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Editor's Report

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It is with great pleasure that we present the twenty-fourth issue of Explorations, which brings together ten research articles and two book reviews that examine how belonging, livelihood, health and schooling are shaped, contested and negotiated in contemporary India. The issue ranges from the ethnic conflict and migrant lives of Northeast India to coal mines in Telangana, floods and landslides in the Western Ghats, the dumping yards of Nagpur, the caste practices of school students in Tamil Nadu, and the politics of childbirth in Hyderabad, and it draws on ethnography, oral and archival history, narrative inquiry, surveys and policy review.

A recurring concern runs through these contributions: how groups placed at the margins by history, geography or policy make sense of that position and respond to it. Whether the subject is displaced Kuki-Zo families recreating home through food, tribal communities facing a coal company, Adivasi farmers adjusting to an unstable climate, waste pickers who live beside what they sort, or students who carry caste into the school compound, the articles show that exclusion is produced by institutions and by everyday practice alike, and that those who experience it are never merely passive.

A first cluster of papers turns to Northeast India, in particular Manipur, and to questions of identity, displacement and belonging. Hoineilhing Sitlhou and N. Annavaram examine the consumption patterns of Kuki-Zo migrants in Hyderabad, a population that has grown since the ethnic violence in Manipur that began on 3 May 2023. Using a narrative approach, and drawing on fieldwork in three villages in the hill districts of Manipur and in five ethnic grocery stores in Hyderabad, they show how nostalgia turns everyday food at home into comfort food in the city. The grocery stores produce an ethnic foodscape that brings a place left behind into the present, and food becomes a statement of resilience, belonging and difference. Isaac L Varay reflects on doing fieldwork in the aftermath of the same violence. Based on nine months of ethnographic research across relief camps and field sites in Senapati, Kangpokpi, Churachandpur, Imphal and Bishnupur, the article treats danger, suspicion and positionality as methodological questions and locates friendship as the channel through which trust is negotiated and Meitei, Kuki and Naga informants are reached. Kedilezo Kikhi and Prtithibi Pratibha Gogoi turn to the Dimasas of Assam and Nagaland. Drawing on about eighteen months of fieldwork between 2017 and 2020, they analyse how the militant group Dima Halam Daogah has reworked the traditional institution of Daikho, the clan-based religious geography of the Dimasas, to build pan-Dimasa solidarity, including by re-integrating the matrilineage of Dimasa women who marry non-Dimasa men. Priya Sharma and Khangembam Indira trace the migration and settlement of Nepalis in Manipur from the colonial period. Combining archival documents, secondary literature and oral histories, and reading them through Everett Lee's push-pull framework and Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital, they find a long-settled community whose integration has been a negotiated coexistence rather than assimilation, and which still faces land insecurity, political marginalisation and identity-based exclusion.

A second cluster examines livelihoods, environment and development among marginalised groups. K. Ranjith Babu compares the responses of the two tribal communities such as Lambada and the Kolam to SCCL coal mining in the Goleti area of Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district in Telangana. Using Sherry Ortner's concept of subjectivity, he explains why two tribes living in the same forest responded so differently: the Lambadas adapted and secured regular employment with the company, while the Kolams withdrew into the forest, lost land and saw their social and economic conditions deteriorate. The paper also shows how weakly rehabilitation and resettlement policy has been implemented. Muhammed Sihas K. M.

studies how climate change is altering the livelihoods of three Adivasi communities, the Kurumar, Paniyar and Kattunaicker, in Wayanad district, Kerala. Based on ethnographic engagement between 2018 and 2024, the study finds that vulnerability is unevenly distributed. Some Paniyar families, traditionally bonded agricultural labourers, have begun to lease land and farm for themselves, and several communities are moving back to traditional and organic cultivation because it withstands floods and low rainfall better. The author argues that inequality and social justice must be central to climate debates. Nishant Kumar Dongre and Aruna Chinnappan focus on dumping yard waste pickers in Bhandewadi, Nagpur, who live in close proximity to the waste they work with and so carry a double burden. Using a mixed-methods design that combines interviews and focus group discussions with secondary data, the article documents their economic vulnerability, health hazards and persistent stigma, even though they sustain the city's circular economy. It argues for formal recognition, basic protective equipment and a place for these workers in municipal decision-making.

Two articles address schooling, a theme this journal has returned to often. Elamaran S and S. Ramdoss examine caste-based practices among 142 secondary and higher secondary students in a southern district of Tamil Nadu: threads tied on the wrist, caste colours painted or stuck on cycles and stitched into clothes, and caste-based gangs. The study finds that schools function not only as places of instruction but also as sites where caste identities are learned and reproduced, that age is an important factor, and that students sometimes join caste violence in support of their group without a clear understanding of the situation. The authors call for teacher training, awareness programmes and grievance redress mechanisms. Balaji Kendre and Pankti Surve offer a critical review, based on secondary sources, of India's education policies from 1968 through 1986 to the National Education Policy 2020. They examine how NEP 2020 seeks to move away from rote learning towards a multidisciplinary, learner-centred system, and they identify the gap between policy intent and classroom reality as the central challenge, pointing to inequities, the digital divide, and the need for research funding and institutional autonomy.

D. Veerababu turns to maternal health. The article analyses the rising number of caesarean deliveries performed without medical necessity, in a state, Telangana, which recorded the highest share of caesarean births in NFHS-5. Drawing on national survey data and in-depth interviews with 40 expectant mothers in Hyderabad who preferred caesarean delivery, the study identifies fear of labour pain, earlier traumatic births, and beliefs about auspicious birth times, perceived safety, and misinformation from social media as major reasons. It finds that schemes promoting institutional delivery have not lowered the rate of caesarean births, and it argues that literacy alone will not reduce unnecessary surgery without maternal health literacy, better antenatal counselling and trained frontline workers.

The articles in this issue also show considerable theoretical and methodological variety. Contributors draw on Ortner's subjectivity, Bourdieu's habitus and capital, push-pull migration theory, and ideas of caste socialisation and symbolic reproduction, and they employ multi-sited ethnography, narrative inquiry, archival and oral history, surveys with an interview schedule, mixed methods, in-depth interviews and policy analysis. Four of the ten papers concern Manipur and the wider Northeast, and several of them reflect on conflict, displacement and the practice of research itself, which makes this a timely collection. The article titled Disability and assistive technology devices: negotiating identities among persons with locomotor disabilities by K. Pavani Sree and C. Raghava Reddy explores how assistive technology devices mediate the social construction of disabled identities, focusing on the impact of stigma on their adoption among persons with disabilities in India. Previous studies have documented significant physical and psychosocial challenges following limb loss or deformity; however, the link between identity and assistive technology usage remains underexplored. The article titled Stars, Faith and Profit: The Moral Economy of Astrology in Contemporary Hindu Practice in Jammu by Abhinandan and Abha Chauhan examines the

convergence of consumerism, modernity, and tradition and its ethical consequences for Hindu astrological practice.

The two book reviews and one reflexive essay in this issue extend the discussion to recent scholarship and engage with works of interest to sociologists and social anthropologists.

This issue reflects the journal's continued commitment to publishing rigorous, socially engaged sociological research with a sense of policy implications. We are particularly pleased to feature contributions from early-career researchers and scholars working in under-represented regions and institutions. We extend our deepest gratitude to all contributors for their scholarship and patience throughout the review and revision process. We also thank the peer reviewers for their rigorous engagement and constructive feedback, which have strengthened the articles in this issue. Finally, we thank our readers for their continued support and engagement with Explorations.

We welcome submissions for future issues that continue to expand the sociological imagination, particularly from early-career researchers and scholars working in under-represented regions and institutions. As we navigate an era of profound social, economic and political transformation, the need for critical, empirically grounded and theoretically informed sociological research has never been greater.

Thank you for your continued support.

Prof. Nagaraju Gundemeda,
Editor, Explorations
Department of Sociology,
School of Social Sciences,
University of Hyderabad,
Email: explorationsiss@gmail.com

Article: Food Memories and Migration: Migrants' Conversations and Ethnic Grocery Stores of Hyderabad

Author: Hoineilhing Sitlhou and N. Annavaram

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Food Memories and Migration: Migrants' Conversations and Ethnic Grocery Stores of Hyderabad

--Hoineilhing Sitlhou and N. Annavaram,

Abstract

Migrant communities respond in multiple ways towards the food culture of their host society. For the Kuki-Zo migrants, there is selective preservation of their own traditional foodways – 'everyday food' in the home state becomes 'comfort food' in Hyderabad. The present study is an effort to understand the consumption patterns of Kuki-Zo migrants in Hyderabad, and of how 'nostalgia' plays a crucial role in shaping their dietary preferences. It traces –the 'culinary migration' of food and foodways of Manipur as it travels out of context to a metropolitan city of India; and the ethnic foodscape created by the 'presencing' of the ethnic grocery stores. Beyond its role of fostering community bonds and cultural identity within the Kuki-Zo migrants and amongst Northeast Indian migrants, food becomes relevant in making sense of a place. Even when the ethnic violence in Manipur resulted in the increase of their population in Hyderabad, ethnic foodways played a crucial role in fostering resilience, offering continuity and a shared sense of belonging in the face of displacement and cultural adaptation. The study uses the narrative approach to understand the 'nostalgic consumption' of the migrants, in their conversations with researchers and vendors of the 'ethnic grocery stores'.

KEYWORDS: *Migration; Culinary Migration; Nostalgia; Comfort Food; Ethnic Violence.*

Introduction

The discrimination faced by Northeast Indian migrants in metropolitan cities of India has been widely written about (McDuie-Ra, 2012; Ramesh, 2012; Nongbri and Shimreiwung, 2017; Sitlhou and Punathil, 2017), and their food culture is one causative factor of the prejudice against them (Sitlhou, 2020; Kikon, 2022). Roy's (2026) recent article discusses the placement of migrants from Northeast India within the labor hierarchies of Bengaluru's wellness sector, and the influence of race, region, and class on the 'capacity to aspire' in urban settings. In a departure from the prevailing debates, the present study is an effort to understand the consumption patterns of migrants in Hyderabad, and how 'food memories' in the form of 'nostalgia' for 'home food' plays an important role in shaping their dietary preferences in the new setting. The migration of the Northeast Indians to Hyderabad dates back to the 1990s and early 2000s (Niumai and Rajesh, 2024). While some of them worked in public sector companies, central government departments, and private or retail sectors, others came for higher studies or professional trainings, or to set up their own businesses or enterprises. Ethnic

conflicts in Northeast of India, such as the ongoing one in Manipur, have caused large scale displacement of people. The Kuki-Zo migrant population in Hyderabad has increased owing to the ethnic violence in Manipur that began on 3rd May, 2023.[i] Some of those who were internally displaced chose Hyderabad as their migration destination.

Migrant communities are often compelled to undergo a process of food acculturation in which they acquire or alter their food practices, preferences, habits, and the cultural meanings associated with food. Based on the level of resilience of the migrants to maintain their original culture or their ability to adopt elements of the host society, they undergo a fourfold acculturation process – assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization (Arcadu et. al., 2025). Though the centrality of food as a medium of cultural symbolism, and as a token of 'home land' and 'home culture' cannot be ignored, it can also traverse geographical boundaries as it travels and follows the consumer outside its context. Traditional foodways play a crucial role in fostering resilience within immigrant communities, offering continuity, coping resources, and a shared sense of belonging in the face of displacement and cultural adaptation (ibid, p. 1). It is at the above backdrop that the paper traces the 'culinary migration' of food and foodways of the scheduled tribes of Manipur as it travels out of context to one of the metropolitan cities in the country –Hyderabad.

Materials and Method

The paper used the narrative approach in trying to understand the 'culinary nostalgia' and 'nostalgic consumption' of the migrants, in their conversations with the researcher and the vendors selling the 'home food'. The data on 'home food' of the Kuki-Zos is derived from fieldwork conducted in villages –Haipi (Thadou Tribe), Lingsiphai (Vaiphei Tribe) and Parbung (Hmar Tribe) –in the hill districts of Manipur.[ii] A household survey was conducted with one-third of the total households in the village selected for the study. Fieldwork was also done in five ethnic grocery stores in Hyderabad. The researcher interviewed five vendors of ethnic grocery stores; observed, listened and noted the conversations between the vendors and the customers; and also interviewed the customers. These grocery stores sell food items that cater to the dietary preferences/ ideals of the hill communities in Manipur and other Northeast Indian States. Their primary customers are north-eastern 'migrants' belonging to eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland, Assam, Sikkim and Meghalaya. They share a slightly distinct and different food culture with respect to the 'host communities' in particular and the 'mainland Indians' in general. The 'migrants' in Hyderabad are those who had migrated or are temporarily staying in Hyderabad for 'pursuing education' or for 'work-related purposes.' Of the Northeast Indian migrants in Hyderabad, the consumption patterns of the Kuki-Zo migrants[iii] (including the Kuki-Zo IDPs) from Manipur are taken as a case in point to

understand the extent in which 'nostalgia' play an important role in shaping their dietary preferences in Hyderabad.

Food, Emotion & Nostalgia

The following points discussed in the study by Meredith E. Abarca and Joshua R. Colby (2016, pp. 2-5) has benefitted the present research:

1) Personal memories of food are converted into social (collective) ones via narratives (ibid). Narratives, the act of telling stories, provide the site for the interpretive expression that decodes food-based memories.
2) The sensory and emotional implications of food memories function within the individual, and they are always socially and culturally grounded.

The symbiotic connection between food and emotion has also been deliberated by Deborah Lupton (2007). She argues, food becomes a medium to communicate one's emotion and emotion in turn determines one's food preference. 'The taste, smell and texture of food can therefore serve to trigger memories of previous food events and experiences around food… and the linkages may take place at a subconscious or unconscious level' (Lupton, 2007, pp. 320-321). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu (2010) using the concept of 'habitus' and 'cultural capital' explores the relationship between taste and social structure. Habitus refers to the internalized dispositions, tastes and practices that are shaped by our social position and experiences. It is not simply a set of conscious choices, but rather a deep-seated way of being and acting in the world. It is formed through the unconscious processes of socialization, as we internalize the norms and values of the groups we belong to. Wm. Alex McIntosh (1996) also examined the cultural dimensions of food, examining how societal values and norms shape our culinary practices. Therefore, food evokes emotions and memories of the past that is mediated by the taste, smell, ingredients' specificity (or sometimes replication) and manner of eating (Arcadu et al., 2025).

Defining 'Everyday Food' or 'Home Food'

There are dishes that embody our sense of home, becoming the food memories that we have gathered throughout our lives, and which in turn have come to season the flavors of our cultural identity (Abarca and Colby, 2016). The Kuki-Zo families in the hill-districts of Manipur have a distinctively different food culture as compared to the mainland Indian societies including the South Indian city of Hyderabad. A family's food table commonly comprises of plain cooked rice, rice-porridge with the core ingredient(s) being either meat or vegetables or both; plain salted curry with mixed vegetables seasoned with dried meat; plain boiled vegetables; chilly chutney mixed with meat or vegetables; deep fried vegetables; and meat-based fried curry (including part of animals like head, legs, innards etc.). Ingredients like fermented fish (*Nga-thu*), fermented soyabeans (*Bekanthu*), fermented bamboo-shoot *(Toi-thu*), fermented pork lard/ fat (*Sa-thu*), fermented

sesame (*Si-thu*), fermented crab (*Ai-thu*) etc., ash-soda (*Chang-Al*)[iv] and sun-dried (or dried over traditional fire-place) vegetable, fruit, fish and meat etc. are an important aspect of their food culture or 'home food'. It is often assumed that non-vegetarian diet is a part of the 'everyday dietary practices' of the tribals of Northeast India. To this question, 74 years old P. Kamkholal (pers. comm., June 20, 2025) discussed about the context of the Vaiphei Tribe,

> In the past, the Vaiphei family food table did not have potato or dal but taro, beans, pumpkin (including the leaves), snake gourd, ash gourd etc. In our diet, vegetables were more common comparatively, considered healthier and even eaten alongside meat. It is only at the end of the year that all the celebrations and feastings were done. The celebrations were done at the end when the harvesting had already been done and people were freer in terms of obligations/ requirements from agricultural activities. Families would often eat together in a large plate; rice was served in all corners of the plate and the curry was poured in the middle while the chutney was placed in a bowl outside. Interestingly, even the curries had rice as an ingredient and it is called *meh-pok* or rice-porridge. A lot of chillies were added in the curries. The cooking style changed during the 1950s and 1970s when new food preparation styles were introduced. For instance, instead of '*chang-al'* we would buy 'cooking sodas' from the market to add to our stews because it was more convenient.

Food memoirs are deeply intertwined with personal biographies and cultural identities; creating and recreating meanings; while also seasoning the interpretative process that shaped the narratives (Abarca and Colby, 2016, p. 2). Lal Dena[v] (pers. comm., June 21, 2025) spoke at length on the food habits of a typical Hmar family on a daily basis. He reminisces his younger days in Pherzawl district of Manipur when he and his family would directly procure vegetables and food grains from jhum fields. Meat was eaten very rarely and vegetables were prepared most commonly using the following procedures.

1. *Chang-al me* is a blend of vegetables including bean (*berah*), beans leaves (*bena*), chilly (*marcha*), brinjal (*manta*) and fermented pork fats (*sathu*) etc. *Sizo-chang-al me* is a variant in which *sizo* (eurya acuminata) is the core ingredient. The Hmar Tribe celebrates the '*sizo* festival' and this goes to prove the special place of '*sizo*' leaves in their food culture. Though meat (pork, beef, mithun or chicken) could be cooked with other leaves like mustard or passion fruit leaves, the most revered meat-based rice porridge contains –*sizo*, ash soda (*chang-al*), chilly, pounded rice and meat.
2. *Chi-al me* or 'salted curry' is a simple concoction of ingredients like salt, chilly, culantro (*pathikhom),* elsholtzia communis (*lengmasel)*, spring onions, with a mixture of different vegetables[vi]. It represents the food of the 'working classes' 'agricultural laborers' and an 'everyday food'. In the original recipe, *chang-al, sathu* and masala were not added. But today, they have added fermented fish or smoked meat or cooking soda to enhance the taste of the traditionally simple vegetable mixture.
3. *Me-but or* boiled vegetable (s) is another important component of the Hmar's food culture. The most common *me-but* are boiled mustard leaves, east Indian

glory bower leaves, pumpkin, passion fruit leaves, turkey berry etc. *Me-jeu* or fried curries was also a part of the traditional food culture of the Hmar communities in the past. The only type of cooking oil available in the past was extracted out of pork fat.

4. *Si-thu me* or fermented sesame curry is made by heating sesame in a bowl over a fire. It is then pounded and grounded and a small quantity of water is added to it. It is then placed inside the bottle gourd and placed over the fireplace for 2-3 days. In *Si-thu me, Chang-al* is also added with other vegetables like pumpkin leaves or bean leaves. These are side curries/ dishes.
5. *Sathu mebang marchame* or *Sathu* (fermented pork fat) and *mebang marchame* (vegetable chutney) is a type of chutney in which green chilly is roasted over slow fire, *chang-al*/ ash soda or cooking soda is then added along with a small quantity of warm water. It is then stirred for a long time till the formation of bubbles and spring onion is added to it. Some people also add the insect larvae found inside taro plants into the chutney.

According to Mary Beth Sanate[vii] (pers. comm., June 21, 2025), 'Indians from other parts of the country presume that tribals eat only non-vegetarian food, but in reality, we eat much more greens (both domesticated and wild) as compared to them. We eat the leaves and stems of pumpkin, beans and peas etc.' She also commented on the generational gap with regard to the Hmar society's attitude on food culture and food preferences in the present time.

