed to do, was to produce citizens who will then go out into the city and make it a more livable place, a healthier place, a more just place, a more fair, open and therefore beautiful place.

I've had it in me, and I think growing up in Calcutta, as I told you, instilled it in you, if nothing else, everyone at some time or the other, every student, even class 11 student, brought out little magazines of some essays or poems, or you were supposed to be doing other than just your subject, putting up a play, something meaningful that we thought. So I must say, I see it as a purpose. I see it as giving meaning to my life. And I always wanted to do it. I was extremely happy to retire because I knew I wanted time. I wanted to write in not just academic journals. I wanted to write for more popular reading, whether it is QOC or Scroll or the newspaper or wherever. More people should read what we have to say,whether it is education or urban issues, anything and I am doing that and I am helping an organisation which works in partnership with the municipality. They have four schools in Bandra and one school in Igatpuri, Nasik, for tribal children. So in whichever way I can, I do contribute. I meet the teachers, parents, students and of course, issues of indiscipline and even more serious problems. Just whatever concerns the children, I feel that I can contribute there and I do that, I spend more and more time with them. I feel happy doing that.

I'm happy doing an advisory role but I also write for QOC because our cities are, I mean, what does one say about the kind of development that is taking place in the cities ? It's becoming unlivable, of course, much, much more unlivable for the poor and underprivileged. There's that song, “Iss shahar mein har shaks pareshan sa kyu hai”. I ask myself how much more pareshan is the person who lives on the pavement or lives in the slum. There are so many pressing problems. We have to understand them, try to analyse them from some kind of a larger perspective, and then to offer whatever solutions we think. So that is what QOC does. P. K. Das has done excellent work, you know about the story of the promenades, the two promenades in Bandra. Then

for example, the Juhu beach has created more space to make it available for people, everybody, he is working on better housing.

MR: Professor Munshi, just the last question. You have inspired so many generations of students, scholars, academics. What keeps you going? I believe you also write poetry. So would you like to share one?

IM: Only one poem has been published. So that is my claim to be called a poet. But I do write poetry because I think my literature background which never left me sort of seems to be blossoming now. I write it for myself, I write it, just to express my feelings and for friends and I sometimes share with my colleagues and friends and so on. And one day I would also like to write books for children, just to sensitize them to certain things. Anyway, poetry gives me a lot of joy. Okay, I can read one.out to you. It's titled-

In My City

In my great city

where

dreams flourish

ambitions blossom

enterprise reaps rich harvest

houses scrape the sky

rivers no longer flow.

Brick by brick

waste by waste

road by road

plan by plan

they are

pinched, choked, violated.

Gasping for life

they spew

bubbles of poison

memories of youth

vibrant, lovely, desirable.

These shameless

ugly eyesores

why don't they disappear

must they linger

to avenge

our crime

against ancestors and children

killing us

guilt by guilt

breath by breath

hour by hour

in slow motion.

MR: Thank you. What inspired you to write this?

IM: Yes, Manisha, it is merely an expression of my distress at what our cities have become, where, for example, nature is ruthlessly destroyed, whether it is trees or hills or even the old nullas, ponds, small rivers, big rivers, it's just that they are killed and killed without feeling. And this is what I feel about what we are doing to our cities. Thank you very much, Manisha, for having me here, talking to me, thanks to you and to professor Maitraayee Chaudhuri and to ISS for initiating it. Thank you very much.

Article: Prestige, Honour and Self-Respect: Understanding Dalits' Reception of Arya Samaj and Other Socio-cultural Movements in Jammu, India

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Prestige, Honour and Self-Respect: Understanding Dalits' Reception of Arya Samaj and Other Socio-cultural Movements in Jammu, India

--Ameet Kumar & Lalatendu Keshari Das

Abstract: Scholarly works on the Arya Samaj have argued that unlike the emancipatory ideologies associated with Satyashodhak Samaj, Navayana Buddhism, or Justice Party, Arya Samaj as a socio-cultural movement was at best reformatory and at worst as a movement against the emancipatory ideologies. Drawing from qualitative fieldwork among the Dalit Arya Samajists in Jammu, this paper critically looks at the trajectory of the Arya Samaj movement in Jammu and the reasons for its ascend and gradual decline. Several other socio-cultural movements have replaced Arya Samaj as the dominant movement during this period. This paper argues that Dalits' interactions with socio-cultural movements, Arya Samaj or otherwise, is underlined by the touchstone of prestige, honour and self-respect. Only when these three principles are addressed then only Dalits remain within the fold. Otherwise, they do not hesitate to shift to other available avenues.

Keywords: *Arya Samaj, Dalits, socio-cultural movements, Jammu and Kashmir, Sanskritisation*

Introduction

Scholarly works on the Arya Samaj have argued that unlike the emancipatory ideologies associated with Satyasodhak Samaj, Navayana Buddhism, or Justice Party, Arya Samaj as a socio-cultural movement was at best reformatory and at worst as a movement against the emancipatory ideologies (Jaffrelot 2000a). During fieldwork in Jammu, a number of our research participants , hailing from local Dalit *jatis*, claimed, "Arya Samaj in Jammu only serves, and is served by the *Savarna jatis*. We *Harijans* have no position or power in these temples". This statement is contrasted by an elderly respondent when he pointed out, "I was like a worm in a dirty drain (*gandi naali ka keeda*). I had no identity (*pehchan*), and nobody cared about me. Arya Samaj provided me a platform which gave me an identity (as *Arya*). Today, whatever I am, it is because of the Arya Samaj. After joining them people called me '*Panditji*', and this is my new identity". The above two quotations bring out the internal tensions and contradictions within the marginalised communities themselves with reference to Arya Samaj and similar socio-cultural movements. Using this vignette as a backdrop, in this paper, we explore how the Dalits in India, particularly in Jammu, receive the social, cultural, and sometimes political messaging by organisations like the Arya Samaj. While doing so, we examine the political nature of such participations and acceptance of certain ideologies with their underlying and internal costs. The question of "at what cost?" is evoked and investigated in this study.

The paper is organised into several sections. After the introduction, we examine Dalits and socio-cultural movements in India, followed by a section on Methods and Data. We then present the Dalits and Arya Samaj in Jammu:

Historical and Social Context. Section Five, Challenging the Sanskritisation Model: Rise of Alternative Socio-Cultural Movements, highlights the emergence of several alternative socio-cultural movements in Jammu, with a particular and extensive focus on the Ravidass movement. This is followed by another section, Discussion: Sanskritisation, Emancipation, and Socio-Cultural Movements, and the paper ends with a brief conclusion.

Dalits and Socio-Cultural Movements in Jammu

In India, Dalits have employed a multipronged approach to liberate themselves from extreme exclusion, oppression, and exploitation while aiming for social mobility and dignity. Historically, they have been part of/or organised socio-cultural reform movements to challenge and change their marginalised status. The collective nature of such movements aimed at transforming social behaviour through a reformist agenda grounded in a specific religious authority, such as scriptural reinterpretation, doctrinal revival, or the teachings of charismatic leader (Jones, 1989, p. 12). For example, some Dalit, Adivasi, and backward class leaders have urged their community members to abandon practices stigmatised by the so-called upper castes, such as meat-eating, adopting teetotalism, and giving up hereditary occupations that reinforced their lower-caste status. These efforts aimed to reject the societal labels imposed on them and improve their social standing and self-respect (Kumar, 2024). In the long run, these movements seek to create organisational structures to give permanency to their ideologies and to carry forward their work for a sustained period of time. Omvedt (1994) argues that socio-cultural movements in India are driven by moral principles and aim to alter ingrained social structures and beliefs.

Contrary to movements that attempted to bring certain transformations by banning certain 'stigmatised practices' for the 'upliftment' of the Dalits, during the late 19th and early 20th century, Dalit liberation movements witnessed the emergence of strong anti-caste and social reform movements to challenge the notion of upper caste ordained 'stigmatised practices' (Patankar and Omvedt, 1979). Dalits-led movements like the Satnami of Chhattisgarh (Dube, 2014), the Matuas sect in Bengal (Bandyopadhyay, 2014; Biswas, 2015, 2018), Shree Narayana Dharma Paripalana of Narayan Guru (Cybil, 2022; Abraham, 2023), and Ad Dharm of Babu Mangu Ram (Ram, 2004, 2008), emerged from the desire to challenge social hierarchies, discrimination, and exploitation. These movements highlighted the community's degrading conditions and discussed their prestige, honour and self-respect. Although deeply political- in terms of ideology- in their goals, these reformist socio-cultural movements fundamentally differed from more formal political movements by refraining themselves from demanding change in the political system itself, including the statecraft. Nevertheless, we cannot put socio-cultural movements and their political counterparts into two different watertight compartments. As each political formation defines itself both in terms of culture and social. They feed into each other's areas of influence to create a holistic environment for legitimacy and propagation. Similar

processes are followed by almost all reformist and/or revolutionary movements all over the world (Jaffrelot 2000b; Pai 2002).

Within the paraphernalia of socio-cultural reform movements in India, Jaffrelot (2000a) has classified them into three categories: (a) those who rely on the sanskritisation mechanism; (b) those who take their cues from the Hindu sects of the Bhakti movement without attacking the caste system; and (c) those who are grounded in an ethnic ideology with a solid egalitarian overtone (Jaffrelot, 2000a). In India, particularly in the case of Dalits, such typologies have been manifested in Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi's approaches towards the emancipation of Dalits. While Gandhi considered untouchability as a social evil with roots in Indian culture, he did not consider it as a foundational aspect of Hinduism. By changing people's perceptions and urging them to stop the practice, Gandhi aimed to end untouchability (Sonowal, 2023). Nevertheless, he followed the type 'a' and 'b' of Jaffrelot's typologies. By identifying the 'untouchable' *jatis* as *Harijan* (people of God, sometimes also translated as children of God) and his recital of the so-called devotional song (*Vaishnav Jan to Tene Kahiye…*), Gandhi tried to destigmatise 'untouchability' while remaining within the framework of the Hindu caste system. It can be considered as Gandhi's attempts to create a homogenous Hindu identity and bring to its fold the formerly excluded sections in the Verna system, the *Panchamas* or 'untouchables'. A form of 'new' Hinduism that is "grounded in the values of universal peace, love, and benevolence" (Barua, 2019, p. 25).

Ambedkar's idea of the emancipation of Dalits through radical separation from Hinduism followed Jaffrelot's (2000a) type 'c' of socio-cultural movements**.** Ambedkar defined emancipation as the complete freedom of the oppressed, particularly the Dalits, via political, social, economic, and religious transformation. His ideas were in accordance with Jotiba Phule and Periyar, who advocated cultural revolutions with the transformation of Indian society completely for the attainment of liberation of the oppressed. They rejected the upper caste vision that identified the Indian nation as Hindu, deriving from the Vedic period and the creation of the Aryan people. They propagated the ideas of equality, liberty, justice, and rationality in opposition to the edicts of Manu and the *varna vyayastha* he helped propagating (Michael, 2007).

Highlighting the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate on Dalits, Guha (2010) highlighted that Gandhi aimed to uphold Hinduism by outlawing untouchability; in contrast, Ambedkar thought that his people's problem lay outside the dominant religion in India. Gandhi saw self-governing villages as the cornerstone of a free India. Ambedkar, a supporter of modern technology and city life, rejected the Indian village as a place of moral decay. Gandhi advocated peaceful protest and was suspicious of the government, whereas Ambedkar operated inside the government and thought that social problems could be resolved by political and legal changes (Guha, 2010). However, Gandhi on the other hand emphasised social harmony and integration; his approach was mainly rooted in the reformation of Hinduism and the removal of untouchability within

Hinduism. He was part of a long tradition of privileged caste Hindu reformers and their organisations like Brahmo Samaj of Raja Ram Mohan Roy 1828, Arya Samaj of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Ramakrishna Mission of Swami Vivekananda etc (Roy, 2019).

In an attempt to create a middle path between Ambedkar and Gandhi, Palshikar (1996) highlighted that despite the different strategies of Gandhi and Ambedkar, both shared similar aims of social justice and the emancipation of Dalits. They underlined the significance of mobilising people to use democratic methods, primarily through popular struggles, to combat injustice. Although Ambedkar was occasionally perceived as supporting non-agitational politics and Gandhi frequently preferred compromise and avoided conflict, both leaders essentially believed that struggle was necessary for societal progress. They believed that correcting injustice required struggle and were dedicated to popular participation. Additionally, both would agree on the significance of non-violence in their strategy for attaining social justice (Palshikar, 1996).

Rao (1997a) contradicts Palshikar's methodology. She contends that Ambedkar's critique of caste-based injustice, which he aimed to eradicate, is not comparable to Gandhi's emphasis on moral upliftment. She maintains that placing these intellectuals only in the general framework of emancipation ignores the particular social and political circumstances that influenced their ideas. Gandhi's awareness of caste as an abstract idea contrasted sharply with Ambedkar's lived experiences of violence (Rao, 1997). In his response to Rao, Palshikar (1997) clarified that he wanted to bridge the gap between Ambedkar and Gandhi's ideas. He maintained that both philosophers viewed Indian society as a unified entity as opposed to a disjointed set of identities. They approached caste and social inequality with a common goal of society unity as the foundation (Palshikar, 1997). Rao (1997b) rebutted Palshikar that caste differences, which had been formed by centuries of dominance and subjugation, could not be depoliticised. She underlined the need to address caste directly and understand it as a political issue. According to her, identifying and resolving the ingrained caste divisions in Indian society is the only way to bring about significant unity and social progress (Rao, 1997).

While revolutionary ideologies were gaining momentum in Madras and Bombay Presidencies, in the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (which included Ladakh) within its Hindu-majority Jammu region, the reformist agendas of Jeffrelot's type (a) and (b) were gaining ground in the form of Arya Samaj's socio-cultural activities. In the following sections, we will discuss Arya Samaj's mission of sanskritising the backward castes, particularly Dalits, in Jammu and its aftereffects. But before that let us discuss the methods we have used to undertake this study.

Methods and Data

The paper is part of the first author's doctoral thesis. Ethnographic Fieldwork for the study was conducted for a period of eight months between 2021 and 2023. Arya Samaj has seven branches in the Jammu city and three in adjacent rural areas of Jammu district. To locate the representation and participation of Dalit communities in Arya Samaj, the first authors visited all the ten branches of the organisation. During this period, the authors realised that all branches of Arya Samaj in Jammu city were dominated by members of the *Savarna jatis*. Out of ten, only one branch (located in Ranbir Singh Pura Tehsil) had a substantial proportion of Dalits- both as members and office bearers. Therefore, it was selected for ethnographic exploration. The first author participated in the weekly programs and other activities. The author had conversations with committee members, followers, and priests. During the fieldwork, it was observed that some members of the studied Arya Samaj temple were also participating in the activities of Sant Ravidass Sabha and similar socio-cultural movements. In the final phase of fieldwork, the author surveyed 103 households to gain a deeper understanding of the discourse surrounding land in the village.

Table 01 shows the breakdown of the research participants:

Category	Sub-category ↓ / Age →	20-29	30-39	40–49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80 above	Number of Key Research Participant-s
Schedule Caste	Mahasha/ Doms	01	01	03	02	05	04	01	17
	Chamar/ Ravidasis	00	01	02	02	04	00	00	08
	Bhagat/ Megh	00	00	02	02	06	02	00	12
Other		00	00	00	01	00	01	00	02
Total		01	02	07	07	15	07	01	40

Dalits and Arya Samaj in Jammu: Historical and Social Context

A unified princely state of J&K came under the rule of a Hindu King in 1846, when in the aftermath of the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46) the British East India Company signed the Treaty of Amritsar with the Sikh rulers of Punjab. As an appreciation to the help of the Dogra ruler of Jammu, Raja Ghulab Singh Jamwal, who had helped the East India Company's forces to subjugate the Sikhs, the colonial government offered Ghulab Singh the region of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh for Rupees 75 lakhs (Nanakshahi), while the suzerainty remained with the British (Tremblay and Bhatia, 2021; Bose, 2003). The Dogra Rulers placed the authority of religious supremacy in the hands of Brahmin purohits, Dharamaacharayas, or gurus. As the Dogra kings helped the British during the 1857 rebellion, the latter did not pay much attention to the socio-political reforms in the province (Rai, 2004).

During this period, the majority of Muslims, backward, and so-called lower caste Hindus lived in a state of utmost impoverishment (Bhatia, 2014). The Dalits were landless farm labourers who lived in abject poverty. They were not allowed to enter common village temples, water sources, educational institutions, administrative and bureaucratic set-ups, and political representations (Bazaz, 1987; Gupta, 1998). They even had their cremation grounds separate from those of the upper castes. They were forbidden from going to temples and wells. They had different cremation grounds; their entry was restricted to the Maharaja's Darbar. They were also restricted from donning turbans, and even using good names. Such treatment of Dalits affected the community's access to resources, opportunities, and social standing.

Like many other social-cultural reformist movements functioning across the Indian subcontinent, in the late 19th century, Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 presented itself as a beacon of hope for the downtrodden and the marginalised (Dua, 1970a; Rai, 1915; Sharma, 1912). The Jammu region has a higher concentration of the Hindu population and shares its border with Punjab, where the Arya Samaj was active (Saxena and Saxena, 2017). As narrated by research participants and confirmed by published works, some traders from Punjab arrived in Jammu in the last decade of the 19th century because of employment opportunities and trade in Jammu. They laid the foundation of Arya Samaj in J&K, beginning with four branches in the state. Here, Arya Samjists focused on proselytising among the lower castes, particularly the *Meghs* and the *Doms* (Rai, 2004; Saxena and Saxena, 2017). Initially, Arya Samaj established a society called *Dalitoddhar* that worked for Dalits. They offered Dalit communities sacred threads, opened educational institutes for the latter, organised *Shuddhi* (reconverting followers of Islam to Hinduism), philanthropic activities, encouraged widow remarriage, and discouraged child marriage (Gupta, 1991). With time, Arya Samaj also engaged in other activities such as hosting weekly *Yajna* ceremonies and religious discourses, conducting marriages, annual programs (like *balidan Diwas*, foundation Day, etc), celebrating important national days, holding

health camps, conducting self-defence camps, training youth, etc. It also provided the Dalits in the region a new identity of 'Arya' (meaning the noble one).

As Dalits were traditionally not allowed to study and conduct religious rituals as priests, so, Arya Samaj encouraged individuals hailing from these communities to undertake the learning of Vedas and other religious scriptures. A research participant, who along with his sons is actively engaged in priestly work, viewed that the Arya Samaj in J&K helped to provide a dignified life to Dalits and helped to keep them within Hinduism. A few among them even learned Sanskrit and became priests, an honourable position in a status-conscious Indian society. This transformation has led to a reduced dependence on Brahmin priests and perceived humiliation by the latter. Further, for Dalits, other than self-respect, honour and prestige are key identifiers of a dignified life. Several research participants claimed that Arya Samaj gave them self-respect apart from identity. As stated by a research participant, "Arya Samaj has taught us to be clean, eat clean things, and keep faces clean" (Personal Interview, December 2022). Nevertheless, despite becoming priests their 'lower caste' origin has kept them away from performing priestly activities for the upper caste, as the latter are still hesitant to invite them inside their houses.

The movement gathered momentum in the Jammu region with the opening of Arya Samaj branches and even schools for all castes, including Dalits (Saxena and Saxena, 2017). It condemned the caste system as it was practiced and propagated the Vedic *varnashrama* system, a system that supposedly assigned status according to one's actions and is not based on one's birth. The openness of Arya Samaj attracted several Dalits to its fold during these early days. During the formative years of Arya Samaj, both Dalits and Arya Samaj faced difficulties from Sanatani Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Zamindars, and government servants. Arya Samaj wanted to bring reform in Hinduism, as they claimed that Sanatan Hindu priests polluted it with their acts, and foreign religion because of their conversion policy (Rai, 2004). As stated by a research participant:

> Earlier Kashmiri Pandits were against the Arya Samaj. They urged even the Maharaja not to allow Arya Samaj in the princely state, or else the Pandits would commit mass suicide (*Samadi*). Debates also took place between Arya Samaj and Christian Missionaries, who were not able to stand in front of Arya Samaj preachers (Personal Interview, December 2022).

Nevertheless, Arya Samaj mediated in creating a cordial atmosphere that led Maharaja Hari Singh to open the doors of temples and other public spaces for Dalits in J&K (Vidyarthi, 1978). As one research participant explained:

> In the 1930s, a conference was held in Rattian village in Ranbir Singh Pura where many people from lower castes gathered, expressing their desire to convert to other religions to escape the oppressive caste-based Hindu society and its social injustices. Maharaja Hari Singh recognised

> that if this happened, it could lead to a significant loss of followers for Hinduism. During this time, the Arya Samaj gained momentum in the region and successfully incorporated many lower castes. Thus, preventing them from converting to Islam (Personal Interview, November 2022).

In India, surnames often indicate caste, which ultimately leads to discrimination against people who belong to lower castes. To combat this, Arya Samaj urged followers to adopt the surname *Arya* to promote equality and to overcome the stigma attached to it based on caste. As claimed by one research participant belonging to the Mahasha *Jati*: "Arya means noble or '*shreshth vyakti'*, and Arya Samaj refers to a community of such noble individuals, as our entire family is associated with Arya Samaj, so all of us use 'Arya' as a surname". Another research participant pointed out, because they use the surname 'Arya', people often assume they are part of the Arya Samaj. However, in terms of caste identity, we belong to the *Mahasha baradari* (community), outside Arya Samaj, we are still identified as *Mahasha*". This highlights that symbolic changes, such as adopting a reformist surname or affiliating with a movement, do not automatically erase deep-rooted social perceptions related to caste. Furthermore, *Mahasha* is a Dalit *Jati* in J&K, earlier, they were known as *Doms*, a stigmatised identity that got a new name of "*Mahasha*" due to the efforts of the Arya Samaj. The *Mahashas* faced severe social stigma and economic hardship, performing labour-intensive jobs and struggling with poverty. The *Mahasha Sudhar Sabha*, an organisation for the community's betterment, adopted rules aligned with Arya Samaj principles, promoting social reform and economic prudence.

The strengths of the Arya Samaj became reasons for its decline. One research participant noted that in Arya Samaj:

> The medium of communication relies heavily on language, and Arya Samaj mainly concentrated on the Sanskrit language. This made it difficult for the general public to access its literature and speeches. Comparatively other socio-cultural movements emphasise people-friendly languages that helped them to flourish more in the region (Personal Interview, August 2021).

Secondly, despite Arya Samaj's claims on inter-caste marriages, there was not much progress in the society. Several research participants narrated that Arya Samaj helped them in their social empowerment, but inter-caste marriages are still a dream and are happening only in rare cases either through elopement or so-called love marriage. Apart from inter-caste marriage, except few branches in rural areas all the branches are mainly dominated by the upper caste and the membership from Dalits is negligible. One upper caste research participant stated that:

> Swami Dayanand criticised the social evils of Sanatan Dharma and was against idol worship and the caste system. But still, most of the branches are captured and under the dominance of the upper caste.

> Nowadays these branches do *Yagya* with little attention to religious discourse (Personal Interview, August 2021).

Furthermore, the Arya Samaj's dominance and the overall political atmosphere of Jammu have traditionally marginalised Ambedkar's vision of Dalit emancipation through radical socio-cultural movements like Buddhism and Ravidassia assertion in Jammu. Religious majoritarianism, nationalism, and regional identity have dominated Jammu's political discourse, leaving little room for caste-based discourse. Because of this, caste has remained socially prevalent but politically defanged, and unlike in areas like Uttar Pradesh, where Ambedkarite politics has gained traction, independent Dalit political leadership remained absent. However, Ambedkar's goal of emancipation in the region has been revived and advanced in recent years by new Dalit organisations and socio-cultural movements.

Despite the perceived positive changes brought by the activities of Arya Samaj in Jammu, critical scholars working on the work of Arya Samaj have shown that the Arya Samaj was not a revolutionary organisation. This resonates with Ambedkar's experience with the Arya Samaj, when the organisation tried to censure him from presenting his ideas on the "Annihilation of Caste" and doing away with the caste system itself rather than simply trying to make reforms from within (Ambedkar and Rodrigues, 2002). Gooptu (2006) also makes a similar argument that Arya Samaj's *Shuddhi* program, designed to reclaim lower-caste Hindus and those who had converted to other faiths, was aimed to expand and reinforce Hinduism. Arya Samaj's emphasis on the Vedas and the hierarchical varna system based on merit led to disillusionment among lower-caste members who joined the Arya Samaj. Even the Adi Hindus movement founder, Swami Acchutanand, claimed that the main intention of the Samaj was to make Hindus slaves of the Vedas. Although Samaj admitted Dalits, it did not grant them equality, and it led to a fissure between the high-caste and purified low-caste Hindus (Gooptu, 2006).

The influence of the Ravidas's ideas also helped in the decline Arya Samaj, as, rather than the sanskritising model on acquiring social respect without crossing over caste boundaries, Ravidass wore the "forbidden" clothing and upper caste emblems as a form of protest against societal injustice. He wanted to prevent the lower castes from leaving their caste to move up the caste hierarchy, as would happen during sanskritisation, by mimicking the appearance of the upper castes (Ram, 2011). Even Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar who worked for the liberation of the oppressed, advocated for a cultural revolution with the transformation of Indian society completely. They rejected the upper caste vision that identified the Indian nation as Hindu, deriving from the Vedic period and creation of Aryan people. They propagated the ideas of equality, liberty, justice, and rationality in opposition to the Manu and the *varna vyayastha* (Michael, 2007).

Challenging the Sanskritisation Model: Rise of Other Socio-Cultural Movements

Many religious movements and sects are active in North India, each trying to attract followers and increase their influence. The one dominant Arya Samaj is facing competition from anti-caste socio-cultural movements. Many lower-caste populations in Jammu backed the Arya Samaj in its early years because it offered them an opportunity for social upliftment. But as time went on, new reformist and spiritual traditions like the Guru Ravidass, Sant Nirankari Mission, Sahib Bandgi, and Radha Soami Satsang Beas, etc. Meanwhile, the Ravidasi and Kabirpanthi movements emerged within different jatis, which were characterised by their clear expression of anti-caste beliefs and dedication to opposing Brahminical hierarchies. As put forth by Bhatia (2020), while maintaining a strong affiliation with their broader 'Hindu identity', various Jatis among the SCs have simultaneously carved out alternative religious spaces. Alongside adherence to anti-caste spiritual traditions associated with Kabir, Ravidas, and the Buddha, where Bhagat/Meghs identify as *Kabirpanthis* (followers of Kabir) and Chamars as *Ravidasis* (followers of Ravidas), they also engage with sectarian movements such as Radhasoami, Nirankari, and Sahib Bandgi etc. These traditions, distinct from mainstream Hinduism, offer a more dignified and inclusive socio-religious sphere for marginalised communities (Bhatia, 2020). A similar pattern was observed during our fieldwork, where Dalit communities engaged with alternative religious traditions that challenged caste hierarchies and offered new avenues for asserting spiritual autonomy and collective dignity. Among the Mahashas of Jammu, for instance, Guru Nabha Dass is a prominent figure of devotion, though some members also align themselves with the reformist ideals of the Arya Samaj. Additionally, some individuals within the educated Dalit population are turning towards Navayana Buddhism, drawing inspiration from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's conversion. For them, Buddhism represents a pathway to transcend caste-based discrimination and to affirm principles of equality, dignity, and self-respect.

Ravidass Movement

Guru Ravidass, a 15th-century Bhakti saint born into a Chamar family in present-day Uttar Pradesh, preached a message of equality, devotion, and emancipation that profoundly resonates with the lived experiences of the Chamar community. His teachings embodied a rebellious socio-religious philosophy that inspires self-respect and confidence among his followers. The Ravidass Deras, dedicated to the worship and dissemination of his teachings, play a central role in this tradition. In Punjab, his ideology has significantly influenced the emergence of an alternative Dalit agenda, driven by persistent issues like Dalit landlessness and the failure of efforts such as Sanskritisation and religious conversion (Ram, 2011). The teachings of Ravidas, who offered a middle ground between assimilation and radical separatism, laid the foundation for the evolution of Dalit consciousness in Punjab (Ram, 2008). Singh (2019) argues that Dalits actively transform socio-cultural landscapes to

counter historical oppression and assert their identities. Historically marginalised, Dalits are now creating distinct social and physical spaces that challenge mainstream culture and reinforce their dominance over other Dalit sub-castes. These spaces serve as platforms for identity formation, cultural assertion, heritage construction, and social mobilisation. Exclusion from mainstream cultural arenas has driven Dalits to develop alternative socio-cultural spaces within or outside the traditional social structures. These new spaces contest the cultural hegemony of dominant castes and foster a sense of "cultural selfhood," offering dignity and respect (Singh, 2019).

Referring to the shift in orientation among the marginalised caste groups, a research participant from a lower caste noted, "a number of Deras are currently operating in the area; earlier, the Arya Samaj, which placed more stress on varnashrama based on merit than birth, was present there" (Personal Interview). Whereas another research participant pointed out that Arya Samaj's shortcomings, which contribute to the reason why it was unable to maintain a strong emancipatory appeal among the Dalits in the area. The issue that the Arya Samaj's use of Sanskrit as its main language alienated a significant portion of Dalits; on the other hand, other socio-cultural movements prospered by speaking in regional languages that spoke to the everyday experiences of marginalised groups (Personal Interview). Arya Samaj's internal weaknesses, like the current leadership's self-interest and lack of dedication to outreach and propagation, were brought to light by another respondent. Particularly in contrast to previous generations, this drop in active participation further hindered the movement's capacity to address the demands of marginalised communities. According to a personal interview, even progressive ideas like inter-caste marriage have lost support among their adherents (Personal Interview). Several factors contributed to the decline of Arya Samaj among Dalits, including the refusal to give Dalits leadership positions, the upper castes' continued dominance within its structure, internal property disputes, the use of inaccessible languages like Sanskrit, and a decreased emphasis on propagation. These factors created a vacuum that allowed other movements, such as the Ravidass tradition, to emerge, which offered a more inclusive and empowering alternative for Dalits.

However, over time, other reformist sects like Ravidass Sabha, Kabirpanthis, etc, have emerged that focus more explicitly on building an egalitarian society and rejecting the hierarchical Hindu caste system. While in Jammu, Ravidass Deras play a significant role in the Dalit movement for equality and social justice. Beyond serving as centres for spiritual gatherings, these Deras contribute to constructing and affirming Dalit social and religious identities. During our interaction with the President of the Guru Ravidass Sabha, he informed us that the All J&K Shree (AJKS) Guru Ravidass Sabha, with its head office in Krishna Nagar, Jammu, was established in 1966. Whereas, in areas with a substantial Chamar population, numerous Ravidass Deras have been established, often affiliated with the central Ravidass Sabha. These Sabhas organise events such as Shobha Yatras and celebrations of Guru Ravidass Jayanti and Ambedkar Jayanti, reinforcing a shared sense of identity,

dignity, and collective pride. These events act as strong means to reconnect individuals and communities with their spiritual roots, deepen their devotion, foster unity, and find guidance on their path towards spiritual emancipation and liberation. In addition to the construction of Sabhas (local branches), the Holy Pilgrimage (main headquarters) occupies a central place. The Guru Ravidass Sabhas place significant emphasis on the medium of communication, as they utilise mass-friendly language to ensure that the teachings of Guru Ravidass, conveyed through literature, devotional songs, and community events, are accessible and easily understood by local Dalit communities. Guru Ravidass's teachings and the Deras' activities provide a space for spiritual empowerment, promote equality ideals, and challenge society's entrenched caste-based hierarchies. For Chamars in Jammu, devotion to Guru Ravidass not only offers spiritual solace but also constitutes an alternative religious identity that resists and redefines dominant Brahmanical norms (Field diary).

Further, the Arya Samaj was instrumental in bringing social reform throughout North India, has historically been associated with the Mahashas of Jammu. This interaction echoes what Jaffrelot (2000) explains about the Yadavs and Jatavs of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who used manufactured stories of Aryan ancestry to assert Kshatriya status with the help of the Arya Samaj. When lower castes try to attain upward social mobility by imitating upper-caste ideals like vegetarianism, teetotalism, moral reform, and Vedic ceremonies, Jaffrelot refers to this process as ‘Sanskritisation’ (Jaffrelot, 2000). Thus, it is possible to interpret the Mahashas' affiliation with the Arya Samaj as a tactic to acquire acceptance in the Brahmanical social structure. But such efforts often reinforce the caste hierarchies they aim to overcome, resulting in limited structural change. The Ravidass movement, on the other hand, has drawn support from the Chamars of Jammu. This movement uses the egalitarian teachings of Guru Ravidass to create a unique social and spiritual identity that expressly opposes caste hierarchy instead of following the rules of the higher caste. The growing network of Ravidass Deras and the vibrant celebration of festivals like Ravidass Jayanti and Ambedkar Jayanti represent a deliberate assertion of Dalit dignity and cultural autonomy. In contrast to Sanskritisation, these groups aim to challenge the validity of the prevailing social order rather than assimilate into it, creating a more radical and emancipatory path for the marginalised.

Discussion: Sanskritisation, Emancipation and Socio-cultural Movements

Srinivas's sanskritisation model (Srinivas, 2003) facilitated by Arya Samaj and other socio-cultural movements in Jammu, played a key role in improving the social status and dignity of Dalits in Jammu. The Arya Samaj, with its emphasis on Vedic rituals and Sanskritic practices, became an important vehicle for Dalits in Jammu to engage in Sanskritisation. The movement's promotion of Vedic education and its focus on social equality helped Dalits adopt practices that aligned with upper-caste norms, offering them a path to social mobility. Even though Arya Samaj's efforts were somewhat limited to certain jatis, it still provided an avenue for sanskritisation by encouraging

Dalits to participate in higher-caste rituals and religious practices. This alignment with the practices of the Brahmanical upper castes through sanskritisation helped Dalits gain recognition and respect in social settings. Arya Samaj's emphasis on equality and rejection of untouchability encouraged Dalits to adopt the customs, practices and rituals of higher castes.

Further, studies have highlighted the relationship between Arya Samaj and the Dalits within the framework of sanskritisation under which Dalits were given a few concessions so that the latter remains within the broader framework of Hinduism (Jaffrelot, 2000a). However, this literature does not capture the lived experiences of Dalits and how the latter feel about the processes. As in the case of Jammu, several research participants who belonged to the marginalised section highlighted the emancipatory role of Arya Samaj.

Although the Arya Samaj offered Dalits in Jammu opportunities for reform, education, and social mobility, the Arya Samaj's effect has been erratic and ultimately limited. The movement allowed some Dalit Jatis to achieve symbolic social respectability and assume rebuilt identities in its early stages. However, the followers were encouraged to conform to a homogenised Hindu identity rooted in Vedic orthodoxy; this assimilation meant marginalising unique Dalit cultural expressions, oral traditions, and lived experiences while internalising upper-caste standards. The caste hierarchy's ideological underpinnings were maintained because the movement promoted conditional inclusion within Hinduism rather than a structural critique of caste oppression. Furthermore, the Arya Samaj placed Dalits within the Jammu Hindu majority by associating them with reformist Hinduism, unintentionally promoting sectarian divisions, such as the Muslim Kashmiris versus the Hindu Jammu. As a result, the movement shaped Dalit identity in Jammu by integrating it into the dominant religious-regional political framework, rather than allowing it to emerge as an independent or oppositional force. This dynamic ultimately hindered the development of a politically active Dalit movement in the area.

Citing the case of Jats in Punjab, Datta (1997) has shown the processes by which Arya Samaj and Jats interacted closely, as evidenced by local texts, Jat narratives, and vernacular literature. Arya Samaj helped in the creation of a Jat identity that was distinct from the four-fold varna system, according to which the Jats were Shudras. The attainment of Kshatriya status by the Jats was part of the sanskritisation process to build an identity that was distinct from the prevailing notion about the community. In Punjab, locally dominant caste groups like the Jats benefited the most from the Arya Samaj movement, which helped them to control political and cultural power (Dua, 1970b). It was discovered that in addition to following the Vedic texts, and ten principles, it functioned as a working ground for politics in Punjab (Dua, 1970a; Pareek, 1973; Mehta, 1985). The Arya Samaj was able to engage in such practices by trying to bridge the porous wall segregating the sacred world of religion, and the profane world of politics.

Despite the Arya Samaj's assertion that *Chaturvarnya* is founded on individual worth/merit (*guna*), Ambedkar argued that the perpetuation of caste

hierarchies based on birth is achieved through the usage of conventional varna designations. Ambedkar emphasised further that Chaturvarnya denied fundamental rights, particularly to women and Shudras (Ambedkar, 2014). Ambedkar advocated for a dramatic restructuring of Hindu society based on equality, in contrast to the Brahmo and Arya Samaj's restricted reform initiatives that concentrated on the upper castes. His analysis of religious literature and lived experiences of caste-based exclusion influenced this demand (Reddy, 2022). As a revolutionary act, Ambedkar formally converted to Buddhism in 1956, a few months before his death, marking a historic break from Hinduism and a decisive step towards spiritual and social emancipation for Dalits. He created the new vehicle, Navayana Buddhism, to release Dalits and eventually Indian society as a whole from the caste system (Jaoul, 2016). As contrary to the sanskritisation model, Indian Bhakti saint poets like Ravidas and Kabir put forward a new vision of utopia that was free from caste and class oppressions.

Engaging in a close reading of Ravidas' poem Begumpura, Omvedt (2008) has argued that the utopian world of Ravidass was based on the three grounding principles of seeking prestige, honour and self-respect for the marginalised so that a casteless, classless urban community can be established. These movements put forward social messages through their poetry, providing identity to Dalits that are pre-Aryan, and against priestly Brahmanical rituals in contrast to Arya Samaj. Some of these movements were also influenced by their ideas Like Ravidass, Kabirpanth, Sahib Bandgi etc. These movements gave Dalits a forum for social inclusion and spiritual equality, enabling them to overcome prejudice based on caste. Dalits gained entry to formerly closed religious and social venues by embracing the teachings of these movements, which promoted their social recognition and sense of dignity.

The anti-caste movement also promoted the idea of equality, social justice and spiritual liberation of lower castes, to attain this they also faced several challenges, one major hurdle was the persistence of entrenched caste hierarchies, both within society and sometimes within the movements themselves, where Dalits often faced exclusion from leadership roles or key activities. Additionally, these movements have limited appeal, like Arya Samaj in Jammu district. Only one branch of the Arya Samaj exists where Dalits are part of it (jati). Chamars are the main followers of Guru Ravidass Ji Maharaj, whereas Bhagat/Meghs are the followers of Kabirpanth. Despite a large number of followers from lower castes following these socio-cultural movements, the outreach is yet limited.

Conclusion

During the Hindu Dogra regime rule in the princely state of J&K, Dalits were living in despicable conditions. Several socio-cultural reform movements were also witnessed during the same period to work for the betterment of society. One such was Arya Samaj which became instrumental in looking at the desires of Dalit *jatis* for empowerment and inclusion in the wider societal activities without overt discrimination. While we witnessed at one point in time that

Arya Samaj was able to garner Dalits' support, with time it lost its relevance due to several factors like upper caste-centric attitude, their hegemony in most of the branches, the rise of other socio-cultural movements and its inability to combat the caste structure. Dalits also became aware and conscious of their condition, and ultimately for prestige, honour and self-respect (Still, 2016) they started moving away towards other alternative socio-cultural movements, who proactively follow the Bhakti saints with their dream of an egalitarian (casteless and classless) society where everyone is treated equally. Therefore, the interactions that Dalits have with socio-cultural movements, Arya Samaj or otherwise, is underlined by the touchstone of prestige, honour and self-respect. Only when these three principles are addressed then only Dalits remain in the fold. Otherwise, they do not hesitate to shop for alternative avenues. Any analysis of Dalits in India and elsewhere, we argue, needs to keep the trinity of prestige-honour-self-respect at the centre, if Dalits and their politics need to be empirically studied.

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Article: Analyzing Caste for Instrumentalising Equality Act 2010 in the United Kingdom: From an Ambedkarian Perspective

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Analyzing Caste for Instrumentalising Equality Act 2010 in the United Kingdom: From an Ambedkarian Perspective

--Jayashree Ambewadikar

Abstract

Religion is the basis of happiness so religion must mainly be a responsible act. It cannot be a matter of rules. But what is religion by the Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibition rules in the Vedas and the Smritis, truly universal, applicable to all races, to all the countries, at all times causing inequality due to caste system.Caste has become more than South Asian paradigm and thus the definition and location of caste in their society for equality is needed to curb the injustice.This paper is based on Dr. BabasahebAmbedkar's Writings and Speeches, various reports and fieldwork in the selected places of the United Kingdom to locate caste in the Equality Act 2010 of the United Kingdom. It also looks into growth and theories of caste and its related discrimination in the world and especially in the UK with an Ambedkarian perspective.

Keywords: Ambedkar, South Asia- the United Kingdom, Castes-Race, Discrimination, Equality Act 2010

Introduction

There are various attempts to understand, analyse and intervene in the study of caste system in south Asia and now at world level and do away with this unnatural institution of caste. This attempts of reform has created a great controversy regarding its origin due to conscious command from Supreme Authority, or due to an unconscious growth in the society in a typical conditions. In this study the Ambedkarianperspective will provide workable framework to understand and analyse the caste system. Ambedkar says, "Apart from its practical importance the subject of Caste is an all absorbing problem and the interest aroused in me regarding its theoretic foundations has moved me to put before you some of the conclusions, which seem to me well founded, and the grounds upon which they may be supported" (Ambedkar, 1989:22, Vol.1).

There is a need to safeguard against the biasness while dealing with the sensitive subject. This subject of caste should be judged with science and objectivity rather than sentiments. "For myself I shall find as much pleasure in a positive destruction of my own ideology, as in a rational disagreement on a topic, which, notwithstanding many learned disquisitions is likely to remain controversial forever" (ibid).

This present paper is based on the Equality and Human Rights Commission research (EHRC) report (EHRC 2014a), Dr. Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, 1989 Volume 1, books and journals and relevant documents as secondary documents. Further field work in the form of case studies carried in the London city, Wolverhampton, Birmingham and Bedford across religion, region/nationality, and language of the caste infected people is the methodological framework.

Connotations of Caste and its Expression in India

In the context of colonial writings, "the emergence of ethnological race theory, in the mid-nineteenth century, unquestionably had a strong impact on caste ideology" (chiefly, see Ambewadikar, 2012. Race theorists, such as H.H. Risley (1904, 1908), Senart (1930), etc. saw "caste as an elemental force in Indian life". These ethnologists divided Indians into hierarchical classifications. For instance, "Risley has segregated Indians population into seven racial types, from the dark-skinned *Dravidians* to the fair-skinned *Aryans*-the most ethnologically advanced one" (ibid). The Victorian race theorists like Risley (1904, 1908), Hutton (1963,1969), etc. saw caste as an evolutionary weapon designed by the *Aryan* descendants who devised "conventions of purity and exclusion as a means of maintaining the purity of their blood and race. The belief that race was the paramount factor in the analysis of caste stems from these writings"(ibid). It was due to collective effect of colonial institutions and discourses, as Dirks (2008) argues, that caste was made into a peculiarly rigid social phenomenon, detached from the political processes, and 'a specifically Indian form of civil society' (Dirks 2008: 76; also Fuller, 1997:6 in ibid). Hutton (1963, 1969), makes a view that caste is "the indigenous device of Brahmans".

Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches

In the early twentieth century, Ambedkar also reflected on the caste system in India and formulated a scientific theory about the genesis and growth of caste. According to him, "Some are puzzled as to whether there can be such a thing as the origin of caste and, suggest that if we cannot control our fondness for the word 'origin', we should better use the plural form, viz 'origins of caste'. As for myself, I do not feel puzzled by the "Origin of Caste in India for, as I have established before, endogamy is the only characteristic of Caste and when I say Origin of Caste, I mean the *Origin of the Mechanism for Endogamy*" (Ambedkar,1989:14). The very fact that "the endogamy was confined to a particular group and happened to be the root of origin of caste, the exclusion of other group for the marriage purpose was very much embedded in the caste itself"(ibid).

Endorsing Ambedkar's thesis, Professor Ram, Ambedkar Chair Professor in Sociology from 1985-2010 in Jawaharlal Nehru University, India and an scholar on Ambedkarian thought and philosophy (Ram 2008: 2-3) also has stated that, "Some had the view that during the Vedic and later-Vedic periods, the Aryans (who later got identified as Hindus) were divided into four *Varnas*

which got divided later into numerous *jatis*or castes and *upjatis*or sub-castes or sub-sub-castes due to various reasons. Some reasons includes imposing or super-imposing endogamy over exogamy. Next the Brahmins initialled a policy of closing their door to other varnas in terms of commensal relations, including marital alliance. This was latter followed by the other groups or *varnas*" (see Ambewadikar, 2012). This means, one has to accept "the presence of numerous groups, not varnas or castes, of the people pursuing different types of occupations, customs, belief systems and also having heterogeneous types of social organisations, interaction patterns, commensal relations, etc" (ibid). Then, the extended view is that the four-fold varna model was, as mentioned above, "an ideal devise or scheme of the Aryans under which the already existed numerous groups of the people were supposedly or notionally fitted" (ibid). But there were other few groups that were not fitted or forcefully kept out or voluntarily opted out. Such groups of people were termed either aborigines or tribals, Dravidians, *Antyajas, Antyavasins*(Ati-Shudras or Untouchables) (see Ram, 3-4 in Ambewadikar, 2012). Ram (2008:5) says caste system as a unitary structure but dynamic one with various permutations and combinations causing complexity with regional variations (also see in Ambewadikar, 2012).

Theses on Mechanism and Growth of Caste System :

Based on Ambedkar's views, Ram (2008:7), says there are "five main theses on the mechanisms and growth of caste system in a regions over a period of time. This growth is to be understood by its numbers and attributes it in a given hierarchy of castes found in a region".

Thesis 1 : Policy of Exclusion, as referred by Ambedkar (1989), Ram (2008:8) says it is simply permanent boycott or expelling of member from a caste in early period of the Indo-Aryan and later Hindu society in India. This can be said as 'close door policy' which is applied on the lower castes in rural society through temporarily (also see Ambewadikar, 2012:7-8). Thesis 2: Theory of Superimposition of Endogamy over Exogamy, is due to shift from the exogamous form of marriage to the endogamy one. (referred in Ram, 2008:8 Ambewadikar, 2012).

Thesis 3 : Theory of Surplus Men and Women, is a theory in which when a spouse in a marriage dies and the widow or widower is restricted for second marriage in the caste/group than they have to remain as it is or have to marry outside the group. The latter option produced numerous castes and sub-castes. This theory also draws from 'absolute surplus' who hire labour from the resourceless lower caste and they through interaction and imitations forms different castes (ibid).