> Many of the younger generation are no longer as interested or aware of the traditional Hmar food culture. This could be attributed to the large-scale migration to cities in India and abroad for employment and education. Even those who have stayed behind have forgotten a lot of the age-old unique recipes and mode of food preparation. Food is very much linked to one's identity; and forgetting one's food tradition would in the long run be akin to forgetting one's Hmar cultural identity.

There were also meat-based traditional recipes that were unique to the Hmar community but overtime have become a part of the food culture of the other tribes within the Kuki-Zo or Kuki Chin group of people.

1. *Chartang-me* is made either with beef, mithun, pork, dog meat etc. The meat is cooked without water with only traditional spices –including *elsholtzia communis* or *lengmaser* (dried), chilly, *thingmalcha* (pepper), *saiser* (dried hatkora peel) and dry bay leaves. There is a change in the mode of preparation and the ingredients added to the curry. The traditional Hmar family would serve the *chartang-me* on the rice-porridge in the middle of the food spread in a big plate which could sometimes feed a whole family. In the past, it was the Mithun meat which was more popular than beef, but this has changed. The ingredients today have also changed –along with beef meat, innards and intestines, turmeric powder (and all other kinds of spices, meat masalas, soya bean sauces or pounded coriander seeds etc.), pounded garlic and ginger, dried red chilli, dried bay leaves, salt and wild coriander/ culantro are commonly added today.

2. *Bongkerot* is a dish in which the core ingredient is the leg of a cow which is dried, roasted and chopped into smaller pieces. It is cooked in a pressure cooker. Salt, cooking soda/ ash soda is added along with warm water. Fermented pork fat is added after stirring it for a long time. When similar ingredients and procedures are applied to the head of the cow, it is called *Bonglurot.* There is also a unique tradition of preparing pork sausage known as *sathi-thun* (*voksa thithun*). The intestine of the pig is filled with a mixture of minced meat, pig blood, herbs and spices. It is boiled, cut into smaller pieces and roasted over fire.

Migration, Culinary Migration & Nostalgic Consumption

One way of studying food and eating practices in migration processes is by tracing how culinary traditions, flavors and rituals move and are transformed across contexts. The concept of 'culinary migration' refers to the transfer of dishes and recipes from one context to another. Traditional food, dishes, and food rituals are known to reflect and preserve identity and cultural elements while providing a stable anchor in a distant and uncertain living context (Arcadu et al., 2025). Migrant communities respond in multiple ways towards the food culture of the host communities –full adoption, selective preservation of their own traditional foodways or the creative hybridisation of both (ibid, p. 2). In the destination country or state of migration, these sensory and emotional experiences can foster a sense of home and familiarity (Arcadu et al., 2025). 'Moreover, traditional foodways can play a crucial role in fostering resilience within immigrant communities, offering continuity, coping resources, and a shared sense of belonging in the face of displacement and cultural adaptation (ibid, p.1)'. Rachel Slocum considers 'eating'(consumption) and 'cooking' (food preparation) as acts that are constitutive of racial identity and its politics, and to the development and preservation of racialized identity and belonging for women, diasporic populations, immigrants, and the displaced, enslaved, and impoverished (Slocum, 2013, p. 28).

The concept of 'nostalgic consumption' was introduced by Jessica Steinman. It means 'the act of purchasing and consuming products that evoke memories of home, places, people, feelings and senses,' Steinman (2024) explores the food experiences of Vietnamese female migrant traders in Moscow (Russia), of how it shaped their sense of belonging and identity. Donna R. Gabaccia (1998) in his book on the history of food in the American Culture, drawing from the history of the Colonial Creoles, Native Americans, and waves of ethnic groups arriving in the United States over the past 200 years, puts into historical context the ethnic, regional, and national relationships of agriculture as well as food practices and preferences. This perspective provides the background of the varying horticultural and agricultural practices of different ethnic groups prior to their migration to the New World. It also looks at Native American traditions prior to, and after, contact with others arriving to the New World. Central to Gabaccia's historical understanding of ethnic food origins and food traditions is how such foods or

similar foods are used in the U.S. When foods could not be readily produced, such as in urban settings. Ethnic stores and shops in these settings satisfied those culinary needs. What emerges from this historical perspective is the regional variation throughout the U.S. that mirrors the migratory patterns, wherein immigrant communities were established (Andreatta, 2002).

For Fabio Parasecoli, food and eating are used as coping mechanism for migrant communities in order to deal with the dislocation and disorientation they experience in their new environment. They re-create a sense of place around food production, preparation, and consumption, both at the personal and interpersonal levels. The culinary traditions also undergo change, they are either maintained, or transformed, or made to become important points of reference in the formation of a sense of community and belonging (Parasecoli, 2014, p. 415). The 'Othering' process of food works in two ways –it is a food that connects the migrants to their history, culture and people, thus marking them as different from the host society. Secondly, the consumption of those very foods might mark them as outsiders in the host society in terms of flavors, smells, and behaviours. It undergoes various degrees of transformation due to the availability of ingredients, the exposure to different flavors and techniques, and the need to adapt to a dissimilar rhythm of life. 'These negotiations, where the participants often do not enjoy the same positions in terms of power and privilege, constantly shape and reshape culinary systems' (Parasecoli, 2014, pp. 419-420).

Arijit Sen's article 'Food, Place and Memory: Bangladesh fish stores on Devon Avenue, Chicago' explores the importance of food in the production of immigrant identity and placemaking in Chicago. The Bangladesh fish stores located on Devon Avenue, Chicago serve the unique culinary needs of immigrants from Bangladesh and Bengali speaking regions of India. Based on interviews with store owners and customers and architectural analysis of these stores, Sen's research explores how everyday engagements with food, specifically fish harvested in the delta region of Bangladesh, trigger cultural memories and reproduce particular forms of shopping practices and place identities among this relatively less studied group of South Asian immigrants. This case study suggests that immigrant world-making is Janus-faced; simultaneously looking back and remembering the past while adapting to the present and reconstituting hybrid places in both societies of origin and settlement. An examination of this tension between past and present, near and far, local and global shows how diverse material contexts influence the way we interpret and invoke food memories. By tracing the trajectory of the fish, Sen's article demonstrates that food defines a variety of immigrant places –retail stores and grocery stores aisles –as well as larger ecologies and spatial imaginaries, otherwise invisible in the studies of immigrant architecture (Sen, 2016, p. 67).

Lidia Marte (2007) used food mappings as a methodology to research spatial temporal aspects of food relations among migrant communities. Food enables

them to re-imagine or re-invent their cultural histories in consecutive homes or places (Marte, 2007, p. 262). 'Foodmaps are maps of relations, perceptual models of how people experience the boundaries of local home through food connections …(it) is an image-based approach to research that pays attention to the way people relate to food in the interaction of senses, emotions, and environments (ibid, pp. 262-263)'. The concept of 'food mapping' is relevant in understanding the Kuki-Zo migrants' experiences of navigating and negotiating in an urbanscape like Hyderabad, and more specifically of how food was instrumental in establishing a sense of 'belongingness' in an unfamiliar setting.

Rituparna Patgiri (2022) examines the social dynamics of food within university hostels in New Delhi –food not merely as a means of nourishment but as a social process that creates interactive, inter-relational, cooperative, and sometimes conflictual relationships between people. Hostels serve as crucial public spaces for migrant students who come from smaller cities and towns seeking education and employment opportunities. Hostel food functions simultaneously as a tool for community building (via shared meals) and as a mechanism for exclusion and social division. For students from Northeastern India, hostel menus—which feature northern and central Indian cuisines—become a source of alienation and exclusion. The exclusion of northeastern food from hostel menus is particularly significant, as the food is often stereotyped as 'smelly' and 'dirty,' with fermented ingredients and pungent aromas becoming tools of otherization. This exclusion reinforces the idea that only certain dietary practices are considered authentically 'Indian.'

The Ethnic Grocery Stores in Hyderabad

This section gives a detailed account of a set of ethnic grocery stores in Hyderabad. Though owned by retailers from Manipur, they called themselves Northeast (Indian) stores –an inclusive food politics and a convenient marketing strategy. As Arijit Sen had mentioned in another context, the 'practice and engagement within these spaces produce ethnicity—a symbolic interactionist logic that argues that acting is being, engaging with the grocery store produces ethnic subjects…and eating certain kinds of food connects people to their ethnic roots (Sen, 2016, p. 75)'. The narrative approach is used in trying to understand the experiences of the vendors and the conversations in (and around) the ethnic foodscapes. The location of the ethnic grocery stores is positioned where migrants are more populated, and some migrants prefer to rent places closer to these stores. Therefore, the presence of the ethnic grocery stores enables the formation of an 'ethnic gastronomic destination', and 'spatial imaginaries are produced during everyday lived experiences, perceptions and interactions (ibid, p. 67).'

TABLE 1 (Profile of Vendors Selected for Study)

Vendors	Age	Gender	Hometown	No. of years in present Business
Vendor 1	46	Female	Churachandpur District, Manipur	8 years
Vendor 2	39	Male	Churachandpur District, Manipur	2 years
Vendor 3	40	Male	Jiribam District, Manipur	3 years
Vendor 4	37	Female	Tamenglong District, Manipur	6 years
Vendor 5	40	Male	Jiribam District, Manipur	7 years

Photos from the Field-Sites



Image 1: The Northeast Shop and Monica Kamei Organic North (East) Vegetables.

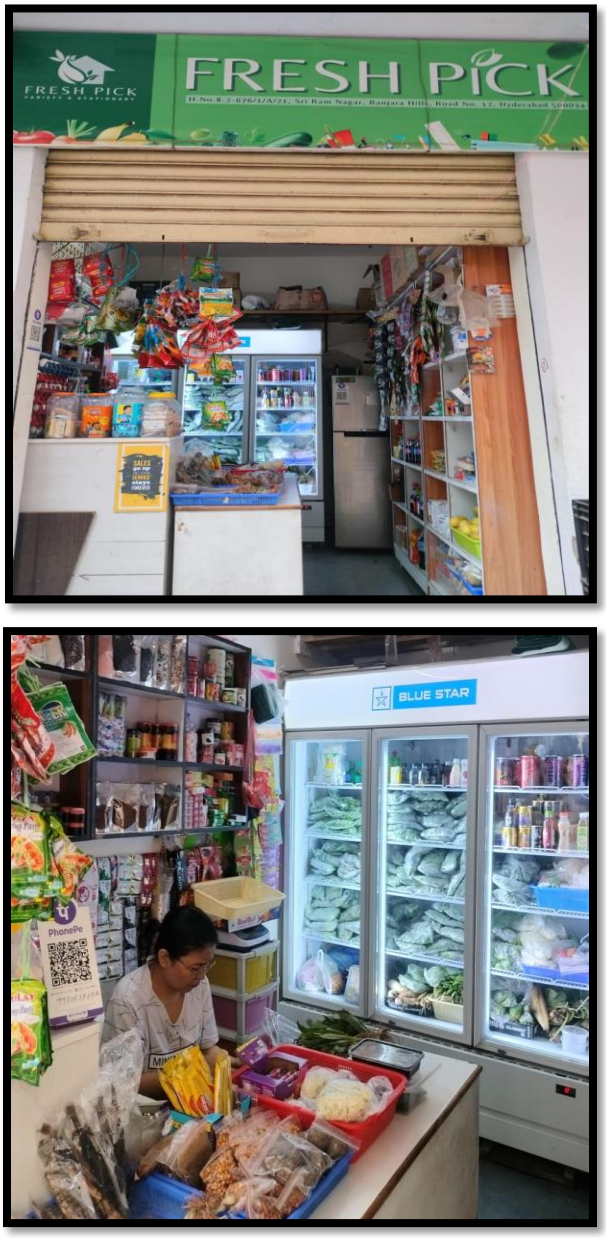

Image 2: Fresh Pick Store in Sri Ram Nagar, Banjara (Inside and Outside the Store)

Vendor 1

Vendor 1 (pers. comm., August 26, 2025) has been in this business since 2017. She was the first from Manipur to start this business of selling home grown vegetables from the hills of Manipur. She recalls that she started it as a small-scale business venture. Initially, she began operating it from her house buying for her own family and to a small circle of known and consistent customers. But the response and demand were so overwhelming that she was encouraged to take it to

the next level. She has now opened her own shop and has hired two assistants under her. She sells the following vegetables, fruits and fermented vegetables (and meat) amongst many others.

TABLE 2

1. Snails *(Tuilung)* 2. Fermented Soyabean *(Bethu)* 3. Mustard leaves *(Ankam)* 4. King Chilli 5. Culantro *(Pathikhom)* 6. East India Glory Bower *(Anphui)* 7. Passion fruit leaves *(Saptheiche)* 8. Swordbean 9. Starbean 10. Fox nuts (*Thangjing*) 11. Heart Leaf/ Houttuynia Cordata (*Aithanglou*) 12. Garlic chives *(Changnamjung)* 13. Elsholtzia communis (*Lengmusel)* 14. Chives (*Nakuppi*) 15. Water mimosa (*Ekai Thabi)* 16. Stinky beans (*Jonglha)* 17. Climbing wattle (*Khangkhu)* 18. Dysoxylum gobara *(Thingthupi)* 19. Sour leaf (*Toiki*) 20. Bladder dock (*Anbongche)* 21. Kelantang/ Eurya Acuminata (*Sijou)* 22. Bitter eggplant (*Anjang)* 23. Bean leaves *(Bena)* 24. Colocasia (*Baal)*	25. Pumpkin *(Mainou)* 26. Red Pumpkin (*Maisan)* 27. Indian Prickly Ash (*Lingnamse)* 28. Acmella paniculata/ Panicled spot flower (*Ansache)* 29. Sticky corn *(Kolbu Man)* 30. Cucumber (*Changmai)* 31. Sichuan/Michinga Patta *(Singjol)* 32. Indian Pennywort (*Changkongche)* 33. Squash leaves 34. Red potatoes 35. Spring Onion (*Louthul)* 36. Bamboo shoot (*Gotoi)* 37. Passion fruit and leaves 38. Dry fish 39. Dry bamboo shoot 40. Spiky gourd (*Changkhot)* 41. Fern leaves 42. Small red chilli *(Jumalcha)* 43. Taro stem *(Dol)* 44. Ficus Auriculata or elephant ear fig (*Theipi)* 45. Indian trumpet tree or Broken bones plant (*Bahlong)* 46. Beehives (*Khoinou)* 47. Green peas leaf (*Hawaiche)* 48. East-Himalayan Cardamon (*Aigitil)*	49. Fermented Shrimp paste (*Ngapi*) 50. Java Plum (*Lenmui)* 51. Pigeon Pea *(Belhing)* 52. Salty fish *(Ngachiel)* 53. Pineapple *(Lengthei)* 54. Pumkin leaves (*Maiche)* 55. Bitter eggplants/ turkey berry (*Anjang Neo*) 56. Jordan fruit (*Jonmut)* 57. Ginger flower 58. Banana flower 59. Banana stem 60. Fava bean/ legume *(Hawaimubi)* 61. Small Mushroom (*Pasi)* 62. Dried taro leaves *(Dolgop)* 63. Jungle Netvine *(Ankhapi)* 64. Drop wort *(Komprek)* 64. Yam flower (*Baibing)* 65. Kidney beans *(Rajma)* 66. Dried meat *(Sagop)* 67. Dried Roselle flowers 68. Fermented of dried taro leaves (*Anishi)* 69. Fermented bamboo shoots (*Toithu*) 70. Fermented fish (*Ngathu*) 71. Fermented pork fat (*Sathu*)

Some of these vegetables and fruits are also found in Hyderabad, but the variety and taste differ from those grown in the hills of Manipur –topography, climate, soil, temperature, seed variety etc. Moreover, unlike the farming communities in Hyderabad, the leaves of beans, peas, mustard, pumpkin, squash, passion fruit are also sold by them. Vendor 1 also sells pickles, tin fish, cooked meals and curries like blood sausages, pork innards, meat-based curries etc. The groceries in her store are restocked at least once or twice a week depending on the demand.

Business tends to pick up during march and December. Many students and working professionals travel home during Christmas. When they return, they usually bring back food and vegetables from their hometowns, which lasts them until around february. By march, their provisions are exhausted, and the demand rises again. In december, especially leading up to Christmas, business picks up due to house parties and advent Christmas celebrations. Her customers would tell her of how they would include the ethnic food (not available in the Hyderabad market or restaurants) in order to make it extra special for their guests. Selling these food products or vegetables help in preserving the consumers' respective identities or food culture. There are also certain foods like mustard leaves and king chilly which are shared across many communities. The business means a lot to her as she herself consume this food on a daily basis. It was because of her adherence to food values and home food that she became inspired to start this business in the first place.

Food holds an immense value as it weaves together our identity, and tradition in a way that feels profoundly meaningful. In her opinion, food and culture are deeply intertwined. Every community or tribe (in Manipur) has their own unique way of preparing even the same vegetables or meat. She takes pride in her profession and considers herself to be a contributor to her home culture through these ethnic groceries and vegetables. She strongly feels that food can be the catalyst that can act as a 'unifying factor' which can bring all the tribes and communities of Northeast India closer and shed aside their differences.

One of the biggest challenges for the vendors has been to convince customers of the reasonability of the price of the products being sold. She said, 'there's a stark difference in pricing which isn't driven by us, but by a range of external factors like logistics, availability, and market dynamics. For instance, *Ngathu* (fermented fish), which costs rupees one hundred and five for 250 grams at the source, ends up being sold for rupees one hundred and sixty at the destination. Similarly, rice cakes from Moreh (border town between Myanmar and Manipur) priced at rupees eighty are sold in Hyderabad for rupees one hundred and fifty. Sometimes customers compare it with the price at their own hometown and complain about it. Not only are the transportation costs high, but there are also other challenges. During summer, vegetables spoil quickly due to the heat. Flight delays will then exacerbate the issue and sometimes shipments arrive after three days, and half the products would have been spoiled and rendered useless. Frequent flight cancellations are the biggest challenge which customers hardly think about when they compare prices.

Vendor 2

Vendor 2 (pers. comm., August 25, 2025) has ventured into the business in January 2023. For him, sales are better in winter season as compared to rainy season. In rainy season, half of the vegetables get spoiled during air transport. In

winter, churches order in bulk for the Christmas feast. Once the venders receive the specifications, they arrange the orders with suppliers from the home states. Besides selling ethnic groceries, vendor 2 also supplies readymade dishes cooked with ingredients and recipes that resonate with the food culture and culinary styles in the home states of the customers. He explained, 'many of our customers live alone and do not have time to cook for themselves after a long day at work. Ready-made foods are a convenient arrangement for them (customers) and a profitable business for the vendors. Moreover, many people from the Northeast are not adjustable to the culinary cultures in mainland India –the excessive consumption of spices, cooking oils etc.'.

For him, the food that one eats mirrors one's 'belongingness' to a particular community. He feels privileged that he could cater to the needs of his fellow migrants by providing them an avenue (ethnic grocery store) in which they can obtain their ethnic food in a faraway geographical context. While discussing Polish ethnic grocery stores in Ireland, Linda Coakley invokes Hetherington's concept of *praesentia* or *presencing* of something that is not really there, in order to argue that the very sight or taste of ethnic food generates a sense of home and may remind immigrants of a place, time, and geography that they have left behind (Sen, 2016). The experience is similar to the context of the Northeast India migrants, including Kuki-Zos in Hyderabad.

Vendor 3

Vendor 3 (pers. comm., August 23, 2025) started his ethnic grocery store in 2022. He earns a monthly average income of rupees seventy thousand to eighty thousand selling products like organic vegetables, non-vegetarian pickles like chicken, fish, pork, beef, prawns, king chilli pickles, bamboo shoot pickles, fermented soyabeans pickles etc. In conversations about his ethnic grocery store, he told us that home-grown vegetables are construed as reminders to a 'home' and a 'culture' that migrants leave behind. They are expressions of their tradition, culture and identity; representing and embodying their roots, belongings, origin and history. Donna R. Gabaccia (1998) has written something similar on the American context. She wrote, through the use of certain foods, be they herbs or spices, vegetables or fruits, or the manner in which foods are prepared, cultural and ethnic traditions are passed down through the sharing of food. Traditional, ceremonial and feasting foods, as well as the use of ordinary or common foods, reinforce cultural and ethnic identity.