Thesis 4 : Theory of Division of Labourers, is that of the occupational affiliation or division of labour, emphasized in sociological studies, though Ambedkar (1989; 47-48) considered it, with his substantive argument, as "division of labourers performing skilled and unskilled, pure and impure, occupations either voluntarily or by traditions or birth were treated as separate

castes, and were ranked higher and lower in the order or system" (Ram 2008: 13-14), along with ranking or gradation of these occupations. This thesis, "not being the convincing one as it could not be found in all the civilised societies of the world wherein division of labour is a necessary feature" (ibid : 14 in Ambewadikar, 2012) . Hence, "this theory could never be the basis and mechanism of genesis and growth of castes and the caste system as well" (ibid).

Thesis 5 : Theory of Divine Origin says there are the four *varnas* of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra originating after meeting of the Purusha (Male) and the Prakriti-nature (female). But this theory is not possible scientifically or physiologically. Further, these four *Varnas are assigned* four different functions to each of them and accordingly they enjoy higher or lower rank. The members are also punished for violation of these functions in the form of ex-communication (ibid:14-15 in Ambewadikar, 2012).

Varna system as per Religious philosophy

Endorsing the Ambedkarism views some Western social scientist opined about position of varna system based on religious rituals. They says "the four varnas have relatively fixed position by the religious philosophy and traditional law, further ritual purity acted as a gulf between the top three strata and the Sudras. Here it is mentioned that the touch a low-caste or anything touched by them creates ritual pollution" (see Ambewadikar, 2012). Kingsley Davis (1949) mentioned criterion of "an 'unclean' caste which has inability to be served by clean Brahmins and even water-carriers, tailors, barbers, etc. who serves the caste Hindus". There is limitation on contact with caste Hindus because of possible pollution. There is inability to serve water to caste Hindus" (see Ambewadikar, 2012). The inability to use public facilities such as roads, ferries, wells, or schools or enter in Hindu temples or get dissociate from a unclean occupation. The social honour of the member in the caste system is well connected with ritual values.

Characteristics of Caste System

Mr. Senart, a French authority, says caste as "a close corporation, in theory at any rate rigorously heredity: equipped with a certain traditional and independent organisation, including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festivals: bound together by common occupations, which relate more particularly to marriage and to food and to questions of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction, the extended of which varies its members of jurisdiction, the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the sanction of certain penalties and, above all, by final irrevocable exclusion from the group" (Ambedkar, 1989:6, Vol.1, see also Ambewadikar, 2012). Ambedkar says,..... 'caste is an enclosed class' and 'endogamy is the only characteristic of caste' (Ambedkar, 1989:15, Vol.1, see also Ambewadikar, 2012).

Similarly, Ambedkar's views are endorsed by Indian and Western social scientists who says caste system is segmental division of Hindu society, it has hierarchy, it includesrestrictions on feeding and social intercourse, it imposes civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, restricted choice of occupations, and puts restriction on marriage (Ghurye, 1932). Similarly, Dutt (1931) says caste is hereditary, that is, no transition from one caste to aother, but one still its members will be expelled for not confirming to the caste rules, like in case of marry outside caste, additionally the caste system is for the prestige of the Brahmins (also see Ambewadikar, 2012).

Caste system as per Western Social Scientist

Endogamy is rules restricting marriage to members of one's own caste for maintaining purity of descent or caste (Klass, 1980:33). *Hierarchy:* This is arrangement rank of in hereditary group where Brahmins is at the top and keeping so called untouchables at the bottom, and the middle caste rank are the most flexible (Bailey, 1963). *Hereditary Membership* means membership by birth in a particular caste till death which is passed to the next generation. There can be temporary expulsion/exclusion of its members for violating caste rules. (Klass, 1980:34).*Purity and Pollution system is the* structural and functional construction of the caste system for maintaining distance to avoid pollution.(Dumont 1970). According to Bougle (1971), shares three basic features of caste, they are, exclusion, hierarchy and division of labour (Hsu 1963: 128, see also Dube in Srinivas, 1997). Chakravarti, (2003) says the lower castes people are located at the outskirt of the villages to avoid pollution to the upper or pure castes (see also Ambewadikar 2012.

Further, *"Restrictions on commensality means* restriction on social / commensal relations for example sitting together, smoking stem pipe, dining and drinking wearing dress, speaking and following customs to the members of the caste. There are severe punished of its violations but there are relaxations also in the present time. Regarding *Occupational differentiation, respective* caste has been assigned by customs and traditions a specific occupation to its members , like occupations of Lohar (Blacksimth), Sunar (Goldsmith), Kumhar (Potter), Teli (Oil presser), Chamar / Chambhar (Leather worker), etc. So caste is systemisation / hierarchisation of occupations to their members in high or low status. Thus caste is systematization of the traditional occupational differentiation. *Caste council or Panchayats, is* for maintaining castes system by collective authority of the elderly (ibid).

Members accountable towards Castes

The members of each caste has the responsibilities of doing hereditary occupation but at the same time caste maintains the functional interdependence, social structural separation, with ascending repulsion (Bougle, 1971 in Ambewadikar, 2012), consequently, the pure caste has strong hold on the polity and economy of the society (Beteille, 1965). That is also affirmed by Dumout (1970) who says "interaction based on economic and

political power position cannot over-ride status one's ritually determined caste status or rank".

Secondly, this restriction has created "varying degree of discrimination, poverty or richness and exclusion or need-based functional inclusion or inter-dependence were very much embedded in the caste- based closed stratification system" (Bailey, 1963). This was "more strictly applicable for the lower caste who are deprived of all human resources thus perennially or chronically poor in economic resources, and spatially, religiously and socially excluded from members of the other castes and communities" (Ambewadikar, 2012).

But there were, both quantitative and qualitative changes in the caste-system from the early colonial period. In 1930s Marc Galanter, a Britisher, attempted to understand the practice of 'Untouchability' due to lower social status in hierarchy by measuring it in scale, but it was in vein. But this helped to place the untouchables as scheduled castes in the Constitution of India in 1950 and it is in use with little change from 1936 (Galanter, 1984:122-135 in EHRC, 2014a).

Modifications in the Caste and Caste System

It is seen that "castes and sub- castes originated due to their laxity in the strict norms. Further, the middle rungs of caste system was started getting challenged" (Bailey, 1963 in Ambewadikar, 2012).

> "The religious attributes like rituals and purity and pollution, etc. in the caste system started losing their importance, particularly in the public spheres and on the other hand religious practices have become 'vicarious ritualisation' even in private domain of one's life" (see, Singer, 1972, 1963 in Ambewadikar, 2012).

Finally,

> "the political and economic power and authority attributes of the caste system have gained more importance. The achievable attributes through secular education, economic well-being, and power and authority have started dominating over the caste-based status, but this status has not yet lost completely its importance. It is seen that all the similar attributes and their resultant consequences are accommodated in the caste system" (see especially, Beteille, 1965 1963 in Ambewadikar, 2012).
>
> "The scheduled castes people experience more blatant inter-relationship between discrimination, poverty and social exclusion in villages than in urban spaces with varying forms, degree and extent of it as both sequential and causal in either clock-wise or anti-clock-wise or vice-versa direction" (in Ambewadikar, 2012).

Caste: A World Problem

Ambedkar says,

> "the caste problem is a vast one, both theoretically and practically. Practically, it is an institution that portends tremendous consequences. It is a local problem, but one capable of much wider mischief, for as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders ; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem." (Ambedkar, 1989:5, Vol.1).

Theoretically,

> "it has defied a great many scholars who have taken upon themselves, as a labour of love, to dig into its origin. Such being the case, I cannot treat the problem in its entirety. Time, space and acumen, …"(ibid).

World Conference : Discussion and Debate on Caste and Race

It was World Conference against racism which opened up discussion on caste at international level. The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, which was adopted by the 'World Conference Against Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa', did not address the problem of caste-based discrimination. However, the 2001 outcome document mentions **"**discrimination based on descent in several paragraphs, which with Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination(CERD)'s interpretation of the term and its subsequent practice would mean that caste-based discrimination should be considered as a form of discrimination" to be reviewed in the Durban Review Conference and Caste-Based Discrimination (https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/globalcaste/caste0801.pdf)

This interpretation has been validated in multiple country reviews by CERD's subsequent practice.

> "In the course of reviewing state party reports, CERD has expressed explicit reliance on the "descent limb" of article 1 in order to address the situation of Dalits in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Yemen, as well as the analogous situations of the Burakumin in Japan. Concluding observations have also been made by the Committee in respect of Mali, Senegal, Madagascar, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mauritius and Somalia" (ibid and also in the Human Right Watch) .

When examining pertinent state reports, other United Nation treaty body committees, including the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Committee Against Torture (CAT) and Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) have also examined caste-based discrimination, indicating that it is covered by these instruments as well.

> "The Special Rapporteur on racism has extensively addressed discrimination on grounds of caste and other systems of inherited status as implicit in his mandate. Other UN Special Procedures have also on several occasions expressed concern about caste-based discrimination in reports and communications with governments…UN Special Rapporteurs have several times raised the issue of caste-based discrimination on issues related to minorities, violence against women, torture, housing, right to food, freedom of expression and belief, education, human rights defenders, etc." (ibid and also in the Human Right Watch).

Even though caste is not the same as race, discrimination on this basis nonetheless occurs. The claim that racism and caste-based discrimination are not the same thing is insufficient justification for the appropriate UN mechanisms to ignore this grave human rights violation.

> "The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has affirmed that the "descent" of article 1 of the Convention encompasses situations of caste-based discrimination and analogous forms of inherited social exclusion. In General Recommendation XXIX on "descent-based discrimination" adopted on 22 August 2002" (ibid and also in the Human Right Watch)

Sociologists are inclined to view "caste as a system of social ranking, with recognised regional variations and considerable fluidity" (Jodhka, 2012). This variation are at international level also causing as usual discrimination an inequality. According to IDSN, Kumar and Thorat and Newman, it is found that the caste-based discrimination is affecting around 260 million people around in the world. The discrimination is visible in the both private and public spheres, creating violation of human rights for the "low caste" or ex-untouchable people. This dehumanising practice is widespread in South Asia and in other parts of Asia, also in some African countries, the Middle East countries and the Diaspora population. Caste-based discrimination has multiple forms depending upon the notion of purity and pollution.

> "It includes social and economic exclusion, segregation in housing, denial and restrictions of access to public and private services (social security services, especially health, justice) and employment, and forced traditionally prescribed occupations of the most demeaning and hazardous kind. De facto denial of equality before the law, the lack of protection of caste-affected people

> against violent attacks and other crimes, and impunity for such crimes are among the fundamental expressions of continued caste discrimination"(IDSN 2009, Kumar, 2006; Thorat and Newman, 2010).

The victims of injustice are routinely

> "denied access to water, schools, land, markets, credit and employment/ labour; the exclusion of Dalits and similarly affected communities by other groups in society and the inherent structural inequality in these social relationships, leads to high levels of poverty among affected population groups and exclusion, or reduced benefits, from development processes, and generally precludes their involvement in decision making or political power and meaningful participation in public and civil life" (ibid). The inequality creates hinderance for human resources and further development which hits the labor, market and economy.

Meaning of Caste in the UK and its Intersects

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2014a:3) research report on caste in Britain says, "Caste is a form of identity that is used as a basis for social differentiation and usually involves inequality". The report says "in Britain, as in India, the term 'caste' subsumes three concepts. Firstly, the four fold hierarchical order of the varna system and fifth class of excluded order of 'untouchables' or now the dalits (self identifying for the origin of caste and for justice)" (ibid:4). Second, "the South Asian concept of *jati and sub-jatis in any religion*, within a geographical locality and are effectively the operational units of a system that varies with region and with historical periods and socio-political context" (ibid:5). Third, "caste also encompasses *biradari*, a regional (largely Punjabi) term, in the UK mostly used by Muslim groups (in application to Sikhs in Britain)" (as referred in report (ibid:5). Reports says that, "in Pakistani languages, caste is also referred to by the term *zaat*, interchangeably with *biradari*or *biraderi*or in combination with it, (*zaat-biradari*) to maintain as a system of endogamous, extended family or kinship grouping" (ibid:5 Shaw, 2000).*Zaat*is in turn "related to '*nasal*' (lineage), or quite literally, race" (as referred in report (ibid:5), see Gazdar, 2007). Report also clarifies, "in everyday usage in Britain, caste is used interchangeably for *varna*, *jati*, and *biradari and is* also extended to include clan/tribe" (ibid:5).

Caste sometimes has inter-linkages with ethnic identity, race and religion. Coming back to India, firstly, Ambedkar says,

> "Through constant contact and mutual intercourse they evolved a common culture that superseded their distinctive cultures. It may be granted that there has not been a thorough amalgamation of the various stocks that make up the peoples of India, and to a traveller from within the boundaries of India the East presents a marked contrast in physique and even in colour to the West, as does the

> South to the North. But amalgamation can never be the sole criterion of homogeneity as predicated of any people. Ethnically all people are heterogeneous. It is the unity of culture that is the basis of homogeneity. Taking this for granted, I venture to say that there is no country that can rival the Indian Peninsula with respect to the unity of its culture. It has not only a geographic unity, but it has over and above all a deeper and a much more fundamental unity—the indubitable cultural unity that covers the land from end to end. But it is because of this homogeneity that Caste becomes a problem so difficult to be explained. If the Hindu Society were a mere federation of mutually exclusive units, the matter would be simple enough. But Caste is a parcelling of an already homogeneous unit, and the explanation of the genesis of Caste is the explanation of this process of parceling" (Ambedkar, 1989:6, Vol.1).

The EHRC (2014a) report says, "however, despite the idea of caste as different cultural identities or 'communities', whether in South Asia or in the UK, for the most part the salient divisions of caste occur *within* not *across* cultural divides".

Secondly,

> "To hold that distinctions of Castes or really distinctions of race and to treat different Castes as though they were so many different races is a gross perversion of facts. What racial affinity is there between the Brahmin of the Punjab and the Brahmin of Madras ? What racial affinity is there between the untouchable of Bengal and the untouchable of Madras? What racial difference is there between the Brahmin of the Punjab and the Chamar of the Punjab ? What racial difference is there between the Brahmin of Madras and the Pariah of Madras ? The Brahmin of the Punjab is racially of the same stock as the Chamar of the Punjab and the Brahmin of Madras is of the same race as the Pariah of Madras. Caste system does not demarcate racial division. Caste system is a social division of people of the same race"(Ambedkar, 1989: 48 Vol.1).

Same is the situation when caste migrant to other parts of the world or in the UK.

The EHRC report says, "caste and race have long been interlinked. But colour gradation are irrelevant to caste distinction. The other meaning of *varna*as 'colour' has led to the misleading simplification that it denotes a racial hierarchy". Ambedkar says,

> "European students of Caste have unduly emphasised the role of colour in the Caste system. Themselves impregnated by colour prejudices, they very readily imagined it to be the chief factor in the Caste problem. But nothing can be farther from the truth. The

> colour of the skin had long ceased to be a matter of importance" (Ambedkar, 1989:21, Vol.1).

Ambedkar says,

> "Caste is no doubt primarily the breath of the Hindus. But the Hindus have fouled the air all over and everybody is infected, Sikh, Muslim and Christian. You, therefore, deserve the support of all those who are suffering from this infection, Sikh, Muslim and Christian" (Ambedkar, 1989:80, Vol.1).

The EHRC report also stress, "globally, discrimination on grounds of caste is not strictly religious, nor 'Hindu'; it exists among Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and other groups" (as referred in report, see O'Brien, 2012, Mosse, 2012, Singh, 2012). It also says,

> "Egalitarian traditions in Indic religions challenge caste hierarchy, so Dalits and others have formed sects or converted to other faiths like Buddhism, Ravidassias and Valmikis as expressions of equality. Such that identities of caste and religion intersect in complex ways in the UK causing caste-based discrimination and not religion ones" (EHRC report:2014a:4).

In sociological terms, "caste is not equivalent to ethnic identity because caste is found across religion, language, region, cultural practices but do not form a distinct social group" (ibid, Waughray, 2009).

"The Victorian race theorists like Risley (1904, 1908), Hutton (1963, 1969), etc. saw caste as an evolutionary weapon designed by the *Aryan* descendants who devised conventions of purity and exclusion as a means of maintaining the purity of their blood and race. Hutton, in his comprehensive review and discussion on the question of the origin of the caste system, disposes swiftly of the view that caste is the indigenous device of Brahmans" (Ambewadikar, 2012). However, he notes that, "it is so deeply rooted and a pervasive social institution as the caste system could hardly have been imposed by an administrative measure" (ibid). "Indeed I hold that it is your bounden duty to tear the mask, to remove the misrepresentation that as caused by misnaming this law as religion. This is an essential step for you. Once you clear the minds of the people of this misconception and enable them to realize that what they are told as religion is not religion but that it is really law, you will be in position to urge for its amendment or abolition" (Ambedkar, 1989:76, Vol.1), thus pioneering prospective of social reform.

Caste-based Discrimination in the UK

According to 2011 census, "there are estimated to be nearly 4.5 million South Asians (4,232,661 South Asians living in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland ; and 71,317 South Asians living in the Scotland)".It is found that "there is strong presence of caste- based discrimination in the UK which is the

government commission called as National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) in 2010 report" 'Caste discrimination and harassment in Great Britain' in the areas covered by the Equality Act 2010. NIESR says, that "non-legislative approaches are less likely to be effective in the private sector, and do not assist people where the authorities themselves are discriminating" (NIESR, 2010). Prior to NIESRs report the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance's (ACDA) timely report Hidden Apartheid – Voice of the Community - Caste and Caste Discrimination in the UK (October 2009) published during the passage of the Equality Bill, came to the same conclusion. This report had input from four university professors from three different universities. "Of the 300 people who input into the ACDA report (100 as part of the on-line survey): 9% said they had missed promotion at work. 9% said they had experienced verbal abuse. 7% under 12 year olds – said they had faced threatening behaviour and 16% verbal abuse; 10% of perpetrators of under 12 year olds were teachers and 42% fellow pupils. 58% said they had faced discrimination because of their Caste" (ACDA, 2009).

The 2014 EHRCa report confirms the findings of the ACDA, NIESR and other papers and reports and case studies. It states that "there is caste prejudice, discrimination and harassment in Britain which is destructive and should play no part in contemporary British social life". Even my present fieldwork of May-June 2017 sponsored by the my University in the UK in London city, Wolverhampton, Birmingham and Bedford with sixty elaborated interviews and case studies on the caste-based discrimination experiences shows similarity. Citing few case details self explains the existence of caste-based discrimination like restriction in commensal relation in private spheres, creating margins of socialization furthering into spatial segregation, in the name of renting only to vegetarian or Brahmin only so also to keep away fear of inter-caste marriage.Even the membership of social/cultural groups ormandals has a column of caste that shows the rigid presence of caste practice.On the other hand, the socialising spaces like pubs were socially nomenclatured as 'Chamar Pub', in Bedford, reaffirms the caste structure. Further "strict practice of endogamy but duality in caste cross-bordering for sexuality and body politics gives room to analysehonour behavior.The faith-based diversity makes the relationship between caste and religion more complex" (in report, see Singh, 2012; Zavos, 2012). But the Sikhism, Christianity, Islam are preaching equality, it is their followers who practice casteism. Example, followers of Sikhism excluded dalits Sikhs from management committee or cooking or serving langar or from being beloved followers (Pyare) in the celebration of Guru's procession (though it was a religious mandate of inclusion), etc. Thus "resulting into assertion of equality and removal of caste stigma through independence of worship and religious identity like Ravidassias and Valmikis" (in report, see Leslie (2003: 69, Ram, R. 2008, Dhanda, 2013b). Further, "the religious education in schools in the UK creates awareness of varna / caste / jati, leading to understanding of purity and status thus causing caste-based bullying" (in report, see Baumann 1996: 152, Nesbitt 1997 Ghuman 2011 and Dhanda 2009). The caste minded parents are polluting the juvenile minds of their children or school-mates by

inquiring about caste. There are many incidences of discrimination towards higher education dalit students from the peer groups, especially, after the knowledge of them being awardees of caste-based educational financial scholarship, thus leading to taunting, caste calling and finally non-commensal relation or social exclusion. Further in some cases scheming for dalitresearcher for the research supervisor in the academic field (public spheres) and also spying in domestic (private) sphere to know the caste identity and their social movement is observed. In the economic spheres, structural work differentiation raging to less income for the dalits is a routine phenomena but non-acceptance of a dalit as a boss (for ten long years) by a Brahmin even in a reputed big company puts question in a wide open to how to analayse and locate deep rooted caste in foreign land. "This casteism is also affecting the social security system process and benefits of the country" (EHRC, 2014b). Lastly, the data shows sign of positive correlation between caste-based discrimination and capital / income culminating into social exclusion across religion like Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity and Muslim, and across nationality (in report, see Ballard, 1994, 1989: 225, Moose2012), gender, age and culture. Like the report, data also says "there is a generational differentiations in experiences of the caste-based discrimination but Dalit youth are confident to face and combat it with the law". Thus there is a need of Equality Act in the United Kingdom.

Application of international examples

The EHRC reports says "while clearly the Indian and the UK experience of caste cannot be equated, legally, the non-discrimination clause technique is equally applicable and relevant but it can draw the Indian precedent. Because India lists caste alongside race and other ground for non-discrimination, similar to the other South Asian States' constitutions, which list caste in their constitutional texts alongside race, religion and other grounds. In the UK, the legislative duty under s.97 of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 is that caste be made 'an aspect of' race , but caste as not a protected characteristic in itself" (EHRC, 2014a).

Caste in the international framework

The EHRC report says,

> "the international context is relevant to caste in Britain from two perspectives. First, the United Nations has examined the question of caste discrimination in its international treaty law, finding that it is a form of descent-based discrimination and therefore a form of racial discrimination for the purposes of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination 1965 (ICERD), to which the UK is a signatory" (EHRC, 2014a).

Second,

> "the domestic systems of a number of other States have legislated on caste, potentially providing models for the Equality Act 2010 as well as affirming that caste can occur outside of the South Asian context. Overall, the international sphere provides a benchmark against which to assess the current requirement contained in s.97 of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013" (ibid).

The report states,

> "the United Nations informs that the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), in its examination of the UK's State Report under ICERD (a requirement which assesses the extent to which a state is implementing its treaty obligations), concluded that the inclusion of caste in the Equality Act 2010 was a treaty obligation" (ibid).

Conclusion

Religion must mainly be a responsible act and cannot be a matter of rules for humanity wherein it becomes necessary to take out the misrepresentation caused by misnaming the law as religion. Especially, the laws as religion which creates hierarchical gradation, disabilities and privileges, inequality, repulsions / expulsion and social exclusion for the members of the society. But the idea of law is also associated with the idea of change which can create equality in society by liberty, fraternity and justice. For justice we need to go to the base of the social structure to annihilate the divisions, that is annihilation of caste, even in the UK society.

In this paper the whole ambiguity in understanding of what caste is and how and where to locate caste is discussed keeping in mind the context of the proposed equality legislation in the UK. Firstly, the research on caste-based discrimination shows fierce resurfacing in the social reproduction of caste in multi-dimensional form in the diasporic community of the United Kingdom. Secondly, in Ambedkarian perspective, caste is found across religion, language, region, cultural practices thus graded inequality and social exclusion of dalits in the UK which fetches a location in the legal frame as a separate or fifth sub-category of race because caste is distinct from ethnic origins.

In order to eradicate caste-based prejudice, the World Conference on Caste-Free World 2025 held at Toronto has provided an essential forum for global discussion with an emphasis on workable answers and legislative interventions (https://www.dignitypost.com/news/2025/02/176). Since, over 260 million individuals worldwide face cruel treatment and institutionalised discrimination on the basis of their race, ethnicity, and caste. "What started out as a South Asian regional issue has now spread to the entire world".

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Article: Mapping the Discourse of Panchayati Raj Institutions through the Prism of Caste and Power

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Mapping the Discourse of Panchayati Raj Institutions through the Prism of Caste and Power

--Satish Chennur

ABSTRACT

This article draws attention to the "The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's) in India" and critically assesses its progress in decentralizing political power. It also asses the central claims made by PRIs that it has incorporated hitherto historically excluded groups such as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), Other Backward Caste (BC), and Women into the power structure critically. In the process of deepening and widening the spirit of democracy, PRI's became a benchmark in Indian politics. On April 24, 1993, through the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India, Article 243D mentions reservations were given for the SC, ST, OBC, and Women in village politics, an opportunity to participate in village-level politics. Perhaps it is necessary to reflect on the progress of these PRI's after two decades of their introduction, both conceptually and empirically.

Key Words: Caste; Panchayati Raj Institutions; Power; Development; Decentralisation; Participatory Governance.

Introduction

The local self-government i.e. Panchayati Raj Institutions, immensely impacted the marginalised groups in India in their pursuit for equal share in the political power. The implication of acquiring political power will have it affects strongly on other spheres, particularly social, economic and cultural. There are continuous evaluations assessing the scale of impact on these groups. Particularly focusing on the negotiating space between agents who manage social, economic and political power at various levels in the village structure. To be clearer, the 73rd constitutional amendment attempted to restructure the power structure in the villages India. Indian society, being the rigid social organization, driven hierarchically had to encounter the situation created by the Constitution. Keeping this complexity, this paper critically engages with the question on how far the idea of democratic decentralization impacted in the sphere of power and development, stretching both historical and contemporary contours, and importantly, it examines the role of the state in colonial and post-colonial periods and their approach towards PRI's. To do that, this paper is divided into three parts. The first part is engaged with the

concept of power through the prism of PRIs, whereas in the second and third sections, an attempt is made to interpret PRIs through development and the role of state followed by a critical summary.

The primary objective of this paper to theoretically and empirically evaluate PRIs' success in empowering marginalised groups at the same time paying attention to the limits in implementing the concept of decentralisation in Indian society which is a caste-based society.

Historical and Conceptual Background

An amendment was made to the Constitution during the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991–1996), under Article 243D: The thrust of the Article is that seats should be reserved for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and Women in all panchayats in the country by considering the size of the population. The concept of decentralization, or empowerment of marginalized groups, theoretically reflects the idea of distributive justice in terms of political power. However, these ideas would have several connotations if operationalized without taking account of the Indian social structure.

Decentralization of political powers in a caste-ridden society implies a certain merger of social spaces. Commenting on the decentralization of the political power, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1982) said in the parliament, that the "[P]opulation which is illiterate, which is steeped in ignorance, which is swallowed up in superstition and devoid of social and economical equality, it is not possible to achieve political equality." This article tries to address the scepticism, evidently visible in Ambedkar's statement carefully and critically in both letter and spirit. In the following section, we will discuss power conceptually and tries to locate it empirically within the Indian social structure and evaluate how political parties and politicians negotiate their strategies in claiming and retaining power.

Power as a conceptual framework to understand PRIs

Power is always a contested concept in the social sciences, irrespective of its 'orient' or 'occident' origins. Scholars from various schools of thought have addressed the concept of power. Haywards (2000) calls power a social phenomenon. It particularly becomes vital to understand the concept of power in relation to Panchayati Raj Institutions. The central philosophy of PRI's, i.e., the decentralization of political power in the Indian context. It exclusively focuses on the transfer of power to all social groups. The then-Congress government argued that making the PRI's centripetal system more inclusive in

rural areas would pave the way for a centrifugal system.

Max Weber (1948), a classical sociologist, pioneer in studying the concept of power. Both while studying religion and independently, he produced substantial work on power, dominance, and authority. Weber advocated that all the political structures use force, but they differ in the extent to which they use it against other political organizations. Comparing the landlords to the bureaucrats, as they are natural and the primary exponents of prestige, they felt that power for their political structures meant power for themselves.

Weber's concept of prestige would be quite helpful to understand the political and social structure in Indian society. The British rule was responsible for the developing and essentializing the landlord class in village India, which turned out to be a chief obstacle to the empowerment of marginalized sections. The concept of prestige played a pivotal role in shaping the vertical structure of Indian society. Because of the element of prestige, the elite and upper caste, with their prejudices, push dalits, adivasis and women from power and the decision-making process into the periphery.

Several scholars have extended Weber's thoughts on power, broadly can be called as post-Weberian thoughts on power. Amongst, for the purpose of this paper I have chosen three- Robert Bierstiedt, Steven Lukes, and William Connolly. Robert Bierstiedt, proclaims that in every kind of relationship, power exists, irrespective of economic, social, political, or military; bringing all categories under on rubric and calls it 'social power'. It is possible to relate this to the concept of PRI's in India, as to how they are empowered by the decentralization of political power to marginalized groups. This invokes, Ambedkar's statement that economic and social powers are vested with the upper castes of society, offcourse the political power too, whereas the lower sections would be sharing only the political power. The Indian society went ahead without considering this paradoxical, complex characteristic of Indian society to decentralize the powers in the political domain.

Steven Lukes looks at power in a radical dimension. Lukes said that there was much preference towards studying behaviorism, that too actual behavior, i.e. overt action of the individual. By not focusing on the covert behavior, the other two dimensions of power (plural, anti-plural) are missing the potential issues which wouldn't constitute overt behaviour. Lukes says that it is not that there is only overt power but also covert behavior, where it wouldn't be anything explicit, but the effects will be on marginal people. Lukes locates another lacuna among the early theorists, where they didn't give importance to the non- decisions, they have focused mainly on the decisions which are taken

directly in the front stage. This third dimensional view says when the actors don't have the grievances about the domination of power, and then there is no problem for the actor, who is forcing the others to obtain their desires but not letting the actor's interests. The main concern of the third dimensional view is to bring the potential issues into the front stage, which can cause the actors individuality, and his position in the society. The focus of this theory was to locate the actor's behavior on his 'off stage', and to look at the actor's decisions which also cannot be direct, but only indirect.

William Connolly's concept of power is concerned with 'power to' and 'power over', these two concepts are interlinked. He says that it is not only the individual who dominates the others; there is also the possibility of communities dominating over other communities. Connolly is very keen on addressing authority and power. There is a lot of significance to Connolly's interpretation of power in the Indian context. The basic question about the PRI's is that, as caste is a perennial problem in India, it is critical to understand how caste operates. Although it has been proposed by the ruling classes for the decentralization of political powers, given the social inequalities, as Connolly argues, power should also be given to marginalized groups to exercise power over them. Despite the claims of the achievements of the PRI's in a few states, it is interesting to see whether marginalized groups have benefited at all? Only with the amendment to the Constitution, dalits, adivasis and women became part of the power structure, until then they were on the periphery of power. These questions of 'power over' the people but not 'power to' the people have been critically examined in the following pages.

In the next two sections, an attempt is made to understand the structural factors for the stagnation of power in the panchayati bodies. Particularly, what role does development, governance play in the decentralisation of democratic powers. These sections also delve into the processes involved in the ways in which the dominant castes effectively exercise power in most of the villages, including in the villages reserved for women, dalits and adivasis thus blocking both development and participatory governance.

Development, PRIs and Marginalized groups

Development as a conceptual theme is constantly undergoing change in its content (Pieterse 2001). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines development as "the enlargement of people's choices." The concept of development has been theorized from different perspectives, such as social, human, post-development, alternative, or anti-development. In this context, it becomes relevant to cite, Arturo Escobar (2012: 10), who says that development

as a historically singular experience, the creation of a domain of thought and action, by analyzing the characteristics and interrelations of the three axes that define it: the forms of knowledge that refer to it and through which it comes into being and is elaborated into objects, concepts, theories, and the like; the system of power that regulates its practice; and the forms of subjectivity fostered by this discourse, those through which people come to recognize themselves as developed or underdeveloped. The ensemble of forms found along these axes constitutes development as a discursive formation, giving rise to an efficient apparatus that systematically relates forms of knowledge and techniques of power.

The ideas that revolve around the concept of development discussed in India are predominantly borrowed or forcibly imposed by western developed countries. Two major themes have emerged from within the discourse of development-democratic decentralization, and participatory governance (Ananthpur 2002). Even though these two terms are sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory, yet they are inherently dependent on each other. The former emphasizes the powerhouses as multiple centers, and it is against the 'centripetal', whereas the latter gives the meaning that involves individuals in the process of governance.

To layout a little further, the idea of democratic decentralization is known to transform political powers from a higher level to a lower level. It has been constantly restructuring itself and by the power holders (ruling class) from a while ago. Historically the idea of democratic decentralization prevailed from the 18th century in western thought, from the period of Montesquieu to Alex-de-Tocqueville. Tocqueville (1856) said that

"[T]he local community was considered a 'fundamental cell' of democracy, the place where citizens experimented with the basic rules of democratic government".

In contemporary times, decentralization has been supposed to play a crucial role in developing and underdeveloped countries. The concept of local self-government has emerged within the contours of decentralization, particularly in India during the colonial period, primarily taking a prominent shape conceptually and becoming a subject of intense discussion politically. Even after independence, it continued to have relevance both within and outside of the political sphere. Jain.R.B. (1981) discussed the concept elaborately, saying that democratic decentralization is a

"political concept, which is aimed at widening the area of people's participation, entrusting authority and autonomy through dispersion or

devolution of powers to people's representative organizations from top to bottom in all the triple dimensions of political decision making, i.e., financial control, administrative management with least interference and control from higher levels".

In India, democratic decentralization can be translated into *Panchayats*, while tracing the historical antecedents of the term; it will take us to a system with self-governing village communities characterized by the agrarian economies in India from the past. But in the medieval period, particularly during the Mughal period, the judicial powers of *Panchayats* were slightly curtailed but local affairs remained unregulated from above. Village officers and servants were answerable primarily to the panchayat (George 1994).

It was during colonial period, the idea of Panchayat system acquired lots of attention from various corners, particularly from the colonial state who were keen in decentralizing the political power. However, there were several interpretations of the colonial ruler's intention of the decentralization process. One dominant interpretation was that the British brought forth the decentralization as a strategic tool to disintegrate the Indian states and provinces, out of fear of repeating the 1857 mutiny, and to increase land revenue in rural India and reduce the burden of administrative powers. To conclude this section, we have tried to critically summarize contours of PRIs with reference to development and political power. Whereas in the next section, I would be discussing the other important aspect in development, i.e., participatory governance. What role it has played in involving people and the power at the grass root level.

Participatory Governance and PRIs

The spirit of participatory governance is to involve people at various levels of power centers. Conceptually, democratic decentralization replaces the concept of centralization, where the former moves away from the centre and transfers power from higher to lower levels, whereas the latter moves towards the centre where the higher holds the power. The Indian social structure laced with caste was more revolving around centralisation was challenged through community development programmes (CDPs) initiated later by successive governments. But the inability of these CDPs to radically alter the power centres at the village level, because of the rampant caste system in the villages, the panchayats became one of the tools for the development of marginalized groups in India. But this tool too was inescapable from the caste.

As Pant (2003) said, "the effective devolution of powers to the panchayats requires political will and commitment at the state level. Not just political but

also more social. Succumbing to the pressure of caste system, the participatory nature of Panchayat Raj bodies has come to be upper caste driven". There are still several perennial questions pertaining to the regular course of procedures like rotation of seats, reservations, and importantly social inclusion of marginalized groups including women. It is almost four decades that PRI's are under the flagship of the constitution, but still the situation remains static; optimists say that progress takes gradually, but this gradual makes India more passive even after the Constitutional status gives way. The transfer of power from top to bottom could happen with the panchayats 'if caste – ridden hierarchical society exists, and each person is treated not on ascriptive but through the achievement basis'.

Considering several political compulsions, the Nehruvian government with its agenda towards industrialization focused not much on the rural areas, thus effecting the empowerment of marginalized groups. In the initial days of implementation, it was not done with full commitment. Instead of calling it village panchayats, Kripa Ananthpur (2004), a social anthropologist prefers to call them as customary village councils (CVCs) because of the structural ways through which informal leaders who belongs to the dominant caste holding power rather than formally elected representatives who comes from the marginalized sections. The concept of decentralization is not an end in itself; it is a process of harnessing and channeling the energies of the people for equality and to bring about social transformation in such a manner that every member of society comes to occupy his or her rightful place in all spheres of life, irrespective of social, economic, and political life. This task can be an achievable challenge, provided there is transformation, i.e., social transformation, and power must be transferred to all sections of society, including women. The process of social inclusion at the grass-roots level is another concern. There is a possibility for democratic decentralization of powers when all categories of people participate, control economic issues, and supervise their own activities.

The dominant castes and classes effectively resisted these initiatives because it disturbs their traditional power and authority structure. They were reluctant and feared to decentralize power because the hegemony they maintained over centuries would be diluted. Having had wholehearted support from the Colonial rulers, the upper castes acquired power through land ownership and control over economic and social resources. Colonial rulers conquered India not only through superior arms, military power, political strength, and economic wealth, but mainly through cultural techniques, by way of co-opting the dominant sections of Indian society. Colonial rulers granted power to the upper castes/classes, including the ability to collect taxes. By holding the

power, these castes/classes got recognition, and their acts were considered as socially legitimate. Other sections of society, particularly from marginalized groups, got excluded from the society's cultural, economic, social and political activities.

The principal ideology behind the PRI's is to decentralize political power to marginalized groups, where the power has been centralized only to certain sections of society. It is generally argued that those who own more land dominate the socio-economic life in the villages, and notably, it is the feudal lords, with whom the power was centralized in their hands (Sathe 1989). The purpose behind decentralizing the political powers is not merely to bring those excluded groups into the political scenario, nor is this development about providing basic needs such as food, shelter, health, and education; the significance aspect is providing freedom of expression (Cocoyoc Declaration, 1974). When there is curtailment of freedom of expression, then there is no meaning of development for the marginalized groups.

Although there is vast literature on PRI's, many studies give only the description of its structure and function, as desired and visualized by the national leadership and the ruling classes (Jaganath Padhey 1980). Most of the scholars who discussed PRI's have left the essence of the issue untouched. In Indian society, the essence of social context is incomplete without discussion of caste. Without altering the basic relationships in the social structure, democratizing the caste-ridden society is a romantic utopian perspective. The idea of PRI's in principle is to create space for people to participate in politics. The assumption here is that local communities know about themselves better and will be able to manage their affairs directly because it is the 'people' who know best what their problems are, what their priorities are, and what could be the best solutions to suit their requirements. But unfortunately, it turned out to be that people's participation implies the participation of one section of society only. Marginalized groups became passive because of their socio-cultural dynamics.

The participation of people in the development process is supposed to have increased at the global level (Harrison 1970). In that process, the concept of the People's Participation Programme (PPP) was initiated by the United Nations in 1982 in the African country of Sierra Leone. The main motto was to organize and encourage the active involvement of people coming from grass-root level. This concept has similar connotations with the concept of 'alternative development', where it is inclined to one kind of radical development towards the empowerment of the marginalized sections. PPP has been designed specifically to empower rural people, implying that they express their needs particularly at social and political level. The concepts of

PPP and PRI have similarities in their objectives. Both focus on grass-roots democracy, and their ideology is to involve the people in the power structure and in the development process and, secondly, decentralize the powers. The preconditions are that every citizen is equal, irrespective of their economic, social, and political background. Harrison (1970) said that "the idea of participation is gaining much wider accuracy in all spheres. There is growing consensus that development can be accelerated if the energies and resources of the people are mobilized and that the poor have a basic human right—hitherto denied to them by unequal power structures—to take part in making the decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods (Harrison 1970). If caste being an informal social institution trying to block the process of decentralisation thus also blocking development, participatory governance, the formal institution, like State also appears to be an important bottleneck in decentralising the political power. This point would be critically examined in the next section.

The Role of State in Decentralization of Power:

In the developmental agenda of marginalized groups, the role of the state is substantial. During the British period, Lord Rippon, who was closely associated with *Panchayats*, named them "Local Self Government". Sir Charles Metcalf called the Indian Village communities "Little Republics". The Colonial state impact on the panchayats was enormous mainly in administrative, feudal, and agrarian transitions (Johnson 2003). As I have indicated that a strong narrative emerged around that time that colonial rulers attempt to pay more attention to panchayats is to disunite the people. For instance, Munroe said about the panchayats that, "they gave themselves no trouble about the breaking up and division of kingdoms; while the village remains entire, they care not to what power it is transferred: wherever it goes, the internal management remains unaltered" (Dirks 2002). As the classical sociologist Max Weber tried to put it, a 'Nation can be part of the State', in a similar way, Indian villages became separate entities for themselves. Colonial rulers tried to establish the Indian villages more like independent entities.

Panchayats and responses after Independence

Among the national leaders, Mahatma Gandhi was more vocal and inclined towards the concept of the Panchayats, where he even articulated the idea that the villages were 'Gram Swarajyas', meaning autonomous units.

In the post-colonial period, the concept of Panchayati Raj became a valuable concept and became a tool in the hands of some prominent leaders. There is a tremendous impact of the Indian ruling class, more particularly represented by

the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru along with Gandhi and Ambedkar saw the PRI's in structural terms, particularly Nehru, perceived PRIs on the grounds of political gains for the ruling party and brought them into existence.

In the period of the Nehru government, panchayats became a central issue in politics, though he never identified himself with the village (Jodhka 2002: 3348). At that time, there was nationwide discussion about the inclusion of panchayats in the Constitution of India in the meantime; Panchayats became part of the Directive Principles as outlined in Article 40 in the Constitution of India. It is mentioned that as "[T]he state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self- government" (Hoshiar Singh 1994). The Nehru government has initiated PRI's to give equal political power to marginalized people, and the due course it has evolved and it got a greater scope after the Balwant Rai Committee's recommendations.[i] Balwant Rai said that without involving the local people in the local power strucutre, the fruits of development programs might not reach everyone and the effect would be minimal. This committee suggested the framework of decentralization and made the government accelerate the establishment of panchayats. This idea was first initiated in the state of Rajasthan. Nehru inaugurated it and called it "the most revolutionary and historical step in the context of new India.

Later, with the Ashok Mehta Committee[ii] (1977) recommendations, panchayats evolved as political institutions rather than developmental organizations. This committee also recommended constitutional status for the panchayats. It is Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister during 1984-1989, who has been considered instrumental in developing the concept of PRI's in rural areas. However, Rajiv Gandhi took up initiatives for the reforms under some political compulsions. The intention behind these initiatives was to give political life to the rural cadre of his own party and strengthen the party base in rural India. After several rounds of discussions with leaders and the heads of respected villages all over India, his government initiated the idea of giving constitutional status to the panchayats. This decision was taken forward in the period of the P.V. NarasimhaRao government (1991-96). In 1992, PRI's became part of the Eleventh Schedule (villages) and were brought into practice in Rajasthan.

From the idea of Lord Rippon's term local self-government, panchayats were transformed into institutions; now they are called Panchayati *Raj Institutions* (PRI's). With these developments, one can see the second phase in the development of panchayats that have emerged (Subramanyam 2002). Before

the constitutional amendment, the role of the state was involuntary, but after that, it became mandatory for all the states in India to implement the PRI's. Having had to agree for the inclusion of PRI's in the Constitution, the political parties made their way in a more sophisticated manner into the second level of political culture (Mukhopadhya, Dasgupta, 1989).

Political parties, irrespective of their ideologies, have been using the PRI's as their tools; it is argued that they have become 'buffers' or ladders for their political leader's life. The former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi used the term 'power brokers' to describe these kinds of political leaders, because, with this kind of land ownership, the rural elite can exercise their power in rural villages. According to M.N. Srinivas (1977), the size of land holdings plays a major role in the perpetuation of the domination of castes in rural villages. Caste determines almost everything in the villages, along with the size of land holdings, capital, muscle, etc. Caste becomes the core, while land holdings and capital become the periphery in the villages. Dominant caste's main intention is, 'expansion' as Weber says, these expansions are over the powerless[iii]. After the constitutional amendment, more powers have been transferred to the local bodies; their orientation was more political than developmental.

On the other hand, Gandhi and Ambedkar emphasized the strengths and weaknesses of the PRI's. Ambedkar strongly opposed the inclusion of panchayats in the constitution. His main concern was about the ignorance of the villagers, the narrow-mindedness of the caste people, graded inequality, etc. With all these contentious issues, he said that it is not possible to expect political equality without achieving social and economic equality. Experiencing village life very closely, he observed that power (economic and social) was located in some sections of the people. In these conditions, it is not at all fair to decentralize political power, especially in rural areas, which gives more flexibility for the upper-caste people to continue their dominance over the marginalized groups. On the other hand, Gandhi emphasized that the Village Panchayats are the future pillars for India. Gandhi even gave a name for them as 'Gram Rajya' and 'Gram Swarajya', both indicating the village states and independent villages, respectively.

An attempt was made to present a critical summary of the role of the state, both colonial as well as post-independent, in introducing and achieving the idea of democratic decentralization and participatory governance and tracing its chronology was done in the previous section. What revolved more in the due course was power, it is the power for which successive governments and leaders either used or abused panchayat raj systems, and in some cases, they overwhelmingly invited, like Gandhi or cautiously accepted, especially political leaders like Ambedkar.

Critical Conclusion

An attempt was made through this article to investigate the conceptual and empirical understandings about panchayati raj institutions through the prism of caste and power. The central concept of PRIs is to decentralize and create more space for the dalits, adivasis and women to participate in the political governance, On the contrary, this paper has argued that even though conceptually the concept of PRIs is very empowering and egalitarian but when it comes to implementation, it is visible that there were several blockades which this paper brought out evidently. The fundamental blockage comes from the very social structure it tries to address. The caste ridden Indian social structure, in principle, functions based on hierarchy where 'lowered' sections and 'powerless' groups were kept outside in lieu with manu dharmashastras. As Ambedkar says that without social and economic democracy, political democracy is a futile exercise.

This paper also critically argued about the responses from the state, both colonial and post-Independent, towards the demands put forth by the marginalised groups. The colonial state responded to the demands keeping with its vested interests, whereas the post-Independent state with feudal tendencies tried to respond but failed to execute the empowering and egalitarian principles. Because the process has to go through several mechanisms like prestige, influence, dominance, authority. All these variables become hindrances in manifesting the imagination of decentralization of democratic powers. Three perspectives on power, brought another dimension in terms of understanding the power fluctuations/stagnations and the power structure itself. Because of this reason, even after seven decades of the Independence the progress and performance of PRI's is still abysmally, especially including the marginal sections in the decision making. Marginalized groups become passive receivers and not the active participants in the local democracy. As the village structure in India reflects dominance of the upper castes. It needs to be stated that without breaking the traditional norms, such as exercise of the power by the upper caste propertied class, it is not possible to think of devolution of power socially.

[i]BalwantRai Committee (1957) appointed to review the Community Development Programmes, which came after Independence. Nehru, then Prime Minister, was very keen in establishing the Community Development Programme. To review the Programme, the Nehru Government has appointed BalwantRai as a Chairman to review the programmes.

[ii]Ashok Mehta Committee (1977) suggested several new dimensions to the PRI's, among them participation of Political parties in the local elections. This committee suggested the government focus on the development programmes.

[iii] Weber uses the term in the context of using it for political powers in the western countries.

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Article: Bridging the Digital Divide: Girls' Education in Government Schools of South Delhi During the Pandemic

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Bridging the Digital Divide: Girls' Education in Government Schools of South Delhi During the Pandemic

--Ajailiu Niumai & Gunjan Rajora

Abstract

This paper critically examines the gendered digital divide in education among girl students during the pandemic. It investigates how intersecting socio-economic constraints and unequal access to digital devices create exclusionary educational experiences and influence students' motivation to engage in online learning. The study introduces the concept of digital learning disability to describe how structural limitations such as poor connectivity, shortage of smartphones, and unfamiliarity with technology lead to digital illiteracy and technophobia, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies of class, caste, and gender. A mixed-methods approach was employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, utilising purposive and basic random sampling strategies. Through a combination of individual interviews, an online survey, and closed-ended structured questionnaires, we interviewed 54 girl students and 26 teachers from two schools in South Delhi. Findings reveal various forms of inequality in an increasingly networked society, where gender performativity is expressed through both digital participation and absence. Gendered expectations exacerbated various challenges, as girls often performed household chores, cared for siblings, and assisted the elderly, leaving limited time and motivation for study. Teachers observed that parents tended to value daughters' domestic proficiency as a form of social and marital capital. Rooted in sociological theoretical frameworks, this paper explores how girls' attitudes toward technology are socially constructed and institutionally shaped. It underscores the need for equity-focused digital inclusion policies to promote just and sustainable educational futures.

Keywords: *digital divide, digital learning disability, education, gender performativity, inequality, digital inclusion*

Introduction

This paper addresses three core issues: first, it examines how the pandemic revealed new modalities of exclusion within digital education; second, it explores the underlying causes of absenteeism, low motivation, and study-related stress among students in online classes; and third, it interrogates how inequalities are reproduced in the Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) age through the interplay of economic resources, social norms, and gendered expectations. The study raises critical questions: How are students' attitudes toward technology socially shaped? Was online education truly inclusive? How did the shift to virtual classrooms affect students from urban slums? Why were children from lower socio-economic backgrounds unable to secure their educational rights despite state efforts? How did girl students, already navigating structural vulnerabilities, experience new forms of marginalization in digital spaces? Does digital illiteracy constitute a form of social disability that restricts one's participation in the digital public sphere?

By situating these concerns within Bourdieu's (1997) theoretical lens, this study demonstrates that educational inequalities in the digital era are not merely outcomes of technological deficits but manifestations of unequal distributions of economic, social, and cultural capital. It highlights how gender performativity, socio-economic realities, and digital access intersect to shape participation in online education, calling for a deeper reimagining of educational justice in a networked society.

Education is one of the most powerful social institutions that mediates processes of transformation, mobility, and empowerment. It is intricately linked to human development and functions as both a personal and collective resource for societal change. In a stratified society, education operates as a key determinant of life chances - an educated individual is more likely to secure employment, gain social recognition, and exercise agency than one excluded from formal learning opportunities. Development theorists have long underscored the role of education as an investment in human capital to

advance Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG-4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education[2]. However, the digitalization of education has fundamentally restructured the pedagogical landscape.

[2] https://globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/

Traditional modes of instruction have been replaced or supplemented by digital technologies such as computers, smartphones, tablets, and online platforms that now shape how knowledge is produced, transmitted, and accessed. This shift has simultaneously expanded opportunities for learning and entrenched new forms of exclusion. Limited access to digital devices and connectivity creates a digital hollow gap, where exclusionary experiences are not simply technological deficiencies but reflections of broader social inequalities. The digital divide, therefore, must be understood as a socio-structural phenomenon intersecting with class, caste, gender, and geography.

This paper argues that digital literacy and technological competence have emerged as new forms of capital that determine individuals' capacity to participate in the digital field of education. Students from privileged backgrounds possess greater digital capital - a hybrid of material access, cultural familiarity, and institutional support. This cultural capital enables them to adapt the online learning environments more easily. In contrast, students from lower socio-economic strata, particularly girls in government schools, experience compounded disadvantages due to the lack of such capital. This significant gap leads to digital learning disabilities and alienation from educational processes.

Digital World and COVID-19

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief the deep interconnections between technology, society, and inequality. The crisis not only disrupted everyday life but also redefined the parameters of social, physical, and mental well-being, particularly for those already situated within the margins of poverty and deprivation. With most activities shifting

exclusively to online platforms, the digital realm emerged as the central site for work, education, and social interaction. This transformation, often described as part of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, reflects an era characterized by accelerated technological change, automation, artificial intelligence, and digital interconnectedness. Yet, this revolution has simultaneously amplified global anxieties around the equality of opportunity, access to resources, and the uneven distribution of technological capital. The pandemic, therefore, functioned as a sociological lens, exposing how structural inequalities are reproduced within the digital order.

In India, the vision of creating a digitally empowered society remains entangled in the enduring cycles of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. The pandemic exposed these contradictions vividly when education systems were forced to transition entirely to online modes of instruction. Schools, colleges and universities, regardless of infrastructural preparedness, had to adopt digital platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp to sustain teaching and learning processes. This abrupt digital migration reanimated the long-standing debate between *"India"* and *"Bharat"* between a technologically equipped, urban India and its under-resourced rural and subaltern counterparts.

The disparity in digital accessibility between these two realms illustrates not merely a technological divide but a deeper sociological divide grounded in class, caste, gender and spatial hierarchies. The pandemic thus revealed the fragility of digital inclusion and the emotional, cognitive, and material vulnerabilities that accompany digital dependency. For students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the challenges of exclusion from digital learning environments was not simply a consequence of lacking devices or internet connectivity but a manifestation of structural marginalization rooted in their class reality and family background. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's (1997) concept of capital, digital participation requires access to a unique combination of economic capital (resources to purchase and maintain devices),

social capital (networks that facilitate learning support), and cultural capital (skills, digital literacy, and familiarity with technology).

Those without such capital became passive subjects within the digital field - present yet unable to meaningfully participate. The online model, therefore, placed an additional burden on disadvantaged students who were expected to perform educational participation without the infrastructural or symbolic means to do so. Overcrowded living conditions among low-income households further complicated digital engagement. In spaces where social distancing was impossible, the idea of a private learning space became a privilege rather than a norm. While the digital world promised limitless information, access to opportunities remained restricted for those excluded by socio-economic and infrastructural barriers. The digital divide thus transcends mere affordability - it shapes cognitive development, emotional resilience, and future employability. Skills and digital literacy emerge as critical factors in determining who can successfully navigate the digital field.

The structural realities of schools, teachers limited digital preparedness, and the lack of institutional support aggravated these inequalities. Many institutions lacked adequately trained teachers capable of adapting to online pedagogies. Expecting educators or students to transform into technocratic subjects overnight reflected a deep institutional injustice and a disregard for the unequal distribution of technological capital. Both teachers and students, therefore, experienced the transition not as a seamless digital shift but as a process of adjustment, resistance, and vulnerability. This reveals how the digital world, far from being an equaliser, reproduces the hierarchies of the physical one.

Manuel Castells' (2004) notion of the *network society* resonates with framing the digital sphere as a global structure defined by information flows and connectivity. However, access to these networks is unevenly distributed, producing inclusion and exclusion. Those without stable connectivity or digital competence remain excluded from the digital space of flows, the locus

of power and productivity in the digital age. When viewed through these theoretical lenses, digital education during COVID-19 reflects the structural logic of neoliberal globalization. This phenomenon privileges those with pre-existing resources and renders the marginalised further invisible. The intersection of gender, class, caste, and geography thus determines who becomes a legitimate actor within the digital field and who remains a passive subject of its expansion.

Literature Review: Understanding Gendered Digital Inequalities through a Sociological Lens

The idea of the digital divide has evolved significantly since the 1990s, reflecting deeper social structures of inequality rather than mere technological gaps. JAGM van Dijk's seminal work (2006), *Digital Divide Research: Achievements and Shortcomings*, remains central to this debate. He conceptualizes the digital divide not simply as the gap between "those who have" and "those who have not" but as a layered phenomenon involving motivational, physical, skills, and usage access**.** His argument resonates with classical sociological concerns articulated by King, Ronald (1980) in his work 'Weberian Perspectives and the Study of Education,' where he argued that Weber's idea of ownership of material resources (possessions), social position, and professional roles determine one's access to power.

Reflecting on JAGM van Dijk's position, we find his framework illuminating yet incomplete when placed in the context of gendered realities in India. His notion of access presupposes availability and motivation as neutral processes, but in practice, these are mediated by patriarchal norms, domestic hierarchies, and gendered expectations. For instance, even when digital devices are physically available within a household, access for girls is often conditional, regulated by age, morality, and notions of propriety. Thus, what JAGM van Dijk frames as "motivational access" is, in a gendered context, also a question of permitted access.

JAGM van Dijk also critiques the diffusionist optimism that technology naturally "trickles down" and equalizes access as it becomes cheaper and ubiquitous. The digital divide, therefore, is not static but continually reproduced through the social processes of class, education, and gender. This insight becomes particularly salient when examining India's Digital India campaign, which celebrates connectivity but often overlooks the embedded inequalities in its diffusion. Hilary Silver (2007) extends this conversation by linking denial of access to broader forms of exclusion. Her insight that exclusion from digital spaces mirrors exclusion from recognition, resources, and belonging is sociologically rich.

This relational dimension is also evident in Gurumurthy's (2011, 2018) work, which powerfully calls for the inclusion of women's voices in ICT and global governance. She argues that women's absence from digital discourses reflects the gendered nature of technology itself - a domain historically coded as masculine. We find her argument deeply relevant when we examine how even well-intentioned policies such as ICT-enabled education fail to reach women and girls meaningfully.

John Rawls's (2005) *Theory of Justice* provides another normative framework for thinking about equity in digital education. The reflective equilibrium principle, which advocates for positive discrimination toward the underprivileged, invites us to consider ICT not merely as a technological intervention but as a moral and political one. This resonates with our own conviction that bridging the digital divide requires deliberate social justice mechanisms, not market-led solutions alone. Drawing on various perspectives, Gurumurthy (2018) underscores that digital access is not just about connectivity but about citizenship - the ability to participate equally in the public realm. Exclusion from digital spaces equates to exclusion from civic life itself. During the fieldwork, we realized how students without access felt invisible, not only to teachers and peers but to the state's digital infrastructure of learning. Their exclusion is not accidental but symptomatic of a system

where socio-economic vulnerability dictates who gets to be seen, heard, and connected.

Our own engagement with the works of Rawl, Gurumurthy, and the like has shaped a nuanced understanding that the digital divide is not merely about devices or connections, but it is about structures of power and recognition. It reveals how gender, class, caste, and cultural hierarchies are being re-inscribed within the so-called "information society," producing what might be termed digital hierarchies of belonging.

Sociology of education

Sociology of education examines the patterns where experiences affect the level of accomplishment, purpose and its result. It is classified into two streams: 'structural-functionalist theory' and 'conflict theory'. The first theory focuses on education as an integral part of human development and society; we can't separate it from society; it is similar to how the brain is essential for the human body. The second one observes the role-play of school and cultural capital, where social institutions have a significant part in the process of socialisation in which they're involved. A Structural functionalist theory is also referred to as 'consensus' or 'equilibrium theory'. Sociologists like Emile Durkheim (1956), and Talcott Parsons (1937), who focused on the essentiality of education for the development of human society, claimed that each part of the society's system is concerned with the relationship of the family, education, economy, and polity. Education is made up of interconnected pieces that work together to provide an essential service to the overall functioning of society. Education systems are viewed as a critical place for bringing society together in a cohesive and functional way as a whole.

Durkheim was the first person to propose that a sociological approach must be used to study education. He expressed his thoughts on the function of schools and their link to society in his book on "Moral Education" (1956), strongly claiming that moral values are the cornerstone of social order. A society is sustained through moral principles that are taught in educational institutions,

implanting values in youngsters. Any change in society, and vice versa, reflects a change in education. In fact, education is a driving force behind any transformation.

The functionalist theory was the dominant one during the mid-20th century, which defined institutions as components of whole societies or social systems. Durkheim explained the role of education in society as:

"Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those who are not yet ready for social life. Its object is to arouse and to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual, and moral states which are demanded of him by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined" (Durkheim, 1956: 28).

Lischka-Schmidt, R. (2023) in his work cited Talcott Parsons's sociology of education, in which he said that one of the key functions of school is to pass on the knowledge and behaviour required to keep society in order. Schools are an important training ground for children because here they learn to be social beings and establish proper social ideals through interaction with others. This theoretical approach leads sociologists to focus on the structural aspects of the organisation, such as subsystems (schools and classrooms), positions within the structure (teachers, administrators, and students), and how they work to achieve specific goals. Patriarchy and exploitation, as well as male supremacy, are all factors that impact the ability to receive an education.

Gender digital divide

In the 1990s, Lloyd Morriset, President of the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation invented the term 'Digital Gap' to represent disparities and the divide between those who have access to information and those who do not (Hoffman, L. Donna and Novak. P. Thomas 2000). Digital divide study is an interdisciplinary endeavour that began around the year 2000, focusing on communication science, sociology, psychology, economics, and education science (van Dijk, 2017). General demographics, wealth, education, age,

gender, and ethnicity were linked to physical access to digital devices. These factors explain the diffusion of technology in the market and the adaptation choices of consumers. After a while, communication and media scholars raised their voices to address difficulties going beyond access and user skills. Diverse applications of the internet and access complexity were re-imagined as a whole technology appropriation, expanding the meaning beyond physical access. This phase was objectified as 'second level digital divide', showing differences in skills and classifying the psychological part of the ownership of digital devices (Hargittai: 2002).

van Dijk used another phrase, in 2006, 'deepening divide or digital gap' to describe that inequality does not end when physical access is gained, but rather begins when the use of digital media starts to be incorporated into daily life. The second level of the digital divide explains the categorical differences to argue that unequal access to digital technology in society leads to unfair resource distribution. Here, the importance of access is linked to technology usage, which has a significant impact on motivation and attitude. Physical access, skills access, and usage access are the three types of access coming through social and cultural support. This is vital as it determines an individual's social standing and the outcomes they receive based on their status in society. The cost of maintaining hardware defines the attitude behind the ownership of different devices. Symptoms of internet anxiety and technophobia occur due to the avoidance of using digital gadgets. Unequal ownership of devices and socio-economic factors are linked to age, gender, social status, employment, education level, household composition, as well as material resources (income), social resources (quantity and quality of support), and attitude towards the use of the internet.

Research Methodology

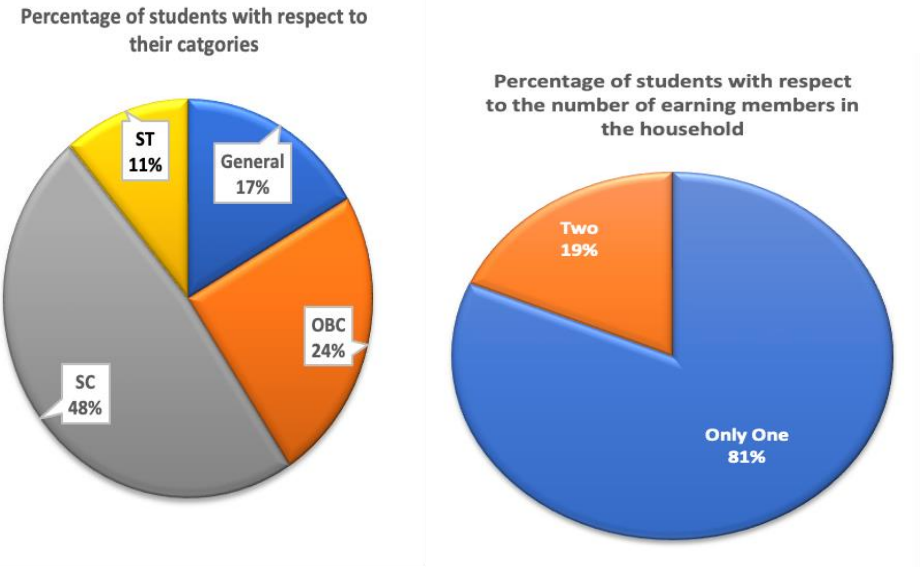
This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research techniques to capture the multidimensional nature of digital exclusion in education. The research employed a purposive sampling

strategy supplemented by elements of basic random sampling, combining individual interviews, an online survey, and the administration of structured closed-ended questionnaires. The unit of analysis comprised 54 girl students and 26 teachers drawn from two government schools in South Delhi. Fieldwork was conducted over one month in July 2022. The unit of analysis included girl students from Classes VI to X enrolled in two schools - Government Sarvodaya Vidyalaya, (a co-educational institution) and Government Girls Senior Secondary School (an all-girls institution) in Ambedkar Nagar. The selection of these schools was guided by the intention to represent educational spaces situated within socio-economically vulnerable communities, where a large proportion of households belong to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. The majority of families in these localities rely on informal sector employment, including occupations such as driving, domestic work, carpentry, blacksmithing, and petty trade.

From a sociological standpoint, these neighbourhoods represent microcosms of urban marginality in Delhi, where economic precarity intersects with caste and spatial segregation. While some families have secured pucca housing under government welfare schemes, others continue to reside in roadside jhuggis (huts) under precarious living conditions. The ethnographic encounters during fieldwork revealed the everyday struggles of these families - negotiating space, livelihood, and dignity in congested environments dominated by traffic noise, water scarcity, and the recurrent spectre of domestic conflict. Quantitative data collected through surveys were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), while qualitative narratives were interpreted through the sociological and feminist theoretical frameworks. This methodological triangulation enabled a nuanced understanding of how socio-economic status, gendered constraints, and technological access collectively shape students' experiences of online education in a post-pandemic digital society.

Disrupted Learning and Digital Exclusions: A Sociological Reading of Girls' Educational Experiences

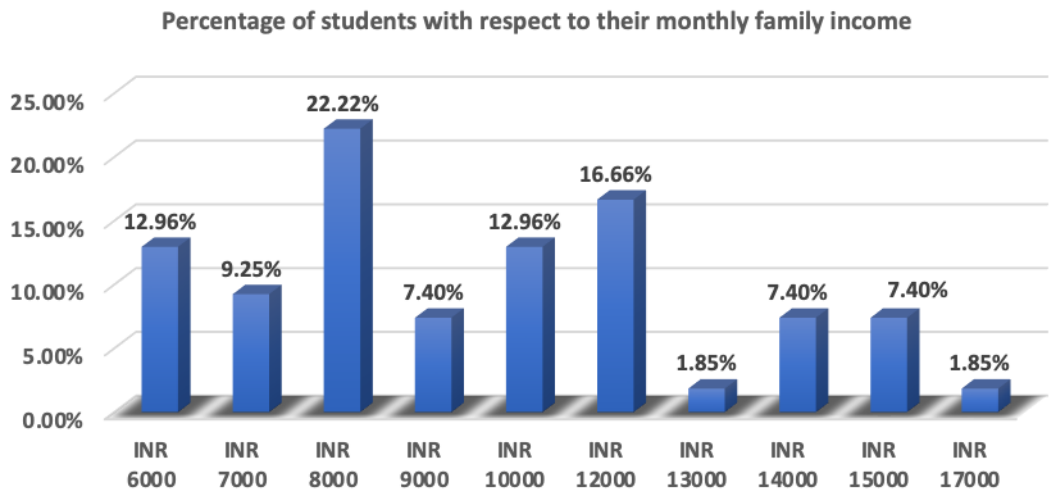
This section presents a detailed analysis of how girl students in government schools experienced online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on participation, absenteeism, motivation, and psychosocial well-being. The findings reveal that educational access during this period was deeply shaped by socio-economic hierarchies and gendered inequalities.

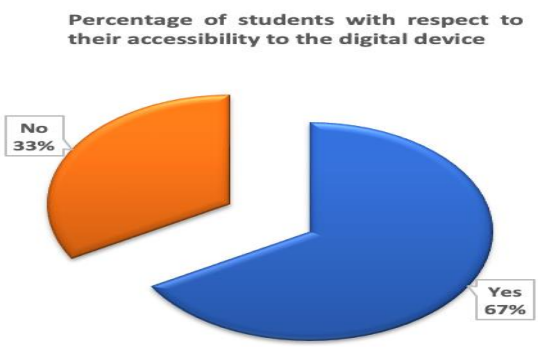


The data were stratified according to socio-economic categories to examine how income levels, affordability of digital devices, and social background intersected to influence learning participation. Students from lower-income households, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Other Backward Class (OBC) communities, reported facing multiple layers of disadvantage - ranging from unstable internet connectivity and device scarcity to lack of personal space for study. Many also experienced frequent household conflicts, financial anxieties, and emotional distress stemming from the uncertainty of their future educational and career prospects. The absence of *social and cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1997) was reflected in heightened frustration and conflictual interactions within

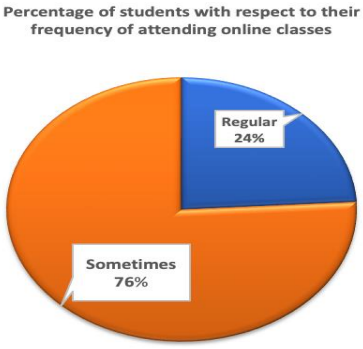
households, as children's aspirations clashed with the structural constraints of poverty and limited opportunities.

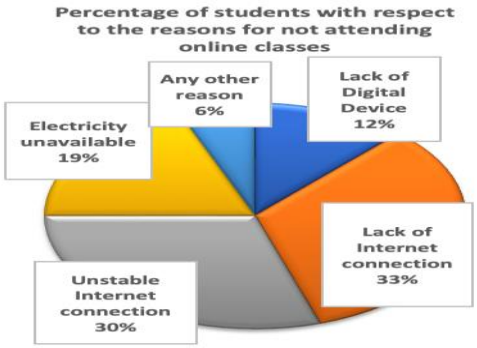
Respondents frequently cited the absence of private study spaces, missed meals, disrupted routines, and inadequate time for personal reflection as recurring issues during the lockdown. Several students expressed that the lack of face-to-face schooling deprived them not only of academic learning but also of moral and social development. As Émile Durkheim (1956) emphasize, schools function as socialising agencies - "miniature societies" that teach children how to get along with others and prepare them for adult economic roles. The digital divide, by excluding marginalized students from these spaces, thus disrupted crucial stages of social and moral formation.

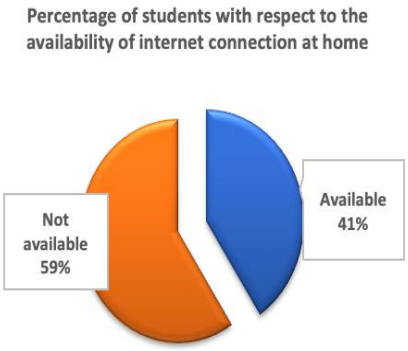


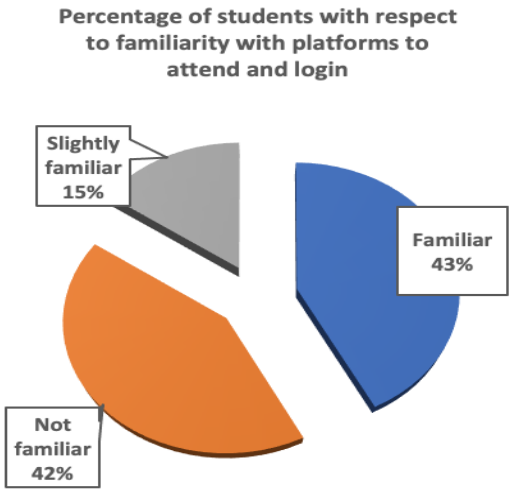


Drawing from Weberian (King, R. 1980) perspectives, the ownership of digital assets and specialised technological skills operates as a form of new capital, influencing both educational attainment and prospects in the labour market. The capacity to participate in digital learning thus becomes a marker of class privilege and a form of symbolic capital, while those without access are pushed further into educational marginality. Our own observations during fieldwork confirm the reality that those who already possess technological capital continue to upgrade and adapt rapidly, while those at the margins fall further behind. Gurumurthy's notion of the "access trap", where the majority remain offline due to intertwined factors of affordability, awareness, and social restriction, articulates precisely what we observed in the fieldwork: the illusion of universal connectivity masking deep social inequalities.



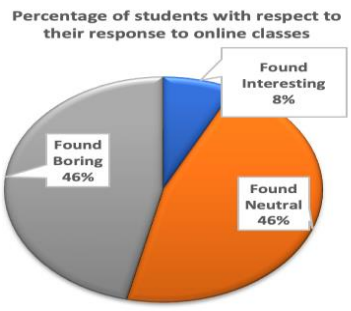


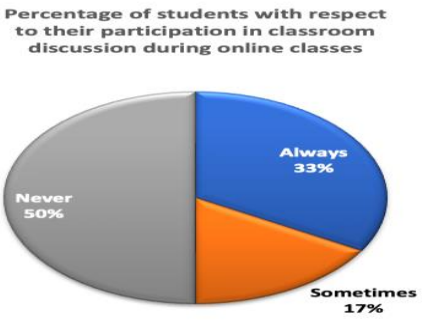




Despite efforts by schools and teachers, digital infrastructure remained the exception rather than the norm. The promise of inclusive education was undermined by the material realities of exclusion. Students reported repeated interruptions due to unstable networks, electricity cuts, and limited device sharing among family members. Even those who managed to attend online classes found it difficult to sustain engagement, often being disconnected abruptly without the opportunity to communicate with their teachers.

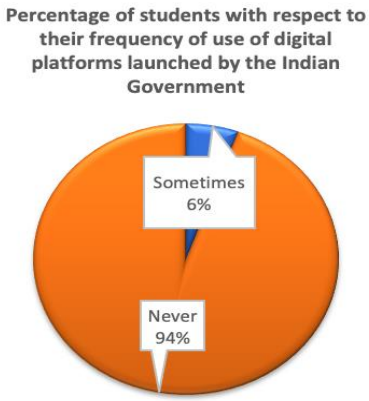
Approximately 34.78% of female students reported having devices in poor condition, and 16.6% faced repair costs, placing additional strain on low-income households. Even in the absence of personal or household ownership of digital devices and stable internet connectivity, many students resorted to borrowing smartphones or using mobile hotspots from neighbours and acquaintances as temporary substitutes. Respondents revealed that while such assistance occasionally reflected community solidarity, repeated dependence often strained interpersonal relations, evoked mistrust, or led to suspicions of theft - forcing some to seek help covertly. This precarious negotiation of access underscores the violation of the Rawlsian (1971) principle of fair equality of opportunity articulated in *A Theory of Justice*, where structural inequalities impede the capacity of marginalised students to participate on equal terms. Gurumurthy (2018) aptly describes this as an "access trap," in which large sections of the population remain excluded from the digital world. Within this context, *digital disability* emerges as a sociocultural impairment - non-physical in nature yet deeply consequential, manifesting through the inability to derive benefits from the digital sphere due to limited literacy, infrastructural gaps, and unequal technological competencies.

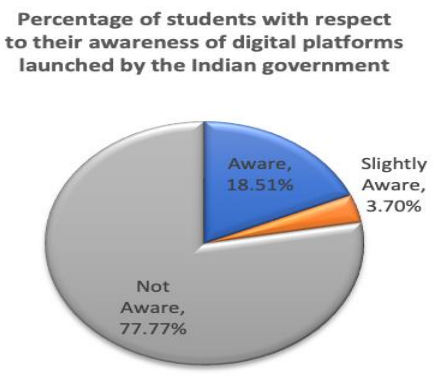




Unequal access to digital technology reproduces structural disparities in the distribution of resources, knowledge, and opportunities within society. Access to technology profoundly shapes individuals' motivation, attitudes, and digital competencies, which are cultivated through consistent engagement with digital devices. As Jan A.G.M. van Dijk (2006) notes, *access* manifests in three interrelated dimensions - physical access**,** skills access, and usage access - all of which are mediated by one's social and cultural capital. These forms of access are deeply entwined with the broader structures of inequality articulated by Weber: ownership and possession determine class position, while profession and power relations influence one's ability to participate in the digital realm.

Symptoms such as internet anxiety and technophobia emerge among those who are systematically excluded, reinforcing a cycle of digital disengagement. In the contemporary context, the Internet of Things (IoT) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) function as the new "opium of the people," offering the illusion of inclusion while masking deep-rooted exclusions under digital capitalism. As societies celebrate progress through digitalization and technological diffusion, it becomes imperative to question - who counts as a citizen in the digital world? The critical task, therefore, lies in envisioning a model of communicative citizenship that acknowledges and addresses the new cartographies of power, exclusion, and participation shaped by the global information economy.

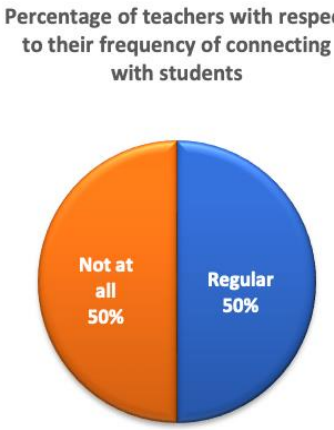


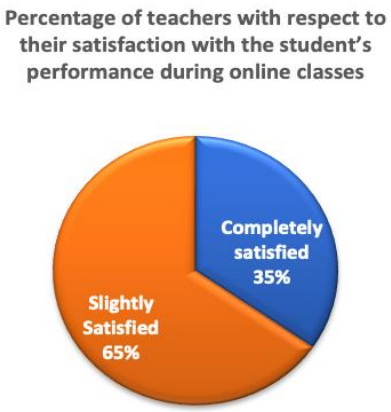


When respondents were asked about their awareness of government-launched digital learning platforms such as DIKSHA**,** e-Pathshala, and the National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER), a striking pattern of digital unawareness emerged. A vast majority 77.77% reported having no knowledge of these initiatives, while 18.51% were aware, and only 3.70% indicated partial awareness. This lack of awareness underscores a critical gap between *policy intention* and *ground-level reach*. Despite the government's efforts to democratize access to educational resources through digital platforms, limited dissemination and uneven digital literacy prevented students from utilizing these opportunities. Consequently, a significant section of learners remained excluded from the very interventions designed to bridge educational inequalities in the digital era.

Respondents' experiences of stress in relation to online classes varied according to multiple personal and structural factors. When asked whether they discuss their emotions with family members, many students indicated that such conversations rarely occur, reflecting household norms where open emotional communication is uncommon. The stress associated with navigating online education and the broader repercussions of the digital divide illustrates the intertwined relationship between participation, non-participation, and psychological well-being. Online learning, in this context, becomes both a site and a symptom of social exclusion. As Dominic Abrams (2004) explains, this form of exclusion has profound implications for an individual's personality, identity, and emotional equilibrium, often manifesting in what can be understood as exclusionary language - subtle expressions of marginalization that shape self-perception and affective experiences. The digital environment,

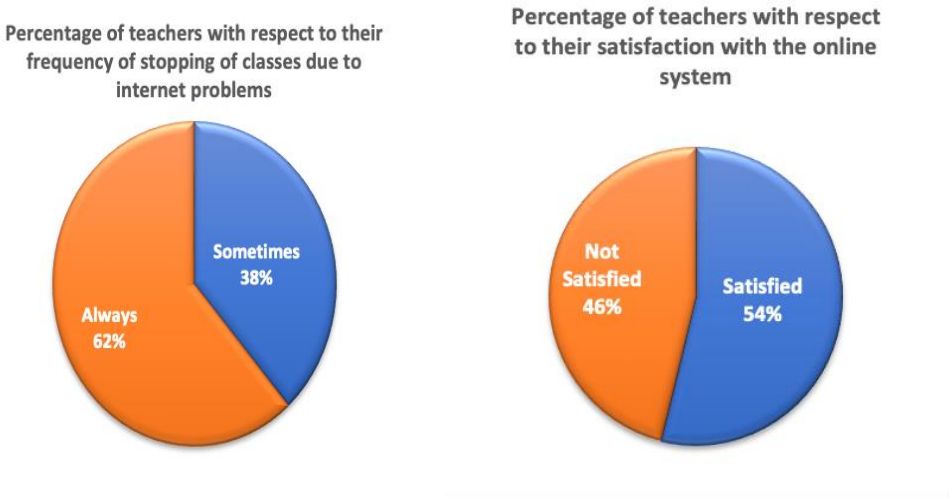
therefore, not only mediates access to knowledge but also structures the emotional landscapes of students who are systematically disadvantaged. As we reflect on our interactions, we find Hilary Silver's (2007) interpretation strikingly relevant. Their inability to participate in online classes did not merely affect learning - it fostered a sense of inferiority and emotional isolation. The digital divide, then, becomes a lived experience of disconnection - both technologically and socially.





Teachers highlighted the challenges inherent in maintaining meaningful connections with students through digital platforms. Many students were already irregular in attending offline classes, and the shift to online education exacerbated difficulties in monitoring participation and assessing learning outcomes. Virtual classrooms introduced significant communication gaps**,** particularly for students lacking personal devices or stable internet connections, and these gaps were intensified when class sections were frequently reorganized, delaying lesson delivery. Furthermore, time constraints limited opportunities for fostering constructive student-teacher relationships, making it difficult for educators to provide individualized support or to cultivate engagement in the digital learning environment. The online modality, therefore, not only affected instructional efficiency but also transformed the social dynamics of classroom interaction, reflecting broader structural inequalities in access, resources, and relational capital. Drawing upon Paulo Freire's (1994) core focus within the framework of conflict

perspective, the emphasis lies on explaining pedagogy as a practice of freedom. He emphasised the importance of education in achieving liberation from oppression and strongly advocated for students' critical thinking. Paulo Freire stressed the need to build students' critical consciousness and to make teachers their partners in co-learning, thereby challenging systemic inequalities. This perspective arises from his argument that traditional educational institutions operate under a 'banking model' of education, wherein teachers deposit knowledge into passive students - a model rooted in the hierarchy of the dominant class.



Digital Inequality, Household Constraints, and Online Learning

The pandemic exposed structural and socio-cultural barriers affecting students' engagement with online education. A majority of teachers (61.53%**)** reported frequent internet disruptions, often forcing classes to halt midway. Gita, an English teacher, observed that disconnection and audio-visual issues were prevalent among both students and teachers. Many students were simultaneously managing household responsibilities and had limited personal space for study or recreation, which compounded the challenges of learning difficult subjects such as mathematics and science. Teachers emphasised that offline classrooms provide critical interaction, supervision, and timely

feedback - elements that online platforms cannot fully replicate. Ramu, a Hindi teacher, noted that monitoring students in large virtual classrooms was particularly difficult, often leading to academic shortcuts, such as homework being completed by family members or answers being copied.

Socio-economic conditions further restricted access. 85% of students shared digital devices with siblings, 34.78% reported devices in poor condition, and 16.6% faced repair costs, placing additional strain on low-income households. 64.81% of families earned less than ten thousand rupees per month, with 50% having five to eight members and 81.48% relying on a single breadwinner. Consequently, 94% of students depended on mobile phones, and 77.77% relied on mobile data. Despite the availability of government-supported platforms, 77.77% of students were unaware of these resources, highlighting gaps in both access and awareness. Gendered expectations amplified these challenges. Girls often performed household chores, cared for siblings, and assisted elders, limiting time and motivation for study. Teachers noted that parents valued daughters' domestic proficiency for social and marital positioning, reflecting Judith Butler's (2006) notion of gender performativity, where societal norms shape girls' roles and priorities.

Emotional stress was also widespread: 20% of students experienced daily household conflicts, and 35.18% reported occasional clashes. Small living spaces and unreported domestic violence compounded the vulnerability of marginalized families. Large class sizes in online settings further constrained individualized attention, with 50% of students never participating and 46.15% of teachers expressing dissatisfaction with online learning effectiveness.

Overall, these findings reveal how digital infrastructure, socio-economic precarity, household responsibilities, and gendered norms intersect to produce compounded disadvantages, limiting educational participation and perpetuating inequality in the digital era. These circumstances imposed an extra burden on the girl students, which is going to impact their overall cognitive abilities. To make education more inclusive and improve the digital

divide, while compensating students who missed significant learning during the pandemic, the focus should be shifted to minimize the gap between students' skills and their learning. This could be achieved by creating a more robust infrastructure and establishing a single-window route to strengthen the focus on skills among students, where students and teachers both can leverage the changing technology.

Limitations

This study explored the digital divide through a gendered lens, focusing on the experiences of girl students in urban government schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the perspectives of male students are absent, limiting cross-gender comparisons. Rural areas, where digital exclusion is often more pronounced, were also not included, leaving gaps in understanding the structural and infrastructural challenges faced in non-urban contexts. Additionally, the study did not address other critical dimensions of deprivation, such as access to mid-day meals, nutrition, and menstrual hygiene, which were affected by lockdown protocols and social distancing measures. These limitations suggest that the findings provide a partial yet significant insight into how digital exclusion intersects with gender, socio-economic status, and household dynamics.

Conclusion

The pandemic exposed precarities and inequalities in unprecedented ways. Lower socio-economic households faced constrained choices, balancing survival, health, and education under conditions of job loss, migration, and restricted livelihoods. Women and girls disproportionately bore the additional burden of household management and care work. In this context, the digital world became essential for continuity, yet access was uneven. Students' participation in online education was constrained by a lack of smart devices, unstable electricity, limited digital literacy, and overcrowded living spaces.

Online learning revealed the structural roots of digital inequality, highlighting that expecting households to rapidly acquire technological competencies was unrealistic. The findings illustrate a stark dual reality: those with access to digital resources could leverage opportunities, while those struggling to meet basic needs faced compounded exclusion. The digital divide is inseparable from socio-economic conditions, with access, literacy, and skill acquisition mediating opportunity in the digital era. Accelerating technological change risks further entrenching disparities, privileging early adopters and marginalizing those unable to keep pace. Addressing these inequalities requires systematic interventions: expanding equitable access to devices and connectivity, fostering digital competencies, and supporting adaptive skills to navigate a data-driven economy. Such measures are essential not only to bridge the digital gap but also to ensure that education remains inclusive, equitable, and resilient in the face of future disruptions.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Article: Invisibilised Labour: A Study of Period Poverty and Menstrual Hygiene Management Among Students in Kolkata

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Invisibilised Labour: A Study of Period Poverty and Menstrual Hygiene Management Among Students in Kolkata

-Arhita Biswas

Abstract

This paper investigates the menstrual labour—collecting culturally appropriate products, maintaining them, educating and training other menstrual bodies, providing emotional support, complying with social norms and limits, and even upholding social taboos—that is performed by and expected of menstruating bodies by the household, community, and the state. Employing social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017) and the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), the paper argues that this menstrual labour, essential for biological and social reproduction, is often invisibilised and naturalised as a female responsibility. The study employs a mixed methods approach integrating a critical analysis of the GoI's menstrual hygiene schemes with primary survey data from 500 school-going menstruators in Kolkata West Bengal collected over a period of 6 months in 2024. It contends that these women are socially and infrastructurally required to bear the additional burden of menstrual labour, not only for themselves or their immediate kin but for entire communities: work that is consistently invisibilised through normalisation.

Keywords: menstruation, period poverty, labour, menstrual hygiene management

Introduction: The Status of Period Poverty

In a Menstrual Health and Hygiene (henceforth MHH) Conclave held in Kolkata in November 2023, a group of activists, non-governmental organisations, government officials, international agencies and researchers congregated to discuss the future of menstrual health. While discussing the struggles of managing periods, they also noted the strides taken by these organisations and individuals, be it in product manufacturing, distribution, or awareness generation. The theme of period poverty recurred in the discussion often in all aspects. Although educating non-menstruators was seen to be an important factor, what was deemed essential was the role played by women: mothers, female guardians, ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) workers, Anganwadi workers, and female teachers. These roles are assumed at menarche and continue past menopause. This paper begins by looking at the phenomena of period poverty, and what it entails. This paper makes use of the data from a not-for-profit organisation's menstruation awareness programmes in 2024 to analyse the extent of the practice of social taboos, and the educators of menstrual hygiene management and taboo restrictions at the household level. It uses the theoretical concepts of social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017) and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) to understand the roles and responsibilities of menstruators which not only stem from their naturalised

domestic labour or role as caregivers but are also further reinforced by state policies.

Period poverty, which is a relatively new term, refers to the limited or lack of access to menstrual hygiene products, knowledge of menstrual processes, and menstrual health benefits. Period poverty does not limit its impact to menstruators but extends to non-menstruating individuals, as well as to private organisations, and national and international agencies. The lack of knowledge includes menstrual taboos: menstruation is surrounded by myths, taboos, and misinformation. Menstrual blood is perceived as being evil, impure, and an active contaminant. Several limitations and restrictions are placed on menstruators in terms of their diet, mobility, hygiene, and participation in educational, occupational, and cultural activities. They are expected to avoid physical contact even with the rest of the family (Thakur et al., 2014; Garg and Anand, 2015; Mason et al., 2017). They are frequently required to conceal their menstruation and perform tasks in private (Kapur, 2016; Mason et al 2017). Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM henceforth) is largely seen as a concern of menstruators, to be discussed amongst menstruators alone: mothers and daughters, female teachers and female students, aunts and cousins. Menstruators are prohibited from sharing their concerns openly within the household, and in the community, which usually results in the further entrenchment of stigma.

The lack of access to menstrual products such as sanitary napkins compels menstruators to make use of cloth pieces as menstrual absorbents, which requires the presence of good washing facilities, a regular supply of water, and bright sunlight to dry and sterilise the materials in order to be considered a hygienic practice. However, due to the lack of sanitary facilities at home, menstruators are forced to wash their menstrual-cloths in a nearby source of water and dry them in a dark spot to avoid being seen. In addition, menstruators may burn and bury the used fabric in a field. This absence of facilities is not limited to individual households but extends to the public sphere: schools and workplaces, where female students and employees are unable to replace sanitary absorbent materials at schools. All of these contribute to poor menstrual hygiene and the spread of reproductive tract infections (Coleman, 2011). Additionally, the lack of menstrual products and quality sanitation facilities impacts the education and career of menstruators (Wendland et al. 2018).

Approximately 355 million women and girls are said to menstruate in India on a monthly basis, and a woman requires 7,000 sanitary pads, on an average, to manage menstruation days before her menopause. Only 12 per cent of young girls and women have access to, and use, sanitary napkins [...] there are seldom mechanisms available for safe disposal of sanitary napkins in households, schools, colleges and community toilets (Kapur 2016; p. 23).

The Government of India has a plethora of menstrual hygiene schemes, all sharing a common element: menstrual health education. However, it must be noted that these programmes rarely discuss the socio-cultural taboos impacting

the lives and livelihood of menstruators. Additionally, fund allocation is skewed towards infrastructural components such as sanitary napkin manufacture, procurement, storage, and distribution, often overlooking the essential software component of menstrual health education. Several studies have pointed out the gaps in the implementation process. The policy structure of these government schemes has failed to reach many schools, even in rural areas where the focus lies. There is a lack of proper disposal mechanisms for menstrual products, a lack of access to sanitary napkins, and a lack of quality sanitation facilities in schools. Menstrual hygiene education is also not discussed in schools, leading to the continued state of misinformation, taboos, and restrictions, contributing further towards absenteeism and the high drop-out rates noted among female students of pubertal age (Sivakami et al, 2015[1]; Van Ejik et al. 2016[2]; Sinha and Paul, 2018[3]).

Theoretical Perspectives: Social Reproduction and Emotional Labour

This paper employs two theoretical approaches to analyse the invisibilised, unpaid and naturalised work of menstruation management: social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2017) and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Although Western in its origins, its application to the Indian context reveals a magnified effect where patriarchal norms and government policies converge to a unique and intensified burden for menstruating bodies: women and girls. Despite strides in product manufacturing and distribution, management of menstrual hygiene and its social norms, and providing educational and emotional support remains a "woman's responsibility:" mothers, female guardians and teachers, and female health workers. Women, being the biological reproducers of children, are given the domestic role: they are constructed as primary caregivers, who must stay back at home and take care of children, and the activities necessary for the maintenance of a household are viewed as an extension to such care-related activities. As Devaki Jain (1996) writes, '"The Three Cs": cooking, cleaning and childcare are intricately linked to the nature of a woman[4].' Whereas a man, seen as the sole bread earner, is a part of the industrial unit and is free from performing such domestic activities.

Social reproduction theory views human labour as the base of reproduction of society. It distinguishes between two spheres and two processes of production: the economic or the workplace and the social or the domestic space. In the workplace, the worker produces surplus value and therefore adds production value to the system. The capitalist relinquishes control over the reproduction process of the worker as he is deemed 'free' under this mode of production. It is at the domestic level that the worker undergoes a process of regeneration or social care. This regenerational work can be conducted on a daily basis as well as/parallel on a generational basis. Social reproduction includes processes of ensuring steady access to clothes, food, shelter, socialisation of children, care for the ill and elderly, and so on.

[...] the activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and

intergenerationally. It involves various kinds of socially necessary work—mental, physical, and emotional—aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined means for maintaining and reproducing population (Bhattacharya 2017; p. 6).

However, the capitalist system only recognizes productive, wealth-generating, labour as 'work,' while the labour that goes into the social reproduction of the society, including domestic and communitarian work, is unrecognised (in no small part due to its naturalisation). Although social reproduction takes place in a variety of institutional spaces—such as schools, hospitals, and prisons—as well as in the home, this form of labour is often naturalised into women's essential nature: the caregiver. Despite being essential to the reproduction of the society both materially and affectively, it remains unpaid. Fraser (2017) talks about the 'crisis of care' that society is currently facing. 'Capitalist economic production is not self-sustaining, but relies on social reproduction' (Fraser 2017: 24). Waged work, the creation of surplus value, and the smooth functioning of the capitalist system are all heavily reliant on social reproduction activities such as housework, child-rearing, schooling, and affectual work, which is not only instrumental in replenishing current workers and producing a new generation of workers, but also in maintaining social bonds among generations and social groups. The capitalist system associates social reproduction with women, as well as any other labour that is thought of as stemming from love, and associates productive work with men. As a result, it relegates these vast and complex forms of labour to the domestic or 'women's' sphere, thereby naturalising it into non-existence.

[T]he capacities available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally. Historically, this work of 'social reproduction' has been cast as women's work, although men have always done some of it too (Fraser 2017; p. 21).