Vendor 4

Vendor 4 (pers. comm., August 24, 2025) ventured into this business in 2019. After she got married and had a child, it was no longer feasible for her to continue working in a private sector. that was when she set up the ethnic grocery store, we have covered in the present research. On an average she makes a profit of rupees

twenty thousand to thirty thousand per month. She is happy with the profit and the customer satisfaction that she derives from it. She procures the food products from Imphal (Manipur)[viii] and Dimapur (Nagaland). She spends about thirty thousand to forty thousand for restocking her goods. What inspired her to venture into the business was the idea of bringing in home (Manipur) grown organic vegetables for migrants in Hyderabad like herself. To her, it was a way of contributing to the preservation or continuation of a cultural identity via food culture. She felt it was necessary to introduce the home food culture to the new generation of children who were born and socialised in the host land – Hyderabad. Local Hyderabadis do not frequent the shop except occasionally to buy fruits like pineapple.

Vendor 5

Vendor 5 (pers. comm., August 23, 2025) ventured into the business of selling ethnic groceries and vegetables from Manipur since 2018. The average gross annual income of his store is about four lakh rupees (capital and profit included). The price of one consignment, inclusive of shipment and product cost, ranges from rupees thirty-five thousand to forty thousand. Restocking of goods takes place two to three times a week. All ethnic tribes in Manipur are equally represented as customers at his store and they frequent his store more than the customers from the other Northeastern states. Ethnic groceries and vegetables are sold at a price that is two to three times higher in Hyderabad as compared to the home-state. For example, if mustard leaves cost rupees twenty at the home state (Manipur/ Dimapur/ Guwahati), it is sold at rupees sixty in Hyderabad. Similarly, one kg of snail cost rupees eighty and is sold at rupees two hundred in Hyderabad. He said, 'though they complain about the price differences, they would still purchase it. The very fact that more and more people are entering into the business of marketing northeast Indian foods and food products are a proof that the market for it is doing well, thriving and growing. The business is however not very popular with non-Northeasterners.' He considers it a very profitable enterprise.

Vendor 5 made the following observations on the subject of food, culture and identity based on his conversation with his customers in his seven years of experience.

> I feel they could identify with these home-grown vegetables and they are 'comfort food' that help them to adapt to unfamiliar surroundings and overcome work related stress. It helps them to maintain emotional connection to a place they consider home despite the distance. I feel I have made a very important contribution by bridging the gap (physical distance) between 'home food' and the 'consumer', and enabling the migrants to continue with their dietary habits and preferences even in a new place (Hyderabad).

The nostalgia for 'home food' is naturally found more among people who have recently arrived in the city. 'When migrants find themselves in unfamiliar sensory

and cultural environments, eating is an inevitable component of daily life that forces them to interact physically, emotionally, and cognitively with the surrounding Otherness (Parasecoli, 2014, p. 418)'.

All the vendors receive between fifteen to hundred customers in a day –from Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura and Assam. They also occasionally receive customers who are local Hyderabadis. These customers are infrequent visitors, though. The peak sale of the north-eastern ethnic stores in Hyderabad, we are told, is during weekends and festive seasons/ occasions like Christmas, Assamese Bihu, Manipuri *Laiharaoba* celebrations etc. Years of experiences in the profession enabled the vendors to recognise a pattern in the purchasing preferences of their customers from different ethnic communities–Kuki-Zos (Manipur), Meiteis (Manipur), Nagas (Nagaland and Manipur), Mizos (Mizoram), Local Hyderabadis etc. There are some ethnic foods that are common to many tribes of Northeast India –king chilli, fermented soya beans etc. King Chilli, considered the world hottest chilli, also known by the scientific name *Capicum Chinense Jackquin*, is a common favourite. Assuming different names, fermented soya bean is also a commonly preferred food. It is known as *Bethu* amongst the Kuki-Zos, *Bekang* amongst the Mizos and *Akhuni* amongst the Nagas. In Manipur, fermented fish and bamboo-shoot and king chilli are eaten by all communities.

When vendors were asked on what basis they choose which ethnic foods to sell in their stores, the answer was 'popularity of the ethnic food –in the home state. Considering that all ethnic food in the Northeast Indian states (or Manipur) cannot be transported to Hyderabad for various reasons, the vendors have to be selective of which item to invest in while also keeping in mind customers' preference.

The Ethnic Foodscape –Emanating the Sense of Familiarity

In the Sri Ram Nagar colony of Banjara Hills, Hyderabad, the field sites consist of food stalls and ethnic grocery stores operated by individuals from Manipur, serving customers from the eight Northeastern states. During the fieldwork period from November 2025 to May 2026, there were a total of nine such ethnic food stalls and grocery stores. All were owned by retailers from Manipur, with the exception of one, were all part of the Kuki-Zo community.

Table No 3:

Number of Stalls/ Eateries	Store Name	Year of Establishment	State of Origin	Variants of Customers Received
1	Northeast Kitchen (Small Eatery)	2024	Churachandpur, Manipur	Different communities in Manipur, Khasis (Meghalaya), Mizos (Mizoram), Nepalis, Local Hyderabadis (including Telugus) etc.
2	Fresh Pick Kitchen (Small Eatery)	2025	Churachandpur, Manipur	Mostly from the different 8 Northeastern states.
3	Monica Kamei Organic North East Vegetables (Ethnic Grocery Store)	2019	Tamenglong, Manipur	Mostly from the different 8 Northeastern states.
4	Eimi Hotel cum Northeast Vegetable Store (combined Small Eatery and Ethnic Grocery Store)	2024	Churachandpur, Manipur	Mostly from the different 8 Northeastern states.
5	Northeast Fast-Food Corner cum Fresh Vegetable Store	2025	Jiribam, Manipur	Mostly from the different 8 Northeastern states.
6	Fresh Pick (Ethnic Grocery Store)	2022	Churachandpur, Manipur	Mostly from the different 8 Northeastern states.
7	Mero-North-East Variety (Ethnic Grocery Store & Ethnic Handloom Products)	2025	Churachandpur, Manipur	Mostly from the different 8 Northeastern states.
8	Northeast Vegetable Centre (Ethnic Grocery Store & Ethnic Handloom Products)	2022	Jiribam, Manipur	Mostly from the different 8 Northeastern states.
9	Northeast Hub (Ethnic Grocery Store & Small Eatery in another location closely)	2017	Churachandpur, Manipur	Mostly from the different 8 Northeastern states.

For Joassart-Marcelli, Salim and Vu (2018), ethnic foodscapes consist of physical places, people, objects, discourses, and sensual elements, that are associated with the foodways of ethnic groups in particular places. Many of the customers discuss how they feel right at home in the neighbourhood where the ethnic grocery stores are located. When browsing the stores, customers feel a sense of nostalgia being able to hear other people speak languages they could easily associate with. The place and the sight or taste of ethnic food enable the presencing 'of a place, time and geography that they have left behind' (Sen, 2016, p. 72). There is an assemblage of people who look alike, speak similar or familiar languages, share similar culture or ethnic origin or home state or similar culinary habits. The food is culturally relevant, invoke emotional reaction, is considered healthier (organic) –it is a food that they trust and they are eating the food that they had known all their lives. Customers are therefore willing to pay for the same food, three to four times their original cost price. We can call it 'nostalgic consumption' because one of the core logics for purchasing and consuming it is –they evoke memories of home and people.

The ethnic grocery stores also sell pungent food items like fermented bamboo shoot, fermented fish, fermented soyabean, fermented mustard leaves juice, fermented roselle seeds and *Ngapi* (shrimp paste) etc. Besides the taste, the smell of food is known to evoke emotions and trigger memories of previous food events and experiences around food back at home (Lupton, 2007, pp. 320-321). The smell of ethnic food of the Northeasterners in cities like Delhi and Hyderabad has often been the subject of debate. They have often been subjected to racial discrimination, humiliation and denied rented accommodation due to their food practices (Sitlhou, 2020; Niumai and Rajesh, 2024, pp. 1-2). However, 'though these foods might produce feelings of revulsion to some, for others, the same smell invokes feeling of comfort or remembrance of home, especially in unfamiliar surroundings (Kikon, 2015).' In Hyderabad, these sensory and emotional experiences foster a sense of home and familiarity to the Kuki-Zo migrants.

Ethnic Violence & Ethnic Food

The ongoing ethnic violence has fundamentally affected the discourse on food and eating practices in migration processes in three significant ways. Firstly, the vendors began to face problem with the transportation of vegetables and groceries from Manipur as Imphal Airport became inaccessible for the Kuki-Zos. They had to find an alternative route via the airport of Dimapur (Nagaland) or Aizawl (Mizoram) or Guwahati (Assam). This required building new connections with the agriculturalists and suppliers in these states and they were often much more expensive comparatively. Thus, in the overall dealings, the profits procured by the vendors become very marginal.

Secondly, after the ethnic violence, food has transformed into a political statement and a repository of collective memory and cultural resilience. Suddenly, there is the realization that this is my food culture and that is yours –a classification or differentiation to something that had been shared for decades together. In the initial days of the ethnic violence, when ethnic sentiments ran high, there was a boycott of Meitei food, including the fermented fish called *'Ngari'* by the Kuki-Zos. Ngari is a unique food, made of sun-dried, non-salted fish called pool barb (*Puntius Sophore),* which was fermented in earthen pots for several months. It is an ethnic food that is popular in family food tables across all ethnic communities in Manipur. The tribals now wanted to dissociate themselves with the Meiteis, and food required to be one such avenues in which they need to minimize their dependency and assert their independence. There were efforts by the tribals to prepare their own version of fermented fish (*Nga Thu*) and *Singju* (vegetable salad with fermented fish) (Sitlhou, 2025). This affected the ethnic grocery stores in Hyderabad. Meitei customers of vendor 1 stopped frequenting her store and the Kuki-Zos for some time stopped purchasing food items that they associate with the Meiteis.[ix]





Image 3: Tribal version of Fermented Fish –*Pu-Pa Ngathu* (forefathers fermented fish) & Tribal *Ngathu* (Source: Sitlhou, M, 2025).

Thirdly, ethnic food became even more meaningful to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). They were forced migrants whose houses were burnt, properties destroyed or looted and fleeing persecutions from Manipur after May 3rd 2023. For them, food becomes coping mechanism in dealing with the displacement and disorientation they experience in their new environment. 'They are known to re-create a sense of place around food production, preparation and consumption…' (Parasecoli, 2014, p. 415). Eighty-years-old Kimi (pers. comm., January 20, 2026) fled from Imphal with the help of the Indian paramilitary forces. Already advanced in years, it was difficult for her to adjust to the food culture in Hyderabad. The availability of the homegrown vegetables and ethnic groceries were convenient for her. Another regular customer to these stores in Sri Ram Nagar Hyderabad, 49 years old Kai Kipgen (pers. comm., January 21, 2026) was surprised to find his favourite vegetables like *Sijou* (Kelantang) and *Ankam* (mustard leaves) upon reaching Hyderabad. He said, "when I consume them, I feel like I am at home in Manipur or as if 'home' is not far away". For 26-year-old Mamang Sitlhou (pers. comm., January 21, 2026), Hyderabad stands out from other cities in India because of the availability of almost every type of food. His village is deserted because it is located in the buffer zones. Ethnic food becomes comfort food for him in a context and food culture that is new to him.

The presence and ready availability of organic vegetables, smoked meat and other ethnic food via these ethnic grocery stores were instrumental for 35-year-old Priscilla Patsy Staunton-Haokip (pers. comm., January 20, 2026) and her family. It made their adjustment to a new place much easier and gave them a sense of continuity between the place they left behind (Imphal) and Hyderabad. Mrs. Joycee Lunching (58 year) (pers. comm., January 21, 2026) has mixed emotions about eating ethnic food in Hyderabad. In her own words:

> I feel nostalgic and memories would flood back of the old days in our house in Imphal (now burnt down) when we could have the same food in the comfort of our homes with our family members who were still alive. Now, we are far away in a distant land and in a rented accommodation trying to adjust to a culture (city life) and food that is so different from the ones we are used to. On the other hand, to look at it from another vantage point, I feel fortunate that I am able to continue to relish the same food in another setting. The ethnic grocery stores and the food in them smell like Manipur.

Conclusion

The study is an effort to understand the significant role played by 'nostalgia' of 'home food' in continuing to shape the dietary preferences of the Kuki-Zos in their migration destination –Hyderabad. The ambience surrounding the ethnic grocery stores produces an ethnic foodscape that brings back fond memories of home while also enabling them to adapt '…to the present and reconstituting hybrid places in both societies of origin and settlement' (Sen, 2016, p. 67). The narratives of the vendors inform us of the struggles, benefits and pride they experience in running the ethnic grocery stores. All of them agree –the reward

they get from a business venture such as theirs is not only in terms of monetary gains but also in the satisfaction they gain in having contributed in the sustenance of the consumer's culture and identity via the continuation of their food culture in a far-off place.

Food memories are always socially and culturally grounded and this proved true in the context of the Kuki-Zos. Their culinary traditions became an important point of reference in the formation of community and belonging amongst themselves and with the larger Northeast Indian community in Hyderabad with whom they share a similar food culture. In fact, among the Kuki-Zo IDPs, it played a crucial role in offering continuity, coping resources, and a shared sense of belonging in the face of displacement and cultural adaptation. It is food that connects migrants to their history, culture and people, while also marking them as different from the host society (Parasecoli, 2014, p. 415). The nostalgia triggers in the ethnic foodscape/ grocery stores are in their abilities to emanate a sense of familiarity in terms of language (s), smell, culinary habits, cultural assemblage, cultural histories and traditions. It enabled the 'presencing' of a place they left behind. Food became a political statement of 'resilience', 'belongingness' and 'otherization'.

There are a lot of misnomers or misconceptions about the tribal food culture by others who are outsiders to their culture. The food cultures of the various scheduled tribes of Manipur are a case in point. There are a lot of research and studies conducted on the discriminatory aspects of Northeastern food in metropolitan cities of India (Kikon, 2015; Sitlhou, 2020; Nongbri and Zimik, 2017). It is therefore pertinent that there are policies formulated or awareness initiated by the government to ensure that tribals in India, including those from Manipur, are not discriminated for their food practices. The differences in dietary practices in different parts of the country ought to be 'celebrated' rather than 'judged' or 'misunderstood'.

End-Notes

[i] A tribal solidarity march was organised by an apex tribal body against the Manipur High Court's order (dated 27 March, 2023) on the subject of the inclusion of the Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list. The demand for scheduled tribe status by the dominant Meitei community is seen by the tribals as a ploy to bypass procedures which protect their rights on land

and share of quotas in government jobs and education that are reserved for STs under the policy of protective discrimination in India. A counter protest led by Meitei civil society groups, the burning of tyres near the Kuki centenary gate, burning down of villages and bludgeoning to death of a man, ignited a conflict that has spiralled into a never-ending 'acts of retaliations' of one community against the other. The ethnic violence caused displacements of Kuki-Zos to the hill districts (and the Meitei IDPs to the valley districts) within Manipur, outside of Manipur within Northeast India and other states in India. The violence in Manipur has led to more than 250 deaths and about 58,000 individuals forcibly displaced (Sitlhou, 2025).

[ii] Haipi village is in Kangpokpi district; Lingsiphai village is in Churachandpur district and Parbung village is in Pherzawl district of Manipur.

[iii] The word 'Kuki' is a generic term, which includes a number of tribes and clans. The Directorate of Tribal Welfare and Backward Classes, 1981 used the term 'Kuki-Chin'. There have been continuous attempts at redefinition of identities and ethnic identity assertions over the years. Some ideologies, movements or groups have challenged the term 'Kuki' –to replace it with 'Chikims' or 'Zo' or 'Chin-Kuki-Mizo'. The ongoing ethnic violence that begun in 2023 has further affected an alteration of the nomenclature into 'Kuki-Zo' or 'Kuki-Zomi-Hmar-Mizo' respectively. In this paper, I use the term 'Kuki-Zo' or simply 'Kukis' over the more elongated nomenclature 'Kuki-Zomi-Hmar-Mizo'. This group comprises of – Gangte, Hmar, Lushai (Mizo), Paite, Simte, Thadou (Kukis), Vaiphei, Zou, Suhte (Tiddim-Chin), Mate etc.

[iv] *Chang-Al* or Ash Soda is a special ingredient made by pouring water over ashes (from burned woods or grains). The brownish liquid is stored and added in curries and vegetable stews to enhance the taste.

[v] Prof. Lal Dena (retd.) is a renowned Hmar academician who previously worked in the Department of History, Manipur University. He has researched and written extensively on the Hmar culture, Colonialism in Manipur and Historiography of the Hmar people.

[vi] Including beans, pumpkins, taro, Indian prickly ash or zanthoxylum rhetsa (*singzour*), gourd, mustard leaves (*ankam*), passion fruit leaves (*saptheina*), pumpkin leaves (*mai-na*), pea leaves, peas, east India glory bower (*anphui*), winged beans, climbing wattle (*khangkhu*), turkey berry (*anjangkha*), pingku or dysoxylum excelsum (*thingthupi*) and many others.

[vii] Mary Beth Sanate, renowned Kuki-Zo Women Activist and Secretary of Rural Women Upliftment Society (RWUS) Manipur.

[viii] She belongs to the Naga community in Manipur and therefore trading via the airport is still possible for her.

[ix] The food that is mainly associated with the Meiteis are: *Thangjing* (fox-nuts), Water Mimosa, *Ngari* (Fermented Fish), *Soibhum* (Fermented Bamboo Shoot), *Yendem* (Alocasia Odora) etc.

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Informed Consent

This study was conducted with the informed consent of all participants and participants were informed of the study's purpose.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Hoineilhing Sitlhou and N. Annavaram teaches at Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad

Email Id: hoilhing@gmail.in/ hoineilhingsitlhou@uohyd.ac.in

Article: Impact of Coal Mining and Response of Kolam and Lambada towards SCCL Mining in Kumuram Bheem Asifabad District, Telangana State

Author: K Ranjith Babu

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Impact of Coal Mining and Response of Kolam and Lambada towards SCCL Mining in Kumuram Bheem Asifabad District, Telangana State

--K. Ranjith Babu

Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of SCCL coal mining on the Lambada and Kolam tribes and their physical environment in the Goleti area. The responses of these communities to coal mining differ significantly. The Lambadas have reacted positively and shown adaptability to the industrial environment, which has benefited them. In contrast, the Kolams have responded negatively, withdrawing into the forest, which has adversely affected them. The paper further explores the reasons, i.e., historical and subjective dispositions, behind the different responses of these two tribal communities to the establishment of coal mining in the same forest environment. The Kolams have historically lived in harmony with the Gonds, who established their own kingdom and confronted Hindu and Muslim kingdoms before colonial times. They developed inward-looking dispositions and confronted the invaders in their area. In contrast, the immigrant Lambadas has developed the dispositions of avoiding confrontations and maintaining friendly relations with local communities. In the current situation, the Kolams who withdrew themselves into the forest area continued farming that depended on the vagaries of monsoons. Furthering their misery, the SCCL also changed policies of land compensation from time to time and has not effectively implemented R and R regulations, benefiting the Kolams. The Lambadas, on the other hand, joined the SCCL for their socio-economic development by securing permanent jobs besides continuing farming and cattle rearing.