In the Indian context, the social reproductive works expands to include the management of the biological and the socially stigmatised process of menstruation. It includes biological and health maintenance in the form of procurement of products, maintaining hygiene and managing health. Additionally, it includes the social reproduction of norms where intergenerational knowledge transmission incorporates enforcing and strengthening the taboos that construct menstruation as "impure" and "evil." A mother's education has been deemed as pivotal in the knowledge that she imparts to her wards (Nagar et al. 2010; Kansal and Singh, 2016; Udayar, 2016; Mohite et al. 2016; Goel et al. 2017; Sridhar and Gauthami, 2017). The knowledge imparted can shape how the young menstruator views menstruation: some view it as a sign of womanhood, and therefore pride; some view it as a culturally impure occurrence (Thakur et al. 2014), and it is only on very rare occasions that menstruation is viewed simply or even primarily as a biological process.

In *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling* (1983), Arlie R. Hochschild first uses and effectively frames the concept of emotional labour. Emotional labour requires the management of one's feelings and the curated display of emotions required for a job. While this concept has now developed into being used in several arenas, including the domestic sphere or personal, affinal relationships, the author uses it in reference to certain occupations: such as those of a flight attendant, a bill collector, a day-care centre worker, or a medical professional. Professions like the above, which call for emotional labour, are thus categorised because they have three primary elements: employees must have a face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public, employees must elicit an emotional state in their customers in response to their actions, and employees are obliged to allow their supervisors to exercise a degree of control over their emotional expression via training and supervision. The day-care worker is expected to be warm and receptive toward the child's needs, and to provide emotional support, often to such a degree that the absence of the parent might not be noticed. Social workers are also expected to empathise with, and feel concerned about their charges, but must also not express a strong sense of liking or disliking. Similarly, medical professionals are trained to deliver bad news in a kind manner, trained to be someone who can be trusted with secrets and vulnerabilities, someone who can manage the patient's emotions. These professionals often have to manage their emotions without any immediate supervision. Although an essential part of the job, this form of labour remains unrecognised in terms of occupational stress, effort, and time. Aspects of emotional work and social conduct have now been removed from their private sphere into the public sphere. In the public sphere, it is standardised, processed, and subject to institutional control; due to this process, both emotional life and emotional management have now been in effect commercialised.

Additionally, Hochschild mentions that women are trained to be better emotion managers than men, in the sense that they are socialised into their gender roles which compels women and girls to be vary of others' expectations and emotions and "manage" them. Women perform 'shadow labour' while trying to enhance others' status and well-being. Women and men tend to enter professions which require different levels and types of emotional labour because of the differential socialisation received during childhood: boys are trained to be controlling and aggressive (bill collectors), while girls are trained to be kind and polite (flight attendants).

She actively enhances other people usually men, but also other women to whom she plays the woman. The more she seems natural at it, the more her labour does not show as labour, the more successfully it is disguised as the absence of other, more prized qualities (Hochschild 1983; pp. 168-169).

The emotional labour in the context of menstrual hygiene management in India takes place in two areas. First, in the domestic sphere where female guardians must perform intense emotional labour for girls when they reach menarche. This labour includes managing the young menstruators' fear and

shame, often reinforcing societal norms and restrictive measures. Such teaching is not framed as authoritative, rather as a measure of care and concern, as acts of protection. It ensures compliance, ensuring the continuation of the stigma around menstruation. Secondly, such emotional labour gets transformed into formal role expectations of female frontline workers. An ASHA worker must inform, educate and console menstruators of her community, a female teacher must take on the responsibilities of nodal teachers of MHM programmes and provide emotional support to school-going menstruators. These women must continue their emotional labour, an unpaid and often naturalised part of their occupations, while dealing with the systemic failures: lack of WASH facilities, unavailability and unaffordability of menstrual products, and the "veil of silence" around menstruation. The next section discusses MHM government policies in further detail and the state-sanctioned role of menstruating health workers and teachers.

Emotional Labour and MHM Policies: The Institutionalisation of Menstrual Labour

This section addresses the labour that is performed by menstruators in the domestic as well as in the public sphere. To understand their role in the public sphere, it places special emphasis on Menstrual Hygiene Management policies of the Government of India (GoI). Menstruating bodies begin to perform labour related to menstruation the moment they reach menarche. This labour may extend past menopause, even until death: with grandmothers also contributing to the work by educating the young menstruators in the household. The paper argues that these women are socially and infrastructurally required to carry the extra load of menstrual labour, not only for themselves or their immediate kin with which all post-menarchal individuals are taxed but for entire communities: reproductive work which is consistently invisibilised through normalisation.

The emergence of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) policies in India was marked by the first internationally celebrated MHM Day in 2014, followed by the development of government and non-government initiatives since 2010. A critical policy review informed by theoretical concepts of social reproduction and emotional labour reveals that these well-intended policies often reinforced the gendered burden of menstruation by formalising and institutionalising it. The Indian state, through its flagship programmes, outsources a public health responsibility to unpaid and underpaid labour of women, thereby reinforcing the very patriarchal structures that underscore period poverty. The plethora of MHM policies (SABLA, 2010, MHS, 2011, RKSK, 2014, SBSV, 2014, National Guidelines, 2015) collectively constructs an infrastructure of care that designates women as the primary agents of menstrual hygiene management. In menstrual hygiene management schemes of India, the burden of managing menstruation primarily falls on female frontline workers such as ASHA and Anganwadi workers, and on female teachers. This goes beyond a public health strategy, but acts as a state-sanctioned social reproductive process: "activities and attitudes, behaviours

and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and intergenerationally." (Bhattacharya, 2017; p. 6).

The Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls or the SABLA Scheme (2010)[5] is a potent example. Operating through the Anganwadi Centre (AWC, henceforth) and by creating "*samooh*" through the peer educator system of *Sakhis* and *Sahelis*, the SABLA Scheme initiates a system of delegated action; a system where the work of socialisation of next generation is passed through a feminised hierarchy. The young peer educators of Sakhis and Sahleis, armed with their knowledge of the SABLA manual, become state-appointed agents of social reproduction. The work of maintaining and transmitting knowledge about a biological process is assigned to women and girls only (AWC workers, Sakhis, Sahelis) naturalising it as their inherent domain. This system mirrors the societal norm of menstruation being a "woman's only" concern, socially reproducing it with state sanctions.

The Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (MHS) 2011[6] and Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) 2014[7] deepens this feminised hierarchical system by explicitly naming ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) workers and female nodal teachers as the anchor of implementation. Their roles include physical distribution and stockpiling of menstrual products, and pedagogical work in the community and school respectively. These tasks, in a differently structured system, would be part of a universal public infrastructure; instead these policy frameworks assign it to (a few lakh) women, layering this burden on their existing workload. The system makes use of the unpaid and underpaid labour of women, exploiting their embeddedness within their communities to address the state's public health goals. Studies find that there is skewed fund allocation (Muralidharan et al. 2015) with the emphasis being on "hardware" components of product procurement and distribution, rather than on the "software" component of pedagogical work and community care. This skewed fund allocation relies on the unpaid, naturalised and invisibilised labour of menstruating women (health workers and teachers) in the task of social reproduction.

While the state designates physical and pedagogical labour to menstruating workers, it is in the realm of emotional labour that the cost of this system becomes apparent. The system explicitly and implicitly states that female teachers and frontline workers not only manage product procurement, management, and distribution and pedagogical work, but also manage the guilt and shame associated with menstruation.

The Swachh Bharat Swachh Vidyalaya (SBSV) Scheme 2014[8] and the Menstrual Hygiene Management: National Guidelines 2015[9] delegates the nodal female teacher to provide emotional support along with MHM training. This institutional demand reflects Hochschild's emotional labour. The female teacher is expected to be a counselor, creating a supportive environment, and break stigmas around menstruation (for which they do not receive additional training, as it is perceived as naturalised feminine work)[10]. The teacher must

manage this task of reassurance and support with her own frustration with systemic failures: the lack of adequate toilets, missing incinerator and sanitary napkin vending machines, absence of disposal systems. This affective performance is deemed as essential to support the systemic failures of the inadequate infrastructure. Similarly, ASHA workers do not only act as a mere "distributor", but as a community pedagogical tool: raising awareness during home visits. This involves navigating sensitive discussions around deep-rooted stigma, training women and girls about menstrual hygiene and dispelling myths (which she might also have been socialised into). This form of communal emotional stewardship is left unrecognised in her honorarium. Hochschild's "commercialisation of human feeling" finds a distorted parallel in this context: the state instrumentalises affective care of female workers as a free resource to compensate for the systemic failure to dismantle menstrual stigma.

While emotional labour is invested in by female guardians—who are thought of as better emotion managers, able to help and support the young menstruator—this emotional labour becomes a part of the occupation of health workers and educators. ASHA and Anganwadi workers, and nodal teachers, are viewed as state-sponsored support systems at the community or block level for (especially but not exclusively young) menstruators. Helping menstruators manage their emotions, encouraging them to perform labour during menstruation days by practising a safe and hygienic routine, and providing them infrastructural and emotional support so they do not miss out on school and community work: all of this falls under the roles and responsibilities of the (female) health workers and educators. The state recognises the problem of menstrual shame but addresses it through a gendered solution. By failing to make provision for a "trained specialist educator," or assigning male counterparts with similar roles, the policy framework reaffirms MHM as a "woman-only" concern. It ensures the task of educating and dismantling of menstrual stigmas falls on menstruating workers, absolving male counterparts, community and the state of this collective responsibility. It perpetuates the social reproduction of the menstruator: socially compliant, managing her cycle in silence and secrecy, through unpaid and underpaid labour of other menstruators.

The Burden of Menstruating Students: Fieldwork in Government Schools in Kolkata

This section discusses the detailed analysis of empirical findings from menstrual hygiene programmes conducted by Regent Park Spriha Society, a not-for-profit organisation in Kolkata from July to December 2024. The survey involved 500 students from government-sponsored girls' schools in Kolkata. The data is based on the baseline surveys conducted in each school, which takes the form of close-ended questionnaires. The sample consisted of 300 Hindu and 200 Muslim students, belonging to age groups 13-18 (See Fig. 1). The respondents were selected based on their status as menstruators. Each religious group was further categorised into caste groups (see Fig. 2). Among

Hindu respondents, 137 students belonged to General castes (upper-castes), 43 from Other Backward Classes (OBC), 73 from Scheduled Castes (SC) and 47 from Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities. Among the Muslim respondents, 145 belonged to the General category, while 55 belonged to the OBC group.

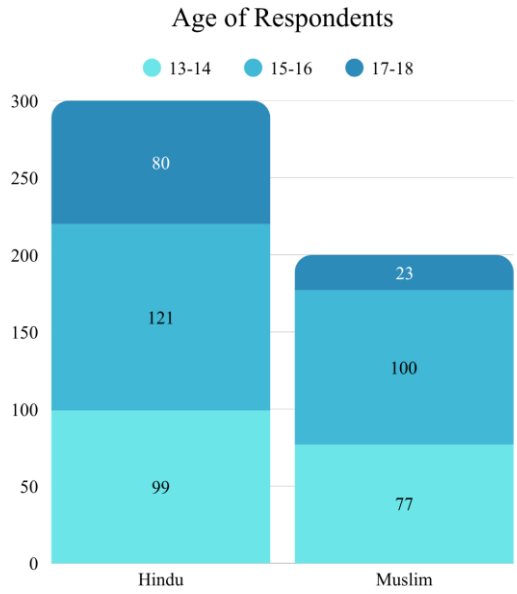

Figure 1: Age of Respondents

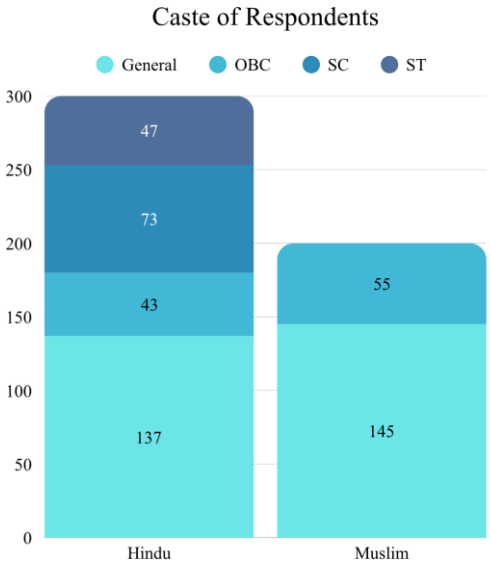

Figure 2: Caste of Respondents

This section moves beyond abstract policy critique to reveal how period poverty is lived and experienced on the ground. It highlights how menstrual labour, physical and emotional, is extensive and often invisibilised. Analysing the data through the dual theoretical framework of emotional labour and social reproduction theory exposes how this menstrual labour is not merely a private household concern, but is intricately tied to broader caste and religious concerns having profound impacts on health, education, and dignity. It demonstrates how state failure and social structure collectively ensure that the burden of managing menstruation falls almost exclusively on those who menstruate.

Intergenerational Reproduction: Menstrual Knowledge and its Source

The status of menstrual knowledge and its sources are deeply tied to one's social position: caste and religion. Among Hindu respondents (see Fig. 3), the General category demonstrated a high level of correct knowledge (56 per cent). However, a significant portion (36 per cent) exhibited ill-informed knowledge status, viewing it as a disease or illness. Among the OBC group, 72 per cent recognised menstruation as a biological process, while 28 per cent viewed it as a disease. Among the SC students, the knowledge is poorer with 45 per cent perceiving menstruation as a disease. The ST category demonstrated the highest rate of identifying it as a biological process (79 per cent). There is a clear caste-based knowledge graduation: OBC and ST group data revealed the highest levels of knowledge, while SCs fared lower in this scale. The general category, despite its privilege, demonstrated high rates of incorrect knowledge highlighting that improved socio-cultural status has little to do with correct health knowledge.

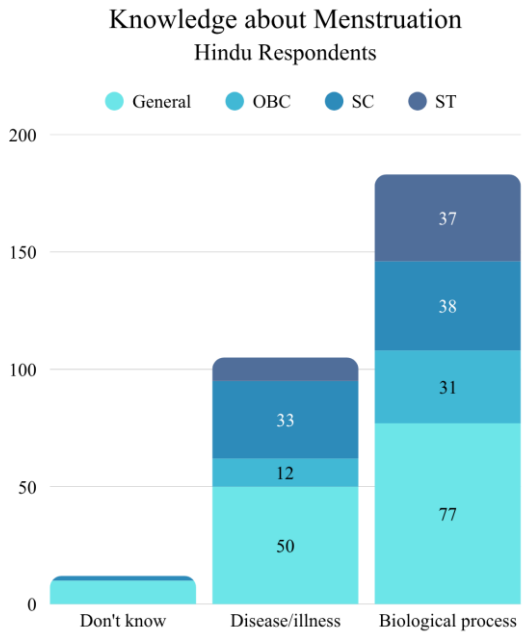

Figure 3: Knowledge About Menstruation Among Hindu Respondents

Amongst the Muslim respondents (see Fig. 4), the General category demonstrated mixed knowledge perceptions: 36 per cent identified it as a biological process, 46 per cent as a disease or illness, and 19 per cent did not have any knowledge about it, despite being menstruators. The OBC group showed better understanding with 56 per cent recognising it as a biological process, and 16 per cent as a disease. The OBC group demonstrated better understanding of menstruation when compared to the General category. This finding directly challenges the assumption that marginalised groups have poorer health knowledge, and highlights the roles played by other socio-economic factors. The inter-relation of menstrual knowledge with caste is community and religion specific. The OBC category amongst Muslim respondents revealed an "advantage," whereas ST students in the Hindu category showcased higher levels of knowledge.

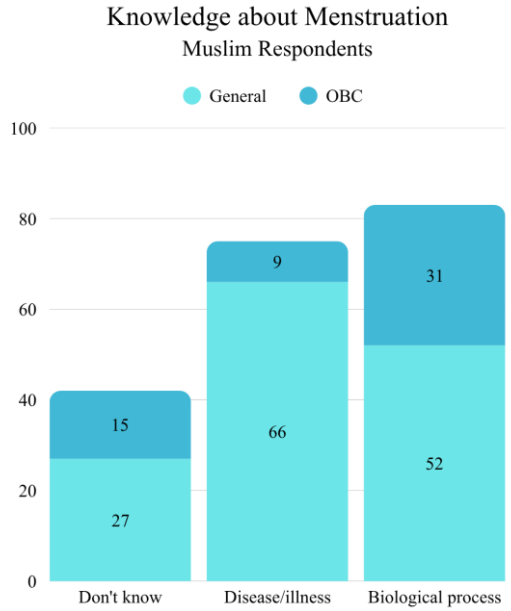

Figure 4: Knowledge About Menstruation Among Muslim Respondents

Among Hindu respondents, the primary sources of knowledge for all castes are family and friends (see Fig. 5), with friends being important sources for SC and ST groups. Formal sources of school education and healthcare workers are weak for everyone, especially dismal for SC students. Media, however, played an important role for SC students, filling in the gap left by formal means of education. Marginalised groups of SC and St menstruators rely heavily on informal sources of family, friends and media, demonstrating a marked lack of access to formal institutional means. The near-total absence of healthcare workers across all castes demonstrates the continued systemic failure to address health needs of vulnerable communities.

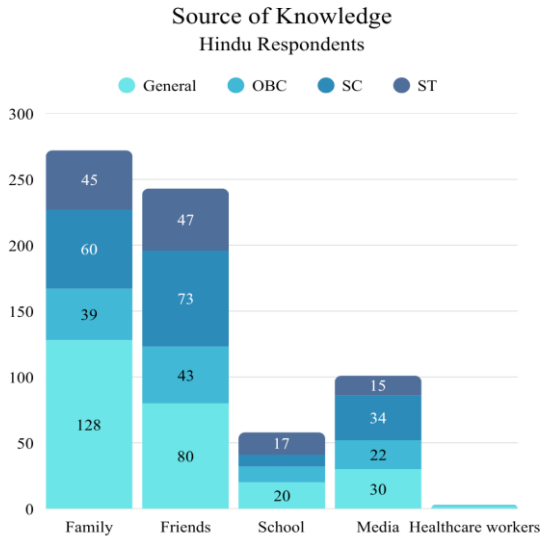

Figure 5: Source of Knowledge (Hindu Respondents)

Among Muslim respondents (see Fig. 6), the primary source for menstrual knowledge is family (100 per cent for both caste groups), highlighting the central role of the household in intergenerational knowledge transfer. Friends and media formed a significant secondary source, with media playing a more notable role for OBC students than general category ones. Failure of the education system and public health system was strikingly exposed in this data, with 8 per cent of General category students recognising schools as a source of menstrual health education. The near total reliance on informal sources of family, friends and media not only highlights these as indispensable knowledge sources, but also points out towards the unreliable sources and systemic failures of formalised institutions of education and public health to provide MHM knowledge.

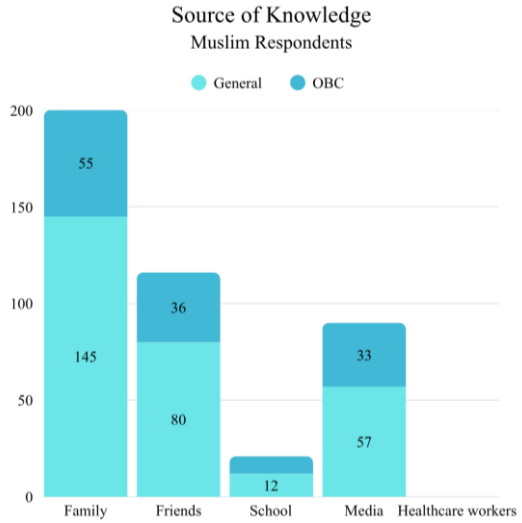

Figure 6: Source of Knowledge (Muslim Respondents)

The ground realities of menstrual knowledge and its sources exhibits a powerful demonstration of social reproduction at play. The household operates as the key site where female relatives, through emotional and pedagogical work, ensures the continuation of the patriarchal system and caste and religious norms that govern bodies. The systemic failure of institutionalised systems of schools and healthcare workers ensures the privatisation and outsourcing of menstrual health education to the unpaid, naturalised labour of women. The intersectional variations of the "OBC advantage" in Muslims and the high degree of knowledge among the STs reveals how dynamic social locations intersect to create unique social reproduction and challenges generalised notions of marginalised communities.

Factors of School Absenteeism

Amongst Muslim students, the General category displayed high rates of absenteeism with 48 per cent missing school sometimes, and 34 per cent remaining absent during menstruation days (see Fig. 7). For OBC students, the absenteeism rate is also significant: 69 per cent missing school sometimes, and 16 per cent missing school always. Reasons for absenteeism (see Fig. 8) are myriad. For the general category, absence of clean toilet facilities (87 per cent) being the primary reason, followed by menstrual stigma (55 per cent). For OBC students, the primary reason was menstrual cramps (60 per cent), followed by absence of clean toilets (24 per cent). This data indicates that unsanitary WASH facilities, coupled with menstrual stigma acts as powerful deterrents preventing General category students from attending school during menstruation days. Social stigma, though prominent among OBC students, played a less significant role.

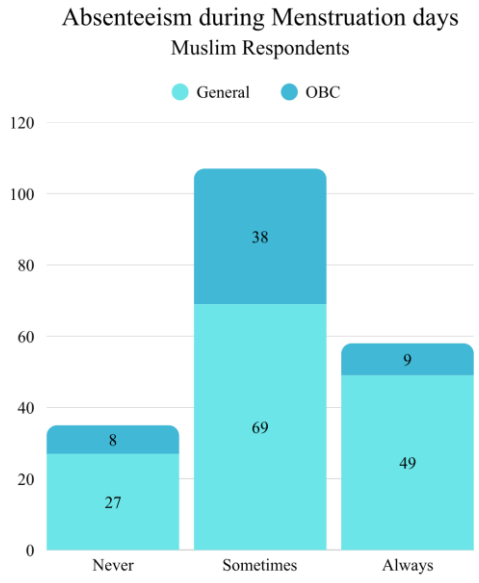

Figure 7: Absenteeism Rate (Muslim Respondents)

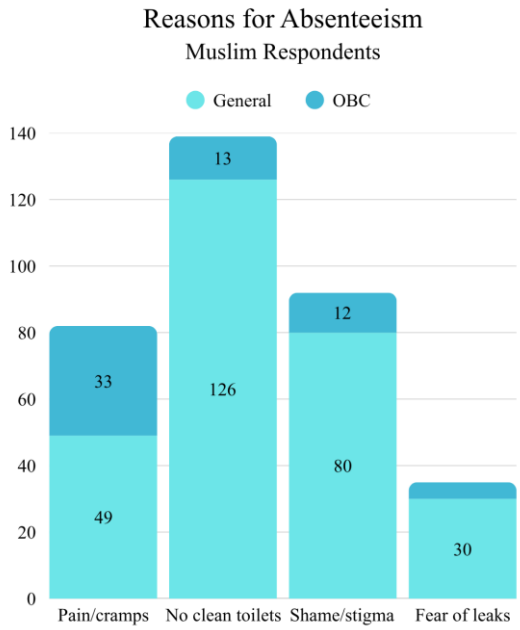

Figure 8: Reasons for Absenteeism (Muslim Respondents)

Amongst Hindu students (see Fig. 9), 60 per cent of general category students sometimes, and 18 per cent always miss school during menstruation days. Amongst the OBC category, 56 per cent "sometimes" and 21 per cent "always" remain absent during menstruation days. For SC students, 56 per cent miss school sometimes and 36 per cent always remain absent. In the ST category, 26 per cent of students always miss school, while 57 per cent sometimes remain absent during menstruation days. Similar to the Muslim respondents, Hindu students also had different reasons for absenteeism (see Fig. 10). For general category and OBC students, unsanitary toilet facilities emerged as a top reason (65 per cent and 72 per cent respectively), followed by menstrual stigma (36 per cent for general category). For SC students, the reasons were more diverse: absence of clean toilets (32 per cent), fear of leaks (26 per cent), menstrual stigma (18 per cent) and menstrual cramps (16 per cent). For ST students, the overwhelming barrier was the absence of clean toilets (79 per cent). While unclean toilets emerged as a primary reason for absenteeism across all caste groups, it impacted SC and ST students more. On the other hand, the impact of menstrual stigma impacted General category students more in comparison to other caste categories.

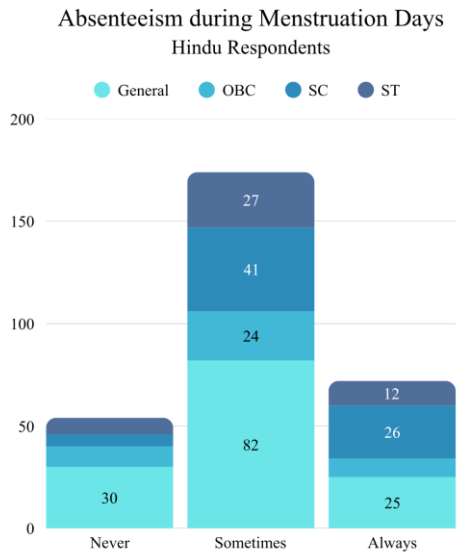

Figure 9: Absenteeism Rate (Hindu Respondents)

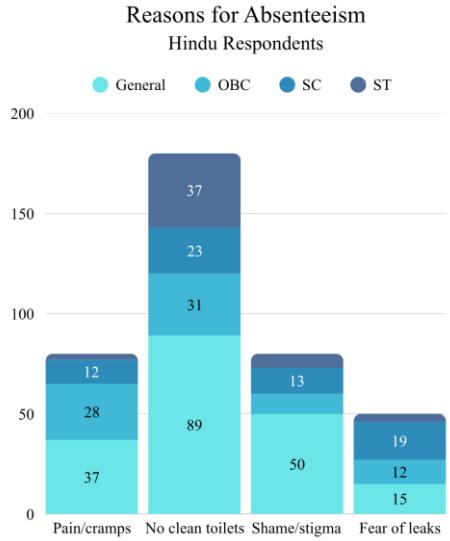

Figure 10: Reasons for Absenteeism (Hindu Respondents)

From a social reproduction perspective, the institutional failure to provide sanitary WASH facilities, directly burdens the individual's capacity to maintain a healthy cycle while participating in public life, effectively excluding them. The high rates of menstrual stigma reveals the success of the previous reproductive process in inculcating shame and fear, manifesting as an internalised form of emotional labour dictating behaviour now. This burden is heaviest for those at the lower end of caste and menstrual intersection (SC students) for whom economic, infrastructural and social burden become significant challenges and barriers in attending school during menstruation.

Access to Menstrual Products and its Limiting Factors

Access to menstrual products like sanitary napkins were distinctly divided along caste lines. For Hindu students (see Fig. 11), the General category demonstrated greater access to products (72 per cent always has access, and 28.5 per cent sometimes has access) when compared to OBC (77 per cent always has access), SC (32 per cent only has steady access) and ST (30 per cent always has access) students. SC and ST students fared lower when it came to accessing period products. The limiting factors of inaccess were again diverse (see Fig. 12). For general category students, cost emerged as the primary reason (21.9 per cent), followed by lack of knowledge (16.8 per cent) and family restrictions (12 per cent). For OBC students, cost acted as the primary deterrent. For SC and ST students, cost emerged as a dominant barrier (52 per cent and 70 per cent respectively), followed by unavailability and lack of knowledge. Cost barriers intersect with caste, relegating SC and ST students to a sphere of limited access to menstrual products, resulting in higher rates of absenteeism due to "fear of leaks," when compared to General category students.

Figure 11: Menstrual Product Accessibility (Hindu Respondents)

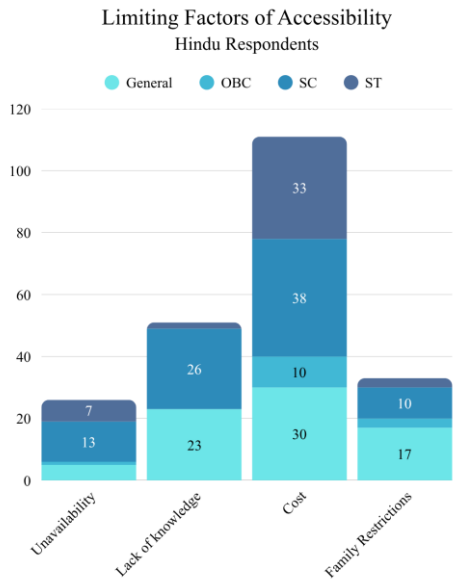

Figure 12: Limiting Factors of Accessibility (Hindu Respondents)

Among Muslim students (see Fig. 13), 29 per cent of General category students and 11 per cent of OBC category students had limited access to menstrual products. For general category students, the limiting factors of menstrual product access was primarily cost (29 per cent), followed by family restrictions (25 per cent), and unavailability of period products (17 per cent) (see Fig. 14). For OBC students, the limiting factors were equally distributed across all factors of cost, familial restrictions, unavailability and lack of knowledge. The data reveals interesting intra-community disparities based on caste categories, with OBC categories having improved access to menstrual products (see Fig. 14).

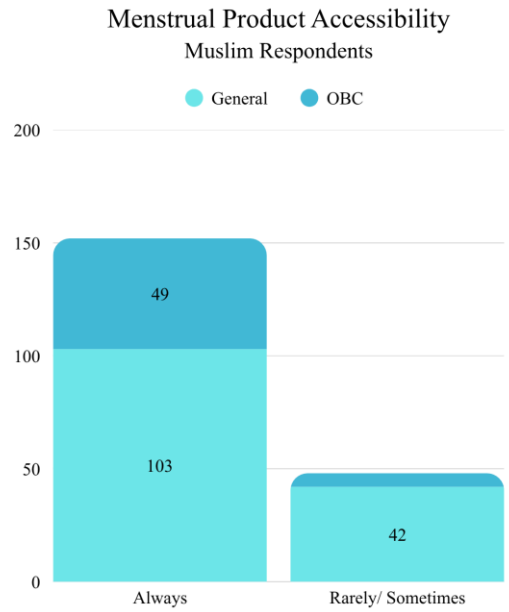

Figure 13: Menstrual Product Accessibility (Muslim Respondents)

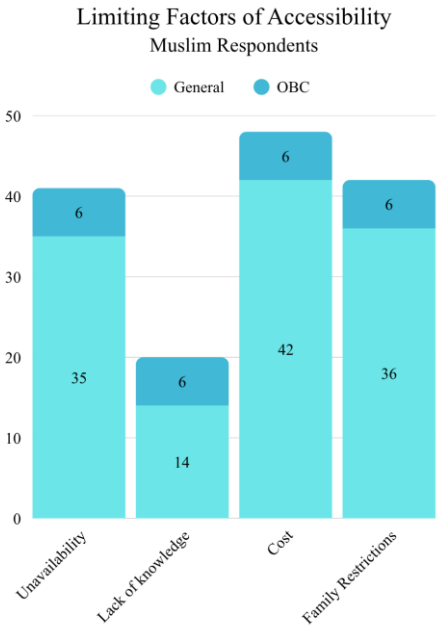

Figure 14: Limiting Factors of Accessibility (Muslim Respondents)

Economic marginalisation linked to caste categories has a profound impact on menstrual product access amongst Hindu students, with SC and ST menstruators suffering greatly from limited access. For Muslim students, however, there is a reversal of caste dynamics with OBCs faring better than General category students. The overall access to period products is better for Muslim students compared to Hindu caste categories.

The data on menstrual product access reveals that menstrual labour is more than emotional and pedagogical labour; instead it is also governed by social-economic factors. Cost emerged as an important factor of exclusion, often doubly marginalising SC and ST students among Hindu respondents. Whereas among the Muslim respondents, the OBCs fared better than the General category students, further reiterating how different factors of social position integrate to create unique expressions of social reproduction. The menstrual labour of navigating socio-economic deterrents and the process of social reproduction are shaped by distinct levels of marginalisation and privilege.

Training at Household Level: Health, Taboos and Social Restrictions

In accordance with previous discussion on menstrual health knowledge, family emerged as the primary source for both religious groups (see Fig. 5 and 6). Menstrual health training, which includes sanitary and dietary training (for example, usage and disposal rules of menstrual products, hygiene training, food consumption), is undertaken by family members. Among the Muslim respondents, (see Fig 15), such training was primarily undertaken by female family members and relatives. For general category students, sisters and female cousins (70 per cent) formed the primary source, closely followed by mothers (61 per cent) and aunts (52 per cent). For OBC students, there is a more distributed network of trainers: mothers (80 per cent), aunts (58 per cent), and sisters (84 per cent). Male family members remain completely absent in menstrual health training for both caste groups, significantly revealing MHM education deeply gendered in practice for Muslim groups.

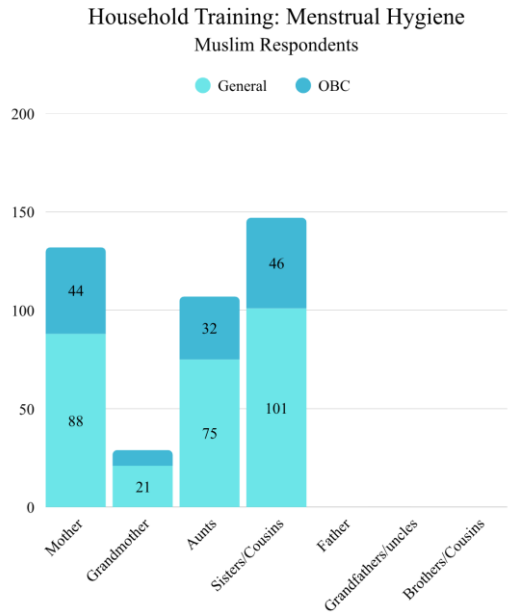

Figure 14: Household Training: Menstrual Hygiene (Muslim Respondents)

Among Hindu respondents (see Fig. 16), mothers remain the primary source across caste groups. For general caste and OBC students, menstrual health

trainers are distributed across mothers (51 per cent and 58 per cent), aunts (24 per cent and 30 per cent), sisters and female cousins (15 per cent and 37 per cent), and grandmothers (40 per cent and 28 per cent). For SC (74 per cent) and ST (100 per cent) categories, mothers emerged as the primary sources of menstrual health information as well. There is slight but meaningful involvement of fathers in menstrual hygiene education for General (5 students), SC (10 students) and ST (7 students) categories. Although this is minimal when compared to female trainers, it marks a positive deviation from Muslim respondents where male relatives were entirely absent from such training. However, MHM training remains deeply gendered in Hindu households as well.

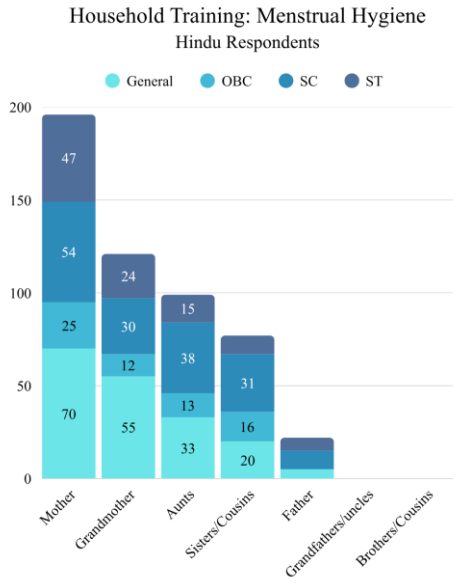

Figure 16: Household Training: Menstrual Hygiene (Hindu Respondents)

The respondents while discussing the social taboos and restrictions enumerated several restrictions which can be grouped into four categories: dietary, religious, cleanliness, and social (see Fig 17 and 18). Within dietary restrictions, menstruators reported being forbidden to go into the kitchen, to touch items such as pickles and lemon, and to share their meals with family members. Religious restrictions included not entering temples or domestic shrines, being forbidden to offer prayers, and touching other sacred objects such as a tulsi plant or the Quran. Cleanliness or hygiene restrictions included not using shampoo for the first three days of menstruation, washing and drying menstrual cloths in secrecy and drying them in a dark space, and disposing of sanitary napkins in local water bodies, in open sewers or by burning them. Furthermore, some of these menstruators were also forbidden to interact with male relatives and friends, obliged to absent themselves from school and social gatherings, and even forced to stay indoors on these days. Such restrictions were ubiquitous across religious groups. For Hindu students (Fig 17), religious restrictions took primacy (100 per cent general, OBC and SC students and 36 per cent ST students followed these rules), followed by

sanitary (93 per cent General and OBC, 75 per cent SC students) and dietary (88 per cent General, 82 per cent OBC, 40 per cent SC and 31 per cent ST students) restrictions. Social restrictions were followed by a handful of students (35 per cent General, 49 per cent OBC and 47 per cent SC). On the other hand, for Muslim students (see Fig 18) social restrictions took equal priority with religious restrictions (100 per cent across caste groups), followed by sanitary (94 per cent General and 58 per cent OBC) and dietary (69 per cent General and 82 per cent OBC) restrictions.

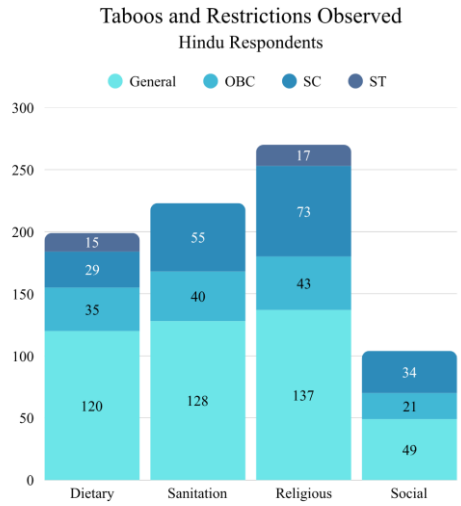

Figure 17: Taboos and Restrictions (Hindu Respondents)

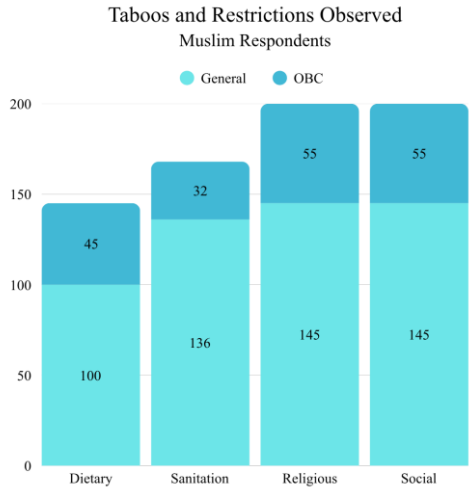

Figure 18: Taboos and Restrictions (Muslim Respondents)

Training regarding these and other menstrual taboos was given by female guardians across all religious groups (see Fig. 19 and 20). Amongst Muslim students (Fig. 19), female relatives emerged again as primary trainers and enforcers of social taboos and restrictions surrounding menstruation: mothers (100 per cent General and 91 per cent OBC), grandmothers (68 per cent General and 64 per cent OBC), aunts (94 per cent General and 100 per cent OBC). Amongst Hindu students, the data reveals similar trends (Fig. 20): mothers (100 per cent General, 100 per cent OBC, 100 per cent SC, 100 per cent ST), grandmothers (73 per cent General, 81 per cent OBC, 84 per cent SC, 51 per cent ST), aunts (58 per cent General, 53 per cent OBC, 63 per cent SC, 32 per cent ST). While roles of grandmothers were limited in menstrual health education, they emerged as significant trainers and enforcers of social taboos and restrictions across both religious groups, while a simultaneous reduction of the roles played by sisters and cousins. This data set highlights how older women bear the burden of maintaining social order and purity/pollution norms. In both data sets, the role of male relatives is absent.

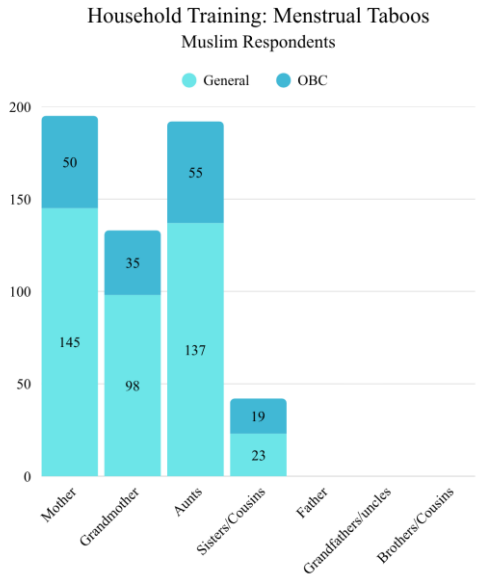

Figure 19: Household Training: Menstrual Taboos (Muslim Respondents)

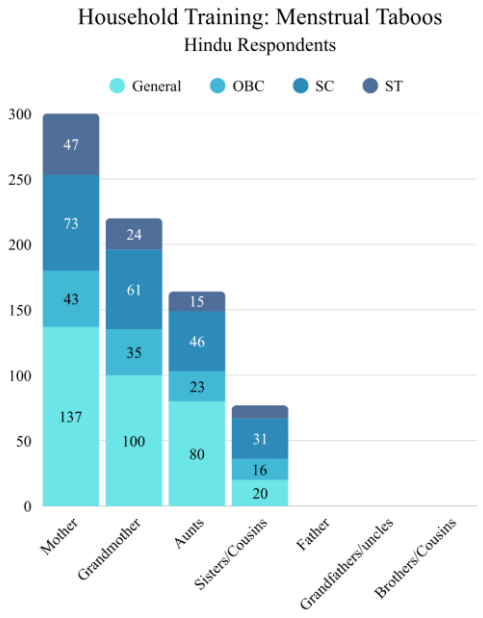

Figure 20: Household Training: Menstrual Taboos (Hindu Respondents)

The household training data paints the most vivid picture of social reproduction of menstrual labour in action. The training delivered by female guardians is the process through which "socially acceptable" menstruators are produced. This production includes biological knowledge, hygiene practices and maintenance of restrictive taboos that uphold the patriarchal system, and caste-religious norms. The data reveals the gendered division of this labour, with the near-total absence of male relatives in this reproductive process. This is a female-managed project where senior members are key players in the reproduction of the compliant gendered subject. Such a system ensures that the burden of upholding patriarchal norms rests on menstruators' shoulders, making them both the subjects and the agents of their subordination. Such a cycle has been and is reproduced through generations, until the structural basis of such a labour can be challenged.

Conclusion: Menstrual Burden and the Way Forward

The paper identified a critical paradox of India's menstrual equity: while there was an increasing recognition of period poverty, the burden for this alleviation of this task remained largely on menstruators themselves. Through the theoretical framework, policy analysis and fieldwork data this paper argues that such a burden is not accidental, but is inscribed into the very structures of the society and state.

The core of this system rests in the intergenerational and institutional reproduction of menstruators. At the household level, female guardians are the primary engineers of this process. The training is multifaceted, ranging from hygiene education to restrictive social taboos and practices, leading to limited knowledge and unhygienic practices. The "veil of silence" ensures continued shame and fear when it comes to menstruation. At the household level, a

menstruator is produced and reproduced, replenished by pedagogical and emotional labour, socialised into bodies that fit social expectations. However, the field analysis revealed the roles played by social intersectionalities in producing unique social reproductive products.

However, this reproductive labour does not limit itself to the household level, but is assimilated into state-sanctioned public health practices. Agents for menstrual education and health remain (active or erstwhile) menstruators: ASHA and AWC workers and female nodal teachers. From procurement of products and intergenerational knowledge transfer, to community and school-level process of product storage, knowledge impartation, and dispelling social myths, the entire process remains feminised. India's current policy framework exploits and institutionalises this gendered and caste-stratified labour, creating efficient managers of menstruators, without dismantling the patriarchal system which reproduces menstrual stigma, anxieties and burden.

Menstruators are not only replenished at the household level, being provided physical, emotional, and dietary support, but also are socially reproduced into becoming the 'right' kind of menstruator by the guardians, health workers, and educators. The right type of menstruator knows why menstruation happens, how to manage their own emotions during this time, as well as those of others, how and where to procure menstrual hygiene products, how to carry out their sanitation and hygiene needs in secrecy, (the culturally or state-approved) appropriate way of disposal of used products, follow several prohibitions in order to not contaminate or pollute more pure and sacred objects and is now also equipped to train other new menstruators, or remind deviant ones to stay within the lines.

The fieldwork data sheds further light on the cost of this system: almost absolute reliance on informal female networks, and failure of institutionalised means of education and support. The high rates of absenteeism, especially amongst intersectional vulnerabilities, exposes a system that fails to provide adequate infrastructure and educational support, forcing individual menstruators to bear the brunt of menstruation and its expenses (monetary and educational).

The paper argues for a fundamental restructuring to a model of shared public responsibility. The entire onus of educating, encouraging and advocating for menstruators should not be a female-only responsibility, rather it should incorporate non-menstruators as educators, supportive parents, health workers, advocates and learners. Their roles must be integrated within state policies and educational curriculum. State policies and school infrastructure must ensure that provision of safe, sanitary toilets, with sustainable disposable mechanisms is a public guarantee and not a private concern. Provision of subsidised or free menstrual hygiene products must be promoted not only in rural areas and institutions of AWCs, but also at urban public toilets and schools. Additionally, a standardised mandatory educational curriculum demystifying menstruation and other pubertal changes must be introduced for all genders,

dismantling the "veil of silence". This should also be accompanied by menstrual awareness training of teachers, parents and community members.

True menstrual equity extends beyond access to period products, rather it requires the dismantling of the system that overburdens menstruating bodies. A redistribution of menstrual labour must be undertaken. There needs to be a shift from "hidden" social reproductive processes to collectively shared public responsibility, promoting a society where menstruation is not perceived as shameful and dirty, and menstruators can live a life with dignity, safety and to their fullest abilities.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to extend their deepest gratitude to the Regent Park Spriha Society for offering their assistance in the collection of the data in this paper. By virtue of their membership in the Society, the author assumed the role of supervising the conduct of the study and the formulation of the questionnaire that was used in the collection of data. The author would like to thank this organisation for offering the opportunity and support needed to conduct this work, as well as for the commitment to improving health, education, and gender equality.

Endnote

1. The study reported that WASH facilities in schools in Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu were inadequate, along with an inconsistent practice of menstrual health education.

2. This study highlighted the lack of awareness regarding menstruation, inadequate facilities and resources leading to high rates of absenteeism and drop-out rates.

3. This study argues that despite government initiatives like 'Free Days' to provide low-cost disposable sanitary napkins, the demand for safe MHM products outweighs their availability and accessibility.

4. Devaki Jain (1996) in her article *Valuing Work: Time as a Measure*, states that an adult woman works up to 5 hours per day in the household, a girl child engages in household activity for up to 2 hours, whereas a man and a boy engage in household activity for less than an hour. Figure 1 in her study displays the engagement in household activity in the states of Rajasthan and West Bengal. Page: 51

5. The SABLA Scheme (2010) with the Anganwadi Centre (henceforth AWC) as its primary unit, targets all adolescent girls, both in and out of school for life skills, nutrition and health, socio-political awareness training. With the AWC, groups of adolescent girls or 'samooh' will be created. These samoohs will receive training from Anganwadi workers, NGOs, and menstrual educators on the biological mechanisms behind menstruation, changes during puberty,

health and hygiene, and the socio-cultural taboos attached to menstruation. Additionally, within each samooh, two Sahelis and one Sakhi will be selected. These three young menstruators, armed with the SABLA manual, will become peer educators and monitors for menstrual health and hygiene (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2011).

6. MHS (2011) makes use of two strategies to combat period poverty: awareness generation and a regular supply of low-cost and high-quality sanitary napkins. For the implementation of both the strategies it relies heavily on ASHA workers and female educators. ASHA workers are assigned the responsibility to conduct community outreach programmes at the AWC every month, and to supplement this during home visits, thus ensuring that no one misses out on the training. For promoting MHH education at the school level, female educators are selected as nodal teachers targeting school-going adolescents. To address the second strategy of distribution of sanitary napkins, ASHA workers have to ensure that all menstruators in their assigned community have access to napkins. They distribute these products during the monthly meetings at the AWCs, and during home visits. At the school level, the nodal teachers are held responsible for the storage of menstrual hygiene products, keeping track of their usage, and ensuring safe disposal of used material (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2011).

7. The Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) 2014 reinstates the roles and responsibilities of ASHA workers and female educators in the promotion of menstrual health and hygiene in the rural community (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2014).

8. SBSV (2014) pays attention to the menstrual health and hygiene education of school-going menstruators. Apart from recommending infrastructural components, such as separate toilets, incinerators, proper water supply, sanitary napkin dispensers, and changing rooms, it also includes an emphasis on the aspect of behavioural change. With the latter aspect, nodal teachers are to be selected and trained in menstrual hygiene education. The nodal teacher (female) is then assigned the task of providing MHH training and support to the young school-going menstruators. The infrastructural as well as the humanistic support would encourage adolescent students to come to school during menstruation days, and therefore reduce absenteeism (Ministry of Education, GoI, 2014).

9. The Menstrual Hygiene Management: National Guidelines 2015 focuses on improving access to knowledge, menstrual products, WASH infrastructures, and disposal mechanisms via a supportive environment for menstruators, individual, family, and community awareness programmes, and policies and guidelines. At the block level, nodal teachers and health workers feature as important stakeholders in product supply, generating awareness and providing a safe environment. However, the National Guidelines have been the first to state that knowledge regarding menstruation is to be imparted to all, starting from individuals to state officials, regardless of their gender. It also pays attention to school infrastructural components—other than the availability of

sanitary napkin dispensers and incinerators—which would encourage a female student to come to school. Additionally, it addresses the shame and guilt that young menstruators often feel, encouraging schools, officials, and the larger society to be understanding of their needs and causing correct information to be propagated amongst the students and their social circles (Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, GoI, 2015).

10. Menstrual hygiene education is emphasised in school sanitation manuals and implementation programmes, thereby putting the onus on female instructors or female health professionals (such as ASHAs in MHS and RKSK schemes) to teach female pupils about menstrual hygiene management. There is no mention in these texts of a specialist educator who is educated in conveying knowledge not only about the biological mechanics of menstruation but also about associated social taboos. According to the guidelines, an existing female instructor would be trained in menstrual hygiene management and would thenceforth be responsible for teaching information to the female pupils, putting an undue strain on a single educator or health worker.

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Article: A Sociological enquiry of the everyday life of women entrepreneurs in Kolkata

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A Sociological enquiry of the everyday life of women entrepreneurs in Kolkata

--Sana Rahman

Abstract: This paper looks at women-entrepreneurship in the context of everyday life which revolves around family and household responsibilities. The findings of this study indicates that entrepreneurship as a career option emerges from and is deeply embedded in the transactions of everyday life within the home and family. Reflecting on the multiple roles played by these women the paper highlights how work-family conflict arise. It further illustrates how women use their agency to negotiate with their environment to carry on their profession. Women entrepreneurs either opt for home-based enterprises or work in close proximity to home, thereby establishing that they view their environment as connected to their business work and family. Indulging in female dominated businesses like beauty, fashion and food industry is another strategy to negotiate with patriarchal social norms. This study finds that women entrepreneurs indulging in women dominated businesses tend to show higher satisfaction of success and independence.

Keywords: women, entrepreneurs, everyday life, agency, Kolkata.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is the process of innovation to introduce new goods or services (Schumpeter, 2000) or a means of opportunity identification to manufacture goods that satisfy human needs in the existing scenario (Kirzner, 1997) to command profit in exchange (Unni, Yadav, Naik, & Dutta, 2021, p. 42). This process of converting an innovation or an identified opportunity into a new and unique product for exchange transaction requires personal time, effort, and economic resources assuming the accompanying economic, social, and psychological risks. An entrepreneur assumes these risks for a return or reward. Entrepreneurship, thus, is a process of movement from an idea to a profitable outcome (Alam, 2021). Academic research on entrepreneurship remained gender neutral till late 1990s, not realising the need for separate investigation on women entrepreneurship (Bruni, Gherardi & Poggio, 2004; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Unni et al., 2021, p. 15). Later, research on entrepreneurship from gendered perspective showed significant differences between male and female businessowners in terms of reasons for business start-up or acquisition, timing and circumstances of start-up, educational qualification, business skills and work experience (Brush, 1992, p. 16). Studies specifically investigating women's entry into small businesses revealed that loss of job, lack of job, quality of work environment and also work life contradictions are the push factors that force women into entrepreneurship, while independence, flexibility and positive work environment were regarded as the pull factors. Here, 'pull' factors refer to the positive aspects which attract an individual to pursue entrepreneurship and 'push' factor refers to the negative conditions that force one to opt for self-

employment or business. However, at times it is difficult to neatly categorise push and pull factors as binaries because the 'push' and 'pull' factors can be intertwined for some individuals (Hughes, 2003). For example, in case of women, the work-life conflict and the need for flexibility in work can be considered as both push and pull factors for having their own start-ups. Previous studies on women entrepreneurship establish that the factors motivating women to become entrepreneurs, the obstacles faced and the sense of personal success are closely embedded in their work and family life. They are motivated to opt for entrepreneurship because it gives them the flexibility to manage work and family (Geoffe & Scase, 1983; Chaganti, 1986; Birley, 1989; Holmquist & Sundin, 1990), and the obstacles also emerge from work and family conflict. As a result, most women view personal success as achieving a balance between family and work (Schwartz, 1976; Humphreys & McClung, 1981; Neider, 1987; Holmquist & Sundin, 1990). Aligning his own observations with these findings, C. G. Brush (1992, p. 19) proposed a new perspective referred to as 'Integrated Perspective' to explain gender-based differences between male and female business owners. According to this perspective, women perceive their business as a cooperative network of relationships rather than a profit-making economic unit. The cooperative network of relationships becomes integrated into the women's life, which includes their family life and community relationships with the goal to bring these connections together. Integrated perspective also suggests that women business owners do not view the environment as a separate element. Rather, they see themselves as embedded in the environment, which is conceived as a network of relationships in work, family and society (Aldrich, 1989; Brush, 1992, p. 23). This becomes applicable for Indian women too as female proprietors in India, were found more likely to be home-based and have smaller scale operations compared to their male counterparts. This further explains why one fourth of Indian businesswomen have successfully expanded their business operations despite the constraints proving themselves to be entrepreneurial (Unni et al., 2021, p. 160). Using this observation as point of entry, this research looks into women-entrepreneurship in the context of everyday life as its primary theme. Previous studies discussed above indicate that women's everyday life is mainly about family and home. This study thus focuses on the everyday life of women entrepreneurs which is embedded in private familial domain. This research employs 'Integrated Perspective' to understand the everyday experiences of women entrepreneurs from their viewpoint. The primary objective of this research is to find out: Whether women entrepreneurs' career emerge from and is deeply embedded in the transactions of everyday life within the home and family? To what extent, women entrepreneurs view their environment as connected to their business work and family? How do work family conflicts arise? How these women use their agency to negotiate with their everyday roles to deal with work-life contradictions? There have been long scholarly discussions over the work-life balance of women and the role conflicts they are subjected to. This paper thus uses role set theory as its theoretical framework to explore the aforementioned research questions.

Methodology

This is an ethnographic study of women entrepreneurs in Kolkata. The need for this qualitative research emerges from the observation that most studies in this area is based on quantitative research. Qualitative research with an ethnographic approach has the potential to contribute towards a more nuanced study offering deep insight into the life and experiences of these women. This research engages in a prolonged fieldwork which was conducted for two years from 2022 to 2024. A stratified purposive sampling method was used to identify the potential respondents. On referring the existing data for sampling, it was found that West Bengal accounts for highest number of women owned MSMEs which is 23.42 per cent (Government of India, Ministry of Micro Small and Medium Enterprises, 2024). As per district-wise overview of Udyam registered MSMEs in West Bengal, Kolkata ranks top with 25,933 registered enterprises. These MSMEs in Kolkata majorly deal in leather, shoemaking, fan manufacturing, printing press, food processing and readymade garments (NABARD, 2023). However, the reports do not provide a district-wise data of the entrepreneurs' gender, religious affiliation or language. However, a state-wise data was published by the Fourth All-India Census of MSME (2011) showcasing the religious affiliation of enterprise owners. As per this report the urban West Bengal enterprise owners comprise of 82.81 per cent Hindus, 16.12 per cent Muslims, 0.39 per cent Christians, 0.18 per cent Buddhists, 0.14 per cent Sikhs and 0.03 per cent Jains. Using stratified sampling the respondents were selected from different segments in terms of age, religion, language, class and neighbourhoods. To elaborate, the sample of this research comprises women entrepreneurs in the age group of thirty to sixty-five years, residing in the city of Kolkata and belonging to various communities based on languages like Bengali, Marwari, Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu and religions Hindu, Muslim and Christian. In order to maintain economic diversity, respondents were selected from both affluent and economically marginalized neighbourhoods. The selection of respondents for each stratum was done using purposive sampling where most relevant individuals were selected. This strategy of combining stratified and purposive sampling, ensured representation of women entrepreneurs from all key sub groups, while allowing selection of participants most relevant as per the research objectives.

The field visits included both in depth interviewing and informal interactions with the respondents in their business spaces, home-based ventures, marketplace stalls, and small storefronts. During these visits the women entrepreneurs' interactions with their customers, suppliers, and family members were also observed in order to gain insight into how gender norms and religious identity and cultural values shape their everyday entrepreneurial practices. Due to ethical concerns pseudonyms are used throughout this study to protect the identities of the respondents. Informed consent was obtained before all interviews and observations, and participants were assured of confidentiality. Table 1 displays the socio-economic profile of the informants with whom formal in-depth interviews were conducted. Although the

narratives of the respondents mentioned in the table have been used in this paper, the data gathered through informal conversations with many other women entrepreneurs of the city also plays a crucial role in shaping this research.

Table 1: Socio-economic background of the women entrepreneurs of Kolkata. Source: Primary data obtained via interview.

	Name	Age	Marital Status	Education	Religion	Linguistic Identity	Business type	Annual Turnover (Rs.)
1	Sania	37	Married	Class 12	Muslim	Urdu	Makeup Studio	7.8 million
2	Maliha	54	Married	LLB	Muslim	Urdu	Restaurant	4.5 million
3	Arti	55	Married	Class 10	Hindu	Marwari	Undergarment's Shop	2.4 million
4	Margaret	33	Married	Graduate (B.A)	Christian	Chinese	Salon	4.2 million
5	Somrita	65	Married	Class 12	Hindu	Bengali	Decorative items	8 million
6	Sarita	42	Married	Graduate (B.com)	Hindu	Punjabi	Clothing Boutique	15 million
7	Asma	33	Married	Class 10	Muslim	Urdu	Jewellery Brand	2 million
8	Tamanna	41	Married	Graduate (B.A)	Muslim	Urdu	Fitness Club	1 million
9	Kuheli	42	Married	Graduate (B.A)	Hindu	Bengali	Consumer Electronics Manufacturer	20 million
10	Lily	65	Widow	Graduate (B.A)	Christian	Chinese	Beauty parlour	4 million
11	Abha	50	Married	Graduate (B.A)	Hindu Brahmin	Bengali	Food products (sauces, pickles, etc)	9.5 million
12	Sadia	35	Married	Graduate (B.A)	Muslim	Urdu	Interior design	6 million

Socio-Economic Background of the Women-Entrepreneurs

The women entrepreneurs under study come from the lower middle, middle, upper middle and upper class. For all these women, irrespective of their class positioning, managing the everyday household responsibilities is as important as their work. For the majority of these women entrepreneurs, the everyday roles of being a wife, a mother or a daughter-in-law is primary. Since women often gave priority to their families over their enterprises, they tended to prefer microenterprises, which they could manage together with domestic responsibilities. Domestic responsibilities forced women to compromise, and notwithstanding the number of children or economic status, the work-home conflict was found to be present (Rani, 1996; Handy, Ranade & Kassam, 2007, p. 386). Vinze (1987) noted that although entrepreneurship was recognized by women and their families as a socially desired behaviour it was hard for women to take on significant risks essential to entrepreneurship. This

is because women saw themselves as primarily the custodians of their families in maintaining traditional values. However, while the women of upper-middle and upper class have the privilege to live as homemakers, the women from lower socioeconomic background do not. Hence the factors motivating women to have their own startups varies depending on their class position. Previous studies on women entrepreneurs in India have shown that lower-income women were motivated by the opportunity to improve their economic standing whereas it was the availability of leisure time which drove women from higher-income classes to pursue entrepreneurship (Rani, 1996; Handy et al., 2007, p. 386). Interestingly in this study on women entrepreneurs of Kolkata a strong co-relation was drawn between the age and class position in driving women towards business as their profession.

In this research, it was found that most women establish their enterprises when they approach the age of forty years. It indicates that they choose to indulge in this profession only after they have successfully carried out their responsibilities towards their family; once their children are either big enough to take care of themselves or are married; their in-laws have either passed away or are too old to control them. These women in the forty plus years age group belong to upper middle or upper class and thus have had the privilege to carry out their responsibilities as homemakers and not have a career of their own. In fact, for them the primary motive to opt for entrepreneurship as a profession either arises from their long-suppressed dreams or as a leisure activity. This clearly indicates that economic factor is not the main reason to drive them to become entrepreneurs. On the contrary for women belonging to the lower middle and middle class, economic need has been the primary motivating factor to opt for entrepreneurship as a profession. Hence these women come up with strategies to cope up with their everyday responsibilities as homemakers while carrying out their businesses. They therefore prefer opting for small scale home-based businesses.

Contrary to the women aged forty and above who indulge in business without challenging the institutions of marriage and family, women in the thirty to thirty-five years age group are found to be more non-conforming to the social structures. Women entrepreneurs whose choice of career has been driven by their dreams or the strong desire to have their own identity fall in the age group of thirty to thirty-five years irrespective of their socio-economic class, religious beliefs or linguistic identities. However, for them too family responsibility seems to be equally important but they make the maximum use of their agency to negotiate with their everyday gendered roles.

It was further found that the socio-economic class of businesswomen of Kolkata intersects with their linguistic identity and religion. Migrant communities like Chinese, Marwari, Punjabi and Hindi or Urdu speaking Muslims are dominant in business sector. Women entrepreneurship also turns out to be dominant among these groups. It was seen that the linguistic identity intersects with the religious identity where entrepreneurship is concerned. Among the Hindus, the Marwari and the Punjabis at large are the business

communities. The Christian women entrepreneurs are found to be mainly of Chinese origin and have been running ladies' beauty parlours and restaurants of their own for generations. As far as the Muslim community is concerned, it is recognised as a business community by the Sachar Committee Report (2006). In this study, it was observed that it is primarily the Urdu or Hindi-speaking Muslims of Kolkata who are engaged in various entrepreneurial activities. Each of these communities have their own distinct history in relation to Kolkata and their entrepreneurial journey.

Kolkata today is known as a Marwari bastion due to the strong presence of the Marwari community in the form of their business activities and culture (Amoncar, 2017, p. 106). The Marwari migrations in Bengal began in the end of the 17th century. They prominently played the role of the bankers and the financiers of the Mughals. Fateh Chand of Murshidabad was one such mega-financier who was given the title of Jagat Seth by the Mughal emperor in 1722. With the collapse of the Mughal Empire in the 18th century, the axis of Indian capitalism shifted from overland trade to the ports. This shift not only led to a change in the nature of the businesses of the prominent business communities but also led to their massive migration and relocation. This 18th century turmoil did not exactly give birth to the Marwari community, but it led to a major consolidation among them. Witnessing the decline of Mughal authority in Bengal, Marwari traders, bankers and financiers migrated to the growing British power in Calcutta. In Calcutta they took over a major part of the market in Barabazar area (Kar, Jaiwardhan & Kundu, 2021). Even today Barabazar continues to be a Marwari trading and residential hub. The Marwaris continue to flourish in business in the city without much competition from the native Bengalis. The native Bengalis in general have been well- educated job-oriented people who consider trading beneath their intellectual capabilities. This attitude created a business vacuum in most of the major East India cities which was filled by the entrepreneurial Marwaris (Kar et al., 2021). Besides, another important factor that contributes to their extraordinary success is their flexibility and the ability to adapt to varied circumstances and places. They are orthodox and are mild mannered, soft-spoken and peaceful. They prefer to live in a joint family; vegetarians who enjoy an assortment of home-cooked dishes, they take vegetarianism seriously (Timberg, 1978, pp. 78-80). This explains the rigid gender roles which prevails within a Marwari family where men are occupied with outdoor business activities, the women take over the household responsibilities. However, more and more Marwari women have been stepping into entrepreneurial activities. Dr. Prabha Khaitan, Manjushree Khaitan, Jayashree Mohta, Shobhna Bhartia, Minu Budhia and Madhu Neotia are some of the big names as far as Marwari women entrepreneurs of Kolkata are concerned. These elite Marwari women are either running their familial businesses or have used their socioeconomic class positions to establish enterprises of their own. Nevertheless, women of Marwari community especially those of Kolkata remain under researched subjects.

People of Chinese origin make up another migrant community with strong presence in Kolkata. The Chinese people migrated to Kolkata in three phases: late 19th century, early 20th century and after the Second World War. Kolkata became virtually an early 'Land of Opportunity' for Chinese migrants. Kolkata's position as a long-established wealthy and prosperous urban centre, offering many job opportunities to new migrants became a major pull factor. Kolkata port also had a significant role to play in it as it brought many Chinese sailors. Many of these sailors were enterprising individuals skilled in carpentry and mechanical works who were exploring the world for better opportunities. These Chinese immigrants eventually involved themselves in numerous businesses, such as carpentry, shoemaking, dentistry, tannery, laundries, restaurants, beauty parlours and food processing, which created the present occupational diversification of Kolkata's *China Para* (China Town). The Chinese had a strong hold in these professions not only since they had highly developed special skills in these jobs but also because the locals of Kolkata refrained from indulging in it. The local people considered most of these professions fit only for untouchables, hence there were fewer competitors in these jobs at that time. This gave the Chinese community sufficient resources and opportunity to expand their businesses. Earlier, most Chinese boys and girls dropped their studies soon after basic school education and went into these businesses. Thus, it can be said that Chinese women in Kolkata have been working hard, side by side with their male counterparts for generations. They have provided hard labour in familial economic activities like the tanning businesses, restaurants or beauty parlours. While Chinese women have always played a vital role in adding to the family incomes, they have tended to keep a low profile and operated in the background. Many Chinese women worked traditionally as hairdressers. Due to certain restrictions on women regarding the choice of their professions many younger unmarried women worked in beauty parlours, while married women used to work in the tannery and restaurant businesses along with their husbands. However, the present generation of Chinese youngsters in Kolkata is seeking for upward mobility by engaging in different, 'more respectable' jobs than their family business could offer them (Bose, 2013). This explains why most Chinese women entrepreneurs in Kolkata today fall in the forty and above age group. They have been running ladies' beauty parlours or Chinese cuisine restaurants. It is evident that the initial immigrant refugee status and the economic necessities drove the women of this community to support their family business or have their own startups. Today the socioeconomic position of Chinese origin people in Kolkata varies from rich to poor. Monica Liu, a Chinese woman entrepreneur aged seventy-one years is currently running four famous Chinese cuisine restaurants in Kolkata namely Tung Fong, Beijing, Kimling and Mandarin. However, the dwindling population of Chinese community due to migration outside India has led to shut down of many Chinese food joints and beauty parlours.

The 19th century colonial Bengal also witnessed the emergence of a new social group namely the Bengali bhadralok which comprised educated middle class, upper caste, salaried professionals who held high status in the Bengali society.

Although the bhadralok majorly comprised the upper caste Hindus, it was an open de facto social group. Caste had no part in the bhadralok membership. Men who held a similar economic position, enjoyed a similar style of life and received similar education were considered as bhadralok (Mukherjee, 1991, p. 179). The Bengal Muslims inspired by the Bengali Hindu Bhadralok ideology started shaping their identity in similar lines (Amin, 1996). Probably this is the reason why the Bengalis of Kolkata irrespective of their religious beliefs have a low representation in trade and commerce. Although small in ratio to their population Bengali businesswomen have emerged in the recent past. Most of them being homemakers in the quest of having a livelihood of their own or reducing the financial burden of their husbands.

Not to forget the Muslims of Kolkata who have a strong presence in leather and food industry. These enterprises are mostly run by Urdu or Hindi speaking Muslims. The leather tanneries which were predominated by the Chinese community has been taken over by the Muslims. Lately their women counterparts have started showing active participation in business activities too. In fact, it seems that the Muslim women entrepreneurs of Kolkata have started filling the vacuum left by the migrating Chinese population in the beauty industry of Kolkata. Apart from beauty salons, they were also found actively running their own clothing boutiques, restaurants, jewellery brands, interior designing firms and cosmetics cum skincare production units.

In other words, it can be said that most women entrepreneurs of Kolkata hail from upper-middle or upper-class families of migrant communities like Marwari Hindus, Punjabi Hindus, Chinese Christian or Urdu speaking Muslims. They derive legitimacy, support and advice from closer environment like the family, friends or the ethnic group (Uphoff, 2000; Hindle, Klyver, & Jennings, 2009; Santos, Roomi & Linan, 2016, p. 51). They opt for entrepreneurship as career post forty years of age when the have finished carrying out primary familial responsibilities of mothering and taking care of the elderly. Entrepreneurship for them is not primarily an economically driven activity. Instead, it is a means to fill the vacuum in life, a leisure activity or a means to fulfil long suppressed dreams.

Why Entrepreneurship?

The choice of entrepreneurship as a career in itself arises from everyday life. Entrepreneurship as a career option gives flexibility to manage work and home as per one's own convenience. Being 'your own boss' allows one to adjust one's work hours as per one's other everyday responsibilities and roles as a homemaker, a wife, a mother, a daughter or a daughter in law. In fact, for some women the urge for entrepreneurship arose from daily activities like cooking for the family, baking for their children, fondness for makeup, dressing up or designing one's own clothes. As for many of these women, family and home is the prime responsibility and entrepreneurship is a means to fulfil family's economic needs without compromising with the other needs of the family which are emotional dependency, care, home management, etc. This can be established from the following narrative:

I have a 15-year-old daughter. I leave her with my mother while I am at work. They both take care of each other. I pray God keeps my family healthy and happy, then only I can work properly. If anything goes wrong with my family, I am going to leave everything. They are my priority. I am earning for them. (Sania, 37, Urdu speaking Muslim, Owner of a Makeup Studio).

As mentioned earlier for this very reason women belonging to privileged socio-economic backgrounds started their career as entrepreneurs after completing the primary duty of being a mother when their children either got married or were big enough to take care of themselves. Entrepreneurship being one of those professions where age is not a criterion gives them the opportunity to fulfil the aspiration of having a career even at a later stage of their lives. While for some women entrepreneurship is the mechanism to fill the vacuum left in their everyday life as the task of mothering becomes less when the children grow up.

When my kids were small, I had established a boutique but had to shut it down because it was affecting my motherly responsibilities. Then kids grew up. Both of them went to Mumbai to pursue education and jobs. I still didn't think of establishing an enterprise but involved myself in cooking and inviting friends for dinner. On being motivated by a friend, I took up my hobby as my profession. (Maliha, 54, Urdu speaking Muslim, Owner of a Restaurant)

My daughter and son in law suggested me to start my own business to keep me occupied. I am happy I did so. Although familial responsibilities still exist but it is not as much as it used to be when my kids were small. (Arti, 55, Marwari Hindu, Owner of women's undergarment shop)

According to some studies (Vinze, 1987; Rani, 1996) women entrepreneurs were typically married and came from families where their husbands or fathers were entrepreneurs. This holds true even for the majority of the respondents in this study. The reason for this can be inferred as that these women entrepreneurs have been observing their family members occupied with their entrepreneurial activities on a daily basis. In other words, interacting with entrepreneurial family members is a part of their everyday life. This does not only contribute towards developing their interest in entrepreneurship but helps them to learn business skills through observation in everyday life. As a result, most successful entrepreneurs here are found to belong to business families or communities at large. It becomes necessary to specify here that unlike the older women, the younger generation in the age group of thirty to thirty-five years tend to realize their dreams early in life. They were found to direct their education and choice of subjects in synthesis with their future entrepreneurial goals.

I inherited this beauty parlour from my aunt because there was no one else to run it. I have given my life to it. Now that my daughters have grown up and moved out of the city, this parlour keeps me even more engaged. But our children think differently. They are not interested in this business. They have

bigger dreams (Lily, 65, Chinese Christian widow, owns a ladies' beauty parlour).

After my graduation I opted for courses by big brands to become a good beautician and hairdresser. This is what I grew up seeing my mom and granny do. Somewhere I knew this is what I would do in future too (Margaret, 33, Chinese Christian married to Muslim, owns a Salon).

The findings indicate that women's choice to pursue entrepreneurship as a career is deeply embedded in the transactions of everyday life within the home and family. Thus, reinforcing the idea that women entrepreneurs see themselves as embedded in their environment, where family, society and work remain entangled as a network of relationships (Aldrich, 1989; Brush, 1992, p. 23). This is because women are involved in multiple roles in multiple systems which makes them continuously consider the ensuing responsibilities while navigating their career as entrepreneurs (Kollan & Parikh, 2005; Khandelwal & Sehgal, 2018, p. 212). But then isn't it true that every individual in a given society occupies multiple statuses and each status has a role associated with it giving rise to multiple roles (Linton, 1936) which leads to *role strain* and *role conflict*? While this role conflict takes place between roles associated with two different statuses of an individual, role strain is experienced when different responsibilities associated within a single status are in contradiction. How then things are different for women?

The narratives of the women entrepreneurs of Kolkata establish that the society at large and women themselves recognise their roles within the private domain of the home as primary. Unlike men, women tend to hierarchize their roles as homemakers, wives or mothers above their professional role. While the role strain remains unavoidable, the role conflict that might arise with responsibilities associated with work and family is minimised by choosing entrepreneurship as best career option. Most of businesswomen are seen to prioritise their roles as mothers or wives in the early phase of their life and begin their entrepreneurial journey much later in life to avoid role conflict. Furthermore, they opt for home-based enterprises to balance the work-family contradictions. Studies on work-family conflict suggest that the responsibilities of women in developing countries are much broader compared to the Western women. This was established through a study conducted in Pakistan where working women were seen to have multiple roles emerging from prevailing cultural expectations. They are not only supposed to look after their children and spouse but also look after aging in-laws and other family members (Ahmad, Muazzam, Anjum, Visvizi & Nawaz, 2020, p. 10). These gendered roles and cultural expectations seem to be applicable for the Indian sub-continent at large.

Interestingly the narratives of the respondents also illustrate that while some women start their business as a leisure activity there are others for whom entrepreneurship becomes the agent for leisure. Homemakers have very little scope for taking a break from fulltime household chores for leisure activities. However, as working women now they not only have their own money to

spend as they wish but also reasons to take a break from their hectic work schedule. The leisure activities of these businesswomen include meeting friends, shopping for oneself, partying, etc. According to Henry Lefebvre (1991, pp. 33-34), the purpose of leisure should be to offer distraction, entertainment and repose to compensate for the difficulties of everyday life. The world of leisure should be entirely outside of the everyday realm, breaking one away not only from work but also from day-to-day family life. In the case of these women entrepreneurs, the world of leisure is sometimes also embedded in work, helping them break away from everyday familial responsibilities and home confinement. For example, throwing and attending parties is often counted as part of work. Socializing is considered as an integral part for business networking. Although social interaction is beneficial for business, it has another purpose too. Socializing also becomes a means for leisure for businesswomen. In fact, the business as a whole provides these women the opportunity to step out of the house, mix with people other than extended families and have a world of their own where work and relaxation go hand in hand.

Agency and Negotiations

In order to balance their work and family life, these women entrepreneurs make negotiations with the patriarchal social structure of family and marriage on an everyday basis. Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of 'patriarchal bargain' was found to be relevant in the lives of these women. Patriarchal bargaining refers to the strategies used by women to gain security and autonomy against oppression within the institution of marriage and family. According to Kandiyoti (1988), patriarchal bargains are made through autonomy and protest or subservience and manipulation. On the other hand, Gerami and Lehnerer (2001, p. 558) identify four strategies to negotiate with patriarchy, namely collaboration, acquiescence, co-optation and subversion. The following narratives illustrate how women use various strategies to bargain with patriarchy in their day-to-day lives for a successful entrepreneurship. In most cases it was observed that women submit to their familial expectations of being a good wife or mother in order to gain approval to carry on with their business. This indicates that women acquiesce to their position while still negotiating for some personal gain (Hoodfar, 1996; MacLeod, 1996; Gerami & Lehnerer, 2001).

Puja is going on at home. I have to leave my work and be there. No matter how big a businesswoman you become you have to carry out the duties of a daughter-in-law of the house. (Sarita, 43, Punjabi Hindu, Owns a Clothing Boutique).

I am the eldest daughter-in-law. You know the responsibilities which come with that. Although we have a maid, I have to do the cooking part and everything related to my husband. I carry out all my household duties and then devote time to work. Nobody should say I am running my business at the cost of my home. (Asma, 33, Urdu speaking Muslim, Owns a Jewellery Brand)

I used to work as a teacher in a government school earlier. I gave up my government job because it was creating issues in my family as my in-laws felt my work was affecting my family responsibilities. Now I am a fitness coach. I have rented a flat next to my residence. I adjust my work hours at my convenience. This makes it easy for me to balance both work and family and gives me a sense of living a well-balanced life. (Tamanna, 41, Urdu speaking Muslim, Runs Fitness Club).

I know the business is in my name. I had become its owner upon my husband's insistence because the Government of India provides income tax rebate facilities for women. You know, so many of my friends are not allowed to leave their houses and work. I feel grateful and lucky because my husband and in-laws are at least allowing me to work, as long as I can handle both household and workplace responsibilities well. So, I never proceed with my plans without taking my husband's consent for purposes of clarity, and maintaining a peaceful ambience within the household. (Kuheli, 42, Bengali Hindu, Consumer Electronics Manufacturer)

The above narratives indicate that women entrepreneurs need to bargain with their roles within family and marriage irrespective of their age, class position, religious beliefs and linguistic identity. However, the negotiations made and the degree of agency intersect with other aspects of their identity giving rise to varied strategizing techniques. Allendorf's (2012) findings on women's agency and family relations in India suggest that a) the practice of endogamous marriages in certain communities compared to those having exogamous marriages gives women more agency b) women in nuclear family have more agency compared to the women of joint family c) women in joint family gain agency when they move up the hierarchy from being a daughter in law to becoming the mother in law d) there is more female agency in families which are supportive of female power or being married in powerful families e) daughters in law having high family quality relation have more agency compared to those who do not.

In similar lines in this research it was found that a) although endogamous marriage (marrying cousins in case of Muslims here) is very rare among the Muslims of Kolkata but it did give more agency to those women who married their cousins compared to those daughters in law who came from another family b) most women opt for career in business post forty when they gain more agency as their mothers in law become old, weak and less commanding c) women were able to establish their business when they moved out of the joint family system and started living in nuclear family d) women married in progressive families were motivated by their husbands and in laws to have their own startup and were provided support in the form of capital, building client base and sharing the burden of household responsibilities. Some of the narratives supporting the above arguments are:

My mom also runs a parlour which she inherited from my grandmother. After marriage, my husband encouraged me to start my own parlour. I was never confident about establishing a salon but I felt it was in my blood so I should do

it. I have kept a small room for my 4-year-old daughter here so that she can be with me after school hours. I spend the entire day in my salon and by the time I reach home, I am too tired to do anything. Thankfully my mother-in-law manages the household (Margaret, 33, Chinese Christian married to Muslim, Owns a Salon).

By the prevalent social norms of our times whereby girls would have restricted mobility outside their houses, I had to discontinue my studies and marry at an early age. Whereas, on account of my brother's privileged position within the household, my father continued investing in his business and turned him into a big shot. Fortunately, my dream of doing something big out of my skills in knitting & sewing could turn into a reality after marriage with the support of my husband. (Somrita, 65, Bengali Hindu, Manufactures Decorative Items).

Sometimes the patriarchal hindrances might not necessarily emerge from within the family rather it could be from people outside the family or the society at large. This showcases the mindset of the society at large which believes that a woman's place is in the private domain that is the house. Not only child rearing but also instilling the commonly held social values in the children becomes a marker of how well a woman has raised her children. This is very evident in the following narratives:

I divided my flat into two, in one half we lived and in the other half, I carried out my business. Although my husband insisted that I use this entire flat as my workshop and we shift somewhere else to stay, I refused. My children were really small then. I wanted to bring them up well, and for that, I needed to give them as much time as possible. I didn't want people to say that she got so engrossed in her work that she didn't bring up her children well. (Sarita, 43, Punjabi Hindu, Clothing Boutique Owner)

Of course, the main problem is society. When a housewife mother of two kids comes out to work and there are changes in her dressing, say from traditional to western attire or she goes to mix around with people she gets negative remarks. People don't understand that I need to socialise. I need to socialise so that people come to know about me and my work. That's how I'll get clients. (Sadia, 35, Urdu speaking Muslim, Interior Designer)

In fact, the hindrances not only originate from gendered differences but also from other aspects of identity which could be linguistic or caste based. Unlike the migrant communities mentioned earlier, the Bengalis, the native habitants of Kolkata are not business-oriented people. Rather they make a job-oriented community. The reason perhaps traces back to the 19th Century Colonial Bengal where most Bengali men worked as clerical babus or held administrative posts in the bureaucracy. This educated job-oriented group was later recognised as the Bengali bhadraloks (gentlemen). They were usually upper caste Bengali Hindu like brahmins, baidyas and kayasthas who had control over large land parcels and could afford English education. They played a significant role in the nationalist movement and the social reform of the Hindu society. Gradually, the Bengali bhadralok came to be identified as

an open group of educated urban middle-class job-oriented people (Mukherjee, 1991, p. 179). This explains why most urban Bengali men and women even today prefer education-based jobs. They seem less keen about entrepreneurship as compared to the earlier mentioned migrant communities.

When I started my entrepreneurial journey, I was told by my neighbours that business is not meant for laypersons like us. It is something that has been dominated for generations by the non-Bengalis, particularly men. I was asked to opt for teaching or content creation as it's more suitable for Bengali Brahmins who have been the reservoirs of intellect since time immemorial. (Abha, 50, Bengali Hindu Brahmin, Manufactures food products like sauce, pickles, juices, etc.)

However, gender continuous to be that part of the identity which cuts across all other aspects like class, caste, language, etc. Like any other working woman, the negotiations made by women entrepreneurs are at two levels, first at the personal level with family and friends, and second at the professional level with the outside world. There have been long debates and discussions in the academic discourse over the work-life balance of women and their everyday experiences across various male-dominated fields of profession. Despite the presence of women in the business world, entrepreneurship remains a male dominated domain. This becomes evident in the General Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2019) Report on women and entrepreneurship that examined the rates of entrepreneurship in 43 countries. The report showed that in all these countries the rates of women's entrepreneurship were lower than that of men (Allen, Elam, Langowitz & Dean, 2007; Pines, Lerner & Schwartz, 2010). The "habitus" in the "field" of construction and engineering is one in which jobs in the industry are seen as intrinsically male. The gender assumptions implicit in how construction and engineering work is described and carried out is rarely questioned, although it can operate at both the conscious and unconscious levels (Ready, 2004; Sayer, 2005; Powell & Sang, 2015). This applies even to the field of entrepreneurship. Studies show that both men and women entrepreneurs in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector conformed to a predominantly masculine model of entrepreneurship resulting in hostile social attitudes and cultural biases towards women entrepreneurs in a 'male' business world. This scarcity of women in technological fields can be explained through the widely spread perception of technology as masculine (Wajcman, 2004; Pines et al., 2010). However, the notion of a predominantly masculine model of entrepreneurship is not limited to the ICT sector. Scholars argue that both men and women perceive entrepreneurs as having predominantly masculine characteristics. They also showed that women who perceive themselves as having more masculine characteristics tend to have more entrepreneurial intentions (Gupta, Turban, Wasti & Sikdar, 2009; Pines et al., 2010). It is not that women are born with lesser entrepreneurial intention than men, rather, they perceive the entrepreneurial role as being less adequate for them. Even if women feel starting a venture is highly valued by the society, they do not think this is an acceptable option for them (Santos et al., 2016, p.

61-62). However, this study on women entrepreneurs in Kolkata infers that women fulfil their entrepreneurial intentions by opting for businesses where women play a dominant role as service providers and consumers like in the beauty and fashion sector. This explains why female entrepreneurs are usually found running clothing boutiques, beauty parlours, cake shops or tiffin services. A report by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ, 2019, p.27) while analyzing women entrepreneurship in India, provides a sectoral breakdown stating that women enterprises primarily constitute of apparels, education, health and personal services like beauty treatment, hair dressing, textile cleaning, household maintenance which are perceived to be traditional female sectors. Studies conducted at global level by World Bank (2018) and GEM (2022) state that half of women entrepreneurs around the world are involved in retail trade and services where most women owned businesses are informal and home-based, conducted in small scale in traditional sector. As a result, gendering of the fields within entrepreneurship becomes evident. However, as per this research there are women who have transgressed these gendered boundaries and indulge in the business of manufacturing luggage bags, elastic tapes or even electrical equipment. Yet these women were seen to be highly dependent on their husbands to run their businesses and to take major business decisions as a result losing autonomy over their own venture. This indicates that gendered horizontal segregation in entrepreneurship gives women more autonomy in decision making and also the chance to be on top in their field. Whereas in male dominated business fields they need the support of male family members most likely husbands and have less autonomy and decision-making power. Thus, indicating that gendered horizontal segregation is based on difference rather than inequality. In fact, studies have found an inverse relation between horizontal and vertical segregation. When the vertical segregation increases or decreases, then horizontal segregation changes in the opposite direction. This inverse relation is the dominant trend essentially because as career structures are separate there is less scope for gender discrimination (Blackburn & Jarman, 2006, p. 308). This establishes that gender based horizontal segregation in entrepreneurship actually allows women to have better opportunities and higher chances of success. This happens because horizontal segregation reduces the chances of discrimination within occupations. The more an occupational career is confined to women, the greater the women's chance of reaching high levels.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that family and household responsibility is the primary aspect of the everyday life of these women entrepreneurs irrespective of their age, class, religion or linguistic identity. Choosing entrepreneurship as a career also arises from everyday life because it gives flexibility to manage work and home as per one's own convenience. Rather than economic benefits, the primary factors motivating women to start business ventures are fulfilling long suppressed dreams or pursuing leisure activities. In fact, in the due course of time entrepreneurship in itself becomes an agency to fulfil other desires like

stepping out of home or building social networks for fun and relaxation. Women entrepreneurs of Kolkata mostly belong to business families of migrant communities like Punjabi or Marwari Hindus, Chinese Christians or Urdu speaking Muslims. The reason for this might be their everyday observation of entrepreneurial activities within the family. This might have also contributed in their learning of entrepreneurial skills. Despite these advantages these women face challenges in their entrepreneurial endeavours. The primary challenge being maintaining work-life balance. Apart from their role as an entrepreneur these women manage multiple roles of being a wife, mother and daughter-in-law within the private domain of home. This study further indicates a strong co-relation between the age and class position in driving women towards business as their profession. Women from privileged classes are seen to start their business after the age of forty when the household chores lessen. This can be counted as a strategy to negotiate with the roles assigned within the familial domain. However, younger generation women in the age group of thirty to thirty-five years refrain from conforming to the structural norms by strategising early in life. Not completely relieved of household duties, these women come up with other strategies to maintain a balance between work and familial responsibilities. Opting for home-based enterprises is one amongst them. They either supply food and cakes made in home kitchen or run boutiques or beauty parlours in close proximity to their homes. This also establishes that women entrepreneurs view their environment as connected to their business work and family. Women indulging in female dominated businesses like beauty, fashion and food industries are found to have higher sense of success and independence as they do not have to compete with men nor seek help from husbands or brothers to run their enterprises. Thus, establishing that horizontal gendered segregation in entrepreneurship reduces gendered discrimination thereby increasing success rates for women.

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Article: Customary Law, Gender Role and Property Inheritance: Perspectives of Ao Women Elites of Mokokchung

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Customary Law, Gender Role and Property Inheritance: Perspectives of Ao Women Elites of Mokokchung

--Takolong Kichu

Abstract

This article delves into the inheritance practice of the Ao Nagas, an indigenous tribal community residing in Nagaland in Northeast India. The Ao's follow a patrilineal inheritance system where rights are exclusively vested with men. At this juncture, it is important to examine how Ao women perceive the prevailing inheritance practice, clan system, and patriarchy. A closer examination of existing literature also highlights that while studies have been carried out to understand the inheritance practices and the rights allotted in Ao Naga society, no studies appear to have been conducted to understand how Ao women perceive the prevailing inheritance practice. Within that context, a research gap and questions arise: what do Ao women feel are the barriers; whether there is any change in their thoughts and perspectives; would they ask for a share in land; and whether they feel the need for a change in the inheritance system? Therefore, this paper tries to answer the research questions that have arisen by conducting in-depth interviews with elite Ao Naga women who were taken as the Key Informants, owing to their distinctive social positions and the intimate knowledge and experience of the subject. The primary objective of this study is to understand the attitudes of Ao Naga women in terms of inheritance practices, and theoretically comprehend the nuances of their attitudes and behaviours, ultimately aiming to shed light on the cultural intricacies shaping inheritance dynamics within the Ao community. The study found that patriarchy, clan and kinship systems and the identity attached to land act as significant barriers to women's inheritance rights. Moreover, despite the lack of rights, Ao women oppose claiming shares in ancestral clan land, valuing the preservation of customs over change. Community sentiment is strong, and socialization heavily influences their lives that it has rendered education and modern ideals of equality ineffective in altering the customary practices and beliefs.

Keywords: *culture, land, inheritance practice, patriarchy, clan, kinship, gender, norms.*

Introduction

In northeastern India, the Ao Nagas of Nagaland, a tribal community, holds onto their distinct traditions and customs. Their way of life reflects ancient roots intertwined with modern challenges, where heritage thrives amid contemporary changes. Among the defining elements of their identity is the inheritance system, a practice deeply rooted in culture yet subject to growing scrutiny. This intricate issue has long been debated within Naga society.

Naga women's narratives often reflect a mix of hardship, aspiration, and resilience. Despite shifts in gender roles, traditional norms still favour men, restricting women's claims to inheritance rights. This raises some fundamental questions: How do Ao Naga women navigate a system that prioritises male lineage? Can it coexist with modern ideas of gender equality, especially in inheritance laws? How do educated and self-reliant Ao Naga women reconcile their cultural roots with contemporary expectations? What insights does the Ao Naga women's case offer to the wider world?

This study explores these questions by examining the perspectives of elite Ao Naga women. As key stakeholders with intimate knowledge of their culture, their views provide valuable insights into the synthesis between tradition and change. Their opinions shed light on broader cultural dynamics and reveal why women continue to uphold traditional inheritance norms despite their exposure to modern education and global ideas about equality.

By exploring their experiences, the study delves into the intricate relationship between gender roles, cultural expectations, and inheritance practices. It examines why women continue to uphold these norms, despite increasing challenges to gender-based restrictions. The research also draws on theories like Durkheim's Collective Consciousness (1933), Parsons' Socialisation Theory (1951), and Boas' Cultural Relativism (1938) to explain how cultural traditions shape individual choices, offering a counter-narrative to mainstream views on gender roles and inheritance, highlighting the resilience of cultural identity and the complexities of gender equality within traditional societies.

Review of literature

The status of women and gender inequality in inheritance practices have been widely discussed. Across different societies, land ownership often favours men, leaving women with limited rights and control (Kieran et al., 2015). In South Asia, Dube (1997) notes that while women contribute greatly to productive activities, they face significant barriers to owning and managing resources. In Hindu South Asia, property is typically passed to male heirs, while in patrilineal Muslim communities, daughters are often excluded from inheritance to preserve patrimony (Ahmad, 1976).

Globally, restrictions on women's inheritance rights are widespread, with profound implications for gender equality (Cooper, 2008). Kinship systems also significantly influence inheritance, as they shape group placement and resource distribution (Dube, 1994). Moreover, in indigenous communities, customary inheritance laws often link land ownership to gender, privileging male heirs (Erleni, 2023).

In Naga society, each tribe has its own distinct set of unwritten customary laws, which, despite their unique characteristics, share common features and operate within the framework of the Rules of Administration of Justice and Police Act of 1937 and the Nagaland Village Council Act of 1978 under the protection of the Indian Constitution (Odyuo & Chavhan, 2024). This

customary law operates alongside a deeply rooted patrilineal system, which Longkumer and Bokth (2021) observe reinforces patriarchal authority by restricting decision-making and inheritance rights to men. Zehol (1998) notes that this creates unequal footing for women in inheritance and other spheres, while Mepfhu-o (2019) argues that societal ideals of masculinity further reinforce women's subjugation.

Jamir (2014) emphasises that inheritance rights for Naga women remain sidelined due to traditional norms that dictate suitable gender roles. Zehol (1998) further describes how unequal power relations and institutionalised denial of property rights hinder women's empowerment, and studies by Fernandes et al., (2002), Chandrika (2008), and Imtisungba (2009) show that modernisation and education, despite their benefits, fail to dismantle ingrained practices that perpetuate women's subordinate status. Parwez (2012) notes that globalisation and education have left women in transition, eager for progress yet committed to maintaining traditional customs. Moreover, Kire (2007) highlights that women often internalise and reinforce the very norms that oppress them.