Key words: *Lambada, Kolam, Agriculture, Coal Mining, Rehabilitation, Resettlement*

Introduction

India has already completed six decades of its existence as an independent state and has made rapid strides in the fields of education, food production, industrial development, information and space technology, etc., registering a growth rate of nine per cent. While it is very satisfying for the state as a whole, the poor condition in which many tribal and marginalized groups still live remains a paradox. In this context, the involuntary displacement of tribal communities due to the establishment of mines, dams, industries and wildlife sanctuaries in the tribal areas has been one of the important concerns of the development planners of the government and social scientists. About 1 38 75,000 tribes were affected during 1951-1990 under various categories of the projects. The exact figure of this displacement is not available. According to some estimates, it is more than 50 00,000 (Saxena, 1999). The misery of the tribes due to their displacement from

the original habitation and the problems associated with resettlement and rehabilitation (R and R) led to a number of protests by the tribes, NGO activists, human rights activists and so on. It is not only in India but also everywhere that the indigenous populations have been greatly suffering from involuntary displacement and rehabilitation. Considering the plight of the displaced tribes, Beteille observed, 'It is an area which is relatively unexplored not only in Indian anthropology but also in anthropology anywhere' (1990: 12).

In fact, Indian anthropologists have been attracted to study various aspects of the displacement of tribes for a long time, i.e., since 1950. A number of studies such as Behura and Mishra (1988), Behura (1989), Sudarsen and Kalam (1990), Baboo (1992), Baviskar (1995), Scudder (1973), Beteille (1990), Burman (1961), Karve and Nimbker (1969), Mahapatra (1991), Fernandes and Chaterji (1995), Saxena (1999), Mishra and Bondla (2007) have indicated that the situation of tribes after rehabilitation has come to be worse than the life in their original habitations. The studies also reveal the fact that the responses of the tribes have not always been the same besides undergoing socio-cultural changes. While some reacted in visible and open protests and sometimes violently, some others reacted in invisible and everyday forms of protest. Yet, some others had never shown any signs of protest. Further, some adapted and integrated themselves into the mining situation, but others did not adapt to the mining situation. In fact, the tribal unrest due to their displacement has drawn attention from international forums also for the protection of the rights of indigenous populations. Keeping the above scenario in view, the study in this regard attempts to address two aspects which need attention. One is to find out whether this new policy has made any positive impact on the tribes or whether the tribes have been resettled and rehabilitated in a better manner. The other is the differential response of the tribal communities to the same stimulus, i.e., the mining establishment. In light of the above discussion, a brief review of the literature available on the subject has been undertaken.

The tribal community usually has moved away from the original habitation or been rehabilitated in a nearby locality when the land inhabited by the tribal community is acquired for the purpose of mining. This kind of arrangement has been made by the government with a view to ensuring that the affected families continue to remain in the same ecological environment, which will not drastically affect their original pattern of life and rhythm. This helps continue the traditional life with little impact from the mining establishment. Further, they can also avail the opportunity of the new livelihood provided by the mining industry. In such situations, it has been noted that the tribes continue to depend on agriculture, which is their traditional occupation, and some could in fact invest more in the land. While this is a positive note, the negative aspect has been that the Ho tribe shows a low level of commitment to industrial work (Dasgupta, 1978). Studies show that forced migration has left them in an uncomfortable and difficult environment in many ways. Industrial employment, first of all, is very new for the tribes; they are totally unfamiliar with the work. There is a wide range of

industrial employment and different working conditions that the Bhil and Mina tribes had to face (Kabra, 1987). In some cases, the tribal families migrated to places like Bombay seeking work as construction laborers from the rehabilitation centers for various reasons (Parasuraman, 1996).

The studies also show serious economic, social and cultural disruption in the lives of tribes. The displacement and resettlement have drastically affected the kinship systems and other tightly knit social networks (Srinivasan, 1996). When the social support networks and arrangements are dismantled, a multifaceted resource is lost. Social disarticulation also resulted from the breaking up of authority systems and loss of leadership (Parasuram, 1996). The Ho of Odisha became very individualistic with the breaking of close-knit social relations after the displacement (Mishra, 2012). Indigenous people are traditionally self-sufficient, relying on products from forests, and with distinct cultural identities. Their culture and livelihood are intrinsically linked to the land and forests. As a result, any threat to land and forests is not merely an economic issue but also constitutes an attack on their identity (Shimray & Ramana, 2007).

The mining has caused a wide range of environmental problems, such as land degradation, air, water, and noise pollution, etc. It is reported that Coal India is planning a massive expansion programme of its coal mining operations in Jharkhand and adjoining areas. All these will have a tremendous adverse impact on the ecology and on the people of Jharkhand. While the multinationals and the commercial and industrial sectors will amass huge profits, a large number of indigenous people of Jharkhand will be driven out of their homelands and deprived of their sources of livelihood (Areeparampil, 1996). Introduction of coal mining in Odisha (Ib Valley Coalfield) has a negative impact on the tribal population in the form of water, air, and noise pollution, degradation in health, loss in agricultural production and displacement. This is because the communities are not being taken into account (Mishra, 2009). The minerals will also be depleted in future depending on the rate at which they are being exploited. What will be the situation when the mineral resources in the region are exhausted? This is the question to be addressed. Hence, a futuristic plan for both the utilization of mineral resources and the rehabilitation of tribals should be prepared (Saxena, 1994).

The corporate interests backed by the state's support are trampling on tribal livelihoods and threatening the ecologically rich and important regions. The case of Niyamgiri hills in Orissa is a good example of ignoring the importance of the socio-cultural and environmental aspects and violation of fundamental rights of the people (Sahu, 2008). The NGOs and the activists, in the case of Polavaram Dam (Indira Sagar) in Andhra Pradesh, were successful to some extent in bringing up the awareness about their rights among the tribal population, Koya, Konda Reddis and other weaker sections living in and around the project area (Rao, 2005).

However, the struggle of the local tribal population against the construction of the Polavaram dam has not been very successful. The movement is unable to generate strong leadership. The tribal resistance is fragmented, and hence the movement has not taken the issue to any logical conclusion (Bondla & Rao, 2010).

Over the years, the winds of change are blowing, though at a slower pace, owing to universal forces of modernization and globalization, across the country, and Adilabad district has not been an exception despite it being largely forested and with a rural background. But the establishment of coal mines in the district in certain respects has speeded up some of these changes. It is actually very difficult to separate these two factors of change - the universal and the establishment of coal mines. The changes due to the latter are considered the impact of it on geography, families, and individuals. Studying these changes could have been a separate project applying more sophisticated methodological strategies. But for the present, it follows the assumption that as this area has been changing due to universal causes applicable to all within the state and country, these factors of change remain constant. Given this understanding, the differences between the Goleti area and others are taken as differential indicators of change. Ideally, it would have been a better strategy to have recorded the situations or conditions before the establishment of coal mines as benchmark data, and studied the same after the establishment of the same. This would have given a better assessment of change or the impact of the Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL). But there was no such opportunity, nor is there any benchmark data available. The alternative strategy available is to rely upon the method of recollection; the respondents have to give information about the aspects of life before the establishment of coal mines, in comparison with the present situation. But in this, the verifiability of the information of the past remains a problem. But this is the only method available at present.

Impact of the SCCL

The Goleti area, which comes under the administrative control of Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district in Telangana state, bordering Maharashtra state, was part of Dandakarnya in historical times. It has a long stretch of hills, forests and rivers. Godavari River meanders through the district along with several of its tributaries. It is sparsely populated compared to the plain areas of the district. More than fifty per cent of the population is listed under the scheduled tribe category. In terms of socio-economic profile, the area is backward compared to other districts of the state. Given this background, the coal mines of SCCL have impacted the geography, landscape and population. The three mines, i.e., Dorli - 1 and Dorli - 2, have affected 21 villages wherein 742 families belonging to Kolam, Gond, BCs, and Lambada lived. Of the 21 villages affected, 18 villages are resettled and rehabilitated in nine centers, and of the 742 families, 641 are rehabilitated.

It may be noted here that as long as underground mining was done, there were not many disturbances, as the land acquisition did not cause great problems, and the villages were not disturbed. However, the underground mining seriously affected the health of the workers, and it was also always a threat to their lives. The open-cast mining has badly affected the landscape in that the forest coverage has been lost, resulting in the acquisition of a large extent of land, consequently relocation of villages, breaking of families and so on. Further, it has been causing air and water pollution, besides environmental degradation. The health of the employees, as well as those not working in the mines, is also affected.

The socio-economic profiles of residents indicate some important changes in the lives of one village, i.e., Goleti, which was not displaced. In contrast, in Dhantanpally village, which was resettled and rehabilitated near the Ontimamidi village and is named as Ontimamidi R and R center, several changes have been noted. As Lambada of Goleti got some benefits of SCCL, in contrast to the Kolams of Dhantanpally, the latter did not get much benefit.

Impact on Lambada

The establishment of SCCL in the Bellampally area, which includes Goleti and Madaram, in 1928, initiated quick changes in the surrounding villages around Rebbena and Thandur Mandal of Adilabad district. It led to the migration of various groups to the industrial areas and the settling of non-tribal populations who have occupied this area that had been earlier inhabited completely by tribes. The village of Goleti came into existence more than a hundred years ago. The informant said that at that time, this area was covered by a forest full of huge trees and bushes. When mining started in the 1970s, the SCCL slowly cleared the forest, and the non-tribes occupied the place. In the past, Goleti was a small Lambada tribal hamlet comprising little more than fifty households. When the tribal families migrated to this village while roaming in different places after leaving their historical domicile in North India, they slowly settled down one after the other by constructing semi-*pucca* and *kutcha* houses. At the time the Lambadas in the area primarily depended on minor forest produce and breeding of cows and selling milk. Then, they gradually started clearing the forest and cultivating the forest land, besides tending the cattle and moving around the village in the forest area. Later on, gradually, one by one, they started depending exclusively on agriculture by maintaining a smaller number of cattle. Some took up non-agricultural activities in the non-tribal villages also. Finally, they permanently settled down in the *thandas*[1]. As they lived for some years in close contact with the non-tribal agriculturists, they learnt improved and efficient agricultural techniques from them. Then, later on, the main occupation for the Lambadas became agriculture.

[1] The settlement of the Lambada's is called Thanda.

When mining came into existence, there was a shift from the traditional occupation to industrial labor. This was not a one-time and sudden shift for all of them, but it depended on the situation. Some have slowly adapted to the mining. When coal mining started in the surrounding areas of Goleti, some of the Lambadas showed interest in working with the SCCL when the SCCL officials approached them. Then later on, the other Lambadas in the village also got the job in SCCL. At that time, there was heavy drought conditions in Goleti village, so many people had migrated to different places in search of employment. Though it was scary to work in the underground mine due to a few reports of accidents of caving in and chemical explosions, some Lambada took courage to work in the coal mine instead of migrating to different places. Getting jobs in the SCCL was easy in the initial days, but many people were scared to work in the SCCL. However, several of the Lambada men did not hesitate to work in the coal mining; their good physical strength, dependency on cow's milk and milk products, perhaps helped in this regard.

In the 1970s, the mining operations started in the Goleti area, and gradually the open-cast mining spread across other villages, leading to the acquisition of a large extent of land and the displacement of villages, etc., and by 2004-05, including Dhantanpally where nine rehabilitation centers came into existence. There have been several changes with regard to Goleti village before and after the establishment of SCCL in terms of expansion of villages and improvement in infrastructural facilities like better roads, electricity, better means of transportation, schools, banks and health care facilities, etc. The SCCL Company has constructed the quarters for its employees. Therefore, Goleti Township has come into existence, and non-tribes have come and settled here.

The number of employees, skilled, semi-skilled and daily wage workers also increased over the years. The company provided training to the semi-skilled and changed their category to skilled and also introduced promotions with higher salaries. The daily wage workers also became permanent employees with a higher salary, paid holidays, health benefits, retirement benefits, etc. The work in mines was no longer considered hazardous due to the safety measures taken by the company. Thus, SCCL jobs were sought after, and they became very competitive.

The company has paid the compensation depending on the market value of the land. It also gave the option of employment in SCCL instead of paying the compensation. The Lambadas quickly realized that working in SCCL was much better than working elsewhere; they were ready to work even as daily wage workers, as after some time, they could get regular employment. So, several of them opted for regular or daily wage employment instead of compensation for the lands. There were more intakes of land losers in the SCCL from the affected villages, who were both tribal and non-tribal individuals. But later, the situation changed as there were a surplus number of employees, the company started giving more compensation to the affected families to overcome the excess manpower in

the SCCL Company. The non-tribes who migrated to this place slowly got settled down at this place due to the establishment of different market businesses.

In the beginning, the income of the daily wagers in the mines was very low when compared with that of the agricultural laborers. At present, the SCCL employees are earning more than Rs. 40,000 to Rs. 50,000 per month. The Lambadas who are working in SCCL are economically in a better position when compared with the non-SCCL Lambada families.

Lambadas of Goleti village, who had practiced agriculture as their main occupation, improved their agriculture with tractors that they purchased with compensation by disposing of their bullocks and bullock-carts. The Lambadas who possessed lands and also got employment in the SCCL as land losers, agriculture became a secondary occupation, and they carried out their cultivation, engaging farm servants on an annual wage. So, apart from the SCCL workers, the majority of the Lambada families in the village depended upon agriculture and non-agricultural activities for their survival. It is observed that the SCCL employees are not sending their wives to work as daily wage laborers; instead, they work in their own agricultural work. The SCCL employees are earning more money, so they don't want to send their wives as daily wage workers because it is a matter of their status. Getting labor for the agricultural activities has become a great problem for the Lambada because everyone is busy during that season. The SCCL Lambadas are paying high wages to the laborers to get their work done, which is affecting the other non-SCCL families. The average labor wage after the post mining phase is very high when compared in the pre-mining phase.

In the Goleti area, Lambadas have become economically and politically dominant among the tribes as industrial workers, agriculturists, agricultural labor and non-agricultural labor. In terms of employment, they are better off compared to others who are working in central and state government institutions and private organizations. Several of them live in the RCC or *pucca* houses with spacious rooms, whereas the non-SCCL workers, with several unemployed members in families, are poor and live in the semi-*pucca* and *kutcha* houses. This difference is due to their economic condition, as they are earning a good income because of their permanent employment in the SCCL. The better off Lambadas bought a motor bike, a color television set, a refrigerator, a gas stove, a music system, furniture - chairs and cots, an air cooler and smartphones, etc. It seems most of these goods are acquired as their incomes and contacts with non-tribes have increased. These acquisitions reflect the influence of non-tribes on the Lambada. In recent times, very few of them have also bought tractors and are renting them to others. It is the phenomenon of economic heterogeneity where the poor tend to remain poor while some become rich. The Lambada farming families are spending more on food, the education of their children, health and clothing, etc. Thus, there is an emergence of a kind of class difference among them. This is visible in terms of the upper-class Lambada who are sending their children to

reputed educational institutions and also spending huge money on coaching centers in Hyderabad for getting a government job, while the families of the lower class are sending their children to the local schools and colleges. There is also a difference in terms of food habits and dress patterns. The dress pattern among the Lambada men and women has changed from the past to the present. In the past, all used traditional dress, particularly the women, but now the upper-class women wear modern dress of non-tribes, leaving their traditional lifestyle, while the lower class continue the traditional dress. In the past, they used to eat jowar roti regularly, but now it has been replaced with rice. Now the upper class Lambada is having different varieties of breakfast like *idlis, sambar* and *dosas* in the morning. They also get parcel from the Goleti Township for their family members. They are having non-vegetarian food twice or thrice a week. But it is not the case with the Lower-class families, they eat non-vegetarian food once a week, but it depends on the money at hand. Generally, whenever there is any ritual or ceremony in the village they consume the alcohol. Apart from this, the majority of SCCL workers consume alcohol frequently because of the heavy work they do at the mines. They are also spending money lavishly on different festivals, rituals and ceremonies, especially for marriage. But this kind of luxurious way of living is not seen among the majority of non-SCCL families, except in very few cases.

The Lambadas have experienced significant changes in social and religious practices. Marriage celebrations have been condensed from over a month to a single day, as they view the longer duration as a waste of time. Traditionally, elders arranged marriages within joint families, but this system has broken down, leading to individual decision-making in smaller families. Marriages among SCCL employees are increasingly based on personal choice, with modern music replacing traditional tunes and women opting out of traditional attire.

There has also been a shift from bride price to dowry, where the bride's family provides cash, jewellery, furniture, and vehicles to the groom's family. Dowry demands have intensified, with SCCL employees often expecting high dowries, even if the groom is unemployed, due to potential job opportunities tied to family connections. Some SCCL employees also secure jobs for their sons if they declare themselves medically unfit. Additionally, the Lambadas now celebrate non-tribal festivals like Sankranti and Ganesh Chaturthi in ways that reflect their status. The employed Lambadas easily secure institutional loans if any need arises.

SCCL Impact on Kolams

The main occupation for the Kolams at the time of their displacement was agriculture and minor forest produce collection. Before the establishment of SCCL, about 15 per cent of the Kolam households possessed 21-25 acres of land in Dhantanpally, but now most of them have turned into landless people. There is an increased number of marginal landholders possessing 1-5 acres. The situation in Dhantanpally is presented in Table 1. It is the same in all the villages that are

being displaced. As can be noted from the Table, there is a quantum jump in the category of those possessing land between 1-5 and 6-10 acres of land. The landless have phenomenally increased from 8.3 per cent to 31.9 per cent. Thus, it is a reverse development wherein the landholders have become landless. This is not the case in the case of Lambada, as discussed before.

Table 1. Total land of Kolams before/after the displacement

S.No.	Land in acres	Before displacement		After displacement	
		No. of Households	Percent	No. of Households	Percent
1	1 – 5	22	30.5	34	47.2
2	6 – 10	22	30.5	13	18
3	11-15	8	11.1	0	0
4	16 – 20	2	2.7	1	1.3
5	21 – 25	11	15.2	0	0
6	26 – 30	0	0	0	0
7	31 – 35	0	0	1	1.3
8	36 – 40	0	0	0	0
9	41 – 45	0	0	0	0
10	46 – 50	1	1.3	0	0
11	NA	6	8.3	23	31.9
12	Total	72	100	72	100

Source: Author's field data

With the loss of land, the Kolams of Dhantanpally, which was the major source of income, have seen a fall in the incomes of the households. Table 2 shows the income differences between before and after the displacement. Similar is the situation in the case of other villages.

As can be noted from Table 2, income less than Rs. 20,000 per annum has grown by about five times after the displacement. Similarly, the income between Rs. 20,001 and Rs. 40,000 also increased considerably. Thus, the households of Dhantanpally have become poorer. The number of those in the no-income category has also increased four times. Thus, the SCCL has negatively impacted the Kolams of Dhantanpally and other villages.

Table 2. Annual Income of Kolams Before/After Displacement

S.No.	Income in Rs.	Before displacement		After displacement	
		No. of Households	Percent	No. of Households	Percent
1	0 to 20000	4	5.5	21	29.1
2	20001 to 40000	9	12.5	12	16.6
3	40001 to 60000	13	18	6	8.3
4	60001 to 80000	10	13.8	0	0
5	80001 to 100000	9	12.5	1	1.3
6	100001 to 120000	0	0	0	0
7	120001 to 140000	2	2.7	0	0
8	140001 to 160000	13	18	0	0
9	160001 to 180000	0	0	0	0
10	180001 to 200000	4	5.5	0	0
11	NA	8	11.1	32	44.4
12	Total	72	100	72	100

Source: Author's field data

With the loss of land, there is a major shift in the occupation of the Kolams of Dhantanpally from agriculture to daily wage labor. More than fifty per cent of them have become dependent on agriculture and daily wages.