Within Ao society, women face additional restrictions. Toshi (2018) states that they are excluded from key political forums like the village assembly and the citizen's forum, reinforcing male exclusivity. Parwez (2012) describes how exclusion in inheritance, divorce, and succession laws reflects women's subordinate position, and customary laws restrict inheritance to male descendants, allowing women to inherit only personal items like clothing and jewellery (Jathy, 2020). Longkumer (2020) also notes that landed property is reserved exclusively for male clan members.

In the absence of male heirs, Toshi (2018) explains, inheritance typically passes to a male relative, bypassing female descendants. Longchar (2002) links this custom to the Ao marriage system, which ensures that ancestral property remains within the clan by barring women from inheriting land. Moreover, Longchar and Kinny (2018) highlight that married daughters are considered part of their husband's clan, further justifying their exclusion from inheritance. Toshi (2018) further aids that Ao women are referred to as "süngolang" (bunch of leaves that can be blown away with the wind) or "tetsür-tanur" (literally unfit to participate in discussion due to their feminine traits and lack of maturity), often perceiving women as lacking the authority to engage in property-related discussions.

Jamir (2014) also observes that Naga customary laws grant men exclusive rights to private, clan, and communal land, promoting male dominance, while Imtilemla (2018) argues that Ao women internalise these norms, viewing themselves as less capable despite their potential. Consequently, while women are respected within society, their rights remain limited.

Although previous studies have examined the exclusion of women in inheritance practices in Naga society, few have explored how elite Ao women perceive and navigate these norms. This study aims to address this gap by

exploring their experiences and perspectives on the intersection of gender, tradition, and inheritance rights. Here, inheritance of property is taken primarily in relation to land rights.

Study methodology

The study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, analysing primary data obtained through a semi-structured interview schedule that was administered in September-October 2023. The sample comprised of 11 women respondents purposively chosen who have marked themselves off as elite within the Ao community, owing to their distinctive social positions as highly educated, employed with high income, and none the less intimate knowledge and experience on the subject. By 'elite women,' this study refers to the class of individual women who have achieved notable success in their respective fields, ascending to a prominent position within the society (Pareto, 1935). These 11 respondents were identified for in-depth study from a larger sample of a field project undertaken by the researcher. They were more vocal and could be taken as Key Informants, and their views were revealing in terms of their reluctance to challenge the customary law. In fact, the narratives presented by these especially elite Ao women brought a twist to the study assumptions made at the beginning of the study.

Key Informant interviews were conducted in Mokokchung town, the district headquarters, and the main urban centre of the Ao community in Mokokchung District, Nagaland. The sample comprised of five academic professors, some of whose works have been reviewed in this study, namely Jamir (2014) and Toshi (2018), three past and present presidents from Ao Women's Organisation (Watsu Mungdang), two church leaders of considerable reputation, and one advocate who herself was a researcher as well on gender issues in Naga society.

A semi-structured interview schedule was employed to carry out face-to-face interviews at a time and place convenient for the respondents. The interviews were conducted in the native Ao language, lasted 60-90 minutes, and were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. The quotations and views obtained have been presented as findings of the study. The interview schedule focused on four themes: barriers to women's inheritance rights, changes in perspectives, women's willingness to claim land, and the need for change in the inheritance system. Additionally, secondary data was gathered from books, journals, and publications for the literature review.

Ethical standards were rigorously followed. Written consent was obtained from all respondents, who were all informed of their right to decline questions encroaching on their privacy. The responses and opinions acquired, as well as the findings, are solely for academic purposes, a measure appreciated by the participants.

Findings and Interpretation

This study explored the views of Ao Naga women on inheritance norms, and its findings are presented in this section. An overview of insightful viewpoints and experiences that were acquired through interviews scheduled with elite Ao Naga women has been elaborated and discussed under four themes.

Barriers impeding women's access to inheritance rights

In Ao society, women's inheritance rights are restricted by traditional systems and practices. Customary law dictates that properties should be inherited by male descendants, reflecting the social structure. Respondents consistently pointed to patriarchy and the clan system as the primary barriers to women's inheritance rights, as highlighted by their comments.

Respondent 8, a 51-year-old women's organisation leader, stated:

"If we look at our practice, women are not given the right to inheritance because of patriarchy and the clan system."

Similarly, Respondent 10, a 65-year-old retired associate professor and also a member of the women's organisation, observed that:

"Based on patriarchy, we base the practice of inheritance by men on both ancestral and acquired properties, and I also feel that men pick the rights that suit them the best and ignore the rest."

Respondent 1, a 37-year-old advocate, summarized it as:

"Our patriarchal system, where only men have the rights to land and ancestral properties."

Another barrier identified was the historical ties between land ownership and the clan system, where land is deeply tied to the clan and the kinship system. There is a prevailing belief that land should always remain with the clan. Respondent 5, a 48-year-old associate professor, explained:

"It stems from the historical and social systems where land is tied to clan and kinship, with the belief that it should always stay within the clan."

Also, Respondent 4, a 52-year-old associate pastor, added:

"Our culture has been a patriarchal society, and land belongs to the clan."

Marriage practices further restrict women's land rights. Women are not given the rights to land because their inheritance would pass to the husband's clan through their offspring. This concern of losing land to another clan through marriage further restricts women's inheritance rights. Respondent 2, a 36-year-old assistant professor, noted:

"Due to our culture and clan system, a girl must marry into a different clan. If she inherits land, it will transfer to her husband's clan through their children, making it difficult to safeguard the original clan's lands. This is why women are not given land rights."

Respondent 9, a 76-year-old retired principal and a member of the women's organisation echoed this:

"Women do not have a share in land because we women marry out of the clan. To prevent the land from going to her offspring who are from another clan or might be from a different village, it is not given to her."

Gender inequality was also cited as a key issue. Respondent 2 commented:

"People frequently claim that we Nagas and Ao's have gender equality, yet a closer examination of the community reveals a different image. We women have no say in anything. Our village council system is a prime example. Women's voices are not being acknowledged."

Respondent 6, a 57-year-old associate pastor, agreed:

"Regarding the barrier or impediments, I think it is our gender within the patriarchy and clan system."

Moreover, many respondents noted that women themselves perpetuate these customs. Respondent 3, a 48-year-old professor, remarked:

"Women ourselves are a part of perpetuating the current practice. Epidemy of our Ao Society."

Respondent 7, a 34-year-old assistant professor, also highlighted societal rigidity:

"Because we are a patriarchal society, and since it has always been that way, changing the system is quite difficult as we are a very rigid society."

Besides her, Respondent 11, a 50-year-old associate professor, emphasised:

"Customs and customary law, everything springs out from there. Our customary laws have a highly rigid structure that is not flexible, and besides that, patriarchy is a big factor."

These findings highlight a complex interplay of patriarchy, clan systems, marriage practices, and entrenched customs that limit women's inheritance rights. Despite advances in education and emancipation, traditional norms remain deeply rooted in Ao Naga society.

Changes in thoughts and perspectives

The inheritance system practiced in Ao society is deeply rooted in traditions, and people have been socialised in those practices. However, as society grows, views and perspectives may shift. This section highlights whether Ao women's thoughts on these practices are changing in light of the existing barriers and inheritance norms.

Respondents consistently affirmed their adherence to these norms, viewing them as integral to their identity. Respondent 3, a 48-year-old professor, stated:

"We identify with the customs and traditions that have been passed down through the generations and are treasured by the people. Tampering with it is frowned upon as it is considered sacred."

Similarly, Respondent 5, the 48-year-old Associate Professor, remarked:

"There are no changes in terms of ancestral land. People will continue to adhere to it since it is a part of our culture."

Socialisation also plays a crucial role in reinforcing these norms. Respondent 2, the 36-year-old assistant professor, explained:

"Right from the moment we are born, we are shaped by the ideologies of our parents. We grow up with the mentality that 'I have no right in this land."

This acceptance by women acceptance is also linked to concerns about preserving clan land. Respondent 4, the 52-year-old associate pastor, stated:

"When it comes to inheritance, I believe that women should not inherit clan lands. When it comes to immovable property and anything related to the clan, only men should inherit."

Respondent 10, the 65-year-old retired associate professor, observed:

"Even we women believe that the current practice is valid in certain ways. We do not seek that privilege, believing that the land should remain within the clan and village."

While some acknowledged the system's discriminatory nature, they still upheld its validity. Respondent 1, the 37-year-old advocate, noted:

"From a legal perspective, we say that all men are equal. However, because it is our cultural practice, we accept what is there."

Respondent 6, the 57-year-old associate professor, reflected on this duality:

"As a woman, I don't believe in the right to inherit property since it's not our norm. If all my male siblings received land rights and I didn't, I wonder why. But I realise it is because we have been socialised to think only men have such privileges due to patriarchy and the clan system. When this happens, women just grumble and leave it as is since it goes against our norms to argue."

Respondent 9, the 76-year-old retired principal, shared:

"Since they are women, they will have no right to land. Our forefathers did not think along that line, nor was the practice intentional. But the practice we have was practical that way, and it is still very relevant now."

Another reason women accept the inheritance norm and do not have any change in perspectives is because of their preference to maintain the existing tradition. Respondent 7, the 34-year-old assistant professor, argued:

"Changing the system would be difficult because we are a patriarchal society. It is best to maintain the homogeneity of the clan."

However, perspectives shifted when it came to the acquired properties of the parents. Generally, women do not ask for a share or interfere with village and clan lands. They also refrain from claiming ancestral movable objects passed down through the male line. Instead, Respondent 8, the 51-year-old women's organisation leader, asserted:

"What a husband and wife acquire after their marriage should be shared equally with their offspring."

Similarly, Respondent 11, the 50-year-old associate professor, stated:

"We are strict about ancestral property, and women have no voice in it. I also am not discussing ancestrally inherited land rights for women. However, acquired land rightfully belongs to women if their parents obtained it."

Here we can see that Ao women have no interest in the clan lands but believe that they should have the full right to acquired properties. However, Respondent 11 also noted that:

"It is unfortunate that there are cases where the so-called 'inheritors' (next male kin of the deceased) attempt to take away even the acquired properties of parents that rightfully belong to women when there are no male offspring in the family."

These insights show that Ao women uphold traditional inheritance norms while advocating for equal rights to acquired properties, reflecting a nuanced perspective that balances respect for tradition while acknowledging evolving gender roles.

Women and share in land

Despite deeply rooted patriarchy and clan-based customs in Ao Naga society, women's perspectives on inheritance norms show little change. This section explored whether Ao Naga women would request a share of ancestral lands while navigating cultural practices and individual rights. Respondents emphasised that patriarchy and clan-based customs remain deeply rooted in Ao Naga society, and most respondents opposed women asking for a share of ancestral or clan lands. These sentiments are evident in the following narratives. Respondent 5, the 48-year-old associate professor, states that:

"Women should not ask for a share in ancestral clan land. We must uphold the sanctity of our tradition and safeguard it. I will not request a share because I can acquire things on my own. Why go through the difficulty of taking something that is not ours?"

Similarly, Respondent 9, the 76-year-old retired principal and member of the Women's Organisation, emphasised that:

"We dwell in clan land and follow patriarchy. Women intervening in that practice or requesting a share, and land passing from women to her descendants of another clan will disrupt our practice and dilute our heritage."

Respondent 10, the 65-year-old retired associate professor and women's organisation member, noted:

"Even in the apex Ao women's organisation, we do not talk or debate about the rights of the ancestral clan land. The idea of challenging it is out of context."

The societal force against women's land rights is also highlighted by Respondent 6, the 57-year-old associate pastor:

"Men often say that whether it is acquired or inherited, land and buildings never belong to women. That force is too big for women to counter."

Against that force, some respondents internalise this resistance. Respondent 1, the 37-year-old advocate, shared:

"It is up to the individual to make a claim or request for a right in the clan or ancestral land. But my consciousness would not allow it for me. We have been socialised to believe that women have no right to do so, and we would not want to disrupt that tradition."

In the face of disrupting the tradition, Respondent 7, the 34-year-old Assistant Professor, added:

"I wouldn't do that, as it undermines the land's homogeneity, which is equally important. Unless there is an alternative, we should not go against it. I don't think it's fair on our end either."

Similarly, Respondent 11, the 50-year-old associate professor, added:

"I prefer not to discuss clan land. If it is clan land, I don't mind women staying away from it. Customary laws and practices are deeply ingrained in our society, making them difficult to change. Let the clan land go to the inheritors, even if some women disagree. Changing these practices could destabilise the entire societal structure."

However, some respondents believe women should ask for a share of land, questioning why only men should have land rights in the contemporary world. But they refrain from doing so out of respect for prevailing traditions. Respondent 8, the 51-year-old women's organisation leader, argued:

"A woman should ask for her fair share since she has every right to do. But only because we understand that we live in a patriarchal society and that this is not part of our cultural practice, we don't ask for it."

Respondent 2, the 36-year-old assistant professor, questioned:

"Why should only men have the right? So, what do we get? That question arises."

Respondent 3, the 48-year-old professor, explained:

"When exposed to education and what is happening in the global scenario, I believe it is only natural that women begin to question their ascribed status, privileges, and limitations."

Lastly, Respondent 4, the 52-year-old associate pastor, suggested:

"Women should clearly understand their rights and should be comfortable with who or what their rights are."

Thus, as per the responses, Ao women believe they should not ask for a share of ancestral or clan land to uphold tradition and safeguard it. Due to socialisation, they recognise patriarchal norms and customary land practices and feel challenging these would disrupt society. Yet, some respondents acknowledged the need for equal rights, reflecting a tension between cultural adherence and evolving perspectives.

Debate over need for change in the inheritance system

Despite barriers to women's inheritance rights, Ao Naga women generally do not seek changes in the inheritance norms nor ask for a share of ancestral land. They share a common desire to maintain their customs and cultural heritage, viewing the current system as acceptable within the established patriarchal structure. Even without rights in the existing system, they understand the reasons behind them not having the rights and do not feel a need for change. Respondent 5, the 48-year-old associate professor, remarked:

"I think what we have now is okay as far as ancestral land is concerned. Even though we don't have the right to own or inherit, we are still given the privilege to utilise the land or live on it till we die. It is not like we are totally restricted from it."

Similarly, Respondent 9, the 76-year-old retired principal and member of the women's organisation, stated:

"I, as a woman, accept the current practice as it is, and we women do not lay claim to ancestral and clan properties, so the need for change does not arise."

Some respondents felt that change was not possible. Respondent 8, the 51-year-old women's organisation Leader, said:

"We have been socialised this way, and the practice is such that in our patriarchal society, the need for change does not arise."

A similar view was shared by Respondent 10, the 65-year-old retired associate professor and women's organisation member, who added:

"In our current situation, I don't think it is possible because we are not in that position. We tightly and rigidly hold onto the tradition and the practice."

Respondent 2, the 36-year-old assistant professor, also noted that:

"Despite my efforts to convince myself otherwise, I live in a male-dominated society where the male head of the household makes all decisions. Therefore, I believe that change, especially in ancestral and clan property matters, is unlikely. Even if we give our lives, we will not be able to change this."

Others opposed change altogether, prioritising stability. Respondent 6, the 57-year-old associate pastor, commented:

"I do not expect or hope that the current practice will change. I do not wish to jeopardise the foundation and stability of our society."

Moreover, Respondent 3, the 48-year-old professor, observed:

"This ancestral property is related to our kinship system. Giving women a part of the clan land would somehow dilute the patrilineal kinship system that we have, and the clan may view it as a threat. Therefore, discussing land rights for women might be premature at this stage."

Some highlighted the distinction between ancestral and acquired properties. Respondent 1, the 37-year-old advocate, stated:

"Customary rights are protected by Article 371(A). It's just that we need to distinguish between ancestral and inherited property. Women should not demand change."

Respondent 4, the 52-year-old associate pastor, emphasised:

"I believe we should stick to our traditions. Not that I am degrading myself, but when it comes to the topic of change, I insist that it should stay within the lineage and keep that identity because the land is life for us tribals."

Similarly, Respondent 11, the 50-year-old associate professor, remarked:

"I didn't even consider change in the ancestral properties because I don't see any change happening. This is man's world and land; that mindset of our society will not change. However, with the acquisition of private properties, there is a growing realisation that it should be distributed equally."

However, some respondents called for recognition of women due to changing circumstances. Respondent 7, the 34-year-old assistant professor, stated:

"If we are truly concerned with preserving the culture and the clan's homogeneity, and if this is the only way to do so, then no change is needed. However, with education and modernity, circumstances have changed, and it is time to recognise women as well."

To conclude, from the perspectives obtained, Ao women share the desire to maintain their customs and cultural heritage, accepting the current inheritance practices for ancestral clan land. They believe change is unlikely due to the strong patriarchy and rigid traditions. Some respondents are opposed to change or do not even consider it, emphasising the importance of preserving the foundation of society and homogeneity of land. They understand that the prevailing practice is linked to patriarchy and kinship structure. The need for change arises only when women are denied rights to their parents' acquired properties, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between ancestral and acquired properties and the associated rights.

Discussion and Contextualization

Through the perspectives and viewpoints obtained, the findings reveal that women in Ao society neither claim land rights nor feel the need to change the inheritance norms. It has been observed that they are content with the current system and does not see changes in thoughts or perspectives regarding ancestral clan properties. This section aims to theoretically contextualise these findings and utilise a multi-theoretical approach that includes Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness, Parsons' theory of socialisation, and Boas' principle of cultural relativism to explain the persistent adherence to traditional customary inheritance practices among elite Ao Naga women.

In Ao Naga society, inheritance of land and ancestral properties is inherited exclusively by men, creating a barrier to women's rights (Longchar, 2002; Jamir, 2012; Bendangkokba, 2019). Emile Durkheim's concept of collective

consciousness, described in his work The Division of Labour in Society (1993), explains this as a shared set of values and norms binding the society. Durkheim defined collective conscience as "the sum total of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of the society" (Simpson, 1993, p. 10). This collective consciousness is maintained through institutions like the family and the clan, and the kinship system reinforces these norms, deeply embedding them in the collective consciousness of the people. Women, socialised within this framework, accept these norms to preserve social order and moral solidarity. This strong adherence to shared values fosters a sense of societal stability. Challenging the system risks disrupting this stability and fostering anomie, a breakdown of norms, which explains their reluctance to advocate for change.

Moreover, despite the discriminatory inheritance system, women do not seek change or land rights because society socialises both men and women to believe that only men have these rights due to the patriarchal structure. Talcott Parsons' theory of socialisation explains this by highlighting the role of social norms and values in shaping individual behaviour and maintaining social order in a society.

Parsons (1951, p. 211) says that socialisation is "a particular part of learning" by which actors get "the requisite orientations for satisfactory functioning in a role." According to him, "as actors learn to both imitate and identify with others, eventually learning their specific role-values and symbol-systems," socialisation is essential for the maintenance of both social continuity and social order (1951, p. 238). It is the process through which the norms and values of a society are passed down from one generation to another, maintaining social order and integrity.

In Ao Naga society, as per the views obtained, women internalize the gender roles and expectations through socialisation, thereby shaping their views on inheritance, property rights, and societal norms. This can be examined through Talcott Parsons' value orientations, such as "Affectivity vs. Affective Neutrality" and "Specificity vs. Diffuseness," which explain the emotional bonds and specific inheritance norms favouring male heirs.

Affectivity emphasises the emotional connections within a family or society, resulting in a patriarchal preference for male heirs. This emotional investment in the patriarchal system, reinforced through socialisation, makes it a fundamental part of cultural identity and maintains social order. Specific inheritance norms, benefiting men, are deeply ingrained and passed down through generations, perceived as essential for maintaining societal structure.

The "Particularism vs. Universalism" value orientation helps to comprehend the gendered inheritance system. Male heirs from the clan are preferred for maintaining kinship ties in a universalistic approach reinforced by the patriarchal standards and socialisation process. This aligns with the broader patriarchal framework in Ao Naga society and strengthens the dominant role that men play in the inheritance process.

Talcott Parsons' theory illustrates that the allocation of land rights to men is the result of socialisation processes, upheld by familial ties, customary beliefs, and societal expectations. Consequently, women accept the inheritance system despite its discriminatory nature, as they are socialised to view it as the norm. Through these socialisation processes, gender-specific roles and responsibilities are perpetuated, influencing individuals' perceptions and maintaining the established social order.

In the previous discussions, we examined how the collective conscious becomes a barrier, and people are socialised to believe it as the norm. Additionally, the inheritance practice of Ao society can be understood through Franz Boas' Cultural Relativist approach. In Race, Language, and Culture (1938), Boas established cultural relativism, stating that "there are no absolutes among cultures; the beliefs and practices of a culture can be examined only within the confines of that particular culture." This means cultural values and beliefs are historical, not universal, and should be understood in their cultural context rather than judged from an outsider's perspective.

Cultural relativism states that in the case of the Ao Naga society, one must understand the inheritance system within the context of its own practices that have been passed down through generations. It allows us to comprehend the reasons behind the development and practice of the inheritance system, even if it seems unfair and discriminatory. The existing inheritance system, shaped by patriarchy and kinship ties, is often seen as a means to maintain social order and stability within society.

Cultural relativism also places a high value on customs and the preservation of cultural heritage, and this can be seen from the findings through the study, whereby there is there is no change in the thoughts and perspectives of Ao women, nor do they ask for a share in land and strive to preserve the traditional inheritance system in order to maintain their cultural identity and tradition.

Hence, cultural relativism offers a lens through which we can understand the inheritance system in Ao Naga society. The patriarchal social structure, clan, and kinship ties, which are interwoven, lead to the prevailing inheritance system, and people have accepted it as the norm because they have been socialised in that norm by society.

To conclude the discussion and to answer the fundamental issues raised, it can be seen that Ao Naga women, including those in elite positions, continue to situate themselves within a patriarchal inheritance system by prioritising tradition over global efforts for gender equality. While societal attitudes towards gender roles have shifted, cultural norms still restrict women's inheritance rights, reflecting a tension between indigenous customs and modern ideals of gender equality. Elite Ao women consciously navigate the intersection of customary law, gender roles, and inheritance rights by upholding traditional practices and rejecting the need for change. However,

this creates a tension between Naga customary laws protected under Article 371(A) of the Indian constitution and the formal laws, which stand for individual rights under national or international human rights frameworks, challenging the validity of these customs. This case offers valuable insights to the wider world, showing that in deeply traditional societies, cultural identity and social cohesion take precedence over modern legal frameworks of equality. Ultimately, elite Ao women reconcile resilient customary laws with modern claims of inheritance by consciously choosing to preserve their customs, highlighting the complexity of balancing tradition with contemporary ideals of gender rights.

Conclusion

This study started with the thought, what do Ao Naga women think regarding their inheritance system? A literature review further revealed a research gap, facilitating the need to study the thoughts and perspectives of Ao Naga women regarding the inheritance system. Thus, the present study endeavours to illuminate the narratives of the Ao Naga women.

The study was conducted in Mokokchung District in Nagaland, where scheduled Key Informant interviews were carried out purposefully with elite Ao Naga women. The findings obtained are purely for academic purposes, and the identity of the respondents is made confidential.

The quotations obtained from key informants have been highlighted in the analysis and interpretation section under four themes. Patriarchy, clan, and kinship systems, as well as the identity attached to land, were seen to be the major barriers to women's right to inheritance. Moreover, because of the adherence to the traditional system, there has been no change in the thoughts and perspectives. Ao women were also opposed to claiming or asking for a share in ancestral clan land, and irrespective of the lack of rights, Ao women shared a common desire to maintain their customs and did not feel the need for a change in the inheritance practice.

Community sentiment is very strong, and socialisation impacts their lives and living so heavily that neither education nor employment, modernising forces, or high status in the society tends to impact any change in the customary beliefs and practices. It is something quite revealing that educated professors, political activists, and women's organisations want the system to continue and appreciate resilience instead of change. This tends to also accept patriarchy as viable and necessary.

While previous studies have documented the exclusion of women from inheritance rights within Naga Customary Laws, this study offers a distinct perspective by highlighting the views of elite Ao Naga women who, despite their education and socio-political status, consciously choose to maintain traditional inheritance norms. Moreover, the study reveals a particularly intriguing observation that Ao women of higher echelon in the society do not consider inheritance rights as necessary for themselves or for women in Ao

society at large. They are doubtful if it would even happen and went on to deny it. Further, this perspective of elite women in Ao society, is shared by Ao women in general. Thus, regardless of social or economic status; whether landed or landless, educated or uneducated, employed or unemployed women, rich or poor, all think alike about the justifiable predominance of customary law relating to Ao women's inheritance rights, and patriarchy undisputedly mediates the role and rights of women. Tradition maintains its stronghold; individual judgement is in line with collective conscience, and their faith in culture, system, and socialisation holds high. Marx would have termed this 'false consciousness' where people participate unknowingly in a system that perpetuates inequality. However, this is not the case with the women in Ao society, as elite Ao women knowingly and consciously adhere to the norms and collectively choose to uphold the prevailing practice due to their socialisation, thereby nullifying Marx's concept of false consciousness. Thus, when women themselves are resisting change and upholding the tradition, the modern non-native ideology of gender equality and debate over ending discrimination stand nullified. In this context, there arises a dire need to reconstruct the 'Zomia' 1 voice for gender equality and women's rights, especially in situations where tradition and custom significantly influence issues of land, law, and social change.

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[1] The term "Zomia" refers to the vast massif of mainland Southeast Asia that extends from the Central Highlands of Vietnam westward to northeastern India and includes the southwest Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, and western Guangxi.

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Article: Solas Mamas: Women Empowerment and Transnational Solidarity between India and Africa

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Solas Mamas: Women Empowerment and Transnational Solidarity between India and Africa

--S.Shaji and Santosh Kumar Panda

Abstract

Gender plays a significant role in global debates on energy. In this context, a specific case of a group of Indian women who are involved in the development of solar energy systems has attracted global attention. The case in point is 'Solar Mamas' of Rajasthan, India. 'Solar Mamas'[1] are elderly village women trained for the assembly, installation, and repair of solar panels. 'Solar Mama' is an NGO-led program for women empowerment started by the Barefoot College based out of Rajasthan in India on an experimental basis since 2000 with support from the Ministry of Renewable Energy, Government of India (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, n.d.)."Solar Mamas" by Barefoot College exemplifies a gender-empowerment model: rural women, often semi-literate or elderly, are trained as solar technicians in India, then support electrification and maintenance in their home villages. By early 2025, the program had empowered approximately 3,500 women from 96 countries, reaching an estimated 2.5 million people (Barefoot College International, n.d.& Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, n.d.), contributing to sustainability, women empowerment, and international collaboration, especially with African countries. India has leveraged this program to foster people-to-people relationships and women empowerment in Africa while furthering community energy security. It is generally presumed that the positive impact of the Solar Mama program is enhancing women's agency and redefine the colonial and traditional constructs that women, especially elderly women, cannot make meaningful contributions to their own progress. However, while the impact of the Solar Mama program has been analysed from various perspectives, the capacity enhancement and experience of women from India and African countries have not been analyzed.

Keywords: Solas Mamas, Women Empowerment and Transnational Solidarity

Introduction

The current paper makes an attempt to understand the "Barefoot Solar Engineers" from the postcolonial feminist approach and feminist capability approach. The capability approach tries to map the opportunity for women which can empower them with real-life choices to lead a life as rationally valued by themselves. It attempts to contribute to the research on the impact of

[1]The Barefoot college established in 1972 in Tilonia, a place 110 Km away from Jaipur, the State capital Rajasthan, train uneducated/illiterate women to assemble solar panels, photovoltaic circuits and lights. They are generally called 'Solar Mamas'.

Solar Mamas on women's agency on the solar energy eco-system and sustainable development as well as on India-Africa cooperation.

Gendered Impact of Energy

In general, economic growth and human development were considered synonymous phenomena for a considerable time in development discourses, with the premise that economic development led to human development. Moreover, the experiences of women and men were mixed together. However, socio-economic statistics indicate continuous suppression of women vis-à-vis men across socio-economic, political, and cultural fields. The UN Women report, "Progress on Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024," sheds light on several of these aspects (Bhatt et al., 2024). Globally, about 26.7 per cent of women face food insecurity which is higher than the men. Moreover, women spend 250 million hours a day collecting water, which is three times more than men. These issues are intricately connected to the scarcity of clean energy. Similarly, household pollution, primarily from unclean cooking fuel, caused 1.5 million women's deaths in 2019. The Report suggests that clean energy sources can save, on average, 40 hours of household time per week and increase women's employability by up to 9-23 per cent (Bhat et al., 2024). Such data indicate that women's limited access to energy is even more pronounced in the case of poor and women-led households. This data hold even more true for African and Indian arid desert conditions (such as in Rajasthan) where resources are scarce and the population is sparse, grid connection minimal, dependent on unsafe, polluting wood and costly kerosene for fuel, accessibility to energy is a cumbersome task. Women in the Sub-Saharan African region bear the brunt of this in their homes (Smith, 2018). The daily hardships of long walks for the collection of fuel wood and water sometimes expose women to gender-based violence (Mishra, 2020). Over Around 600 million people do not have access to rural electrification in Africa (Africa Energy Portal, April 2023). Around 300 million women in Africa are profoundly affected by the lack of energy, resulting in them spending approximately 50 hours a week collecting firewood, fetching water, and cooking. Over 900 million in Africa are affected by the use of unclean fuel in terms of health (Akon, 2025). This mainly affects women who have the primary responsibility of collecting fuel wood, taking care of family members, and managing household affairs. Moreover, purchasing cleaner energy is a drain on household income. In such a context, tapping the abundant sunlight is an insurance against energy insecurity, a source of income enhancement, and women empowerment by enhancing their capability and giving agency (Usman, 2019). In this context, the 'Solar Mama' initiative of Barefoot College holds importance and this paper examines the role of solar skill training in empowering women and highlights the contributions of the Solar Mama program to sustainability and people-to-people solidarity in the global south.

Barefoot College: A Glance

Barefoot College, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), is based in Tilonia, Rajasthan, India. Originally established as the Social Work and Research Centre, it was renamed and established as the Barefoot College in 1972 by Bunker Roy. It has been working on poverty alleviation, improving the standard of living of people in resource-poor regions in India and global south countries, with a vision of a world in which every individual leads a dignified life. Initially, the focus of the NGO was on rainwater capture and water harvesting in the semi-arid desert region and salt flats before gradually expanding to education through night schools, social care work, and women's empowerment under the Solar Mama scheme (Patterson and Kinchington, 2024).

In general, the Barefoot College adopts a "learning as doing" and "community-centric learning" approach to teaching women solar entrepreneurs or solar mamas. Based on the Gandhian idea of sustainable living and village development, it employs the unelectrified remote village inhabitants who are highly vulnerable to climate, as teachers and learners in peer-group patterns. The Solar mamas are trained to fabricate sophisticated charge controllers, solar panels, inverters, and solar lanterns, and installation of the same on individual houses. These trained women work as "Rural Electrical Workshops" leading to community empowerment. What used to be spent on unclean fossil fuel, batteries, wood, and diesel, is now paid by the community to the women technicians leading to women's empowerment (Roy, 2017). As a result, Barefoot College has become a pioneering institution for sustainability and women's empowerment serving the triple needs of development and women empowerment, climate change mitigation, and climate change adaptation. The success has earned the organization international recognition from UNESCO. As a result, the 'solar mama' initiative with the support of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) initiative has been replicated in 96 countries training 1708 women to bring electricity to 75000 homes (Barefoot College International, n.d.). For instance, in Zanzibar region (in Tanzania), 65 local women underwent training and installed solar systems in nearly 30 villages, electrifying about 1,800 households. In Kenya, a study recently pointed out that there exists an increased positive perception by the community about women's technical capabilities once women were embedded in energy service delivery (Winther and Ulsrud &Saini, 2018). Most of the experiences from Africa show that there is a need for scaling accessible, female-friendly training pathways, like Solar Mamas,

Reimagining Women Empowerment

Theoretically, the Solar Mama initiative of Barefoot College aligns closely with post-colonial feminism. In a way, post-colonial feminism is part of third-wave feminism which arose primarily in the former colonial countries in the global south region. It seeks to analyze women's condition at the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy. Colonialism is founded upon the subjugation of

the indigenous people and their knowledge and belief systems and claims of superiority of colonial knowledge. Furthermore, as Mohanty (2003), argues development is only possible, colonial ideology claims, with universal 'global knowledge' that is based on the ideas and experiences of the global north.

Initial models of feminism developed in the West also were based on such an assumption of the superiority of the Western knowledge system. Traditional feminism demanded the same rights and opportunities that men had in Western liberal countries based on the purported similarity of women's experiences vis-a-vis men. The second wave of feminism was also no different, and did not dwell on the internal differences among women belonging to different cultural, social, and national contexts, even though it brought about a radical shift in feminist scholarship that looked at patriarchy and subtle forms of gender discrimination (Mahamane, 2021). Post-colonial feminism is a critique of the power dynamics in knowledge production and gender and the liberal conception of the homogenous experience of women across the world which denies the uniqueness of experience and context of women's experiences belonging to third-world/global south countries. By critiquing, post-colonial feminism tries to reclaim knowledge and decolonize development (Mohanty, 2003). It tries to reclaim knowledge by asserting that the women who belong to the global south countries are change makers and not just passive recipients of knowledge passed down from the global north. In such a context, Barefoot College's Solar Mama program represents a powerful assertion of agency by women belonging to Rajasthan in India and African countries like Kenya and Tanzania (Barefoot College International, n.d.).

The social, economic, cultural, and political contexts of Rajasthan in India as well as African countries are vastly different from those of Western countries. In terms of political trajectory, liberalism had a major role to play in the West. This had an impact on women's opportunities and their struggle for the same. On the other end, Rajasthan and most of the African countries had a colonial experience that Kristen Holst Petersen calls "Double Colonisation" (Ogunyemi, 1988). Moreover, the intersection of caste, patriarchy, and race made the experience of women in these countries vastly different from the global north. For instance, in India, especially in States like Rajasthan, covering the face and head, child marriage, desire for a male child, and reluctance to women's employment as well as women's education put women at a disadvantage compared to males in society. Of course, such trends are more visible in rural areas. The resource-poor and poverty-stricken arid region of Rajasthan is an added burden on women. Women have the primary responsibility of collecting firewood, cooking at home, and tending to the family members (Shaikh, 2024).

In the above-mentioned circumstances, empowering such women is a challenge under the modern developmental paradigm. The women trained at the Barefoot college are old or in their middle-age. They are illiterate or have attained primary school education. The mainstream development paradigm

would focus on investment, infrastructure building, formal skill training, and skilling of the youth as a way out of the issue. Middle-aged illiterate rural women would be ineligible to participate in the development process that empowers women (Duhagon, 2010). The fact that such women are trained to become entrepreneurs tackling complex technical issues relating to solar energy beginning with assembly, fabrication, and installation is a refutation of the colonial-developmental paradigm. Training them in peer groups, following unconventional teaching and learning techniques such as diagram marking, color coding, and repeated practice using local resources and at times as suitable to them is a restatement of local capacity and expertise. Furthermore, the expertise of the old women breaks the colonial division of labor that only men can be technicians. All these things contribute to women's empowerment and Barefoot College is a powerful statement of post-colonial feminism.

In addition, the Barefoot College also empowers the community through the "Solar Mama" program. The solar mamas belonging to all castes and social backgrounds inhabit the same learning space. It breaks the traditional caste-based barriers and fosters solidarity. As the Barefoot solar engineers go back to their villages, they put their expertise to the good use of the community (Iqbal, 2018). They help other households in harnessing solar energy. Other women folk could engage in other meaningful activities due to energy availability. Moreover, it reduces the cost of electricity for rural women and reduces health complications caused by unclean fuel. In fact, they address the issues of rural electrification in a positive way. In some African countries, it is even more important as the women here could access solar energy as the grid connection is either not available or highly costly. Thus, the Barefoot College's Solar Mama program, seen from the post-colonial feminist perspective has reimagined women's empowerment, sustainability, and community development.

Solar Mamas as critical intervention in capacity-building

As Barefoot College reimagines women's empowerment, the capability approach proposed by Amartya Sen opens new dimensions about enabling women with agency and capacity. The mainstream development frameworks propose economic growth, resource optimization, and investment for popular development. Most often such an approach proposes a top-down developmental model for human development (Robeyns and Byskov, 2023). Such a development outlook has also been applied to women's empowerment. The mainstream approaches subsumed women into the general overall development experience. However, this overlooks the unique experiences, conditions, and barriers that women encounter on the path to empowerment.

Such top-down approaches do not address the root cause of women's disempowerment. For instance, women having resources may not have the skills to reap the actual benefits. Similarly, another woman having skills, and resources may still face social resistance from doing what they want to do and as a consequence, they are not empowered. The capability approach tries to remedy such issues. It proposes to empower individuals with real 'agency' and

'functioning'. The 'agency' allows freedom to do what one wants to do. On the other hand, 'functioning' is the daily life activity and the state being (Magni, 2014).

The women of Rajasthan and most of women from African countries face multiple disadvantages with many of them having intersecting connections. The rural Rajasthani women, especially those with little education and resources face immense problems in registering their agency. Moreover, they cannot do actual things that can enable them functionally. The purdah system, child marriage primarily affecting girl children, and lack of energy are major problems in rural Rajasthan. There is also resistance to women working outside of the entrenched patriarchy in rural areas (Shaikh, 2024). Similarly, women in sub-Saharan Africa have the primary responsibility of collecting fuel wood and providing household care which consumes half of their time (Usman, 2019). As a result, both agency and functioning of women suffer.

In the above-mentioned context,the Barefoot College offers a unique solution to interrelated social, environmental, political, and educational problems. Such an interrelated approach prevents people from making "tragic choices" i.e. choosing one involves losing another life choice. This is particularly acute for women who have the primary responsibility of household management, cooking, fuel wood collection, and tending to the children. The Barefoot College empowers communities to overcome the multiple inter-related issues such as lack of energy impinging on education leading to illiteracy further contributing to the loss of agency of women and the community in general. The elderly and middle-aged women are taught in peer groups at the Barefoot institution. The college, rather than imposing any solutions, allows the womenfolk to learn technically complicated solar fabrication, assembly, installation, and LED manufacturing in their local setting which allows them to access soft, friendly, and cheap energy at the grassroots level (Usman, 2019). Such "decentralized access" to energy compared to grid-based energy has a more liberating effect on women's agency Moreover, the barefoot engineers also promoted local discourses on women's capabilities. Elderly women working on complex technical things shatter the traditional notions of ability and work to undermine the conventional patriarchy (Winther and Ulsrud &Saini, 2018). Thus, Barefoot College empowers women and leads to the community's overall development.

India-Africa Solidarity through 'softer and collaborative diplomacy'

The last decade witnessed the replication of 'Solar Mamas' model in global south regions such as Africa. It is to be noted that capacity building is the key component of India's engagement in Africa; therefore, India has been focusing more on new thrust areas like the spreading 'Solar Mamas' experience of Barefoot College in African states, since similar levels of gender and economic issues prevail in the continent. The 'Solar Mamas' experiment empowered several women in India; therefore, it can be quite attractive for African States; thereby has the potential to increase India's softer collaborative diplomacy more deeply.

Moreover, the Solar Mama program was envisaged as a training program in 2008 under India's Indian Technical Economic Cooperation (ITEC). The Government of India has given massive support and publicity to the training program leading to collaboration between the Barefoot College and multiple aid agencies such as Skoll Foundation, Oak Foundation, Enel Green Power of Italy and Cartier from France, and Intergovernmental Organisations such as UNWOMEN, UNESCO, GEF Small Grants Programme and UNDP. Across Africa, the Solar Mama program was run in about 36 countries in 2016 (India Perspectives 2017). Moreover, there are collaborations between Industry and the Barefoot College, for instance, the DP World, a global logistics leader, has collaborated with it in Senegal. Such a program holds immense importance for a continent where electricity penetration still stands at 63% compared to 98% in the world (Grover 2023). Therefore, increasing popular support for the same is crucial, as evident from a statement of a Senegalese woman named Mairame Ba, aged 59, who remarked, *"I never imagined that I could become a solar energy professional at my age—and without ever having been to school."* (Wall Street Journal, n.d.).

However, crucial India-Africa solidarity can occur at the people-to-people level, better categorised as Track III diplomacy (Stella, Pontian, and Were, 2016). African women suffer from multiple challenges such as lack of access to energy resources, lack of decision-making power in the patriarchal society, and lack of economic power. The Barefoot College in the past brought African women to Rajasthan for training along with local Rajasthani solar mamas who have also faced multiple challenges due to the existing patriarchal social system, the lack of education and income as well as resource poverty due to geographical limitations (Iqbal, 2018). Women from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds yet similar life conditions intermingle and interact among themselves despite language barriers. For instance, women from Rajasthan often do not have English language knowledge, yet they collaborate in teaching and learning from African women. In the process, the Indian women learn English, and help build the transnational community, by electrifying the village and promoting women's empowerment (Shaikh, 2024). The stay of 6 months in the Barefoot Academy provides an immersive cultural experience to the participants where they learn to appreciate mutual cultures, promoting respect and solidarity between women in India and Africa (Barefoot College International, n.d.).

In the duration of training, the Solar Mamas in Africa and India appreciate the cultural landscape and learn about each other. In addition, they develop a shared sense of purpose among themselves about the similar conditions of their lives like energy poverty, gender equality, and limited access to education, in their respective countries and the desire to overcome them. The solar skill training also promotes entrepreneurship among poor women whose lives are intricately intertwined with their community and value systems. It has the potential to raise the income level and general well-being of people in the local community. For instance, skilled women from Zanzibar (in Tanzania) turned into micro-entrepreneurs selling cold beverages, and opening

barbershops, and mobile charging stations (Eneunwah, 2024). Thus, when a woman is trained, the larger community benefits from the training. The positive impact of the solar mamas' work earns them approval and certification from the community they serve, securing long-term goodwill for Barefoot College and India. It also redefines professionalism in the process. As Bunker Roy remarked, "You don't need a paper to hang on the wall to show that you are an engineer". The vivid instances of this were found in Gambia when the community members requested Bunker Roy, the founder of the Barefoot College to train two grandmothers as Solar Mamas indicating awareness of the community and cementing positive relationships (Roy, 2011).

The community connection is further expanded as the Solar Mama program uses a decentralized, equality-based, self-reliant, and collective decision-making system. The result is the fulfillment of 14 Millennium Development Goals of the 17 Millennium Development Goals, primarily aimed at the development of the third-world developing countries (Pena, n.d.). This signifies a clear break from the traditional colonial notions of development happening via development paradigms of the West as the trained and trainer both belong to developing and similarly situated countries. Moreover, the program intends to reform the minds of the women so that they can be agents of change. As Brenda Geoffrey, head of Zanzibar Barefoot College remarked "We want to change their mindset from thinking they were born to be mothers and to raise children to knowing they can be professionals" (Mureithi, 2025). All this happens through the means of teaching and learning between the same category of women but belonging to India and Africa cementing the bond between them.

Solar Mamas Gendering Solar Energy and Sustainability

In general, the replication of Indian initiative such as Solar Mama in Africa can help the continent by gendering energy as well as address the issues of sustainability. The intersecting socio-political, economic, and cultural norms play a crucial role in who bears the primary responsibility of energy development. Such norms prioritizing certain gender have confined women as household managers of energy use such as cooking, heating, etc. while also relegating women to a secondary position in other aspects of energy such as development, maintenance, etc. Traditionally women in global south countries depended on labor-intensive and time-consuming forms of energy such as firewood, dung cake, etc. that ate into their ability to pursue education and engage in gainful employment and negatively impacted their health (Shankar, 2015). Solar energy in this context can potentially reduce the labor burden of women, improve health, enhance education opportunities, and contribute to their empowerment.

Thus, women have been largely excluded from the decision-making domain of energy. In this context, the 'Solar Mama' initiative of Barefoot College International brings the gender aspect to the center stage of the energy

discourse. By empowering illiterate and semiliterate women with solar panel assembly, installation, repair, and maintenance, all by locally available means, it breaks invisible patriarchal barriers. As a result of the gendering of solar energy, women make decisions about energy and education. Moreover, they have a greater imprint on sustainability. The concern for sustainability is significant, as the world is undergoing "triple planetary crises" encompassing climate, nature, and pollution (Bann, 2022, p. 8). In such a scenario, sustainable development i.e. resource utilization at present without harming the needs of future generations is ever more important.

The Barefoot College's Solar Mama program involves the local elderly women without imposing any straitjacket. The women learn through mnemonics in their peer groups. In six months, the illiterate women make it into Barefoot solar engineers primarily working in their villages, installing, and repairing solar panels for the villagers. The Barefoot College adopts an ultra-local solution to the complex problems of energy accessibility, gender justice, and education, which would have required massive funding in traditional development approaches. Moreover, the grid-based power connection would not have been cost-effective for the rural poor who prefer solar energy (Usman, 2019). Thus, the barefoot solar mamas ensure financial sustainability, while also helping achieve Sustainable Development Goal 3 which advocates healthy lives and well-being for all, sustainable Goal 5 which advocates gender justice, Goal 7, which advocates accessibility to easy and affordable energy and Goal 13 which aims to ensure climate action to mitigate the worst effects of human actions on the earth. In this context, 'Solar for She' in Africa replicating 'Solar mamas' experience, a part of India's global initiative of International Solar Alliance (ISA), assumes increased significance.

Concluding Remarks

The Barefoot College's Solar Mama program has brought significant changes to the lives of women in countries in the global south. The conventional techno-economic approach to development overlooks social ties and local resources while imposing solutions to local problems. The Solar Mamas initiative of Barefoot College emphasises the significance of local resources, power relations and gender norms. In the process, it has emerged as an attractive model of human development, drawing on norms from global south regions by placing development, gender justice, and women's agency at the core of women's empowerment. It has aided people-to-people connections between India and African countries while also establishing India as a prominent development partner of the global south, thereby promoting 'softer collaborative diplomacy'.

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Article: Upland Livelihood: Politics of redistribution, constriction of *jhum* land and privatization of community farmlands

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Upland Livelihood:

Politics of redistribution, constriction of *jhum* land and privatization of community farmlands *

--N William Singh

***Abstract*:** *Jhumming* (shifting cultivation) is the main source of livelihood in Mizoram. In order to find an alternative to *jhum*, since 1980s, the state implemented numerous development policies. Main aims of the policy were to replace shifting cultivation with alternative land use practices and permanent terrace farming without much harm to the environment and to uplift livelihood. Based on fieldwork at Aibawk sub-division villages under Aizawl district, this paper analyzed livelihood issues due to conscription of *jhum* size and privatization of community land. It examines the outcomes of development polices.

Keywords: Shifting cultivation, diversification of crops, livelihood, development policies.

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Mizoram suffered from two decades of violence (1966-1986). 1986 Mizo peace accord ushered peace into the hills. Despite the prevalence of peace, there are ongoing issues of poverty and lack of production of staple foods. State administration has been facing issues to uplift livelihood and low productivity of staple needs. Livelihood issues, low productivity and dependence of basic needs outside of the state have been the uphill tasks the state has been facing, since it achieve peace.

Traditionally, nature of land owning pattern was collective. Land belongs to the community. *Jhum* lands were distributed to every household on an annual basis. *Jhum* farming has been the main source of livelihood. T H Lewin's 'Fly on the Wheel' (1932, 2018 Reprint), Joy LK Pachau's 'Being Mizo' (2014) provided information on the traditional shifting cultivation. Common themes in these texts are the practice of shifting cultivation. Shifting cultivation as the main source of livelihood, less productivity and distribution of *jhum* land by village chief and village council.

Upland shifting cultivation

Uplands of Mizoram have common features with uplands of other parts of south-east Asia. In these uplands, Scott (2009) provides 'the new ways of reading histories and understanding of these uplands as part of historical patterns, which was a state-evasive tactics against taxation, against centralization and political strategy by inhabitants in the uplands of south-east Asia' (Scott, 2009, p.14). Scott (2009) theorized the uplands of south Asia as *Zomia*. 'It represents, areas of isolation, habitats for small bands of tribes, tended to carry out shifting cultivation with or without hunting and gathering'

(Scott, 2009, p.11). 'In the upland, bands of small tribes are constantly on move looking for farmlands to practice *Jhumma* due to constriction of farms in southeast Bangladesh' (Schendel, 1992, p. 99). Scott further argues 'the reason why permanent agrarian settlements were rare in uplands of South Asia, which was due to state evasive tactics by the upland community, and to thrive under non-state spaces' (Scott, 2009, p.63).

A common sight in rural Mizoram is the practice of shifting cultivation. Shifting cultivators confined to hilly zones and sloppy hills. Colonial and post-colonial governments have seen 'shifting cultivation from negative points of view due to its less productivity and more harm to the environment' (Boserup, 1965, p.28; Sahlins, 1968, p.8; Geertz, 1963; p.75; Fuller, 2006, p.25; Rangarajan, 1996; p.63; Guha, 1999, p.12; Banham & Fuller, 2002, p.85) Each year, spatial changes of farmlands and burning of *jhum* farms are the common sights in hill slopes. The erstwhile 'Lushai (erstwhile Mizoram during colonial administration) District Superintendent Mac Call during 1893 gave effort to introduced permanent farmlands with cash incentives by terracing the hill slopes' (Lianzela, 2008, p.43) 'through water maintenance by storing up required water in the terraced slope farms' (Lianzela, 2004, pp. 45). 'It was a failure to alter traditional practice of shifting cultivation and in the next *jhum* season, natives protested and did not try to even till the soil on the slopes of the hill'. (Lianzela, 2008, p.53).

Previous studies on shifting cultivation in Mizoram focused mainly on income, generation, *jhum* and livelihood issues related to environment. Previous studies found that sixty percent of households in the whole Mizoram 'depend their livelihood on shifting cultivation' (Sati, 2019, p.2140, Garbyal, 1999, p.38; Grogan et.al, 2012, p.165). 'Shifting cultivation is cyclical in nature and is closely associated with ecological, economical and cultural beliefs' (Lianzela, 2008, p.56; Grogan et.al, 2012, p.172). 'Each year, household changed their *jhum* farms from one cultivable land to another cultivable land due to soil-nutrient decays' and this aspect was well documented in Schendel's (1992, p.99) 'The Invention of '*Jhummas'* '.

'Shifting cultivation requires a fallow period for a minimum of ten years, so that soil's fertility can be retained' (Grogan et.al, 2012, p.170). After harvest, the farm had to be burnt down and left unharmed for a fallow period of ten years, so that fertility of soil, nutrients of soil and nature returns itself. Due to annual shifting sites of *jhum* area, every village in Mizoram needs vast amounts of *jhum* area to farm, whereby by eighty percent of the *jhum* farms were usually left untouched during the fallow period.

Each year, before cultivation starts, village council (under 6th schedule of Indian constitution) distributes *jhum* land to every household of the village. Land is still managed by the village council[1] (Note 1) and it was and is still a form of collective ownership, managed by the village chief and village council.

Upland Livelihood

Livelihood refers to range of activities performed by each and every household in the social system, with a primary function to meet the ends, or requirements for the household to function. It is a way adopted by families across societies to secure basic necessities – from - food to water, cultivating to means of resource utilization, shelter to adaption, and needs of life to secure future of life.

Over the years, various explanations on livelihood includes not just concepts like income, activities and farming; various concepts like sustainability, environment, productivity, cropping diversification, global warming, policy making and its impact on income and productivity.

Gordon Conway & Robert Chambers (1992: p.5) defined that livelihood comprises of the capabilities, assets, resources, accessibility and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood should be sustainable, which can cope with and recover from stress and shock, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets that provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generations to come and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods.

Upland livelihood is a way of thinking about the objectives, scope, and priorities for development activities. It is based on evolving thinking about the way in which social groups and class from well off to the poor and vulnerable live their lives, earning incomes, producing needs, nature of consumerism and the importance of policies and institutions in income generation. It calls for rethinking of development policies and its impact on environment and demands to formulate development activities, which are people centric, participatory, sustainable, development and provides better livelihood for the generation to come. It links aspects on people's activities, income generation, resource accessibility and the overall enabling environment that influences the outcomes of livelihood strategies. It also highlights inherent potential of people in terms of their skills, social networks, nature of access to environment resources and financial policies.

Scope and research questions

The main scope of the paper is to explain the affects of livelihood due to reduce of farm size distribution. Privatization of community land affects traditional shifting cultivation in many ways. Rich and affluent class buying up portions of community land is a process undergoing in the hills. Class differences get consolidated. *Jhum* farm size decrease and household receive lesser and lesser *jhum* farm size due to privatization of community land. Two main reasons are due to increase of households and privatization of land. Rich and influential families bought parts of community land. Village councils sold their community land to the rich and influential class of the Mizo society due to lack of funds and variety of economic reasons. Lands cannot be bought by

and sold to non-indigenous community, under the schedule area dictums of the constitution.

Till today, most of the sites of *jhum* farming areas of villages are collectively owned and administered by the village council. Three decades ago, village council distributes larger *jhum* farm size to every household. At the moment, average land distribution for cultivation has been decreasing from six acres, three decades ago, and a mere three acres of *jhum* area, at the moment, due to lesser availability of community *jhum* land (Details, reasons and case study findings at the later section). Shifting cultivation requires large amounts of land. Conscription of land size for farming is affecting the livelihood. New patterns of livelihood activities are witnessing due to conscription of *jhum* size.

'New forms of private ownership had already emerged alongside collective ownership of land' (Maaker, 2020, p.360; Karlsson, 2011, p.76) in Meghalaya. Shifting cultivation is getting affected due to privatization of community land is a dangerous trend in the scheduled areas of Northeast India. Many outcomes such as migration to cities looking for jobs and taking up hard labor jobs are some of the main outcomes. These patterns have been happening in the rural sites of Northeast India. Livelihood issues produced burdens**.**

The question that needs to be answered is - how transformation of land ownership affects the practice of shifting cultivation and its impact on livelihood. 2013 Mizoram Land revenue act came into force. Growth of private landownership in the village has been the outcome of such legislation. Such transformation affected livelihood patterns. At the moment, household cultivates lesser *jhum* area. Lesser harvest and lesser incomes are the common issues in the villages. To meet financial requirements, households practice intensification of multiple cropping. Villages engage on increasing trends of allied livelihood activities such as piggery, private quarries, poultry and animal husbandry. Increasing trend of cash crop farming for market accessibility are the emerging patterns of livelihood.

Another scope of this paper is to analysis of series of development policies since 1980-2020. Development policies, also known as politics of redistribution is associated with every forms of political party exercising power in the state. Political party promises distribution of free cash incentives and to replace the traditional practice of slash and burn method of shifting cultivation. Development policies promise to uplift livelihood for good.

Development policies have not been able to make remarkable changes on the ongoing poverty and livelihood issues. The paper assessed that development policies in Mizoram have not uplift livelihood. Fund installments are delayed and the free fund installments occurred without any check and balances. Misuse of funds, spending on material needs rather than investing the fund to multiply incomes were some of the reasons for failure of development policies in Mizoram. Based on case study at villages, no beneficiaries claims that development policies are life changing policies; rather these are instruments of

political promises by several political parties to wing and govern democratic institutions of Mizoram.

Questions pursued during fieldwork and during interview schedules are the followings. Why there are no such remarkable achievements of development polices? Why development policies have no substantial impacts for better livelihoods? What are the guiding principles behind the series of development policies incepted in Mizoram since 1980s till present? Why such policies to improve livelihood? Why no remarkable success? These are the scopes and questions this paper unravels at the following pages and sections.

Objectives of the study

The main objective is to study the livelihood issues and consolidation of less income generation in the rural parts of Mizoram. Examine the everyday livelihood issues due to nature of land and resources utilization. To reveal that livelihood activities are conditioned by environment and productivity. Also, to reveal the impacts of privatization of community *jhum* land by selling to the affluent class within Mizo society. The outcomes are affects on traditional shifting cultivation, emergence of complex social reality, class differences within the tribal social system, poverty, destitute and livelihood hurdles, conditioned due to topography and economic conditions.

Another objective is to reveal that livelihood hurdles and income generation need to incorporate both quantitative data and qualitative data. Narratives based on field study provide deeper understanding on poverty and livelihood conditions. Nature of livelihood and poverty must be examined through lived experiences and narratives from the field. Not just numbers and percentages usually showcased in government and official reports by financial institutions.

Explaining social realities and rural livelihood hurdles with just numbers and percentages overlooked the lived experience and deeper narratives of livelihood issues on many counts. The point is that while conducting case studies in the villages, it was recognized that facts on social reality and livelihood conditions in rural do not bind with the official data and government survey reports. Official survey reports are filled with attractive figures and numbers. For instance, annual survey reports on statistics and economics by the government of Mizoram are the cases in point. For instance, see economic survey of Mizoram 2021 – 2022 (Government of Mizoram, 2023). Facts and realities on rural poverty, livelihood hurdles and everyday struggles are not well documented in the government survey reports.

Rural hardships and poverty need to be understood from both the quantitative data and qualitative data. Narratives from the field and official data are crucial in understanding livelihood. Official data do not reveal many facets, everyday hardships and poverty. Livelihood struggles and poverty ought to be understood through combinations of numbers and narratives, lived experiences and numerical figures. ‘The irony of data is, one cannot understand social

reality through breaking down of numbers and figures' (Wallace, 1971, p. 7; Lazersfeld, 1955, p. 12; Roth, 1966, p.193).

The field, fieldwork and case study

Aibawk sub-division under Aizawl district has twenty-two villages with an average of 270 households. There are twenty-two villages under the sub-division. Livelihood activities, *jhumming*, average land size distributions by village council to each household for farming activities, diversification of cropping and case study of development policy beneficiaries are the main themes of inquiry during fieldwork. All these villages depend on *jhumming* as the main sources of income generation. Narratives on livelihood activities like trade and selling of seasonal farm products to the market facilities are pursued during fieldwork.

One of the initial findings in the field is intensification of land use and diversification of crop to increase income generation. During fieldwork[2] (Note 2), it was found that poverty, lack of basic needs, less income generation, lesser productivity, and livelihood issues are the common issues. Case study[3] (Note 3) of policy beneficiaries opined that funds distributed for dairy farms, piggeries, poultry, fisheries, sugarcane farms and orchard farms are too less. Installment cannot even financed construction of sty or shed or purchasing tilling machines. Funds to beneficiaries are disbursed on three parts of installment basis. Moreover, delay of fund installment is a major reason why development policies do not transforms livelihood. Beneficiaries informed that delaying resulted to improper maintenance of dairy, piggery units and poultry farms that failed to eradicate rural poverty.

Fieldwork was done during March 2022 – December 2022. Village council members were interviewed with open-ended questionnaires. Questionnaires covered themes on livelihood, privatization of community land, crop diversification, markets accessibility and outcomes of development policies. Church elders, policy beneficiaries, quarry owners and orchard farm owners were also interviewed with open-ended questionnaires.

Case studies were undertaken during January 2023 – March 2023. Case studies of twenty households from different villages were conducted. Cases were conducted to beneficiaries of development policies, sugarcane farm owners, orchard farm owners, piggeries and poultry owners. Narratives from households engaging on diversification of crops are incorporated in the case study. Households whose main income is from selling vegetable were interviewed. Case studies of absentia owners of privatized lands, quarry owners and members of village council were interviewed with different sets of open-ended questionnaires.

Development policies, politics of redistribution and changing pattern of shifting cultivation

Since 1980, Mizoram state has been implementing development policies to uplift livelihood in the rural areas. Series of development policies have been implemented till recent times, without much success and without much change of lives of the poor. Since 1980 to till today, the state has implement series of development policy Mizoram congress – new land used policy (NLUP) to Mizo national front (MNF) – socio economic development program (SEDP) to erstwhile Brig Sailo's 'garden project - Six basic needs' (Mizoram people conference - MPC), series of development policies have been implemented. Beneficiaries of these series of policy have not earned better incomes or their livelihood transformed. Beneficiaries still practiced shifting cultivation, nor their incomes have been multiplied, nor their economic status got uplifted. They still face poverty and lack of accessibility to essential needs.

Politics of redistribution in Mizoram involves free cash incentives to beneficiaries. It was designed to transform livelihood. Field study found that different policies by different governance and ministries have been implemented in Mizoram, without proper check and balance. Government officials did not assess or enquired on the spending natures of the disbursed cash. Lack of proper assessment of the disbursed cash often invites misuse of funds by the beneficiaries. During fieldwork, respondents were asked with a simple question, identify any policies that had changed your lives in the last four decades. The reply was that new government comes, new politics of redistribution, wiping the previous politics of redistribution and implementing a newer policy with a catchy policy title.

Politics of redistribution especially in Mizoram are mainly understood as political promises to distribute free cash incentives to beneficiaries and as *mantras* for winning ballots. Development policies are part of the politics of redistribution that involves, experts recommendation and sum budget estimates, which are all formulated by the state administration and by political party usually in power or as part of their manifesto and election campaigns. Development policies in Mizoram are the cases in point. Congress won elections – six legislative assembly and seven legislative assembly elections of 2008 and 2013 due to NLUP, a document full of attractive promises of cash to beneficiaries. Likewise, MNF won the eight legislative assembly election, 2018 due to SEDP. MNF promised with a more attractive and more cash for the beneficiaries, if elected to power during the run up to the eighth legislative assembly election campaigns.

Rationalizing, developing, improving and modernizing are the pillars behind every development policies. These are 'contemporary sites of struggle' (Murray Li, 2007, p.24) and 'there is always an evitable gap on what is attempted and what is accomplished'. Development policies are 'usually bound to be abandoned and got replaced by another expertise recommended development policy' (Escobar, 1994, p.32). 'Development policies are guided by political choices, ideologies and expert's knowledge' (Escobar, 1994,

p.35). The goal to improve livelihood and productivity are often guided by ideologies and application of expert's knowledge. Examining the nature of development policies, policy makers often categorize between tradition and modern, peripheries and center and the gap between undeveloped and developed.

James Fergusson (2015) in his text 'Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of redistribution' mentioned that 'development policies in southern Africa is a model of policies of redistribution, based on the principle of equal sharing of natural resources' (Fergusson, 2015, p.18). Ferguson wrote, 'new modalities of distribution are associated with both kinds of political obligations, even as they are also bound up with new ways of thinking and rationalities of poverty' (James Ferguson, 2015, p.14).

'Politics of redistribution by design are perfect tools to transform lives of poor' (Fergusson, 2015, p.12; Murray Li, 2007, p.25; Escobar, 1994, p.72). They are the 'outcomes of experts' knowledge and its implementation to improve the population' (Murray Li, 2007, p.46 2014, p.15). Politics of redistribution are also strategic tools for state to prove that development policies could win ballots and remain in power.

During fieldwork and case study, beneficiaries of development policies were asked with open-ended questions. For what purpose the family received the policy? How much was the sum assured? Did the state disburse the promised sum assured? Has the policy changed your livelihood? Responses from the fieldwork and case study of beneficiaries showed that development policies has never transformed their lives for better, once and for all. Nor the state disbursed assured sums on time. Delay of assured sum and shortfalls of promised sum during distribution lessen the meanings of development policies. State officials from the NLUP (under Mizoram congress) and SEDP (under MNF) implementation team rightly opined that politics of redistribution are simply formulated and implemented without even having the required and earmarked capitals. There were always fund lapses. Hence, state never distributed the total sum. Delay of fund disbursement and partial funds – a mere ten percent of assured sum - disbursed on installment basis were the common features of development policies in rural parts of Mizoram.

Traditional practice of shifting cultivation is forced to transform due to implementation of land reforms laws enacted by the state. 'Implementation of new legitimation can be seen as an act of enforcing legitimate control and showcasing state's power' (Tooker & Baird, 2020, p.204; Murray Li, 2007, p.36). Development policies implement new laws on land. The purpose of law is to utilize land in a more productive manner. Laws also come with financial beneficiaries, which defined the nature of politics of redistribution. Expanding the laws to peripheries and implementing laws with expert knowledge produces consequences on customary land owning systems.

Territoriality of the state is basically understood as expansion of control mechanisms, taxation and imposition of legal elements toward the peripheries.

'Expansion of control mechanism produces conundrum effects on political, national, economic and geographical changes in agrarian societies' (Tooker & Baird, 2020, p.307). Expansion and implementation of rational laws are embedded in discourse of improvement and development. Implementation of land reform laws is a sign of expansion of territoriality of the state. The social, religion, cosmological dimensions of shifting cultivation and contestation of upland livelihoods have produced mixed reactions to the legitimacy of state. 'These are simply the consolidation of modern state machineries' (Anderson, 2018, p.6).

Governmentality is a process of attempt to shape human conduct and to improve welfare of the population. Implementation of new laws by government is an act of control to showcase state's power and its legitimacy. 'Expanding the laws to territories, modernizing and rationalizing the tradition are the signs of postcolonial continuity in Southeast Asia' (Murray Li, 2014, p.64). Most of the blue prints of development policies in postcolonial territories do not break away from categorization of moral choices and political choices of the past and present. There is always some continuity. Development policies display language of hope, goals, effectiveness and beneficial values. 'Neologism governmentality is part and partial of development policies with objectives to optimize welfare and life of population through more legitimation and control' (Ferguson, 1994, p. 4).

The presence of categories such as poor, underdeveloped and livelihood issues are the guiding principles for knowledge, discourse, language, frame-work and often to implement development policies. Enactment of 2013 MLRA is the case in point. The act weakens the traditional community land ownership. One of the outcomes of the land revenue act is the legitimation for privatization of community land, where few rich can privatize *jhum* farms and sharpen the class divide in Mizo society. Another case, in Mizoram for expansion of state's machineries has been the implementation of series of development policies during the last four decades. In Mizoram, governmentality, territoriality and implementation of politics of redistribution have been a process of state making and for the improvement of population. Development policies in Mizoram aims to improve infrastructure, state machineries, the population and most importantly to do away with shifting cultivation. So that land and resource can be utilized for better income generation and better livelihood.

History of development policies

The most often heard comments in Mizoram are – "Mizoram is very rich with resources. Virgin soils are all over the hills, plenty of land, flora, fauna and rich vegetation" (Fieldwork narratives, 2021). Field responses also confirmed that there are no remarkable achievements on development policies. Villages face livelihood struggles. Development policy cannot overturn such livelihood issues. Since 1980s, series of development policies have been implemented to eradicate poverty and improvise production of basic needs.

1981 – 83 'Garden Project – Six Basic Needs' project was launched under Brigadier Thenphunga Sailo's (Retd) political party Mizoram people conference (MPC) as a pilot project in Aibawk sub-division, under Aizawl district. The policy ended in the sub-division and it never came back as a development policy. During fieldwork, it was found, the main reason why the policy was never implemented after the pilot survey was due to lack of market accessibility by beneficiaries. In those days, Mizo insurgency was at its peak. Farmers who have harvested cash crops cannot reach Aizawl and sell their harvest to the vegetable markets. There were several military checks. Harvests were not able to convert into income due to militancy and security operations.

During 1989 – 1998, Mizoram Congress implemented 'New land use policy' NLUP I (1989-1994 & NLUP II (1994-1998) as livelihood improvement schemes. The policy promises to improve the livelihood conditions of farmers. The policy was popular in the rural areas. It was not that popular and lesser applicant's from the urban sectors of Aizawl and Lunglei cities. Fieldwork findings suggest that no significant changes on production and for better livelihood. Fieldwork and case study found that beneficiaries pointed out, the policy was a political tool to win ballots. Government changes by 1998.

During 1999 – 2008, 'Mizoram *Intodelhna* (self-reliance) project' (MIP), was implemented by MNF. Main objective was to reduce dependency of basic needs and staple foods procured from outside of Mizoram. The goal was to enhance production of basic need, to produce basic commodities and staple need in Mizoram. Beneficiaries informed during fieldwork, they got only the first installment. The promised second and third installments were never got disbursed. During the run up to the 1998 elections, MNF politicians promised on SEDP as a game changer to transform livelihood and Mizoram to become a food exporting state. Promising two lakhs rupees to beneficiaries. The policy was advertised extensively in television news channels, social media platforms and print medias. During the run up to the 2004 fourth legislative assembly elections, MNF promised to deliver the promises and raised the number of earmarked beneficiaries from one lakhs to two lakhs beneficiaries. All such promises, to deliver and to expand number of beneficiaries led MNF to win 2004 fifth assembly legislative assembly elections.

Mizoram congress came back to power on 2008. During 2010-2018, Mizoram congress implemented the new land used pattern (NLUP) – III[4] (Note 4) with an objective to introduce permanent farming system. After winning the elections MLUP III was implemented by the Mizoram congress government. During case study, it was found that NLUP III beneficiaries were selected on the basis of party loyalty, party worker based on congress party affiliations. MNF loyalist in the villages of Aibawk sub-division did not even apply for the policy. Until 2012, the promised sum of three lakhs rupees were never disbursed in full, as promised during the election campaign. Late disbursal of funds and partial disbursal of funds were the factors behind the failures of NLUP III.

During 2018-2023, socio economic development plan (SEDP) under MNF is the ongoing development policies implemented after the party won the eighth legislative assembly elections. During fieldwork, village elders did not spoke a positive tone on SEDP. They complained SEDP is disturbing and annoying. Promised sum of three lakhs rupees, prior to elections and disbursing only twenty-five thousand and they do not trust the policy. Many households applied and many were not approved. Gaps between promised sum and disbursal of lesser funds, sums up the nature of aggrandizing beneficiaries.[5] (Note 5)

Free cash incentive is the inherent trend in all the development policies of Mizoram. Attractive policies attract electorates and voters. Policy with larger sum assurance wins ballots. It is a ticket for the political party to win lections. During fieldwork, it was found that politics of distribution, development policies and winning elections are closely linked. Three basic components of winning elections in Mizoram are as follows – parties come up with tall promises of free cash incentives, with catchy title, nice sounding. These policies are advertised on large scale even twelve months before the state legislative assembly elections. The promises of policies are promoted through print media, visual media and social media.

Privatization of community land and three forms of land ownership

At the field, village council members clarified that privatization of community lands are mainly due to collective issues and financial shortages faced by the village. Urgent requirements of funds, poverty, helping poor families during financial emergencies and paying educational fees for the good student from a poor families are the main factors for selling off of community farmlands to well off families. Three decades ago, village council members clarified, average *jhum* areas given to every household were six acres. At present, three acres of *jhum* areas are the average size of farmland distributed to each household. Decreasing *jhum* farm size for shifting cultivation affected livelihood. Decreasing *jhum* area produces lesser harvest, and lesser incomes.

Privatization of community land is not binding as per the 6th scheduled constitutional dictums, where farmland, forest and resources are collectively owned and shared by the village community (6th schedule areas, Constitution of India, pp. 305-307). Private land ownership is granted only for residential purpose in the village as per constitutional norms in the scheduled area. 2013 MLRA[6] (Note 6) legitimizes privatization of land. Land and resources have to be owned collectively as per constitutional dictums on scheduled areas. The 2013 MLRA changes all legal assurances and dictums.

At present, three forms of land ownership are found during fieldwork. First, lands own by the community. Second, private lands for residential purposes. Third, privatization of community lands owned by affluent families.[7] (Note 7)

Privatization of community land is a disturbing trend. It is not a good sign for rural Mizoram. This trend is creating wide gulf between the rich and poor classes. It also resulted to emergence of absentia landowners. Sizeable areas of the collectively owned land are sold to families, who do not reside in the village. Issues such as constriction of land and widening gulf of land owning between absentia landowners and shifting cultivators are the recent trends in uplands of Mizoram. Privatizing community land is a threat for generations to come.

Diversification of cropping and market accessibility

'Agricultural diversification is strongly influenced by price policy, and technological improvements' (Gulati et.al, 2004, p. 2346). 'Agricultural diversification gives more employment opportunities, more harvest and better market facilities' (Gulati et.al, 2004, p. 2349; Lone, 2013, p.690). Diversification of crops improved livelihood and quality of life for small landholders. 'It accelerates productivity and rain-fed areas benefited more as a result of agricultural diversification' (Gulati et.al, 2004, p.2354).

Land ownership in the hills put a distance between upland and lowland. It is in this context their 'forms of agriculture, social structures, and much of their culture can be understood as political choices and neoliberal market conditions often helped upland cultivators' (Murray Li, 2014, p.15). Earlier, rice, ginger, maize and sugarcane were the main crops for *jhumming*. Lesser jhum areas, one can witness the diversification of cropping within available space and during the seasons. Households in the villages now engage on diversification and intensification of cropping in the available *jhum* spaces. Spaces are utilized and harvested with different high yielding vegetables. During fieldwork, household engaging on such practice clarified that this is not an old cropping practice. Villagers informed that diversification of crop is helpful in generating more income. Most of the harvest goes to the market and little of the harvest are left for domestic consumption. They further informed, such practice is not environment friendly, because it degraded soil fertility, especially in the uplands.

Villagers face pricing obstacles in *jhumming* seasons. One of the problems on harvest of crops and selling the harvest to the market is that prices of harvest were sold at nominal rates. This is mainly because of the demand and pricing factors. Household get proper benefit, only when, they harvest early or late during the season. Harvesting the seasonal crops during the peak season does

not yield better incomes. Households harvesting at the peak season usually sell their harvest at lower prices.[8] (Note 8)

Moreover, the pricing factor cannot be resolved due to non-availability of cold storage and preservation facilities. There are no storage facilities at Aibawk sub-division villages. Even in Aizawl vegetable markets, during the early season, prices of vegetable prices are much lesser than during peak season of the harvest. The point is that in spite of free cash distribution in the name of development policies, state authority could have install storage facilities, which will help households to earn better incomes. Storage facilities could maintain demand and supply of farm products.

To help better income earnings for households in the villages, state could have set standards for pricing mechanism either through implementation of law or a nodal agency. 'Market reform through legal changes would boost agricultural growth, proper prices, augmenting income of small farm holders and promoting market access' (Banham & Fuller, 2002, p.90). Laws for pricing mechanism and setting the standard prices of varieties of harvest could integrate production and marketing of commodities. 'Pricing of harvest good has to be formalized in informal sectors through appropriate institutions and market facilities' (Lone, 2013, p.690). These are better options for market accessibility and for better income generation.

In rural Mizoram, there are no proper pricing mechanisms.[9] (Note 9) Outcome of diversification of crop is the fluid nature of market prices. 'Flexibility of farmers for diversification is constrained by the size of markets and price risks, soil suitability, cost of labor and land rights' (Dorjee et.al, 2003, p.9). Villages harvest and sold their harvest to the Aizawl markets. Most of the harvest goods are sold mainly at the Aizawl saturday market facilities. This is mainly due the twenty kilometers average distance of the villages of Aibawk subdivision. Lesser commuting only on weekends also saves the fares for everyday commute. Villages developed economic and saving strategies. Middlemen trader of the village buys in bulk of the harvest from different households. The trader usually sells the harvest, which were harvested during the weekdays.

Fodder prices have increased many folds. The outcome is decline of animal husbandry, running orchard farms and sugarcane farms as sources of livelihood. There has been a decline in piggery, poultry and fisheries in the villages, due to price rise of fodders. Likewise, prices for plant nutrients and fertilizers to run orchards and sugarcane are also declining. These farms need experience workers. Labor wage rise and water shortages add more woes. Earlier there were dozens of orchard farms in Aibawk sub-division. Only four orchard farms, at present, are growing oranges. Owners of orchard farm informed that wages for the workers are higher than before, costly fertilizers and plant nutrients have affected maintenance of orchard farms. Prices for

essential items to run the farms have increased multiple folds. However, prices to sell the harvest oranges and sugarcane have not rise exponentially. Farms are closing, due to lesser profit. Growers have opted for alternative sources like diversification of cropping in the erstwhile space of orchard farms and sugarcane farms. Maintenance cost and labor charges for running orchard farms are becoming a costly affair. Villagers opined livelihood hardships are the creations of legitimation, ineffective governance, price rise, environment conditions and topography obstacles.

2013 Mizoram land revenue act (MLRA) and growth of private quarries

Existing forest laws and environmental laws are mostly naïve to villagers. 2013 Mizoram land revenue act further complicates the land accessibility and resource utilization. The act legitimizes privatization of land. The act legitimates the affluent and well class to buy community land. The act recognizes periodic *patta* (land settlement certificate) for a period of 25 years. The act also introduces renewal of land owning certifications ranging from twenty-five to one hundred years of land ownership for private, non-government permanent *patta*. As mentioned in the previous section, three types of land ownership patterns have been the outcome of the 2013 land revenue act. The state justifies the act by claiming that more revenue fees and taxation for the periodic *patta* generates revenues for the state.

Private quarries profiting from topography resource is the case in point. The act legitimizes private owners to utilize the land in whichever ways. Rich owners of land usually exploit the erstwhile community land for economic gains. Periodic *patta* of twenty-five years can be converted for mining and quarry activities through approvals from government officials. Two decades ago, there were no quarries under Aibawk sub-division. 2013 land revenue act altered the environment of villages. Quarries operating for economic gains by the already well off household are the new trends in villages. Quarry owners provide self-justification by uttering that they provide jobs to the villagers.

Fieldwork findings proved that families engaging in mining and quarry activities are politically affluent. Village council members clarified that dozens of private mines and quarries have emerged during the last decade. Even, village council started operating quarries in the community land, by informing that quarries provide better earnings. Such quarries are collectively owned, but managed and run by the village council. Most of the incomes earned from the quarries are used for development works – link road maintenance, helping the poor and often pay medical bills for the destitute households. Aibawk sub-division has a total of sixteen quarry units. During case study, it was found that only three quarries are managed and run by the village council.[10] (Note 10) The point is, 2013 MLRA had altered the tradition of managing community land and ushered exploitation of resource for economic reasons.

No remarkable achievements on politics of redistribution

Fieldwork narratives and case studies narrative revealed that policy beneficiaries of development policies - NLUP to SEDP - did not get full installment of sums assured. They received the first and second installments, not the thrid. No full payments, sometimes only ten percent to twenty-five percent of the promised sum. During case studies, basic questions were asked – has livelihood and income generation been transformed by development policies? Followings are the findings and main reasons why development policies have not transformed livelihood in rural parts of Mizoram.

First, shortages of sum assured. At present, SEDP under MNF government promised three lakhs rupees during the 2018 run up to state election. SEDP policy assured three lakhs rupees in three installments. After four years – 2022 - SEDP beneficiaries received two installments out of the three installments. Thirty thousand rupees as the first installment and twenty thousand rupees as second installment, till date were disbursed to beneficiaries.

Second, unethical ventures by the policy beneficiaries. Beneficiaries ended up spending beneficiary money in to something else. Thirty thousand rupees is not even enough for tilling the soil and buying seedlings. Instead, the sum got ended up buying scooter, refrigerator, smart television and smart phone. The errors from the state official is that while disbursing the second installment, state's officials do not review the fund utilization process. There are no proper checks and balances by implementing agency. No proper verification after the first installment was distributed. Every amount of money has to be utilized as per the policy directions. Whether it was NLUP during 2010 – 2018 under Mizoram congress and SEDP (2018 - 2023) under MNF; no checks and balances on the grounds. Such processes are one of the reasons why development policies failed.

Third, development policies are formulated without even having the working capital. Huge budgets are required for the policy implementation. In Mizoram, budgets and funds are mainly managed from the central government funds. Without even having the total budget, government promises huge money and cash distribution for the beneficiaries. When fund flows from New Delhi got delayed, problem starts for both the implementing agency and policy beneficiaries.

Fourth, politics of distribution are for the people and it should be population-development centric. Yet, development policies are becoming more political party centric. A tool used to win elections. That is the reason why development policy fails to deliver.

Summing up

Mizoram's experience on politics of redistribution and development policies is a mix bag of party politics and winning elections. Rather than changing livelihood, policy dictums are used as tools for winning election ballots. The

outcomes are - uneven development, rampant poverty at rural areas and bundles of livelihood issues. Development policies should not have any political colors. Rather development policy should be economic centric for transforming livelihood.

2013 MLRA needs a rethinking. State cannot remained close eyes. Even though there are plenty of forest and resources, existing land, forest and environmental laws drew the sharp line between belonging and non-belonging. Environmental laws and its consequences create inequalities and class divide in the Mizo society. Another alarming situation is scarcity of water. At the hills, water is precious. Monsoon is the main source of water. Many villages do not have supply water and running water facilities. Water is life in the hills. Scarcity of water and inability to provide safe supply water ought to be solved by state authorities wisdom and expertise knowledge. Hills do not have running water. If monsoon fails, shifting cultivation fails. Hills have water points and water springs known as *Tuikhur,* at the outskirts and at the peripheries of villages. During winter, no rain, *Tuikhurs* were usually dry. During monsoon, water fills-up to the brim of *Tuikhurs.* During monsoon, villages harvest rainwater to meet water requirements for the winter season. Livelihood hurdles on everyday basis is a common sight in villages.

NOTES

1. Village council is a statutory body recognized under Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution for tribal zones of Northeast India. It is a representative and autonomous body that performs jurisdiction and administration of the village.

2. Field on the Aibawk sub-division under Aizawl district was done during March 2022 – December 2022. The sub-division has total of 22 villages, which are between 10 – 50 kilometers away from Aizawl. All the villages' village council members were interviewed with open - ended questionnaires. Questionnaires covered themes on livelihood, *jhum* land, community land, privatization of land, crop diversification, market accessibility, income, development policies Church elders, women, policy beneficiaries, quarry owners, orchard farm owner and workers were also interviewed with different sets of open-ended questionnaires. Narratives and experiences were recorded. A field dairy was maintained.

3. Case studies were undertaken during January 2023 – March 2023. Case studies of three households from 10 villages under Aibawk sub-division (Aizawl district) were conducted. Cases were selected after fieldwork. Case study cases were selected based on beneficiaries of development policies. Case studies of selected households, absentia owners of privatized lands in villages, quarry owners, members of village council, policy beneficiaries are interviewed with different sets of open-ended questionnaires. Their narratives helped in writing this paper.

4. For details on NLUP III, see https://mizoram.gov.in/page/new-land-use-policy-nlup . Sum assured during 2010 – 2017, NLUP III under Congress was 2 lakhs rupees for farming, fisheries, dairy and poultry units, small and medium enterprises. During 2007 state election campaign, Congress over-repeatedly advertised in the election manifesto through print medias and local Television channels. At the field sites, during fieldwork, NLUP beneficiaries claimed they received not even half of the assured sum.

5. For details on SEDP, see https://planning.mizoram.gov.in›post›guidelines-on-SEDP.

6. For details See Mizoram Land Revenue Act. (2013). ttps://landrevenue.mizoram.gov.in/uploads/attachments/ (Accessed on 29 May 2023). It was an act that came into force during the Congress rule in Mizoram.

7. Privatization of community land is mainly through the agreements between the buyer and the village council members. Village councils look after many parameters of life and everyday needs of life in the villages. The council sometimes constructs water storage units, community shed, maintenance of link road, helping poor and needy ones. Poor family's houses were built by village council funds Buying water pipes to connect water points to the village water reservoir. Village council mentioned during fieldwork that no one wants to sell land, yet circumstances, force the council to sell land due to dire need of funds.

8. Harvesting either during the late or early season usually sell their harvest goods at much higher prices. Few fortunate cultivators harvesting during early season or late season earned more income. Lack of proper pricing mechanisms hurts not only the producer, but also the consumers. Price floatation up and down is a character of markets in Mizoram.

9. Lack of pricing mechanisms and lack of storage facilities of farm products have direct impact on income generations. State authorities must step up measures to introduce storage facilities.

10. Quarries are mostly owned by well off Mizo families. During case study, a local politician of the ruling MNF party owns a quarry. Contrary to well off private quarries, Village council managing quarries revealed that earnings from quarry are utilized to manage basic needs, infrastructure and helping the destitute families.

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Article: *Bhumkāl* Movement, An Epitome of Tribal Struggles for Survival and Identity

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Bhumkāl Movement, An Epitome of Tribal Struggles for Survival and Identity

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Abstract

India's freedom struggle is marked by the sacrifice of different ethnic communities of people across India. Tribal communities, while protecting their autonomy, opposed the colonial policies and rule through their agents and suppression. They exhibited their anger in the form of movements from the 18th century onwards, such as the Chuar rebellion, Chakma revolt, Halba Dongar Uprising, Tamar revolt, Kol, Mizo, Munda, Khasi and Garo, Santhal, and Munda movements, among others. Tribal leaders led these movements to protect their rights over *Jal* (water), *Jameen* (land), and *Jungle* (forest), thereby fighting for autonomy, self-rule, identity, and cultural preservation. However, colonial rulers projected these movements solely as law-and-order challenges. This paper revisits the *Bhumkāl* rebellion (1910) of Bastar not merely as an isolated act of defiance but as a layered cultural, political, and environmental struggle, deeply embedded in tribal cosmology and everyday resistance. Against this backdrop, this study repositions *Bhumkāl* as a complex socio-political resistance rooted in cultural ethos and survival and its lasting impact on environmental activism and social justice. Methodologically, it integrates archival research, symbolic anthropology, and comparative analysis to explore the multifaceted nature of tribal resistance.

Through this interdisciplinary approach, the paper not only contextualises *Bhumkāl* historically but also analyses its symbolic representations rituals, oral traditions, and visual arts that continue to shape tribal identity and agency. The findings reframe *Bhumkāl* as a multidimensional struggle for dignity, autonomy, and justice, offering enduring lessons for contemporary fights against resource exploitation and for Indigenous rights.

Keywords: *Tribal movement, Bhumkāl, forests, tribal identity, self-rule, autonomy, Dhurwa, Gunda Dhur*

Introduction

Prior to colonialism, tribal communities used to live relatively in isolation and had a distinct lifestyle. They were dependent on land and forest. These were the two central pillars of the tribal economy. Among the tribes, land and forests are not considered a commodity; instead, they have profound religious and cultural connections. The encroachment of outsiders altered the close relationship between the forest and its inhabitants. It changed the ownership of land from tribes to non-tribal communities. With the introduction of policies such as the Indian Forest Acts (1865, 1878, 1927), Permanent Settlement, and Scientific Forestry, tribal communities lost access to their lands and livelihoods. These colonial interventions redefined forest and land as

economic resources under state control, criminalising traditional practices such as shifting cultivation, grazing, and forest-based subsistence.

Xaxa says that "in the new politico-administrative system, tribes faced the steady erosion of control over, and access to, natural resources such as land, forest, and water(Xaxa, 2011, p. 227). Furthermore, Nongbri also explains the process of colonialism as "to maximise production (profit) through the optimum utilisation of natural resources."(Nongbri, 2003, p. 63). Moreover, Nongbri notes that after independence, development policies were primarily shaped by profit maximization and the continuation of colonial policies (Nongbri, 2003, p. 63). The penetration of outsiders into tribal habitats opened the door to the exploitation of natural resources and forced migration from their lands.

Throughout colonial rule, several tribal communities raised their voices against the colonial policies and especially against the presence of *dikus* (outsiders). Therefore, it instigated a process of confrontation between the Britishers and *Adivasis* (Nongbri, 2003, p. 65). Oommen highlights that such labelling by colonial authorities aimed to delegitimise the tribal struggles (Oommen, 2011, p. 96). While analysing the impact of British rule on tribal society, scholars have pointed to multiple mechanisms of marginalisation, such as neglecting the social and economic organisations of tribes, the establishment of industries, transforming the value of land into a commodity, eroding community ownership of land, imposing restrictive forest laws, creating a gap between community and individuals, and destroying the moral fabric of the society (Sharma, 2020, p. 120).

Subsequently, Roy-Burman adds that the forces behind these transformations were the market, state control over resources, the state's failure to introduce new modes of production for tribals, and the rise of moneylenders and traders in tribal areas. Further, Roy Burman says that national leaders also inspired the tribal leaders. Although the problems were similar to those faced by all tribal communities, their responses differed. Several scholars have highlighted the impact of colonial rule on tribal societies and cultures(Nongbri, 2003; Xaxa, 2011). While explaining the tribal movements, Rao articulates that tribals had to confront both Hindu overlords and British colonialists, who exploited them. Several tribal movements were suppressed by "civilised" rulers(Rao, 1978, p. xvi).

The history of tribal movements in India is marked by uprisings against oppressive rulers, exploitative economic policies, and the imposition of external authority on indigenous ways of life. While tribal communities across the country have their unique histories and struggles, the Bastar region of central India presents a particularly vibrant case study, where tribal uprisings have occurred repeatedly over the centuries. A key focus within this historical framework is the Dhurwa movement, which encapsulates the broader dynamics of rebellion in Bastar, combining cultural resistance with political and economic demands. However, much of the historical literature has

prioritised events and leaders while underemphasising the lived experiences and cultural frameworks of the communities themselves.

Archival research has dominated historical reconstructions of the Bastar rebellion, with scholars such as Ajay Verghese and Nandini Sundar scrutinizing colonial administrative records, census reports, and correspondence to expose the structural violence inherent in British policies. Verghese's analysis of colonial forest laws and taxation systems reveals how the "civilising missions" rhetoric led to resource extraction, dispossessing tribal communities of their lands and autonomy (Verghese, 2016). Similarly, Sundar's work critiques colonial paternalism, arguing that labels like "backward" served to legitimise exploitation while erasing tribal agency.

However, these studies, reliant on state-produced archives, often replicate the biases of their sources, marginalising Indigenous perspectives. As Sundar acknowledges in *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, colonial archive privileges bureaucratic classifications and reduce tribal resistance to "law and order" disruptions rather than recognising them as conscious political struggles (Sundar, 1997). Similarly, scholars such as Ajay Skaria (Skaria, 1999) and Alpa Shah (Shah, 2013) were critiqued for the same. This limitation underscores the need to complement archival critique with alternative methodologies.

Symbolic anthropology has further enriched interpretations of tribal resistance by decoding rituals as sites of political negotiation. Alfred Gell's seminal analysis of the Bastar Dasara festival demonstrates how rituals functioned as "coercive subordination" (Gell, 1997, p. 433). Sundar expands this framework, arguing that festivals like Dasara were not merely governance tools but also arenas for dissent, where tribal communities reasserted their cultural autonomy (Sundar, 2001). These studies reveal how symbolic practices mediated power relations, yet they often detach ritual from its socio-economic context. The material grievances underpinning rebellion—such as land alienation and forest laws—remain secondary to cultural analysis, creating a dissonance between symbolic and structural interpretations.

This paper applies symbolic anthropology approach not merely as a conceptual lens, but as a methodological tool, by analyzing visual representations such as ritual paintings, oral songs, ceremonial structures, and their embedded symbols. *Dara Miri* (bunch of mango boughs tied to a arrow) is a natural symbol were not just strategically significant as they served as symbols of protest. Further, the depiction of Gunda Dhur in *Lakshmi Jagaar* paintings is read not only as artistic memory but as political iconography, communicating resistance and spiritual continuity. Similarly, rituals like Bastar Dasara are examined through field-recorded chants, dance formations, and processional symbols that articulate political subversion within ritualised submission.

Comparative studies, though less prevalent, have situated the Bastar rebellion within broader patterns of tribal resistance. Beginning from the Works of K. S.

Singh, who compared it with the Kol and Santhal Rebellion (Singh, 1982). Bara's analysis of the Birsa Munda-led *Ulgulan* (Bara, 2022; Prasad, 2004) and Kennedy and King's juxtaposition of the Santhal *Hul* with the *Bhumkāl* identify shared strategies, such as mobilising traditional leadership and ecological solidarity. James C. Scott analyzes the Bastar Rebellion in his study of "*Zomia*," illustrating how hill tribes across Southeast and South Asia used evasion and resistance to counter state-making projects (Scott, 2009). These comparisons highlight recurring themes of resource conflict and cultural preservation across movements, but often homogenise diverse tribal experiences. The *Bhumkāl* , for instance, was rooted in Bastar's unique cultural geography and forest ecology, factors that resist simplistic parallels with the millenarian fervour of the Munda uprising or the agrarian focus of the Santhal revolt.

Despite these contributions, no study has yet woven archival, symbolic, and comparative methodologies into a cohesive analysis. Archival research remains tethered to colonial epistemologies, oral histories often lack critical dialogue with structural frameworks, symbolic anthropology sidelines materiality, and comparative approaches risk erasing local specificity.

This lacuna highlights the need for a comprehensive methodology that integrates these approaches. This paper attempts to incorporate these approaches by combining archival critique with ethnographic interpretation of symbols and comparative historical mapping. A synthesis of archival critique, symbolic analysis, and comparative history could illuminate how tribal communities navigated colonial exploitation through material resistance and cultural innovation. For example, the *Bhumkāl* rebellion's organisation—led by village headmen and synchronised with ritual calendars—cannot be fully understood without combining oral narratives of collective mobilisation, colonial reports on taxation, symbolic interpretations of leadership, and comparisons with the organisational structures of other movements.

Furthermore, the inclusion of multiple interpretive voices—through tribal oral traditions, women's ritual performances, and community paintings—constitutes a "polyphony" that challenges monolithic readings of archival source of rebellion. Such an approach would also recover marginalised voices, particularly women's roles in sustaining resistance, which remain absent in male-centric archives and ethnographies.

Methodological approach,

The study of tribal movements requires a diverse methodological toolkit to unravel their complexities. By integrating archival research, ethnographic methods, and symbolic interpretation, this paper bridges the fields of history and anthropology to analyze tribal resistance and governance.

While using archival records, researchers aim to reconstruct the socio-political history of Bastar. The methodology involves systematic examination of colonial administrative records, census reports, and official correspondences to

highlight governance dynamics under colonial rule. For instance, the British categorisation of tribal societies as "backwards"(Sumner, 1982) served to legitimise paternalistic policies that simultaneously subjugated and romanticised the tribes. This framework masked the structural exploitation imposed by forest laws and taxation systems. Thus, these records require a critical analysis that acknowledges both their bureaucratic utility and their epistemic violence.