Table: 3. Kolam: Occupation before and after displacement

S.No	Occupation	Before displacement		After displacement	
		Households	Percent	Households	Percent
1	Agriculture	68	94.4	3	4.16
2	Daily wage labor	4	5.5	30	41.6
3	Agriculture and daily wage labor	-	-	39	54.1
4	Total	72	100.0	72	100.0

Source: Author's field data

Agriculture was the main source of income for the majority of households among the Kolams before displacement. At the same time, non-farming employment also provided a major source of cash income to many households. There were different types of non-farming activities like basket making, thatch making, hunting, fishing, honey collection, *ippa puvvu* collection, *ippa parka* collection, *kobbari verlu*[2], *tuniki akku*[3] and lacquer collection, etc. They used to sell the minor forest produce to the Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC). So, the withdrawal of the

[2] Used as tea powder
[3] Used in *beedi* making

Kolams into the forest has resulted in a livelihood crisis. The women have now become totally dependent on their husbands for household maintenance after the displacement. The coal mining has forced the tribes to change their traditional occupation and shift to other occupations. They have lost their land for the SCCL, and it is also observed that there is a decline in the occupation of agriculture after the displacement. Now they are turned into meagre daily wage laborers in agriculture and non-agricultural activities, whereas some of them are employed in the SCCL as contract laborers.

Some of the Kolam women, casual workers, are engaged in sweeping the coal dust that has fallen on the roads. The SCCL also employs casual labor to work in the canteens and assist permanent employees in different sections or departments. The wages that they get are hardly sufficient to meet the daily family requirements. The monthly earnings of the casual laborers are very meagre, while those of the SCCL permanent employees are much higher. Before displacement, all the members used to make economic contributions to the family. But now, the new trend is that a few members in the family work as daily wage workers and others depend on them, unlike in the past when all worked in a family.

When agriculture was the main occupation, they did not have any time restrictions or limitations and could work whenever they wanted, according to their convenience or the task to be accomplished. At the time agricultural operations, all the family members and relatives used to help each other in the agricultural fields or participate in the process of production and collection of minor forest produce (MFP), which helped in building group or kinship solidarity. Therefore, they used to maintain the solidarity and interdependence among themselves. But division of labor is missing after the displacement. The Kolams lost forest land, burial ground, grazing land and herbal medicines, which integrated them in social and economic spheres.

But with the SCCL Company, they have to work according to the company's timings, rules and regulations. Further, if they commit any mistake, the officials yell at them. Except on Sundays, they remain busy with work all the time. They hardly get time to spend with their family members. They work from morning to evening, and after coming back home, they are busy with the regular household activities. They go to bed early and wake up again early in the morning. The new jobs created by the SCCL Company for them have become very difficult to adjust to. In fact, they do not possess the skill to learn new ways of earning a livelihood. Hence, those who were owners earlier have now become daily wage laborers.

Furthermore, the Kolams lost all their lands and became agricultural laborers. Mining has also disturbed the social network among the project-affected families. As they migrated to various other places, they got detached from their other kin members. Disputes arose among family members when compensatory monetary benefits were provided to the common properties. The main reason behind the

separation of family members is to get the benefits of the R and R policy. This separation has affected the close attachment in the parent-child relationship. Before displacement, the senior most member, i.e., the father in a joint family, was considered as the head of the family and his decision was final. But now the situation is different when they have turned into nuclear families.

When mining was introduced in their lives, it affected their culture, livelihood, ecology, environment and health of the Kolams. The mining activities like blasting, drilling, loading and unloading of coal and overburden, and transportation, etc., are the main reasons for the impact on the environment. As a result, the coal dust accumulates on roads and trees as a thick layer, which ultimately causes severe pollution of the air. It is the worst so far as agricultural fields are concerned, and as the productivity of the crops has been greatly reduced in the surrounding areas of the SCCL open-cast mines. The surrounding agricultural lands receive the polluted air filled with coal dust due to mining. It is ultimately affecting the yield; year by year, the production has gone down when compared with the previous years.

The number of livestock like cows, buffalo, goat and sheep, etc., has reduced due to environmental pollution. Kolams are not showing interest in possessing livestock, and they have even been limited to keeping their cattle at the displaced village. During the pre-phase of mining, cattle rearing was considered a livelihood source, but in the post-phase of mining, some say their cattle are dying due to pollution of air, water and noise, and some are dying by falling into the pits dug by the company. Hence, there is no way of protecting the oxen, and therefore, some of them sold out their oxen to non-tribals or neighboring villages at a lower price.

Certainly, coal mining has a direct negative impact not only on the environment but also on the health of the local people. The environmental impact of coal mining in terms of air, water and noise pollution leads to various health hazards. They are suffering from different kinds of diseases, which include asthma, tuberculosis and other dermatological diseases.

Apprehensions of the Future

The project affected families said that at the time of SCCL initiation, everyone had tried to oppose or stop it in different ways, like organizing strikes, boycotts and blocking the roads, particularly the Kolams. But finally, everyone has surrendered to the SCCL Company and the state government. Though the company is trying to provide proper measures for the project affected people at the R and R centers, the people are expressing their dissatisfaction over the provisions made and retardation of their socio-economic development.

The establishment of mining has relatively less positive and more negative impacts on the Kolams' livelihood. But it has a more positive effect on the Lambadas' livelihoods. The increased income, improved standard of living, possession of household assets and improved social networks, etc., are found among the Lambadas. It is quite different in the case of Kolams, which has destroyed the natural resources, weakened the social relationships, lost livelihoods and alienated them from their traditional occupations.

The Project Affected Families (PAFs)/Project Displaced Families (PDFs) are somehow dependent upon the mining in the present situation, but what will be the situation of the tribals if the companies close down the mines? In the case of Lambadas, they are earning a good income from the mining. They are transferred to other new mines if the mines are closed at the Goleti area. They do not have any problem; they can survive because their children may also get jobs in the SCCL under the medical unfit and dependent jobs categories. They can also adapt to any new situation. But here comes the problem for the Kolams. The company may leave the place once the coal deposit in the tribal areas comes to an end. According to some sources, the SCCL is going to stop the open-cast mines at the Goleti area in three to five years. Then what will be the situation of these tribes working as daily wage laborers in the company, and it is very difficult to predict their future, and it will be worse for sure. In this regard, the company has to provide a means of alternative or secure livelihood to the tribes. In order to protect the livelihood of the poor tribes, the state government and the industries have to develop a helpful strategy towards the uplift of PAFs/PDFs.

Some of them informed that the money they received from the company had already been spent on various purposes. They requested the company to provide an alternative piece of land to the project-displaced families, which would ultimately provide them food and also remain for future generations in the event of closing the SCCL operations in the area. Currently, their demand is that the SCCL should provide regular employment for at least one member in a family, refilling of mined out areas and plantation of indigenous trees, minimizing pollution, completing the pending works at different R and R centers and instant distribution of compensation to the left-over lands. Therefore, it is necessary that all the displaced people should be properly rehabilitated at the R and R centers with improved social, economic, cultural and environmental conditions.

The company's compensation to the land of the tribes for mining has been proven to be an absolute failure in providing proper compensation to the PAFs and PDFs, and the promises to develop R and R centers have also not been materialized. There is no proper policy for PDFs. The affected families fought with the company for employment due to the loss of land. But the company has followed different R and R policies for different open-cast projects. It has followed 64 GO land acquisition for the Khairagura open-cast project. The policy states that tribes whose lands are acquired for the project should be given five acres of land in

compensation. The total of 63 Kolam families who are affected due to the establishment of Khairagura project are given five acres of land each. But then the company has followed 68 GO in the case of Dorli-1 and Dorli-2 projects. The company has paid compensation only for the land loss and house to the project-affected families without land. But the government has failed to provide employment or land to the PAFs and PDFs. Now, the company is following the new R and R policy, i.e. G.O. 138, according to which the land losers after 2010 are only given employment in SCCL.

Tribal Employees and Coal Mining

Initially, the company recruited on a physical fitness basis only. At that time, due to the lack of proper safety measures, people were not willing to work in the company. However, once the company started improving the workers' conditions by adopting safety measures, the situation changed, and several Lambada tribal men joined the SCCL. Though some Kolams participated in the events of selection for employment in the SCCL, some others did not show any interest at all. Some of the Kolams, Mannevar, Pardhans and Gonds who were recruited at that time did not continue for long, but very soon they quit their jobs. It is interesting to know some of them 'sold away' their jobs to Lambadas and non-tribes, which is not the case with the Lambadas. It is said Kolams are very thin and weak, and are not strong enough to undertake the arduous tasks of the SCCL, while the Lambada continued in the service because they are physically strong and thus able to withstand the hard labour. There are also cases among the Kolams who did not bother asking for compensation for their lost lands but simply withdrew into the forest, and those who received the compensation but did not seek work in the SCCL projects. In the case of Lambadas, all those who lost land not only accepted compensation for their lost lands, but also demanded jobs in SCCL if they were found eligible.

It is important to note here that the many Lambadas worked hard in the initial days, and they got adapted to the new kinds of jobs and work environment, and they continued their service in the SCCL. Later on, the company regularized the services of some of them. But the other tribes, like Kolams and Gonds, could not adapt to the harsh conditions, so they discontinued abruptly. A few of them did, however, continue for some time, but they were not regular in their duties. One reason attributed by others is their habit of drinking alcohol, which made them indolent and slow in their work. As a result, their services were not regularized and some of them were removed from the job due to their irregularity and frequent absence from work. Disappointed over this, some of them quit their jobs forever.

One dominant reason for the Kolams not working in the SCCL is their inability to adapt to the mining situation. This is what an outsider can infer from the discussion with the Kolams. But the analysis of the social and cultural life of

Kolams and the Lambadas can provide another scenario, which is not articulated. It is about the social and cultural incompatibility and compatibility of the two tribes with regard to the mining work of the SCCL, which needs to be understood.

DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSE OF THE TRIBES TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COAL MINES BY THE SCCL

The study unfolds the fact that the SCCL and the government forced their decisions and will upon the tribes of the Goleti area. The latter were to acquiesce to the terms of the company. However, in this case, the Lambadas cooperated with the government better than the Kolams; the Lambadas also appeared to have adapted well to the changing scenario when compared to the Kolams and others, as discussed above. They had fewer complaints against the government or SCCL, and adjusted well to a large-scale immigration of non-tribes to the Goleti area and withstood the pollution caused by the SCCL establishments. The dislocated Kolams who resettled themselves in the R and R centers have several complaints, as they find it very difficult to adapt to new situations, and they are not happy with the facilities provided. This displeasure led them to resistance, and they joined the protesters who were organized in protests. The Kolams, first of all, were unwilling to part with their lands, and then they made certain demands. Finally, they yielded to the pressures and tactics of the SCCL and the state government and surrendered themselves. Though they organized dharna and rallies, though not on a great scale, they did not achieve anything to their satisfaction.

The Lambadas did protest but very mildly, and they were active in demanding employment of the kinsmen for the jobs that fell vacant after the voluntary retirement service (VRS) from 1997 to 2001 and also those who became medically unfit. Presently, there are 62,500 employees working in the SCCL, as per the SCCL data. There was provision for the employment of dependents, but since 1996, the company has discontinued this benefit. But now the demand was to reintroduce this benefit. Finally, very recently, the state government took the decision to resume this provision.

Some of the Kolams are yet to receive the balance compensation from the SCCL, and the SCCL is yet to provide the basic amenities promised at the R and R centers. Then, they generally approach the SCCL Estate officer and request him to solve their problem as soon as possible. The concerned department negotiates with them by making some promises, which are again delayed further. When they lose, patients organize a protest by stopping the trucks, i.e., by blocking the road.

Thus, it is clear that the behavioral patterns of Kolams and Lambada are different in some ways and they are the same in some other ways. How do we explain this behavior of the tribes from an anthropological perspective? Now, an attempt is

made to explain this differential behavior with the help of the framework of subjectivity.

Subjectivity: The concept 'subject' in social theory has a long history, but its significance has been recognized recently in anthropology. It is discussed often as an individual, person, actor, agent, etc., as embedded concepts in social structure, social organization and social relations. Of late, the agent is now coming to the forefront in social analysis as a dynamic being instrumental in social processes. The role of such an agent was submerged earlier under the group and structure that took central place in the analysis of social and cultural formations, and social organization as the dynamic form of the structure and functions of different parts of the social system. As the agent now, the individual is the one who carries cultural rules and norms of the society, who manipulates and brings about change in the society and its structures. He/she relates himself/herself with others and to the world outside, and the subjective perception of the objective world gives structure to the world thus conceived. He/she reacts to the world as the world acts upon him/her and accordingly becomes self-analytic and reflective. Thus, the subject is the form of an existing being, and subjectivity is the content of that being. The subjectivity is the process in which the subject gets the meaning of what it means to be a subject. Ortner says,

I see subjectivity as the basis of "agency," a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon. Agency is not some natural or originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings… By subjectivity I will always mean a specifically cultural and historical consciousness. (2005:38).

She writes about the construction of subjectivity based on a set of anxieties in the cultural context, besides historical experiences and consciousness resulting from modern and post-modern developments. In this paradigm, the comparative historical experiences of these tribes are relevant. As stated in the introduction, a comparison of these tribes following Peel's (1987) fifth model of historical comparison is attempted in order to develop the idea of the distinct consciousness of these tribes.

The Lambadas are a migrant population from the northern part of India, especially the Marwar region in Rajputana of present-day Rajasthan. They connect themselves with Prithviraj Chowhan. When the king was defeated by Mohammad Ghori in 1192 CE they were divided into three groups. One of these groups was believed to have migrated to the Deccan area. There is a long history of them having connections with the British, Kakatiyas of Warangal, Mughals and Asaf Jahis of Hyderabad. They have adopted different occupations like agriculture and cattle breeding, etc. They sold milk and milk products to non-tribal people and maintained good relations with them. Subsequently, they learned agriculture.

Kolams are one of the indigenous populations classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Unlike Gonds, there is no information available about the history of Kolams either in the ancient or medieval period. Several researchers have made it clear that the Kolams are historically associated themselves closely with the Gonds who were the dominant tribe of the region. Forest and land are close to the hearts of Kolams and Gonds as they provide them with the basic needs for survival. The Kolams who continued to live in the forest interact with the forest and wildlife every day more than the non-tribes, and as such, their lifestyle is heavily influenced by the forest environment.

The propensity and disposition of the Lambada tribe are highly adaptive to the situation. They have been encountering different tribal and non-tribal populations, and often they have had tough times dealing with them in the course of their migrations from Rajasthan. They did not have a history of fighting with the rulers or dominant people. But when they got dragged into a fight, they did fight. Their anxieties are concerned with the survival and harmonious living with nature and other fellow beings.

The Kolams are more inward-looking; it is an exclusive community concerned with its own well-being. It is more or less self-reliant in harmonious relation with the dominant Gond community that in fact respects the Kolams who are ritual specialists for it. The Kolams depend on agriculture and forest, and their livelihood are met with collective activities which require solidarity of the group and interdependencies. Their rituals are great means through which the solidarity gets reinforced in the society. They also depend on the gods and goddesses for meeting their daily needs for survival, providing for their cattle and protecting them from diseases and evil spirits that threaten their lives. They have been living with minimal contact with the non-tribes and even with the Lambada. These two tribes have their own dialects, and their worldviews also differ.

Subjectivity and Response of Lambada and Kolam to the SCCL

It seems these two tribes possess a contrasting cultural framework. The Lambadas are outward-looking while the Kolams are inward-looking. In their experiences, the former has been in continuous interaction with the world outside their community, but the latter has restricted itself to their own affair, unmindful of interference from others. With the kind of dispositions that they are endowed with when the SCCL established mines taking their lands and displacing their villages, they reacted in different ways. For the Lambadas, it is a new challenge, and they considered it a new avenue to explore and make use of the opportunities for their common and individual benefit. Their adaptive nature and capabilities helped them use the resources of the SCCL to meet their needs. They did not get into loggerheads with the SCCL, rather with continuous dialogue through unions and other political representatives being members of these, they have been able to adjust well to the new situation.

The response of the Kolams has been different, as explained earlier; they either enter into confrontation or withdraw from the conflict. As regards the former, they felt it was an infringement of the state and SCCL's rights, and it was an injustice which could be resisted. To some extent, such a reaction has been aided by the social solidarity that they are endowed with and mustered their strength, but it was not enough without the support of the Gonds. Ignorant of the statesmanship and means to fight out with the state, some surrendered, while others withdrew deep into the forest. In the forest, they are struggling to recreate the community in the old environment as its fabric has been greatly disturbed. Those who are outside the forest and in new locations are facing the same every day, encountering the non-tribes and getting buffeted in every respect. They are rebuilding their society in an entirely different physical and social environment. The state and SCCL's apathy are adding to their frustration and throwing them to the ground as hapless beings that lack social solidarity.

Conclusion

The present study has compared responses of two tribes, i.e., Lambada and Kolam, who have been living in the same forest environment for many years, to the establishment of SCCL in the erstwhile Adilabad District of Telangana state. The impact of the same on the socio-economic conditions and culture of the people is also found to be different. The Telangana state government and the SCCL, being a government undertaking, should ensure that positive changes occur and minimize the negative impact on the lives of the local communities with the establishment of coal mines with a proper rehabilitation and resettlement programme. Since adaptation to the local environment is the innate property of humans, the communities will readapt themselves to the new conditions. In this process, changes in social systems are inevitable. The government and its agencies are required to take steps to avoid any adverse impact on the local communities when their physical and social environment is changed.

In the present case, these adjustments of the tribes resulted in a way that one tribe, i.e., Lambada, seems to have benefited from the development intervention, whereas the other tribe, Kolam, could not. This raises a question about how different groups inhabiting a similar environment have developed different behavioral patterns in response to external interventions of national importance. Hence, an attempt is made to examine these behavioral patterns, which have not been dealt with in the earlier studies.

This study has tried to account for the differential impact and response of the tribes with the help of the concept of subjectivity as developed by Sherry Ortner. It is the historical experience and propensity or disposition of people developed over a period of time based on their experiences to react to a particular stimulus in their own way. Though the communities have lived in the same locality for a long

time, they have had different experiences and different orientations. Therefore, they reacted differently to the same stimulus.

The formulation of a policy oriented towards the indigenous communities in a particular physical and social environment is necessary in the welfare state, such that the drastic and negative impact can be minimized. It becomes binding on a government company to follow the rules of the government with a humanistic and sympathetic attitude to the local communities, accommodating the local needs. In this particular case, the beneficiaries are tribal communities whose lands were acquired by the coal mining company. The policy gave the tribes the right to demand what they wanted while they lost their lands. Thus, the policy empowered the tribes, even though it might not be very effective. However, the present study makes it clear that the rehabilitation programme implemented in the present context is far from satisfactory to the people. The displaced, rehabilitated, and resettled Kolam continue to struggle to adapt to the new environment. Their social, cultural and economic conditions have deteriorated. Therefore, having a policy is certainly better than not having anything, but its proper implementation is most important.

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K. Ranjith Babu is an Independent researcher

Email: ranjithanthro@gmail.com

Article: Changing Climate, Changing Lives: A Study on Livelihood Strategies among the Indigenous Communities of Kerala

Author: Muhammed Sihas K. M.

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Changing Climate, Changing Lives: A Study on Livelihood Strategies among the Indigenous Communities of Kerala

--Muhammed Sihas K. M.

Abstract

The Western Ghats, a mountain range along India's western coast, have witnessed a rise in extreme rainfall events, triggering frequent landslides and floods that disrupt local livelihoods. This paper examines how climate change affects Indigenous communities in Kerala's Wayanad district, focusing on their lived experiences and adaptive livelihood strategies. Based on ethnographic research among three Adivasi communities, the study contributes to three key discussions. First, it highlights the relevance of sociological perspectives in understanding climate change. Second, it traces the transformation of Indigenous livelihoods under shifting environmental conditions. Finally, it argues that inequality, vulnerability, exclusion, and social justice must be central to climate change debates, complementing science-based approaches.

Keywords: Climate Change, Indigenous Communities, Livelihood Strategies, Social Vulnerability, Western Ghats, Kerala

Introduction

Kerala has experienced a series of extreme rainfall events and devastating floods in recent years (KSDMA, 2021). The 2018 flood alone caused damages estimated at USD 2.8 billion and claimed 324 lives due to widespread inundation and landslides (Eckstein et al., 2020). Subsequent years witnessed similar tragedies: on August 8, 2019, a massive landslide in Kavalappara, Malappuram district, buried 59 people; and on August 7, 2020, another in Pettimudi, Idukki district, killed 70 individuals. More recently, on October 17, 2021, landslides and flash floods in Kootickal and Kokkayar, along the Kottayam–Idukki border, resulted in 50 fatalities (KSDMA, 2021). The 2024 monsoon season further intensified these patterns, with torrential rainfall, overflowing rivers, and landslides inundating villages, destroying infrastructure, and causing extensive loss of life (Azad et al., 2024). Many of the most affected regions lie within the Western Ghats, home to several Adivasi communities whose lives and livelihoods remain deeply intertwined with the local ecology.

This paper argues that the sociological engagement with climate change in India, particularly in Kerala, remains limited. Most existing studies are rooted in environmental science, hydrology, or meteorology, with social science research largely confined to assessing economic losses, damages, and cost-based impacts. Such approaches often overlook the social and cultural dimensions of climate change. However, climate change is not merely a biophysical phenomenon it intersects with inequality, vulnerability, and social justice. Understanding the

lived experiences of local communities is therefore crucial, making sociological and anthropological perspectives indispensable for a holistic understanding of climate change. Against this backdrop, the present study explores how climate change affects the livelihoods of Indigenous communities in the Western Ghats of Kerala, focusing on their relationship with forests and other natural resources. The paper also examines how these impacts vary among Indigenous groups based on their distinct economic and social positions.

This study is organised into five sections. The first examines how sociology engages with climate change debates in academic discourse, arguing that Indian sociology has paid insufficient attention to this pressing issue. The second section situates the discussion within the Kerala context, highlighting the state's unique ecological vulnerability bounded by the Arabian Sea on one side and the Western Ghats on the other and outlines the study's methodological framework. The third section analyses how climate change has altered the agricultural practices of Indigenous communities, such as the Paniyar, by shortening crop cycles and reducing labour opportunities. It further explores how the depletion of forest resources and shifting climatic conditions in the Western Ghats have disrupted traditional foraging practices, reshaping Indigenous livelihoods, dietary patterns, and ecological relationships, while intensifying human–wildlife conflicts driven by resource scarcity. The final section underscores the need for theoretical engagement and inclusive policy formulation on climate change and marginalised communities in India.

Sociology and Climate Change: Reclaiming a Social Lens

The role of sociology in addressing climate change and its potential contributions to this global crisis remains a subject of debate within academia. Research on climate change continues to be dominated by the physical sciences, even though several disciplines have increasingly engaged with the issue. Bhatasara (2015) observes that sociology has not kept pace with other fields in examining the social and cultural dimensions of climate change. Similarly, Lever-Tracy (2010) refers to a "strange silence" within mainstream sociology regarding this topic, while Urry (2010) notes that the analytical frameworks of most climate scientists rarely draw upon insights from the social sciences.

Sociologists have been relatively slow to engage with climate change at both theoretical and policy levels, despite its nature as a profoundly social problem (Lockie, 2013). Climate change is intricately linked to global inequality (Scott, 2014), making sociological intervention indispensable. Those most affected by its consequences are often the least responsible for causing it, leading Kramer (2013) to argue that climate change should be understood primarily as a social justice issue rather than solely a scientific one. Moreover, climate change is not merely a contemporary concern but an enduring social reality that demands sustained scholarly attention. As Kramer (2013, p. 153) notes, sociologists must

acknowledge that climate change will persist in shaping societies, even with significant mitigation efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Dunlap and Brulle (2015) argue that sociology contributes two distinct and valuable perspectives to the study of climate change by foregrounding its social dimensions. First, sociology enables the systematic analysis of the causes, consequences, and responses to climate change. Addressing and adapting to its effects requires a nuanced understanding of social dynamics operating across scales—from local communities to global systems. In this regard, sociology enriches both discipline-specific inquiries into socio-structural processes and interdisciplinary engagements on climate issues. Second, sociology provides a critical lens for examining and challenging the ideologies that sustain contemporary socioeconomic structures and behaviours. This form of social critique is vital, as exposing these dominant ideologies reveals their constructed nature and illuminates how they perpetuate power relations and constrain the development of alternative epistemologies, theoretical perspectives, and policy frameworks (Dunlap & Brulle, 2015).

Kerala in Transition: Climate, Geography, and Vulnerability

Kerala, situated at the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula between the Arabian Sea to the west and the Western Ghats to the east, accounts for approximately 0.75% of South Asia's land area and 1.18% of India's physiographic diversity. The state's coastline extends for 592.9 km from north to south, while its width varies between 30 and 120 km from east to west (NCCR, 2022). Within this narrow stretch, Kerala comprises three distinct physiographic regions: the eastern highlands, marked by the mountainous terrain of the Western Ghats; the central midlands, consisting of undulating hills and intensively cultivated valleys; and the western lowlands, characterised by estuaries, backwaters, and coastal plains. This unique topography, coupled with high population density and fragile ecosystems, makes Kerala particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change. These vulnerabilities are especially pronounced in the highlands of Wayanad, where Indigenous communities depend closely on forest and agricultural resources for their livelihoods. Understanding their experiences is therefore crucial for grasping how climate change interacts with social inequality, ecological dependence, and adaptive resilience in one of India's most environmentally sensitive regions.

Kerala's climate has undergone marked transformations over the past few decades. The state has faced multiple extreme weather events, including cyclones Ockhi (2017) and Gaja (2018), recurrent droughts (2004, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2017), the Great Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004, and successive floods in 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2024, each varying in intensity and impact (Sreedevi & Eldho, 2019). As a coastal state, Kerala is also highly susceptible to sea-level rise. Over the past 26 years, more than 40% of its coastline has been eroded,

intensifying the frequency and severity of coastal flooding in low-lying areas (Kankara et al., 2018). Together, these recurrent climatic events highlight the state's ecological fragility and underscore the urgency of investigating their broader social and economic repercussions particularly among Indigenous communities in ecologically sensitive regions such as Wayanad, where livelihoods remain closely tied to natural systems.

Kerala's agricultural productivity is increasingly at risk due to its high exposure to environmental hazards, a situation expected to worsen as climate change advances. Over recent decades, the state's water resources have been steadily declining; in 2020, Kerala's annual extractable groundwater recharge was 1.76% lower than in 2017. Prolonged meteorological droughts have triggered severe agricultural and hydrological droughts, particularly as more than 70% of the state's agriculture depends on rainfall. Climate change, compounded by altered land-use patterns, has extended the duration and intensified droughts, thereby heightening water scarcity for domestic use, irrigation, and power generation. Following the intense monsoon of 2018, the state experienced extended dry spells that sharply reduced river flows, depleted wells and streams, and exacerbated drought conditions (Madhusoodhanan & Sreeja, 2019). Many of the regions most affected by these climatic shifts lie within the Western Ghats, where a large share of the population comprises Adivasi communities who have borne the brunt of recurring natural calamities and erratic climatic patterns.

Methodology and Fieldwork

The study was conducted in Noolpuzha Panchayath of Wayanad district, located in the Western Ghats and home to several Adivasi communities. The ethnographic engagement underlying this study was undertaken in three phases: June 2018–March 2019, January–March 2021, and November 2023–February 2024. The first two phases formed part of the researcher's doctoral research on the socio-cultural transitions of Adivasi communities in Wayanad, with particular attention to the role of mass media. Although climate change was not the primary focus during these phases, they provided familiarity with the communities, settlements, livelihood practices, and socio-economic conditions of the study population. The third phase, conducted between November 2023 and February 2024, focused specifically on the impacts of climate change on Indigenous livelihoods and adaptive practices. Prior ethnographic engagement facilitated field access and enabled a more focused engagement during this phase, while socio-economic information collected during the earlier research provided contextual background for interpreting subsequent climate-related changes.

The Kurumar, Paniyar, and Kattunaicker communities were purposively selected because of their distinct historical, socio-economic, and livelihood positions. The Kurumar are predominantly settled agriculturists, while their oral traditions and folklore identify them as among the oldest inhabitants of Wayanad and as

descendants of the Veda kings believed to have ruled the region. The Paniyar, the numerically largest Scheduled Tribe community in Kerala, have historically experienced considerable socio-economic disadvantage and have been closely associated with agricultural labour. The Kattunaicker are traditionally forest-dwelling and maintain close economic and cultural relationships with forest resources (Kjosavik & Shanmugaratnam, 2015). These differences provided the basis for a comparative ethnographic design focused on how changing climatic conditions intersect with different livelihood dependencies and socio-economic positions.

The study covered thirty Adivasi settlements, comprising twelve Paniyar, ten Kurumar, and eight Kattunaicker settlements. Settlement selection was purposive and was informed by the researcher's familiarity with these settlements from the earlier phases of doctoral fieldwork. Population size was also considered in determining the relative coverage of settlements across the three communities: Paniyar constitute approximately 45% of the Adivasi population of Wayanad, followed by Kurumar (20%) and Kattunaicker (11%). The selected settlements provided coverage of the three communities and variation in their relationships with agricultural and forest resources.

A total of 126 semi-structured interviews were conducted during the broader ethnographic engagement. For the present study, forty interviews were purposively selected for detailed analysis based on their relevance to the research questions and their representation of the three communities and diverse social and livelihood positions. Selection sought variation in age, gender, generational position, and occupation, including community leaders or chieftains, farmers, agricultural labourers, and forest-dependent workers. Twelve focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted within the selected settlements, with four FGDs in each community. Each discussion included approximately eight to fourteen participants, with men and women from different age and livelihood groups participating together. The FGDs were used to identify collective perceptions and to corroborate and contextualise accounts emerging from individual interviews. Participant observation and oral histories complemented the interviews and FGDs.

Language differences were addressed during data collection and transcription. Interviews with Kurumar and Paniyar participants were conducted in Malayalam. Some elderly Kattunaicker participants were not sufficiently fluent in Malayalam; in these cases, their accounts were translated from the Kattunaicker language into Malayalam with the assistance of a graduate student from the Kattunaicker community familiar with both languages. Recorded interview materials were subsequently transcribed into English for analysis.

Data analysis proceeded through repeated reading of the transcribed interviews and field materials, followed by categorisation according to the major objectives

of the study. Initial codes were developed around recurring issues and were grouped into broader thematic categories. For example, material concerning agricultural change was organised around changes in the agricultural calendar, shortened cropping cycles, loss of agricultural work, changing seed practices, and livelihood diversification. Material concerning forest-dependent livelihoods was similarly organised around forest-resource decline, declining availability of tubers and other forest foods, changing food practices, reduced honey availability, and increasing market dependence. These themes were compared across the three communities to identify common patterns as well as differences associated with their distinct livelihood and socio-economic positions. The empirical material was then interpreted in relation to broader questions of vulnerability, adaptation, livelihood transformation, Indigenous ecological knowledge, and social inequality. Recurring patterns across interviews and FGDs, together with observations and oral histories, formed the basis for the findings and their subsequent sociological interpretation.

Findings and Discussion

Lives and Livelihoods in a Changing Climate

The impact of climate change on agriculture is a global concern, with particularly severe implications for India, where agriculture contributes nearly 23% of the national GDP and sustains the livelihoods of about 70% of the population (Houghton & Goodale, 2004). As one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, India faces escalating threats to food security and rural livelihoods. Climate variability directly affects crop productivity and agricultural output, thereby influencing both economic stability and nutritional well-being (Ainsworth & Ort, 2010). The depletion of arable land and water resources, combined with the rising demand for food, has already placed immense pressure on the agricultural sector, intensifying existing social and economic inequalities in rural areas.

The study identified three major ways in which climate change has influenced agricultural practices among Indigenous communities in Wayanad. First, shifts in temperature and rainfall patterns have altered the traditional agricultural calendar, disrupting established cropping seasons. Second, in response to these uncertainties, many farmers temporarily adopted modern, hybrid-based agricultural practices; however, following the consecutive floods beginning in 2018, several have reverted to traditional crop varieties that are better adapted to local ecological conditions. Third, climate change has affected the harvesting period, reducing the number of active agricultural days compared to earlier times. The study also highlights that the degree of climate-related disruption varies across communities, depending largely on their historical relationship with land and labour. These patterns reveal how environmental change intersects with social and economic structures, a theme elaborated in the sections that follow.

Among the three Indigenous communities studied, the Kurumar are the most agriculturally dependent. Traditionally, a landowning group in Wayanad, their livelihoods and ritual life are closely intertwined with agricultural cycles. The Kurumar typically maintain two types of land one for homesteads and perennial crops such as fruit trees, and another exclusively for paddy cultivation. Rice, their staple food, is cultivated twice a year during the Mundakan (July–December) and Puncha (January–April) seasons. However, recent climatic changes have disrupted these long-established rhythms. Unpredictable rainfall patterns have delayed the onset of the Mundakan season, which now often begins in August rather than July. Moreover, the significant reduction in December rainfall has forced several households to abandon Puncha cultivation altogether. These alterations illustrate how climate variability directly affects both agricultural productivity and the cultural calendar of the Kurumar, whose seasonal rituals remain deeply tied to the paddy cycle.

Shifting Seeds, Shifting Seasons

Indigenous communities in Wayanad have increasingly moved away from traditional agricultural practices under the combined influence of climate change, state-led development initiatives, and market forces. Among the Kurumar, agriculture has historically been a subsistence activity, oriented toward household consumption rather than commercial gain. Food grains, particularly rice, were stored for year-round use, and each *kudi* (hamlet) traditionally maintained a designated house for grain storage. However, in recent decades, shifts in rainfall patterns and changing policy and market dynamics have prompted many Kurumar households to transition from subsistence farming to market-oriented cultivation. This transformation reflects broader structural changes in rural economies, where Indigenous farmers are compelled to adapt not only to ecological uncertainties but also to the demands of an increasingly monetised agricultural system.

Research indicates a sharp decline in the cultivation of traditional rice varieties in Kerala since the mid-1970s. High-yielding variety (HYV) rice, which accounted for only 15.56% of the total area under paddy cultivation in 1969–1970, expanded dramatically to 93.55% by 2011–2012 (Gopi & Manjula, 2018). Historically, Kerala was home to nearly 2,000 traditional rice varieties (Leenakumari, 2012), and as early as 1976, the Kerala Agricultural University had documented over 1,000 local cultivars collected from different parts of the state. In Wayanad alone, more than 75 Indigenous rice varieties were cultivated before the widespread adoption of commercial agriculture (Kumar & Vedavalli, 2016). This rapid shift from traditional to hybrid strains marks a profound ecological and cultural transition, contributing to the erosion of local seed diversity and traditional agricultural knowledge systems that once underpinned Indigenous food security.

With the increasing penetration of market forces, agricultural success has come to be measured primarily in terms of crop yield. This shift has encouraged many

Indigenous farmers to adopt what are perceived as 'modern' methods of cultivation, replacing traditional seed varieties with commercially available hybrids. However, the transition has not been without consequences. As one farmer explained:

> "I shifted from traditional seeds to hybrid seeds when other farmers in my area told me those seeds would give better yields. In the initial years, it was good, but after 2018, we continuously had heavy rain. During the harvesting period, the crop fell easily, whereas our traditional varieties resisted such conditions better, even if the yield was lower."

This account reflects a broader pattern among Indigenous cultivators in Wayanad, where peer influence and market incentives have driven experimentation with hybrid seeds. Yet, recurrent floods since 2018 have exposed the ecological vulnerability of these varieties, prompting a gradual revival of traditional seeds valued for their resilience to climatic extremes.

Traditional rice varieties cultivated by Indigenous farmers in Wayanad tend to grow taller than hybrid varieties, which makes them more resilient to flooding. When water levels rise in the paddy fields, these taller plants remain above the surface, preventing crop loss. In contrast, hybrid varieties, which grow to a shorter height, are easily submerged during heavy rains, resulting in significant yield losses in recent years. The unpredictability of rainfall has therefore prompted several farmers to return to traditional seed varieties that are better suited to local ecological conditions. However, the earlier shift to hybrid cultivation introduced a new problem. Farmers began applying chemical fertilisers and pesticides more intensively, which gradually reduced soil fertility. Traditional crops had previously relied on organic manures and limited chemical inputs, maintaining ecological balance. Although many farmers have resumed cultivating traditional seeds, they now remain dependent on chemical fertilisers and pesticides, a practice that continues to degrade soil health and local biodiversity.

Rising temperatures, water scarcity, floods, droughts, and sea-level rise pose critical threats to agriculture worldwide, including in India (Abbass et al., 2022). The conservation of traditional or specialist rice varieties is therefore vital for promoting climate-resilient agriculture, as these landraces exhibit a high degree of ecological adaptation and the ability to thrive under adverse conditions. However, Kerala's agricultural landscape has witnessed a gradual erosion of these traditional varieties, largely due to the commercialisation of farming and the widespread adoption of modern high-yielding varieties. Many of Kerala's indigenous rice strains possess specific traits that ensure productivity in challenging environments. For instance, the *Veliyan* variety demonstrates remarkable resistance to both biotic stressors, such as pests and diseases and abiotic stressors like drought and flooding (Swaran et al., 2023). Similar patterns

were observed in this study, where Indigenous farmers in Wayanad identified several traditional cultivars as more resilient to extreme weather events than the newer hybrid strains.

Following the 2018 and 2019 floods, Indigenous farmers who had adopted hybrid seeds often under pressure from peers, agricultural officials, and market expectations suffered substantial crop losses. Learning from these experiences, several farmers began returning to traditional rice varieties such as Veliyan, Chennallu, Mullanthondi, and Gandhakashala from 2021 onwards. Although these traditional varieties require a longer cultivation period and yield smaller harvests compared to modern hybrids, they proved more resilient during the heavy rains of 2020, remaining unaffected by prolonged waterlogging. Farmers expressed renewed confidence in cultivating these crops, noting that their ancestral familiarity with traditional varieties reduced the anxiety associated with unpredictable weather. For many, this shift represented not only an ecological adaptation but also a cultural reassertion of Indigenous agricultural knowledge, restoring a sense of control and continuity in their relationship with the land.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems are inherently well adapted to their local environments and possess a strong capacity for ecological adjustment (Srivastava et al., 1996). As Netting (1993) observes, “traditional cultivators may be more vital and necessary to our future than we realise,” emphasising that such systems are often more sustainable than commercial or industrial agriculture (p. 144). Traditional farming practices are distinct from capital-intensive and input-dependent models, relying instead on locally available resources, collective labour, and community-based decision-making (Howes & Chambers, 1979; Rhoades, 1983; Rajasekaran, 1993; Cernea, 2005). Beyond sustaining yields, they embody cultural values and locally adaptive strategies that reinforce social and ecological resilience (Soleri & Cleveland, 1993; Crevello, 2004). The findings from the present study reaffirm these insights, highlighting how Indigenous agricultural practices in Wayanad draw on inherited ecological knowledge to navigate contemporary climatic uncertainties.

Climate change has also altered the duration of the cropping cycle, affecting both harvesting periods and overall yields. Traditional rice varieties such as Veliyan, Chenellu, Chomala, Chenthadi, Thondi, Gandhakasala, Jeerakasala, and Mullankaima once required longer maturation periods. For instance, Veliyan traditionally took around 180 days to reach harvest, but now matures in only about 130 days. Similarly, Mullanthondi previously needed approximately 130 days, whereas it now ripens within 95 days. Consequently, although farmers begin cultivation later due to erratic monsoons, they often harvest around the same time as before. This temporal compression is largely attributed to rising temperatures during the vegetative phase, when rice plants are most sensitive to heat stress. Elevated temperatures accelerate photosynthetic activity, shortening the crop’s

life cycle and ultimately reducing yields (Abbas & Mayo, 2021; Sridevi & Chellamuthu, 2015). These changes have affected communities differently: the Kurumar, as cultivators, face declining productivity and economic returns, while the Paniyar, primarily employed as agricultural labourers, have lost estimated 30–40 workdays each season due to the shortened agricultural cycle.