This paper also employs the methods of the "symbolic anthropology" to decode rituals and their socio-political implications and "coercive subordination," It examines rituals, iconography, and ceremonial performances not as static cultural practices but as dynamic forms of negotiation and power. For instance, the Bastar Dasara festival is analysed through documented oral narratives, recorded chants, processional symbols, and ritual sequence—decoding how political submission is ritually staged, and where symbolic inversion provides space for subaltern resistance. The festival, where the Raja symbolically submits to the tribal deity Danteshwari, represents a negotiated relationship between the state and tribal communities.

This paper will also seek to capture oral histories, rituals, and everyday practices that provide insights into tribal agency and identity. These include songs sung during *Lakshmi Jagaar*, murals depicting Gunda Dhur, and local narratives of resistance encoded in festival performance. From the paintings and observations of village life reveal how community narratives resist homogenisation and preserve collective memory. Thus, with this, one will try to challenge official accounts by presenting alternative versions of events.

Symbolic anthropology is used as a methodological tool to decode these practices. Rituals such as the Bastar Dasara are interpreted not just as cultural traditions, but as political texts—where the Raja's symbolic submission to Danteshwari becomes a staged negotiation of power. Paintings created during Lakshmi Jaggar, featuring figures such as Gunda Dhur, are analyzed for their iconographic significance, functioning as both mnemonic and political symbols. These interpretations are grounded in ethnographic observations, oral recollections, and photographic documentation, forming a symbolic archive of resistance.

Therefore, this paper presents a "polyphony of voices" — not only textual or oral, but visual, ritualistic, and performative — that challenges the singular colonial narrative. By reading these voices alongside colonial archives and comparing the *Bhumkāl* movement with other tribal resistances such as the Munda and Santhal uprisings, the study synthesises multiple methodological approaches. Comparative analysis highlights shared strategies, such as traditional leadership, ecological solidarity, and ritual mobilization, while also underscoring the unique socio-cultural terrain of Bastar. This avoids homogenising Janjati experiences and instead foregrounds the specificity of localised resistance.

Bhumkāl Rebellion through Archival Records

Tribal communities had consistently resisted the encroachment of outsiders and colonial agents since the beginning of British rule. However, their struggles were seldom acknowledged as part of India's freedom movement. This long-standing resistance ultimately led to the *Bhumkāl* rebellion of 1910, also known as the "earthquake rebellion".

Janjati had initiated the freedom struggle before the officially recognised first Indian independence struggle of 1857 (Pal and Khute, 2021, p. 9). Bastar's social landscape also included non-tribal groups such as the Raut, Dhakad, Kumhar, Jogi, Gaba, Panara, Dhobi, Kalar, Brahmin, Thakur, and Muslims (Pal and Khute, 2021, p. 21). One report noted, 'The Muria tribes were openly questioning the authority of the state to prevent their shifting agriculture'(Popoff, 1980, p. 146).

Bastar operated under a dual system of governance—Kings and Diwans, the latter acting as British representatives. Eventually, *Diwans* became the symbol of exploitation. They were not paying heed to tribal culture and economy. Instead, they fulfilled the needs and demands of the Britishers. Over time, Diwans came to symbolise exploitation, disregarding tribal culture and economy in favour of serving British administrative interests. This led to a series of revolts against the Diwans, their socio-economic policies, and the colonial misuse of local resources. These included the Halba revolt (1774–1779), Bhopalpattanam conflict (1795), Paralkot revolt (1824–25), Tarapur revolt (1842–1854), Maria revolt (1842–1863), Kol revolt for the environment (1859), and Muria revolt (1876), which ultimately culminated in the *Bhumkāl* uprising of 1910 (Pal and Khute, 2021, p. 39–50).

The *Bhumkāl* rebellion did not erupt spontaneously; somewhat, it was shaped by complex internal tensions and gradual disillusionment**.** The relationship between the Raja of Bastar and the Lal Kalindar Singh was fraught with ambiguity and rivalry. The Raja, traditionally considered the protector of tribal interests, was increasingly viewed as a figurehead under colonial influence. Archival correspondence DeBrett, Confidential report reveals that many tribals were sceptical of Raja's ability to challenge British authority(Government of India. (1911). *Confidential No. 4417, Section I, Proceedings Nos. 34–40, August 1911: Letter from DeBrett to Commissioner, Chhattisgarh Division, 1910*. National Archives of India.). Even when the rebellion broke out to support the Britishers, Raja commanded, 'The Raja told the English not to beat him, but to beat the people'(Sundar, 1997, p. 157 Sundar interviewed Mundra Majhi of Pharaspal. A remark that reflected his alignment with colonial forces and his growing alienation from his tribal subjects.

Therefore, the rebellion's roots lay in a combination of failed leadership and intensifying colonial pressure. This was further exacerbated by the colonial government's introduction of forest reservation laws, which severely restricted the tribals' traditional rights to forest resources. Practices such as "*penda*"

(shifting cultivation) and unrestricted grazing, which formed the backbone of the tribal economy, were curtailed (British Government of India, 1905; Crump, 1906). These policies disrupted the delicate balance of their subsistence-based way of life.

Symbols such as mango boughs, earth, chillies, and arrows combinedly known as Dara Miri were also used to communicate calls to arms, representing both urgency and cultural connection to the land. These symbolic objects functioned not merely as messages but as ritualistic instruments rooted in tribal cosmology. Archival testimony from local officials described these symbolic pledges as "primitive in nature but extraordinarily effective" (Clementi-Smith, 1945), noting that they spread rebellion across the Parganas within weeks. In daily life, mango boughs and earthen are used to express the festivity, joy and happiness and auspicious in tribal life. Tying of fresh mango boughs to house or temple is a customary practice to exhibit the auspicious occassions. Whereas the inherent quality of *chilli* is used to express anger, conflict, and protest. Eventually, arrow indicate the readiness to hunt down or attack. Thus these symbols helped in construction of cultural meaning of community protest against exploitation. Taking these symbols by procession from one village to another spread the message of invitation very fast requesting tribals to participate in protest against outsiders. Thus symbols acted as agents of communication in transmitting the hidden meanings and shaped the behavior of Bastarites against the external exploitation.

Rather than being militarily strategic, these symbols reflected a profound cultural logic of protest, grounded in the belief that the land itself participates in acts of resistance. As the Bastar forests, rich in teak and sal, were increasingly exploited by the Britishers for timber. The Central Provinces Forest Department even reveals that "over 70% of Bastar's timber was exported to the plains, leaving local communities without access to essential forest produce."(Jagdalpur Record Room (JRR), 1906). This environmental plunder further inflamed resistance, as loss of forest access struck at the spiritual, economic, and ecological core of tribal life.

Gundādhūr's role in the uprising is emblematic of how indigenous leaders marshalled local grievances into organised resistance. He was born in Nethanar, a small village in Jagadalpur tehsil of Bastar district in Chhattisgarh, whose leadership was instrumental in uniting the tribal communities in defiance of British forest policies and taxation. Folk narratives surrounding Gundādhūr often describe him as possessing magical abilities—disappearing at will and moving with supernatural agility—which served to amplify his mystique and inspire awe among supporters. His knowledge of local customs and ability to mobilise his fellow tribe members against the British made him a figurehead for the rebellion. His charisma, deep cultural embeddedness, and strategic mobility across forested terrain allowed him to operate effectively while evading capture. His leadership drew from the region's pre-colonial political autonomy and traditional resource management practices, which

clashed with British efforts to centralise control over forests and their scientific management.

Nevertheless, the bravery and tactics he demonstrated during the revolt helped to shape his legacy as a folk hero celebrated for both daring and vision. Though he was not a trained soldier, His continued evasion of arrest was seen as a testament to his skill and symbolic defiance. He roamed around the Bastar region and instilled the spirit of revolution in the dissatisfied people. He had prepared a revolutionary organisation in his area and made a strategy. He built an underground network and prepared strategic plans for rebellion. He also gained support from prominent leaders of the time, such as Murat Singh Bakshi, Bala Prashad Nazir, Veer Singh Bedar, and Lal Kalendra Singh, who have also been discussed in both colonial records and contemporary scholarship (Government of India, 1910; DeBrett, 1988). After the revolt, *Gundādhūr* became a symbol of awe and resistance. His name was invoked in both reverence and fear—used by mothers to discipline their children, yet also remembered as a friend and protector of the oppressed.

The rebellion's political organisation reflected a sophisticated use of traditional practices to rally support. Leadership under Gundādhūr and Lal Kalandar Singh exemplified a blend of tribal governance and resistance strategies, shaping mass belief that 'they had a powerful God, and could turn missiles from guns and cannons into water' as noted in DeBrett's letter to the Commissioner of Chhattisgarh Division (Government of India, 1911). Village and Pargana headmen convened to pledge solidarity against the British. They signed an affidavit emphasising their commitment to fighting for their land and rights. This formal oath-taking, grounded in customary assemblies, underscores the intersection of ritual and politics in tribal mobilisation. The uprising also displayed an impressive grassroots funding mechanism, where every household contributed to the rebellion's expenses. In his accounts, William Ward of the Methodist Mission recorded, "Our Christians were compelled to give rice and pay from two to five rupees each. Some gave more"(Government of India, 1910, National Archives of India).

Even the portrayal of Gundādhūr in colonial archival records reveals significant anxiety from the British administration about his ability to mobilise the Bastar tribal communities. Reports from the District Collectorate often portrayed him as a disruptive figure rather than a legitimate leader of the resistance. This revolt is also known as the "*Lal Vidroh*"(Pal and Khute, 2021, p. 60). Pal and Khute recognised the *Bhumkāl rebellion* as a means "people gather at one place and leave together quickly"(Pal and Khute, 2021, p. 10). Colonial documents focused on the swift restoration of "law and order" while neglecting the deeper socio-economic grievances that fuelled the uprising.(Harrell-bond, 1979). However, only after independence did state records begin to reinterpret Gundādhūr's role, framing him as a freedom fighter (Grigson, 1981). This shift illustrates the evolving political narrative, in which symbols of resistance were co-opted into the national discourse of independence. Dhur's ability to evade capture and inspire widespread

mobilisation became central to his posthumous image. Accounts continue to reflect a metaphor that called Gundādhūr the one 'who possessed the knowledge to turn bullets into harmless water'.(*Jagdalpur Court Archives*, 1961) This phrase, part of oral lore, highlights how belief in spiritual protection and symbolic inversion of colonial violence animated popular resistance.

Gundādhūr's knowledge of the forest terrain provided a significant tactical advantage against the British forces. He employed *guerrilla* warfare techniques, leading his fighters to disrupt colonial supply chains and evade capture. One account recounts that despite extensive sweeps by the Britishers, the rebels managed to vanish into the forests, frustrating all containment efforts (Fox-Strangways, 1899). The rebels targeted colonial establishments and collaborators, burning police stations and schools while redistributing grain among villagers. One account mentions that a mock court was conducted by rebels, symbolising their assertion of indigenous justice over colonial authority. (National Archives of India (NAI), 1910)

Although Gundādhūr emerged as the rebellion's figurehead, he ensured the resistance's decentralised nature so it could reach its micro level. Local leaders and village councils played critical roles in mobilising their communities. Dhur, alongside other leaders, as Ward acclaimed, such as Rora Pedda, Kanda Dhur, Banda Dhur, and Chaitu of Dongar (Ward, 1884), were also collaborating in organising the rebellion and targeting colonial leaders.(Guha, 1984, pp. 164–273)

The suppression of the Bastar rebellion was swift and brutal. British officers like Gayer and DeBrett deployed approximately 500 armed police, leading to widespread violence, arrests, and extrajudicial killings (DeBrett, 1988) Despite extensive efforts, British troops struggled to suppress the rebellion due to the decentralised leadership and guerrilla tactics employed by Dhur and other local leaders as the rebels burnt four villages and 'admonished' eight Marias, while sparing those communities who pledged loyalty or offered no resistance. They spared those villages that 'came in'(DeBrett, 1988).

Memory and Myth, Tribal Painting in the *Bhumkāl Resistance*

Bastar's rich cultural landscape has long been intertwined with indigenous modes of resistance and memory-making. Among the Dhurwa tribe, traditional art forms and rituals are central to preserving their cultural heritage and identity. Rituals such as Lakshmi Jagaar, and conventional water management practices are reviewed for their roles in sustaining tribal identity and autonomy during the colonial intervention.

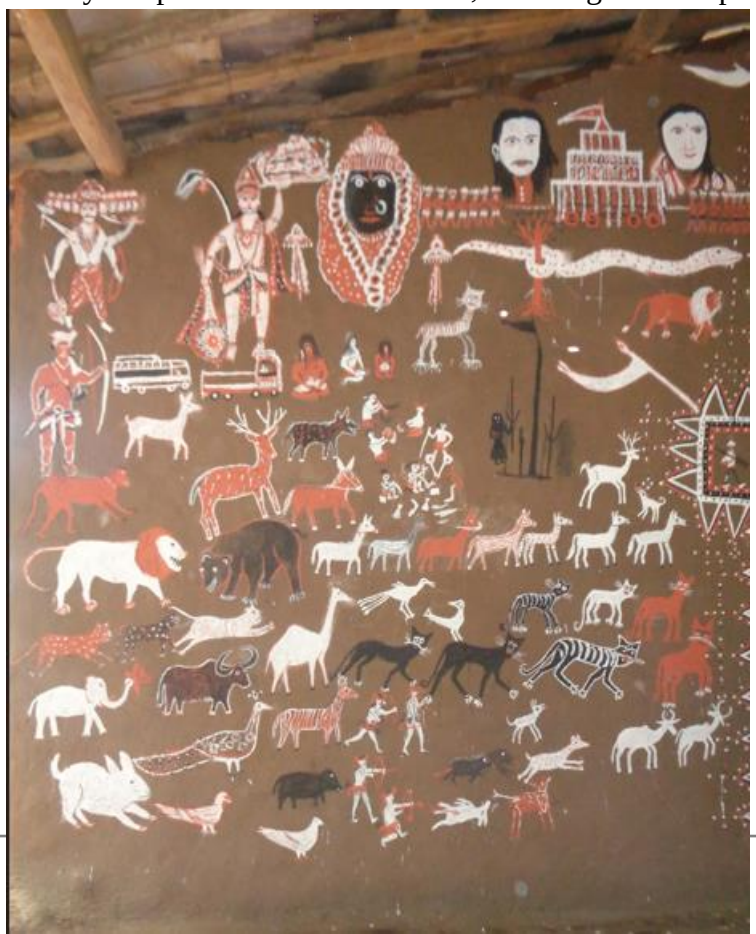
According to oral tradition, whenever the Dhurwa community faces famine or distress, they perform the Lakshmi Jagaar ritual to seek relief. Over time, it has become customary to ensure better crop yields and secure their livelihoods by respecting nature and its resources. This ritual is observed every

three years during the month of *Bhadon* (September) on a Thursday, lasting for fifteen days.

Lakshmi Jagaar involves worshipping Goddess Lakshmi and Lord Shiva, with Lakshmi regarded as the deity of paddy (*dhaan*) while invoking all the deities of the Dhurwa community. The ceremony begins by bringing a pair of paddy stalks from the field of the *mata pujari* (priest), which are then offered in prayer. The celebration is marked by the women of the Dhakad community, also known as *Gurumai*, singing traditional *Dhankul* songs. Meanwhile, Mahara men play musical instruments such as the *nagara*, *tudbudi*, and *mohri* to enhance the festivities.

During the *Lakshmi Jagaar* festival, the Dhurwa community creates intricate paintings using natural colors made from materials like burnt *tumba* mixed with *tora* oil for black, red *chui* soil for red, limestone for white, and *chandan* for yellow. Brushes are crafted from *chhind* tree twigs, and the artwork adorns the temple wall for over a week.

These ritual paintings are not simply decorative—they function as visual texts that encode memory, resistance, and sacred authority. A significant aspect of the painting tradition is the depiction of Gundādhūr, a revered figure considered a miraculous *sirha* (traditional healer) and community hero. Dhurwa honours his memory by painting his image alongside icons of community leaders, such as the *mata pujari*, *mati pujari*, and village headmen, who play essential roles in dispute resolution, resource management, ecological management, and ritual mediation. Such iconography embeds political memory into sacred space, ensuring that leadership is remembered not only through stories but also through sacred imagery. Stories of Gundādhūr's bravery are passed down to children, instilling cultural pride and



preserving the legacy of their folk hero.

Source, Bindu Sahu (2020), Unpublished PhD thesis

The paintings created during these rituals reflect armed figures, ceremonial motifs, and symbolic animals — each chosen for its role in encoding tribal cosmology and political memory. Warrior imagery indicates the community's remembrance of the tribesman, those who defended their land, dignity, and autonomy against colonial aggression. As Prasad and Sahu note, 'oral narratives play a crucial role in sustaining the collective memory and social identity of tribal groups'.(Prasad and Sahu, 2022, p. 14) In this way, ritual paintings work in tandem with oral transmission to create a multi-sensory archive of resistance and belonging.

Lakshmi Jagaar is a significant ritual practice among the Dhurwa, often conducted to invoke divine blessings and community cohesion. Its ritual enactments and visual representations underscore the dual function of spirituality and political expression. Empirical observations from field studies in Bastar highlight how *Lakshmi Jagaar* was a form of cultural assertion and symbolic defiance during colonial rule. As noted by Prasad and Sahu, rituals ensured collective action and social solidarity, particularly during periods of socio-political unrest (Prasad and Sahu, 2022, p. 16). The depiction of ceremonial scenes in the painting reinforces the role of rituals in maintaining community resilience. Prasad and Sahu state that 'rites and rituals not only facilitated resource management but also reinforced cultural identity during periods of conflict'(Prasad and Sahu, 2022, p.18).

These ritual paintings do not merely reflect ceremonial performance—they encode environmental consciousness rooted in locally available resources. Animal symbolism, including lions and elephants, underscores the community's harmonious and─sacred relationship with nature and their spiritual beliefs. According to Dhurwa folklore, these animals are often associated with protection and strength, essential qualities during times of conflict. The presence of warrior imagery and visual symbolism converge to preserve collective memory and social identity of tribal groups by ascertaining the power in rebellious movements. These artistic expressions not only commemorate past rebellions but also continue to animate the moral universe in which resistance is seen as a sacred duty.

Rituals, Power, and Resistance: The Politics of Bastar Dasara

As explored through the lens of symbolic anthropology, rituals reflect cultural performances and complex encoded systems of meaning that reflect and shape socio-political dynamics. Clifford Geertz's interpretive framework posits culture as a "web of meanings," where rituals act as symbolic texts that must be decoded (Geertz, 1977). In the context of Bastar Dasara, a 75-day festival in Chhattisgarh, India, these rituals reveal a negotiated interplay of authority,

ritual, and resistance, drawing further on Alfred Gell's concept of "coercive subordination"(Gell, 1997, pp. 436–437) and a "dialectical framework", revealing how rituals such as Raja's symbolic submission to the deity Danteswari simultaneously legitimise and subvert authority. This dialectic illustrates how political legitimacy in Bastar is produced not unilaterally but through ritual negotiation, where power is both imposed and resisted via culturally resonant acts.

Symbolic anthropology emphasises deciphering cultural symbols to understand societal structures. Victor Turner's concept of "social dramas" highlights rituals as arenas for resolving conflicts and reaffirming social order. Coercive subordination refers to the subtle enforcement of authority through symbolic means- —eliciting compliance not by violence but through ritualised affirmation of social hierarchies. (Turner, 1982) This duality is vividly illustrated in Bastar Dasara, where the Raja's ritual submission to the tribal deity Danteshwari is not merely a devotional act but also a politically performative one. It becomes a site where the state's authority is both enacted and challenged, reaffirming the community's cultural sovereignty even within a formalised structure of rule.

Dussehra in Bastar is historically significant as a symbolic performance to legitimise royal authority. It was an extension of the agricultural economy practices that absorbed and elevated village *jatra* (fair), or local festivals, wherein fertility was ensured and sickness was evaded. The king was a crucial figure for these rituals to unfold successfully at the kingdom level. Danteswari, the tutelary goddess of the Kakatiya dynasty, now emerged as a village mother goddess at the state level. The elevation of Danteswari to chief goddess status occurred due to the integration of local mother goddess traditions and the ritual worship of Manikeswari, the goddess of the Naga kings who had been defeated. This raises a discussion of the nexus between the establish nexus between ritual incorporation and the consolidation of royal power.

The Raja's submission serves as a tool of governance. By deferring to Danteswari, he positions his rule as divinely sanctioned, leveraging tribal cosmology to sustain legitimacy. The state co-opts tribal symbols, embedding itself within local belief systems. The grandeur of the festival, orchestrated by the royal court, reinforces state presence, framing the Raja as both a spiritual devotee and a political leader. However, Gell underplays the role of royal coercion in the initial imposition of state structure. (Gell, 1997, p. 436) He treats symbolic submission as consent rather than acknowledging its possible imposition.

This integration fosters a ritualised cultural contract, reducing overt conflict and facilitating governance. However, such legitimate ceremonies are not unique to Bastar. In neighbouring kingdoms of Orissa with Adivasi populations, a similar structure existed—with a member of the dominant tribe performing the king's investiture. Notably, no king regarded such placement as

humiliating, suggesting a widespread ritual logic of symbolic subordination to tribal cosmology as a source of state legitimacy (Mahapatra, 1987).

The festival epitomizes a ritualized negotiated relationship between the state and the tribe. The state's incorporation of tribal symbols functions as both legitimation and limitation—curbing its ability to impose unchecked external policies. At the same time, tribes gain symbolic and political recognition within the formal structure of power.

This reciprocity reflects Victor Turner's notion of ritual as *"social drama"* that mediate tensions through staged performances of hierarchy, deference, and contestation. The dual function of *Bastar Dasara*—exalting and constraining authority—reveals how power is not static but continuously reshaped by mutual accommodation, ritual affirmation, and periodic resistance.

The investiture ceremony in Bastar traditionally involved throne a member of a dominant tribe placing the king on his throne—a practice that no ruler considered humiliating(Mahapatra, 1987). This act symbolised the king's dependence on tribal sanction to rule, reaffirming tribal sovereignty within royal authority. While Dussehra was typically an occasion for displaying public allegiance to the monarch, it was not an unconditional loyalty. The king's conduct and acknowledgement of the subjects' role were critical in maintaining this bond. Instances of fractured loyalty were evident during significant uprisings, such as those in 1910, 1876, and as far back as 1774. The 1774 rebellion was notably led by Ajmer Singh, the half-brother of King Daryaodev, and involved the Halbas of Dongar.

Establishing royal authority has never been a destination but rather a continuous process where negotiations and reaffirmations abound. Royal authority in Bastar was not a settled institution but a fluid, contested space where rituals performed governance as an ongoing process of negotiation. The following discussion examines three pivotal rebellions—1774, 1876, and 1910—not as isolated revolts, but as cumulative responses to administrative overreach. These rebellions marked critical moments in the transformation of kingship and governance, illustrating the fragility of symbolic power when severed from ritual reciprocity.

Ritual Sovereignty and the Crisis of Kingship in Bastar

The succession of rebellions in Bastar—in 1774, 1876, and 1910—reveals not merely resistance to economic oppression but a profound rupture in the ritual order that had historically legitimised kingship. These uprisings unfolded as cumulative responses to the diminishing authority of the Raja, who traditionally derived legitimacy not from coercion, but from ritual reciprocity embedded in the cosmological and moral world of *Adivasi* society.

In the 1774 rebellion, led by Ajmer Singh—half-brother of King Daryao Deo—the challenge to kingship emerged from within the royal family itself.

Tribal groups, particularly the Halbas of Dongar, were drawn into this internal conflict not simply by allegiance to dynastic claims, but because they perceived the reigning monarch as having failed in his ritual obligations to the people (Pal & Khute, 2021, pp. 39–40). The rebellion can thus be seen as a corrective assertion of ritual order against dynastic neglect.

The Muria rebellion of 1876 escalated in the king's absence and was primarily directed against the Diwan. Still, it also implicitly questioned the Raja's ability to safeguard traditional norms. As Sundar notes, the Raja's absence in Bastar during the upheaval and his reliance on Diwan Gopinath Kapardas, who imposed oppressive demands for forced labor and tax collection, signified a breakdown of the moral covenant between ruler and ruled (Sundar, 1997, pp. 122–125). This disconnects between ritual leadership and administrative governance created a symbolic vacuum.

By 1910, the *Bhumkāl* rebellion brought this crisis to a head. Tribal anger was no longer just about forest laws or economic exploitation—it was directed at a symbolic structure that had become hollow and ineffective. The Raja, once the ritual linchpin of festivals like Dasara, was now seen as a colonial instrument. As reported in confidential British correspondence, tribals were openly questioning whether the Raja still held any absolute authority or was merely "a Raja in name" (DeBrett to Commissioner, Sec. I, Aug 1911, Pro. no. 34–40). The symbolic gestures that once underpinned authority—such as the Raja's ritual submission to Danteshwari—were increasingly perceived as acts of political performance lacking substance.

The disintegration of ritual sovereignty reveals that kingship in Bastar was never absolute, but instead always negotiated through acts of cultural recognition. When these acts ceased to reflect the people's realities, rebellion ensued. The *Bhumkāl* movement thus marked not only the culmination of material grievances but the failure of symbolic kingship itself—a rupture between the cosmological and the political order. As Mahapatra has observed, in tribal polities across central India, ritual investiture by community leaders was not symbolic decoration but a foundational act of political legitimacy (Mahapatra, 1987). Its collapse, therefore, signalled the dissolution of authority at its root.

Impact on Subsequent Struggles

The *Bhumkāl* movement has left an indelible on the trajectory of indigenous resistance in India, setting a historical precedent for future social movements centered on land rights, cultural sovereignty, and self-determination. Its focus on land and cultural identity resonated with later movements, such as the Jharkhand movement, which sought to establish an autonomous state for tribal populations. This movement expanded from an ethnic struggle to a broader regional one, reflecting the ongoing fight against exploitation by non-tribal entities and the demand for self-determination (Ghosh, 2024).

Moreover, the *Bhumkāl* movement's resistance against external exploitation has influenced environmental movements across India. The Chipko movement, which gained prominence in the 1970s, echoes the sentiments of the *Bhumkāl* uprising, as tree-hugging protests aimed at preserving forests vital to local communities' livelihoods, drawing from the historical context of tribal resistance against resource exploitation.

The *Bhumkāl* movement also impacted the contemporary socio-political landscape of India by inspiring movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan or Self-Employed Women Association (SEWA), reflecting the collective action ethos integral to the *Bhumkāl* uprising. These movements focus on social justice and equitable resource distribution, echoing the demands for rights and recognition that characterised the *Bhumkāl* struggle.

Furthermore, the *Bhumkāl* movement's insistence on unity among marginalised groups has encouraged a more collaborative approach to contemporary struggles. The call for solidarity among different social movements is a fundamental aspect of their strategies, seeking to address intersecting issues of oppression and inequality that were first articulated during the *Bhumkāl* uprising(Baviskar, 2009).

Conclusion

Thus, the *Bhumkāl* movement continuously embodies the enduring struggles of tribal communities for survival, autonomy, and cultural identity in the face of exploitation and oppression. Archival reports of colonial times reveal the threat posed by the indigenous communities to British rule and were hence suppressed with military force, treachery, and the divide-and-rule policy. Innumerable tribal leaders and their companions have disappeared from official historical records.

Despite that, tribals have always remembered their leaders and their contributions. They are still alive in folk songs, folk tales, mythical stories, legends, and most probably in the memories of older people. They became a source of inspiration for the ongoing tribal movements in India after independence. On 9 February of every year, the people of Bastar observe Shaheed Veer Gunda Dhur Martyr's Day and pay their tributes. In recent times, a community protest in Alnar village of Gumiyapal Gram Panchayat, Dantewada district, against the mining lease for Taral Metta (mountain) has occurred, as well as Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan's anti-mining protests in the Hasdeo region of Surguja district. Where tribal recollect the heroic contributions of Gundādhūr and sing his songs to inculcate the spirit of belongingness to the land. Since the forests and hills are the abode of their deities, their livelihoods are intrinsically related to them. People attribute the corruption of officials and companies manipulating *Gram Sabha* meetings to the plundering of the forests. Whenever there is a survival threat, the tribal

community draws inspiration from the *Bhumkāl* movement and fights against injustice.

As a pivotal chapter in India's history of resistance, the movement highlights the invaluable contributions of indigenous leaders, such as Gunda Dhur. It continues to inspire contemporary struggles for environmental conservation, social justice, and the rights of indigenous peoples. By preserving the oral traditions and collective memories associated with such movements, one honours the resilience of these communities and ensures their legacy influences future generations in their pursuit of equity and self-determination.

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Book Review: The Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics

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The Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics by Santosh K. Singh (2025), Penguin Viking. ISBN: 9780670098316

--Muhammed E K

While Sikhism is frequently championed as an egalitarian tradition designed to dismantle caste hierarchies, this normative assertion is fundamentally disrupted by the persistent resonance of social stratification and political exclusion. It is into this contested sociological terrain that Santhosh K. Singh's Deras thrusts a significant intervention. Shattering reductive portrayals of deras as merely deviant sects or purely spiritual retreats, this book anchors them at the crucible where caste exclusion, identity politics, popular culture, and aspirational quests for dignity converge. The book, consisting of eight chapters, asserts that deras are not marginal anomalies but pivotal sites where religion, power, and the struggle for social justice are forged in contemporary Punjab.

The opening chapter orients the reader within the sacred geography of Gehuan, a village whose religious landscape is defined by the confluence of worship sites shared by Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim traditions. Through evocative ethnographic vignettes, such as instances of Sikh and Hindu families offering obeisance at Muslim dargahs, or Muslim men venerating the shrine of Baba Nagerkhed, Singh illuminates a visceral, lived syncretism that has historically pulsated through Punjab's religious ethos. Yet, this fluidity of devotional boundaries coexists precariously with entrenched socio-religious stratification. The village is structurally dominated by the hegemony of Jat Sikhs, while Ravidasia and Valmiki communities endure systematic marginalisation across social, religious, and political spheres. The author consciously resists celebrating syncretism as an unproblematic cultural virtue; instead, he understands it as a fragile and increasingly strained arrangement and posits that Punjab's lauded image of religious diversity often functions as a "prototype imagination," a cultural edifice masking the profound pressures exerted by the rise of caste-based identity politics. "Deras have increasingly become signposts of identity politics based on caste. The promises that the mainstream and the dominant traditions could not fulfil led to the mushrooming of these counter philosophies and arguments" (p. 21). This important insight regards deras not as anomalous deviations from religious norms but as structural responses to the institutional failures of dominant traditions. The chapter must be considered as a conceptual precursor for the book's broader thesis, though it arguably could have benefited from an initial, wider historical exegesis of Punjab's multi-faith past before constricting the focus to the granular village ethnography.

Chapter two provides a rigorous conceptual grounding, defining deras, also referred to as *ashrams* or *dharamshalas*, as sacred spaces fundamentally organized around the charismatic authority of a guru or sant. Singh strategically deploys the metaphor of the banyan tree to underscore the syncretic and trans-cultural fluidity that characterizes Indian religiosity, where diverse traditions emanate from shared, deep-seated roots. Simultaneously, the chapter advances a trenchant critique of Sikhism's egalitarian self-image. While Sikhism historically erupted as a formidable challenge to hierarchical social orders, the book empirically demonstrates how caste discrimination persists and accrues in practice, evidenced particularly by Jat Sikh hegemony over land, gurdwaras, and core religious institutions. The proliferation of deras, Singh notes, is propelled by two interrelated socio-political dynamics: the enduring idea of the living guru and the institutional incapacity of mainstream Sikh bodies to effectively mitigate caste inequality. Dalit deras, drawing ideological inspiration from figures such as Ravidas, Kabir, and Valmiki, thus coalesce as counter-spaces that actively contest exclusion and fundamentally reimagine religious authority. This structural contradiction is especially pronounced in Punjab, where Scheduled Castes comprise nearly 32 per cent of the population, yet remain largely ejected from positions of political and religious power. In this resultant moral and political vacuum, deras proffer both material shelter and potent symbolic resources. Figures such as Ambedkar and Ravidas are mobilized not merely as cultural icons, but as cohesive ethical and political magnates designed to subvert caste hegemony.

The political salience of deras is most vividly encapsulated in Singh's incisive analysis of the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) under Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insan. Tracing its rapid territorial and demographic expansion, the book demonstrates how extensive welfare initiatives, such as blood donation camps, drug de-addiction programmes, and mass marriages for the poor, enabled the dera to decisively consolidate a loyal following among marginalized populations, especially in contexts defined by state inefficiency and administrative vacuum. Alongside these charitable activities, this chapter meticulously documents the DSS's escalating antagonisms with mainstream Sikh institutions, including allegations of syncretic appropriation and the impersonation of Sikh gurus. The conflict ultimately catapulted the DSS's emergence as a formidable political pressure group. It is fathom to note that the author refrains from simplifying the DSS as a straightforward locus of Dalit empowerment. Despite its substantial Dalit membership, he characterizes the dera as "an individual enterprise an establishment of, for and by Gurmeet Singh" (p. 46). The strategic deployment of popular culture through songs, films, and spectacles coupled with media campaigns showcasing charitable work, underscores the mechanism by which charisma and media visibility are leveraged to sustain and perpetuate religious authority. Even subsequent to

Ram Rahim's incarceration for serious criminal offenses, the dera's organizational machinery continues to function, portraying potentiality to adapt its operational parameters while maintaining its political relevance.

Chapters four and five revolve around the analysis of Dera Ballan, a prominent Ravidassia dera deeply inscribed within the histories of untouchability and labour marginalisation. Tracing the leadership lineage, from Baba Pipal Das through Sant Sarwan Das, Hari Das, and Niranjan Das, the chapter highlights the catalytic influence of Ambedkarite thought and the indispensable role played by transnational networks, particularly within the diaspora. Remarkably, the assassination of the second chief of dera, Sant Ramanand, in Vienna has sparked harsh responses, surrounding caste discrimination, the legitimacy of the living *guru*, and the demand for religious autonomy in Sikhism. Subsequent internal fissures and leadership rivalries within the movement prompted Surinder Das to schismatically break away and inaugurate a parallel organization called 'the Ravidassia Dharam Prachar Asthan (RDPA). The RDPA positions itself as a modern, politically aware, and progressive organization, dedicated to reinvigorating Ravidassia history, culture, and political consciousness. Importantly, the RDPA articulates a future-oriented, systemic vision of empowerment, arguing that "merely being aware of one's identity and history is not enough; real empowerment will come when the youth of the community occupy important positions in the system" (p. 71). Singh thus expounds that Ravidassia identity is far from monolithic or inert, even as Dera Ballan retains substantial political leverage, which was strongly palpable in moments such as the Election Commission re-scheduling polls to accommodate major pilgrimage events.

The fifth chapter specifically deals with the making of Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan Mandir in Varanasi. Singh interprets the construction of this pilgrimage site as an effort to "remake history" for a community long relegated to the margins of India's caste order (p.88). Drawing on Ravidasian vision of Begumpura, a utopian space free from suffering and discrimination, he shows how pilgrimage becomes a lived experiment in equality. Author's personal account of travelling on the Begumpura Express captures the affective intensity of this movement, where devotion temporarily collapses distinctions of class and status, creating what he describes as a "Begumpura experiment in real time" (p.113). The next chapter strives to interrogate monolithic representations of Dalit politics by engaging with diverse intellectual and cultural trajectories. Buddhist-Ambedkarite, Ravidassia, and Sikh-Ambedkarite wings coexist, united by resistance to Jat dominance but differentiated in strategy and symbolism. In the subsequent chapter, author shows how the ingredients of popular culture have prominently been significant in strengthening the Dalit expressions. Dalit music and

iconography, songs such as *Aarhab Chamara* and *Danger Chamar*, alongside images of Ravidas and Ambedkar, serve as mediums through which devotion and dissent merge.

Despite its much strength, the book has certain limitations. At times, the abundance of empirical material overwhelms sustained engagement with broader theoretical debates. While Singh draws on sociological insights into identity, power, and subaltern agency, these frameworks often remain implicit rather than systematically developed. Additionally, the ethnographic material, though rich, could have been more cohesively woven across chapters; in places, the narrative style resembles journalistic reportage rather than sustained ethnographic analysis. Nevertheless, *Deras* remains a significant and timely contribution. Singh's refusal to treat Indian religions as isolated traditions allows him to foreground deep interconnections and borrowings, noting that "it is this sense of syncretic mutuality and trans-cultural borrowing that characterises the Indian religious terrain" (p. 24). Through this comprehensive analytical approach, the book repositioned deras as institutions that are far more complex than simple spiritual havens or tools of political manipulation. Instead, these movements are coalescing as key aspirational sites where marginalized communities actively envision a state of equality, draw upon and mobilize core ethical traditions, and strategically negotiate power in ways that prioritize their own terms. This book, Deras, is an additional asset for understanding the dynamics of contemporary Punjab and the interwoven destinies of religion, caste, and democratic processes across South Asia.

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Book Review: Understanding the Hindu nationalists Dalit embrace in India

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Understanding the Hindu nationalist's Dalit embrace in India

Badri Narayan, *Republic of Hindutva. How the Sangh Is Reshaping Indian Democracy*. Penguin Viking, 2021, p. 259, ₹499 (Hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-670-09404-2

Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar, *Maya, Modi, Azad. Dalit Politics in the Time of Hindutva.* Harper Collins, 2023, pp. xxvi-307, ₹599 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-93-5629-689-3

--Mridugunjan Deka

Introduction

The rise of right wing parties in electoral democracies has thrown a challenge to the liberal notion of a multicultural world that was expected to shrink into a cosmopolitan village, where social and cultural rights of minorities could exist and thrive. In the last decade, India, the world's largest democracy and sub-continental hegemon in South Asia, had undergone an unprecedented political transformation. Like Turkey, it is witnessing religious revivalism; like Hungary, anti-immigrant rhetoric has increasingly become a part of mainstream political language; like Israel, it is attracting global attention for diluting democratic institutional resilience and procedures; and like China, which is not a multiparty democracy but has a strong republican polity, it is beholding a mass cult of personality directly flowing from the tallest executive in the government.

Apart from these global parallels, the Indian experience is qualified by a cultural pivot of the more than a century old Hindu nationalist movement towards groups that had lain historically lower and outside the caste determined social hierarchy. The two books reviewed in this article– Badri Narayan's *Republic of Hindutva: How the Sangh Is Reshaping Indian Democracy,* and Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar's *Maya, Modi, Azad: Dalit Politics in the Time of Hindutva*–make a timely contribution to this trajectory of Hindu nationalism as its social base expands and consolidates. By focusing on the political world of dalits, the two books speak together on the cultural and electoral dimensions of dalit politics after Narendra Modi's *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) came to power in 2014. Both books are based in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) which sends the highest number of representatives to the national parliament and had historically seen strong political messaging couched in traditionally Hindu lines cutting across political parties (Gould, 2004). Moreover, UP is the only provincial state to elect a dalit political party, the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP), with a majority in 2007.

Hindu nationalism and dalit politics: nebulous fence and ideological core

In his magisterial study on the historical origins and modern formations of Hindu nationalism in India, Christophe Jaffrelot (1998) argued that Hinduism was more of an orthopraxy than orthodoxy. Hinduism did not adhere to a singular holy book and unitary ecclesiastical institution, both being definitive features of the abrahamic world religions. Orthopraxy meant privileging ritual over belief, enabling Hinduism to absorb social groups located outside the mainstream caste fold. In this regard, the sanskritisation process and the Hindu method of tribal absorption, or the encompassment of groups within the Hindu fold albeit at a lower rung, are noteworthy from pre-colonial times (Guha, 2018).

During the colonial period, the production of knowledge via enumeration and categorisation, the decennial census being a good example, induced Hindu organisations to take stock of numbers. There was also the fear of attrition of lower castes from the Hindu fold to other faiths where the spiritual sanction of social bondage was weak or absent. Hindu nationalist organisations, for instance, the *Arya Samaj* in the late 19th century and the *Hindu Mahasabha* and the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) in the 20th century, realised the need for reaching out to the lower castes who were condemned to a life of ritual impurity and denial of human dignity. This outreach was however couched in the language and domain of religion and culture, and not political and social rights. With the establishment of a democratic republic, the political consciousness of lower castes, especially the scheduled classes and other backward classes, contributed to mobilisation on lines of caste identity and the assertion of difference from the upper castes. This marked a break from the past when caste was seen solely as a signifier of social debilitation and structural hierarchy (Manor, 2010).

Republic of Hindutva and *Maya, Modi, Azad* flesh out the present-day manifestation of this older contestation between an overarching Hindu identity canvassed by Hindu nationalist bodies and the substantive realisation of social justice championed by Dalit political parties. Pai and Kumar in *Maya* at the outset provocatively put the central question–'Why does the political outrage of dalits fail to transfer into anger, electorally, against the BJP?' Narayan in *Republic* begins by claiming that the RSS is now a transformed organisation, steeped in political maturity, and balances ideological projects with the constraints of democratic imperatives. The following sections juxtapose these works, gleaning out their major arguments and premises.

Dalit politics after 2014: co-option or convenience?

Pai and Kumar locate the pulse of dalit politics in the BSP's near-irreversible decline after losing power in 2012. Despite being a vanguard party dedicated to dalit empowerment, the BSP grew out of a political movement in north India that could not reproduce the strong social roots of lower caste movements in the South. This restricted its agenda for social transformation to state-led action from above, binding it to the compulsions of coalition

governments. The inevitable irony of such an instrumentalisation of politics opened the BSP's options to ally with ideological opponents like the BJP, and appeal to upper castes, thus diluting its ideological commitment. The BSP's implosion was further facilitated by the BJP's machinations in engineering tensions between dalits and Muslims in areas having no previous record of communal disharmony. Hindu nationalism, after all, is underscored by irredentist notions of historical victimhood at the hands of Islamic invaders. In a significant move of longitudinal groundwork, intra-dalit grievances and insecurities were utilised by Hindu nationalist activists to drive a wedge between smaller dalit groups and their larger, historically more assertive counterparts.

Both books give novel attention to the Hindu nationalist groups at the micro-local level. The BJP, Pai and Kumar argue, is adept at identifying prospective beneficiaries, which includes a bulk of dalit citizens, for social welfare schemes at the local level, and consequently create electoral patron-clients. Narayan offers a detailed analysis of how the RSS always has an ear to the ground, enabling it to pick up aspirations of marginalised dalit communities, for instance, the desire to build a temple to a folk deity.

Recent studies on populism in India have argued for moving beyond defining populism in an anti-elitist economic framework and taking stock of the religio-civilisational rhetoric of the BJP (Vajpeyi, 2020; Varshney, Ayyangar, & Swaminathan 2021). Pai and Kumar contribute to this growing discussion and argue that dalit electoral preference for the BJP is not merely pragmatically inspired to secure some socio-economic benefits, but is in fact increasingly ideological, signalling a deeper cultural transformation of turning into long-term hindutva votaries. This part of Pai and Kumar's book should be read in conjunction with Narayan's profound insights giving a worm's-eye view of how caste heroes, village deities, and local traditions of dalits are appropriated by Hindu cultural and nationalist organisations within a reimagined Hindu pantheon. Inconvenient micro-narratives which are potential sources of friction, especially true of religious sects historically of an anti-brahmanical persuasion, are papered over in constructing a larger meta-narrative of 'being Hindu.'

Narayan advances the extant literature on urban studies by exploring the Hindu nationalist inroads amongst the urban poor, or what he terms 'saffron slums', and its projects aimed at offering material and spiritual succour. Subaltern communities like dalits and adivasis (tribals), argues Narayan, are perceived as soft targets susceptible to ideological manipulation by radical outfits (that, it can be added, in the political dictionary of the right-wing are an internal threat to the cultural national vision) and thus necessitating their inclusion within Hindu nationalist circles. In other words, without stating it in so much words, it speaks to the Hindu right's interpretation of class-based mobilisation, which is perceived as being complicit in suspect loyalties towards the nation. Narayan also rightly credits Narendra Modi with rediscovering the abandoned art of speaking directly to the masses, made possible by combining the social with the political. This observation, for the

interested reader, could also open a discussion into the implications of authoritarianism and centralisation that such paternalism, or what political scientists now increasingly call neo-patrimonialism, could bring to the health of a democratic polity.

Narayan's work has boldly established the argument that the RSS today is a changed organisation with little use for inflammatory rhetoric. Only modest hints pandering to emotive Hindu sentiments are enough to garner votes for its political vanguard party—the BJP. The trouble is with the 'fringe' Hindutva vigilante bodies, he argues, that participate in or provoke egregious violence defying the 'limited purpose' model of the RSS. Bestowing such a utilitarian rationale to polarisation tactics, at the same time, must invite the possibility of carrying its own moral baggage, particularly for a nation like India, with a traumatic postcolonial memory of inter-religious violence and intermittent communal conflagrations.

New Dalit assertions

Appropriation also has its discontents. It has been long argued that the real emancipation of dalits in a hindutva regime is scarcely realised because their empowerment at best takes on tokenistic or symbolic forms, and at worst their services are rendered valuable as foot-soldiers in communal violence (Ilaiah, 2004; Teltumbde, 2018). While reminding us of the dalit movement's tendency to fracture in the face of a hegemonic national party rule, like during the rule of the Indian National Congress in the 1950s to 1970s, and the BJP since 2014 onwards, Pai and Kumar point us to new modes of dalit agency which have come to occupy the vacuum left by a receding BSP. These groups however are not yet electorally viable since they are located sub-regionally and do not command pan-dalit unity. Competing against one another to become the legitimate alternative of the BSP, they reflect an enduring debate of ambedkarite politics: what is the best method agitational or constitutional– to organise dalit politics? The only slippery slope in Pai and Kumar's work might be an apparent over-determination upon the opinions of intellectuals publicly affiliated with political parties, because these in some instances serve as 'summaries', flattening the nuances that are otherwise skilfully portrayed in the book.

Conclusion

Republic of Hindutva and *Maya, Modi, Azad* are best read together to understand the changing relationship of dalit politics and Hindu nationalism. They offer farsighted clues through rigorous field-based investigations and electoral data inferences into the future of dalit politics in India. At a time when there are clear attempts by the opposition to revive the caste question and caste identity politics, and with the BJP finally caving into the demand for a nationwide caste census after losing its parliamentary majority in the 2024 general election, these two books provide convincing answers to the question of the age: why the subaltern rally behind parties identified as an ideological anathema in the conventional social sciences textbooks?

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