The study reveals a significant historical transformation among Indigenous communities in the Western Ghats. As climate change has rendered agriculture increasingly uncertain and economically risky, several land-owning groups have diversified into non-agricultural occupations, leaving portions of their farmland uncultivated. This shift has opened new opportunities for the Paniyar community, who now lease agricultural plots from these landowners at modest rates. Historically, the Paniyar were subjected to bonded labour and servitude under the same agrarian elites of the region. Their present role as independent cultivators though limited and often precarious marks a profound historical shift, as it represents the first time the community has exercised partial control over land and participated in agricultural production for the market. This transition illustrates how climate-induced agrarian disruptions can simultaneously reproduce vulnerability and generate new, though fragile, pathways of social mobility.

Changing Foodscapes: From Forest Abundance to Market Dependence

For Indigenous communities in Wayanad, the paddy field has historically functioned not only as a site of cultivation but also as a space for diverse resource collection. During different seasons, families gathered fish, crabs, and edible leaves from the fields, enriching their diet with naturally available and nutritious food. This interdependence between cultivation, ecology, and nutrition reflected a sustainable way of life, where agricultural landscapes were integral to community health and well-being.

As Kesavan (54), a chieftain from a Kurumar hamlet, reflected:

> "Our ancestors were very healthy. Their hair started greying only after 55 or 60. They would not lose their teeth early like us. They could work the whole day without many breaks. But the present generation does not have the strength that the earlier one had. My hair started greying in my 40s, I have lost some teeth, and I can no longer work in the paddy field. The hot weather makes it difficult to stay outside all day. The soil has become dry, and the fish and water are disappearing. Sometimes, I feel anguish because the climate is never like it was before. We are losing everything our soil, our fish, our water, and our health. The saddest part is that nobody seems to care."

Kesavan's narrative underscores that the traditional food basket of Indigenous communities was remarkably diverse, encompassing various meats, leafy greens, cereals, and tubers available across seasons. Unlike the modern food system, this

seasonal diet provided a balanced intake of vitamins, proteins, and calories derived from locally available resources. Although the Kurumar continue to cultivate rice, many no longer store it for household consumption. With the introduction of the Public Distribution System (PDS), which provides each family with 35 kilograms of subsidised rice, households increasingly sell their own produce in open markets and rely on government rations for daily needs. This shift signifies not only an economic adaptation but also a transformation in food dependency and cultural practices. Traditionally, the Kurumar also depended on forests as a supplementary source of food. Hunting formed an integral part of their subsistence and ritual life; before major ceremonies, men would venture into the forest to procure wild meat for communal meals. However, with the imposition of wildlife protection laws and restrictions on hunting, the community lost a vital component of both nutrition and cultural identity. The decline of forest-based food practices, coupled with market and state-mediated systems of provisioning, reflects a broader erosion of Indigenous food sovereignty.

The data indicate that communities relying on wild and traditional foods derive significant nutritional and economic benefits. Strengthening efforts to conserve biodiversity and sustain traditional farming and food systems is therefore essential for both ecological and human well-being. Narayanan et al. (2021) identified twenty-two edible plant and animal species from paddy ecosystems consumed by Indigenous communities in Wayanad. These include a rich faunal diversity fish, birds, frogs, snails, and edible crabs that supplements local diets and provides critical sources of protein. Beyond their nutritional value, rice fields contribute vital ecosystem services such as water purification, soil fertility maintenance, and hydrological balance. Traditional rice varieties are also multifunctional, serving as food, fodder, fuel, and medicine for local populations (Narayanan et al., 2021; Swaran et al., 2023). Conventional rice-based agroecosystems thus ensure the continued flow of ecosystem services and sustain the dietary needs of low-income rural households. In this context, the recent re-adoption of traditional agricultural practices among Indigenous farmers can be viewed as a positive adaptive response to the pressures of climate change. Rather than representing a simple return to the past, this shift reflects a process of ecological resilience and cultural revaluation rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems.

The transformation of Indigenous food systems in Wayanad reflects the broader social and ecological consequences of climate change. The erosion of traditional agroecosystems, the decline of biodiversity, and the increasing dependence on state-subsidised food supplies have collectively reconfigured patterns of sustenance, labour, and cultural identity among Indigenous communities. Yet, the gradual return to traditional crops and farming methods also demonstrates a form of adaptive resilience rooted in ancestral ecological knowledge. This dynamic tension between loss and adaptation captures the complexity of Indigenous responses to environmental change. However, the impact of climate change extends beyond agriculture and nutrition. As the availability of traditional food

sources has diminished, dependence on forest resources has intensified, leading to new challenges in human–wildlife interactions and resource access. The following section explores how deforestation, habitat alteration, and shifting climatic conditions have transformed the relationship between Indigenous communities and the forests on which their livelihoods have historically depended.

Diminishing Forest Resources: Ecology, Ethics, and the Market

Wild foods and Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) have long been important to Indigenous communities, providing dietary, medicinal, and economic resources and contributing to local food security (Aberoumand, 2009; Belcher et al., 2005; FAO, 2009). Ethnographic studies further show that Indigenous communities possess extensive ecological knowledge concerning the use, management, and regeneration of forest resources (Steward, 1938; Lawton et al., 1976; Woodburn, 1980; Kelly, 1995). In Wayanad, however, the relationship between Indigenous communities and forest resources is undergoing significant change. Declining availability of forest foods, restrictions on access to forest resources, changing climatic conditions, and increasing engagement with markets are reshaping traditional patterns of forest-based subsistence and ecological practice. The following discussion examines these changes through community experiences of forest foods, honey collection, and changing relationships with the forest.

The study reveals that tubers, roots, seeds, and leafy greens once formed an important food base for Indigenous communities in the Western Ghats of Kerala. Hunting, fishing, and trapping of small animals and birds were also part of their subsistence economy and cultural life (Dubois, 2013, p. 76). Forest-food collection involved a gendered division of labour: men typically engaged in hunting and honey collection, while women gathered leafy greens, mushrooms, and tubers, often spending an entire day in the forest. On good days, families could collect and store sufficient tubers for several weeks, whereas a poor harvest yielded little in relation to the effort involved. Species such as *Kattukachil*, *Noorakalasu*, *Narakkalasu*, and *Vennikalasu* were important dietary resources. Community members now report that the collection of these tubers has declined considerably, describing it as increasingly physically demanding and economically unrewarding. This decline reflects not only reduced reliance on forest foods but also a broader transformation in the ways Indigenous households access, value, and sustain forest-based food practices.

Compared to previous generations, younger members of the Indigenous communities appear to have less knowledge of edible tubers and other forest foods, while many also express limited interest in consuming them. As Muthali, the chieftain of the Marode Kattunaicker hamlet, reflected:

> “Look at my body; I am old and weak, yet I still go to the forest every morning. We Kattunaicker are children of the forest it is everything to

> us. When I was young, our entire family would roam the forest together. We collected whatever we needed; the forest was like a treasure box — it never disappointed us. Each day offered new lessons and experiences. But my children and grandchildren are detached from the forest. They go there only to collect honey, gooseberries, or Ayurvedic herbs to sell, not to eat. *Noora and chappu* (tubers and leafy greens) were once our main food, and we valued gathering food for our family more than earning money. Even with better tools, the younger generation lacks the patience to dig for tubers."

Muthali's account points to a significant generational and cultural shift in the relationship between the Kattunaicker community and the forest. Practices that once combined subsistence, family participation, and everyday ecological learning are increasingly being replaced by more selective and market-oriented engagement with forest resources. As his account suggests, honey, gooseberries, and Ayurvedic herbs are now collected primarily for sale, while tubers and leafy greens that were once valued as household food have become less central to younger generations' diets. This transformation is not simply a change in food preference; it also signals a weakening of the everyday practices through which knowledge of forest foods and ecological relationships was transmitted across generations. Similar trends have been documented elsewhere, including declining consumption of traditional plant foods such as berries, roots, and leafy greens, as well as wild animal foods among Indigenous populations (Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996). Changes in wildlife protection laws and restrictions on access to forest areas have further contributed to this transition, affecting traditional food systems and everyday cultural connections with the forest.

Honey collection remains an important source of livelihood among the Kattunaicker community in Wayanad, although community members report a noticeable decline in honey availability in recent years. Honey collection requires specialised skills and intimate ecological knowledge concerning bee behaviour, forest conditions, and appropriate collection practices, traditionally transmitted across generations. The decline in availability is experienced alongside changing forest conditions and altered flowering patterns associated with climatic variability. For the Kattunaicker, this represents not only a potential loss of livelihood income but also a gradual weakening of the ecological knowledge through which relationships between livelihood, forest resources, and the environment have been sustained.

The honey collection season has also shifted alongside changing climatic conditions. As one respondent observed, "The honey collection season used to start in February; now it begins only in April or May." Community members associate this delay with changes in flowering cycles and rainfall patterns in the region. A forest officer interviewed for the study further highlighted differences in honey-collection practices among Kattunaicker groups living inside and outside

the forest. Those living within the forest continue to follow customary practices transmitted across generations, collecting honey only during specific periods and adhering to the belief that "we can collect honey only when the forest allows us." They wait until the combs contain sufficient honey and leave underdeveloped ones untouched for future collection. Such practices reflect an ecological ethic of restraint, reciprocity, and respect for the forest's seasonal rhythms. Among Kattunaicker groups living outside forest areas, however, the officer observed a gradual shift toward market-oriented collection, with greater emphasis on volume and income. The contrast between forest time and market time thus illustrates how changing economic relationships with forest resources are reshaping customary practices of ecological stewardship.

The contrast between forest-dwelling and outside-forest Kattunaicker groups also points to the influence of market integration and changing social orientations on relationships with forest resources. For groups living outside the forest, honey collection has increasingly become a monetised livelihood activity, while the customary practices of restraint and reciprocity described among forest-dwelling groups are less prominent. Proximity to markets and wider technologies therefore appears to reshape not only livelihood strategies but also the meanings and values attached to forest resources. Environmental change thus intersects with economic transformation and shifting value systems, contributing to a gradual movement from subsistence-oriented and reciprocal relationships with the forest toward more market-oriented forms of resource use.

Ecological Change and Human–Wildlife Conflict: New Forms of Livelihood Vulnerability

Changing rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, and increasing water stress are altering ecological conditions and the availability of food and water for both humans and wildlife (DeNicola et al., 2015; El Kharraz et al., 2012). One consequence is the movement of wildlife beyond traditional habitats in search of food and water, bringing animals into closer contact with human settlements and increasing competition over ecological resources (Brown & Berry, 2022; Salehyan, 2008). In the Western Ghats of Kerala, such changes are increasingly experienced by Indigenous communities living close to forest areas, where changing wildlife movements have created new forms of interaction, insecurity, and livelihood risk.

Human wildlife encounters have become an important livelihood concern in Wayanad, particularly for Indigenous communities living along forest fringes. Community members associate these encounters with declining availability of water, food, and vegetation within forest ecosystems. As streams dry up and vegetation becomes less available, wild animals increasingly enter agricultural fields and settlements in search of food and water. Elephants, wild boars, deer,

and peacocks are reported to raid crops, causing damage to agricultural production and increasing livelihood insecurity among Indigenous farmers.

Asokan, a forest watcher from the Kattunaicker community, explained:

> "Climate change has a direct impact on man-animal conflict because the availability of resources in the forest has decreased over time. With rising temperatures, vegetation levels have deteriorated, and the amount of fruits and tubers has declined. Since wild animals lack food and water inside the forest, they come to places where resources are available human settlements. The forest has also become much hotter due to less vegetation and reduced rainfall. Even elephants behave differently now; they move erratically, disturbed by the excessive heat inside the forest."

Asokan's account illustrates how community members understand the relationship between climatic variability, declining forest resources, and changing wildlife behaviour. His observations connect rising temperatures, reduced rainfall, declining vegetation, and the availability of fruits, tubers, food, and water with the increasing movement of wildlife toward human settlements. For Indigenous communities, such encounters create new livelihood vulnerabilities through crop loss, property damage, and heightened concerns about safety. The resulting encounters reveal how environmental stress can reshape everyday relationships between forest-dependent communities and wildlife, making coexistence increasingly difficult under conditions of ecological scarcity.

The changing condition of forest ecosystems is another factor shaping wildlife movement in Wayanad. Community observations indicate that declining rainfall and the drying of ponds and streams have reduced the availability of water within forest areas, while changes in vegetation and food resources have encouraged animals to seek alternatives outside forest boundaries. Elephants, in particular, are reported to enter agricultural fields and village ponds in search of water. These local experiences are consistent with wider research showing that changes in the availability of food and water can alter wildlife distribution and increase movement into human-dominated landscapes (Mancosu et al., 2015; Bharat & Dkhar, 2018). The situation in Wayanad therefore illustrates how climatic stress, changing forest conditions, and human settlement patterns can converge to create new forms of human–wildlife interaction and livelihood vulnerability.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that climate change intensifies the vulnerability of Indigenous communities, though its effects are uneven across different groups. The Kurumar community, for example, has been able to partially adapt by diversifying their livelihood activities, thereby mitigating some of the risks associated with environmental instability. In contrast, the Kattunaicker

community remains highly vulnerable due to their continued dependence on forest-based resources for subsistence and income.

An especially noteworthy finding concerns the Paniyar community, who have undergone a significant historical shift. Traditionally positioned as bonded labourers under local landlords, the Paniyar had limited access to land or production. However, as climate change made agriculture increasingly uncertain and prompted landowning groups to abandon cultivation, sections of the Paniyar began leasing small plots and farming themselves. This transition, though fragile, marks an important step toward social and economic mobility and a redefinition of identity through productive labour. Nevertheless, this development must be interpreted cautiously. Agriculture in the era of climate change is a precarious and risky enterprise, and the long-term sustainability of these new livelihood practices remains uncertain. Continued research is needed to examine whether these emerging opportunities translate into enduring empowerment or expose the community to new forms of economic insecurity.

Another significant finding of this study concerns the renewed cultivation of traditional rice varieties among Indigenous farmers in Wayanad. Following repeated crop losses associated with floods and heavy rainfall, several farmers have returned to traditional varieties that they consider better suited to local ecological conditions. These varieties, some of which have taller plant structures, have demonstrated greater resilience to flooding than the hybrid varieties previously adopted by farmers. However, this transition has not necessarily involved a return to traditional organic farming practices, as many farmers continue to depend on chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The findings therefore illustrate a selective revival of Indigenous agricultural knowledge in response to climatic uncertainty, rather than a complete restoration of traditional farming systems.

Ulrich Beck's (2015) concept of the risk society provides a useful lens to interpret these developments. Beck argues that climate change amplifies existing social inequalities, both among nation-states and within local communities, while simultaneously compelling societies to confront new global risks. His idea of local sustainability adaptive practices that are context-specific and community-driven resonates with the findings of this study. The responses of Indigenous farmers in Wayanad illustrate how localised strategies, informed by traditional knowledge and collective experience, can serve as powerful tools for resilience.

This research, therefore, suggests that while climate change is a global phenomenon, its adaptation and mitigation must be grounded in local realities. Understanding the livelihood strategies, adaptive capacities, and preferences of communities at the grassroots level is essential for effective climate policy. Integrating Indigenous ecological knowledge into planning frameworks can bridge the gap between global sustainability goals and local resilience, ensuring

that climate responses are socially just, culturally sensitive, and ecologically sustainable.

The experiences of Indigenous communities in the Western Ghats reveal that climate change is not only an ecological crisis but also a deeply social one. It disrupts livelihoods, reshapes relationships with land and forests, and redefines long-standing cultural values. Yet, within this uncertainty lies evidence of remarkable resilience seen in the revival of traditional crops, organic practices, and ecological knowledge systems that promote coexistence rather than exploitation. The lessons drawn from Wayanad remind us that the future of climate adaptation depends not solely on technological innovation or policy intervention, but on recognising and strengthening the local capacities of those who live closest to nature. In doing so, sociology has an essential role to play: to illuminate these lived realities, challenge structural inequalities, and advocate for climate futures that are both just and sustainable.

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Muhammed Sihas K. M. is an Assistant Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Science and Humanities, Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology & Research (VFSTR), Andhra Pradesh, India
Email: muhammedsihas707@gmail.com, drms_ssh@vignan.ac.in

Article: At the Margins: Understanding Exclusion and the Lived Experience of Dumping Yard Waste Pickers in Nagpur

Author: Nishant Kumar Dongre & Aruna Chinnappan

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At the Margins: Understanding Exclusion and the Lived Experience of Dumping Yard Waste Pickers in Nagpur

--Nishant Kumar Dongre & Aruna Chinnappan

Abstract

Waste is no longer merely 'waste' in this contemporary society, as it can be transformed into a new commodity through recycling and other means. Central to this transformation are waste pickers, who collect and sort reusable materials. Among them, dumping yard waste pickers occupy a distinct and often overlooked position: not only do they work with waste, but they also live in close proximity to it, facing a double burden. They suffer every day with cuts on their bodies and scars on their social souls. They are one of the most spatially excluded and socially marginalised communities. Despite their unique experiences, dumping yard waste pickers are often grouped with other waste pickers, obscuring their distinct experiences. The current research focuses on dumping yard waste pickers and seeks to understand their lives and work. This study is based in *Bhandewadi*, a dumping yard located on the outskirts of Nagpur, Maharashtra. The current study employed a mixed-methods approach to discuss the subject thoroughly, in which qualitative data were collected through personal interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), and secondary sources were used for the quantitative data.

Keywords: *Dumping yard waste pickers, waste, smell, exclusion, marginalisation*

Introduction

With modernisation, industrialisation, and increasing consumption, waste generation globally has increased. Annually, the world generates 2.01 billion tonnes of solid waste, and it is expected to grow to 3.40 billion tonnes by 2050 (World Bank, 2018). According to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, India generates 53 million tonnes of waste annually (Anil Agarwal Environment Training Institute, 2020). Another study shows that with 62 million tonnes of waste generated every year, India ranks as the third-largest waste generator in the world (Badri, 2023). Along with the data, waste mountains in cities clearly reflect that waste generation is increasing with each passing year. Waste was initially a sanitation issue, but with increasing modernisation and industrialisation, it has become an economic opportunity. In contemporary society, waste is not only cleaned but also managed to extract economic value from it (Lepawsky, 2023). According to a waste market forecast by Market Research Future, India's waste management market size was valued at USD 12.3 billion in 2022 (Vyas, 2025) and is projected to reach USD 14 billion by 2025, growing 7% annually (Meghani, 2023). The waste economy serves as an

alternative economic platform for the urban poor to earn a livelihood by collecting and selling waste (Millar, 2008).

According to the Solid Waste Management Rules, waste pickers "mean a person or group of persons informally engaged in the collection and recovery of reusable and recyclable solid waste from the source of waste generation, such as streets, bins, material recovery facilities, processing and waste disposal facilities, for sale to recyclers directly or through intermediaries to earn their livelihood" (2016, p. 791). For the first time, the term 'waste pickers' started to be used instead of the derogatory term 'scavenger' in 2008, at the First World Conference of Waste Pickers held in Colombia (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, n.d.). This transition from scavengers to waste pickers reflects how waste was only a sanitation issue, and those who were cleaning the waste were called scavengers. With a growing market and the commercialisation of waste, scavengers became waste pickers, so that more workers could join hands to create a larger waste economy. According to a report by the Times of India, there are 15 to 40 lakh informal waste pickers in India (Meghani, 2023), which is 10% of the global waste picker community (The George Institute, 2021). According to the National Labour Survey in India, waste pickers were 1% of the workforce (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, n.d.). However, the waste pickers who work informally in large numbers and help achieve these economic numbers in the waste market remain unrecognised and socio-economically marginalised.

"India has a long tradition of people making livelihoods out of other people's discards" (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). This observation needs to be situated within the broader history of caste, poverty, and informal labour in India, where one person's waste can be useful to others. The discards may be leftover food, clothes, plastic, scrap metal, domestic refuse, or recyclable materials. For those at the lower end of the social hierarchy, such discards often served as resources that enabled survival. Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2015), for instance, reflects how *Joothan* (leftover food) from upper-caste households became both a means of survival and a source of humiliation. In this context, livelihood from discards is not merely an economic practice, but it is also embedded in relations of stigma, dependency, and social inequality. In contemporary India, this older dependence on discards continues in new urban forms through the work of informal waste pickers, for whom the city's garbage becomes both a source of livelihood and a site of exclusion. Waste is a source of livelihood for 1.5 to 4 million informal waste pickers (Bandyopadhyay, 2025). Waste pickers play a significant role, accounting for over 80% of the total recyclable waste (The George Institute, 2021), in making waste a valuable commodity and thus generating an economy of its own. According to Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), some categories of waste pickers include on-route/truck waste pickers, dump/landfill waste pickers, doorstep waste pickers, itinerant buyers, handlers/processors of organic wastes, and sorters. Among these groups,

dumping-yard waste pickers endure a double burden: they not only work with waste but also live near it, which makes them socio-economically and spatially marginalised.

The research problem addressed in this paper arises from the assumption that waste pickers are a homogeneous group, which fails to account for the specific experiences of dumping-yard waste pickers who both work with waste and live in close proximity to it. Unlike other categories of waste pickers, their everyday lives are shaped by a double burden: exposure to hazardous labour conditions within the dumping yard and social-spatial exclusion due to living beside the waste yard. Based on empirical findings from *Bhandewadi*, Nagpur, the current study seeks to understand the lived experiences of dumping yard waste pickers. The study focuses on livelihoods, health risks, sensory experiences, stigma, spatial marginalisation, and the informal contributions of waste pickers to urban sustainability. Sociologically, the study is significant because it brings into view how migration, informal labour, urban planning, and stigma intersect in the construction of marginal urban lives. By highlighting the voices and experiences of dumping-yard waste pickers, this paper argues that their exclusion is not merely an economic or environmental issue but a deeply social one rooted in stigma, exclusion, and the organisation of urban space.

Methods of Data Collection

Based on empirical findings, this research paper attempts to understand the dumping-yard waste pickers from *Bhandewadi*, Nagpur, India. A mixed-methods approach has been employed to thoroughly analyse the subject matter. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to capture their experiences. In addition to semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with participants to deepen understanding and further enrich the study. Qualitative data were analysed through manual coding. The findings were organised and discussed in three primary themes: (1) work and life at the open factory; (2) living at the margins: sensory experience and social exclusion; and (3) informal but important agents of sustainability. The first two themes were further subdivided to provide a more detailed account of the lived experience of the dumping yard waste pickers.

To comprehensively understand the subject and substantiate the primary findings, secondary data have been sourced from reliable sources such as the Central Pollution Control Board, the Environment Department, the Pollution Control Board, Maharashtra, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, India, the World Bank of India, and trusted news portals.

Nagpur's Kachra Patti: Into the Field

"Globally, most of the waste is currently dumped or disposed of in some form of a landfill" (World Bank, 2018). According to the Annual Report 2018-2019 on solid

waste management, India has a total of 3159 waste dumping sites, where 23,354,546 tonnes of waste are dumped annually, with Maharashtra at the third rank, having a total of 327 dumpsites, with 4,034,126 tonnes of waste being dumped annually (Central Pollution Control Board, 2019). Nagpur was the capital of the Central Province and Berar and is currently the third-largest city in Maharashtra and the largest in the Vidarbha region. It also serves as the winter capital of Maharashtra, as sessions of the state assembly take place here in the winter. According to the Oxford Economics report, the City of Nagpur is growing at an average rate of 8.41% and is projected to be the fifth-fastest-growing city in the world from 2019 to 2025 (Environment Department and Maharashtra Pollution Control Board, Government of Maharashtra). Growth comes with an increase in waste generation. In 2020, Nagpur generated approximately 1100-1200 metric tonnes of waste per day (The Times of India, 2020), but as of December 2024, this has increased to 1450 metric tonnes per day (Chakraborty, 2025).

Nagpur Municipal Corporation owns 77 acres in *Bhandewadi*, 52 acres used for dumping garbage and 25 acres for a sewage treatment plant (The Times of India, 2020). Nagpur has seen an increase in everyday waste generation, from 615 metric tonnes in 2009-10 to 1450 metric tonnes as of 2025 (The News Dirt, 2025). To manage the waste and cleanliness effectively, Nagpur Municipal Corporation (NMC) has 10 functional municipal zones, each responsible for 3 to 4 wards. In November 2019, to collect and transport waste to the *Bhandewadi* dumping yard, NMC shifted the responsibility from its shoulders and awarded a contract to two private companies: AG Enviro and BVG India. AG Enviro collects the waste from zones 1 to 5, and BVG India collects the waste from zones 6 to 10 (Nagpur Today, 2022). These two companies have vehicles with two separate compartments for dry and wet garbage, allowing them to separate the waste at the source. With a driver and another worker to help load waste into the vehicle, the vehicles operate between their respective zones to collect waste and transport it to *Bhandewadi*. Though both companies' vehicles have two separate sections for wet and dry garbage, only 20% of the segregated waste reaches the dumping yard (The Times of India, 2020), which means the remaining 80% has to be segregated in the dumping yard itself, which makes the yard always active, running and sometimes fuming. Moreover, in 2022, NMC fined these two companies after finding that 200 trucks were carrying construction debris along with waste to inflate the overall weight of the waste transported (Nagpur Today, 2022). Malpractices of this kind expose two things: first, the failure to segregate waste at the source, and second, an increased burden on waste pickers at the dumping yard.

Bhandewadi, an area that can be smelled from 500 metres away, is known in the city as *Kachra-Patti* (Garbage Line) due to the dumping yard. The *Bhandewadi* dumping yard was established around 1994 at the eastern edge of Nagpur city. Gopal Guru (2009) argued that the Dalit Basti in a village is usually situated in the eastern part of the village, as air travels from the western to the eastern side,

so that the foul and 'polluted' smell from the eastern side (Dalit Basti) should not travel to the western side, where upper castes reside. He further argued that these morphologies and geographies are part of larger social designs, often dominated by the upper caste. Within this context, the development of a waste dumping yard at the eastern edge of the city, *Bhandewadi*, should be understood in connection with the social structure of Indian society. There are other major waste dumping yards located on the eastern edge of the city. For instance, *Deonar*, India's largest and oldest landfill, is situated in eastern Mumbai. *Ghazipur* landfill, the largest in Delhi, the capital of India, is also situated in the eastern part of the city. Is this a coincidence, or is the social structure influencing the morphologies? It may not necessarily be true with growing urbanisation in every city, but it at least reflects the influence of 'social' on the physical. Though more specific research is needed on this subject, these instances reinforce Guru's arguments and reflect the exclusive morphology shaped by broader social designs, especially in the Indian context.

Work and Life at Open Factory

Migration and Pathways into Waste Picking

The current study found that among 22 participants, 17 were from the OBC (Other Backwards Classes) and the remaining 5 were SC (Scheduled Castes). All the OBC participants belonged to the Sahu (Teli) caste, and all the SC participants were from the Mahar caste. All the participants are migrants who came to *Bhandewadi in* the early 1990s and settled there after buying plots on instalments. All the OBC participants migrated from Chhattisgarh; among the 5 SC participants, 2 migrated from Madhya Pradesh, and the remaining 3 were from Maharashtra. It is important to note that the dumping yard in *Bhandewadi* was established after participants purchased plots and began settling there. One of the participants shared that, if I remember it correctly, 2-3 years after buying this plot on instalments, *Kachra Patti* started to build. As of 2019, approximately 8 lakh metric tonnes of untreated waste have been dumped at the *Bhandewadi* yard (The News Dirt, 2025). Initially, they did not think this yard would grow so much, and that it would not only impact their everyday lives but also be part of their identity and livelihood.

Participants have gradually adopted this work, resocialised themselves, and begun collecting waste for reuse and sale in the waste market. Participants are from different age groups; the youngest participant, who is 15, has been working in the yard since last year, whereas the oldest participant, who is 56, has been working there for the last 15-16 years. The 56-year-old participant was a construction labourer but started picking up waste in the evenings after work, and for the last 10-11 years, he has done so full-time. The 15-year-old participant picks up waste after school hours, and another participant, who is 24 years old, is a 2nd-year B.A. dropout who initially worked as a salesman in a clothing store. The participants

were not traditionally waste pickers and had worked as carpenters, construction labourers, and other daily-wage workers, but they became waste pickers mainly for two reasons: first, economic vulnerability; and second, the economic opportunities close to home. While discussing both cases, it is important to note that waste has not only served as a livelihood but has also shaped it (Gidwani & Corwin, 2017). The second generation has already joined the waste-picking workforce. This shows the continuous socialisation and reproduction, which indicates a high chance that the coming generation might end up doing the same work.

Nature of Work and Livelihood

In the decade from 2010 to 2020, the city's waste generation has nearly doubled. Nagpur generated 615.31 metric tonnes of garbage daily, and by 2020, it started to generate 1200 metric tonnes of garbage (Chakraborty, 2019). In this decade, 3,903,685.07 metric tonnes of garbage have been dumped at *Bhandewadi* (Chakraborty, 2019). *Bhandewadi* receives 80% mixed waste (The News Dirt, 2025), consisting largely of organic waste, plastic, cardboard, paper, etc. A study by Arcadis (2017) collected samples from the *Bhandewadi* dumping yard, revealing that 77% was organic waste, followed by 11.60% plastic, 7.66% paper and the remaining 3.74% textile, cardboard, etc. This dumped mixed waste, which largely contains organic waste, makes it difficult for waste pickers to collect and sort out useful waste. Participants said that *Hum kachre pe khade hokar, kachra binate hai jo kaam ka ho* (we stand on the waste and pick up useful waste).

Data from 2024 show that 32.85% of the monthly waste dumped at the *Bhandewadi* site was mixed (The News Dirt, 2025), making segregation at the site inevitable to further process the waste for recycling or refurbishment. In the process of segregating waste by collecting useful items, dumping yard pickers usually find iron, plastic, glass pieces, hair, polythene, cartons, etc. They sell these waste items in the yard at various market prices, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: ***Prices shared by the participants in rupees per kilogram***

Items	Price in Rupee Per Kilogram
Iron	25
Plastic	10
Glass	3
Hair	1000
Polythene	5
Carton and Paper	10
Sole	2
Metal (Mix)	60
Rubber	2
Old Clothes	30-40

Source: Field Work, 2024

These waste pickers are not financially stable, as, on average, they earn 250-300 per day, which amounts to roughly 7000 to 9000 per month. Their income level is very low, which makes them economically vulnerable and helps explain why they collect reusable items for themselves. Lower earnings lead to lower access to health and education and lower purchasing power, which worsens their struggle. Participants also shared that, if the day is good and luck is with them, they would earn even 1000 in a day. Agar humko baal ka guccha mil gaya to fir din ban gaya (if we get a bundle of hair, then our day lightens up), as it pays more, but this is not the regular scenario.

"In 1978, Birkbeck remarked that the Cali landfill in Colombia was like an informal factory" (Chikarmane, 2012, p. 1). It would not be an exaggeration to call the *Bhandewadi* dumping yard an open-air waste factory, where work goes on day and night, without any formal regulations. These pickers do not have a standard workspace; participants shared that their working hours are not fixed and that they are not provided with equipment, gloves, or basic facilities. All participants work independently and informally, with no supervision or protection against potential accidents at the landfill. This open-air factory offers no security, whether financial or physical. Participants go to the yard according to their convenience. Some participants go in the morning, and others in the evening, which keeps this yard active throughout the day. Moreover, they have easy mobility between the worksite and home; they do not have to travel to different places to work. This easy mobility allows more women to join this work. These workers return from the yard once they feel they have collected enough waste to exchange for the required money, which usually takes 7-8 hours. In the absence of formal regulations, these waste pickers' challenges are of no concern to the state. This unregulated workspace goes beyond the labour-wage dichotomy, as workers are free and not under direct pressure from anyone.

Occupational Hazards and Health Risks

Though these workers enjoy independence in working hours, easy mobility, and the amount of labour they want to put in, this work comes with a pack of everyday risks. These workers have direct contact with dangerous pollutants and toxins every day. With insects roaming around, fumes penetrating the nose, and pieces of glass and metal ready to pierce the skin, their working conditions are sickening.

These workers not only work with waste but also live next to it, which increases the impact of waste on them. Whether through direct contact with waste while working or indirect contact while staying at home, they remain exposed to these conditions around the clock. Physical injuries like cuts to the fingers and feet,

often caused by sharp objects such as tiles, glass, and metal, reflect the need for gloves and boots. Biological hazards such as fungi, insects, viruses and bacteria are part and parcel of their livelihood. On top of all these, accident anxiety is also a cause of concern for them. They must also be mindful of trucks, JCBs, and cranes working in the yard, which can cause accidents. In a low voice, one of the women participants shared that, *last year, two people trapped under a loaded truck died in front of me*. After swallowing saliva, haltingly, she further said that *she could not go to the yard for the next 2-3 days*. This reflects the mental trauma she must have had, which still makes her anxious. Physical injuries leave them with scars that not only reflect the physical pain they undergo daily but also symbolise their sacrifices, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: ***A young (24) dumping yard waste picker showing his injured feet***



Source: Fieldwork, 2024

Alongside physical risks, environmental dangers make them suffer even more. Every season brings different challenges to their lives. In the summer, waste dries up, making the dumping yard more prone to fire. This affects the people who work and live near the yard. They fear fire and fumes that cause serious respiratory issues and could cause serious accidents. In 2023, a 60-acre dumping yard in *Brahmapuram*, Kochi, caught fire, which took almost two weeks to get controlled, and due to that fire, more than 1400 people were affected and needed medical assistance (Badri, 2023). Before this, the Bhalswa and *Ghazipur* yards caught fire (Badri, 2023). Here in *Bhandewadi*, fires and blazes are a common sight. Participants said it is a regular thing, which makes some of them anxious and helpless, as they cannot do anything except live with the risks. In recent times, *Bhandewadi* saw the most severe fire in April 2025. The flames reached up to 100 feet in height and lasted for 48 hours. The fumes formed a thick smoky sky over the city's eastern part, and the temperature reached 50 degrees Celsius indoors (The News Dirt, 2025). This not only poses a physical threat but also affects their livelihoods.

After the summer, the rainy season brings its own challenges. Unlike in summer, in the rainy season, all the waste gets wet and smells very unpleasant, which affects their everyday lives. A persistent bad smell lingers throughout this season due to strong winds and the high likelihood of rotting organic waste. Living

beside the waste in the rainy season is not only filthy but also life-threatening. While recalling their experience from last year, one female participant shared that the last time the yard's boundary wall broke, all the water came into our homes and stayed there for days. We struggled a lot during that time; forget working, we were not even able to sleep or cook. Another participant shared that *Jab pani ghar ke andar aaya, bahut kich-kich lagta tha, ganda-ganda saman tair raha tha pani me* (when water rushed inside home, it was giving a bad feeling; filthy garbage was swimming in the water). Even if they tolerate the waterlogging and the continuous smell, they must deal with insects.

Living at the Margins: Sensory Experience and Social Exclusion

Smell and Social Nausea

I still remember, on a two-wheeler, with one of my friends, who had been living in the city for the last few years, we were approaching *Bhandewadi,* and approximately 500 metres away from it, a strong smell pierced our noses. I immediately asked my friend what this smell was. He laughed and said, *'Bhai wahi to jaa rahe hai'* (Brother, we are going there only). He further said, "Welcome to *Bhandewadi*. I could feel that smell for a few days, and from that smell, I could tell that *Bhandewadi* was nearby. Though a new person gets a continuous, unbearable foul smell from 500 metres away from the *Bhandewadi* yard, people working and living adjacent to the yard do not feel the same, as it has become routinised and thus habituated to. A participant said that *Humko bass nahi aati, kyuki humare naak ke baal jal chuke hai* (we do not get a smell because our nose hairs are burnt). Another participant said, *'Ab humari naak me baith gayi hai baas'* (now, the smell is settled in our nose). As it is part of everyday life, most of the participants are not bothered unless the wind is stiff and continuous. However, smells and fumes cause sickness in children and new residents. For instance, a lady who came three years ago after her marriage shared that, *'Mujhe ulti hoti thi, khasi hoti thi, aaj bhi hoti hai kabhi-kabhi'* (I used to vomit and cough, and it still happens sometimes). Participants reflected, 'Aati *hai baas, to kya kar sakte hai?'* (We get the smell, but what can we do?). This helplessness speaks volumes about the city administration and their ignorance towards the people living and working on the pile of waste.

A foul smell not only gives an unpleasant and uneasy experience to the participants, but it also causes them social nausea. Due to its foul smell and fumes, *Bhandewadi* is always the talk of the town as a smelly, unpleasant place to visit. As noted by Zardini (2006), senses influence people's everyday lives and experiences (Wankhede et al., 2023). In this context, every place has a smell, and thus, smell defines the place and its experience. Owing to its dumping yard, *Bhandewadi* has a distinct identity, defined by garbage and a strange, foul smell in the city. Smell emanating from waste affects the experience of place (Henshaw, 2013; Xiao, Aletta, & Radicchi, 2022; Wankhede et al., 2023, p. 3818) and

creates a distinct ambience set apart from the city. Urban spaces offer diverse sensory experiences that encourage people to stay longer and interact more (Wankhede et al., 2023), fostering memorable experiences. *Bhandewadi*, an unusual urban space, offers a distinct sensory experience and thereby invites prejudice from non-residents. Participants shared that they are not only dealing with pollution and foul smells, which are still not as unsettling as social scrutiny and prejudices. One participant shared her school experience of being teased, called *'kachre-patti wali'*, meaning 'lady of the garbage line'. This stigmatised identity has been imprinted in their mind, as they are constantly seen and linked with waste and its smell. It gets worse for them when guests visit their homes and constantly complain about the unpleasant air they smell and breathe. One of the participants said that *Jab koi guest aata hai aur kehta hai, gandi baas aa rahi hai, tab bahut jada bekar feel hota hai* (whenever a guest comes and says a bad smell is coming, then we feel terrible at that time). They also believe that, due to the smell, many guests hesitate to revisit their homes. Stigma by the people of other parts of the city and complaints from their own guests further weaken them mentally and socially, leaving them with no answers but passive compliance.

At Margins: Spatial and Social

The city treats its dwellers differently. According to Harvey (2008), urbanisation and the unequal development of urban spaces are modern capitalist phenomena based on class, in which surplus is extracted from the periphery, and wealth is concentrated in a few hands in the core. In the Indian context, urban space, such as a city, has a structure highly influenced by the 'social', which is caste (Ranganathan, 2022). From the outside, the city looks modern and equal. However, cities have different unequal faces (Bharathi et al., 2021) when looked at from the inside, with colonies named and divided on the basis of class, caste and religion. The theory of regional development based on the core-periphery model proposed by John Friedmann (1966) argues that resources are dispersed disproportionately within the city, with the core, or main city, enjoying all the perks while the periphery is neglected and marginalised. City waste and disposal sites are influenced not only by urbanisation and neoliberalism but also by local politics and planning (McClintock & Morris, 2024). As discussed earlier, *Bhandewadi* is located at the urban corner, and the participants said they sometimes go to the 'city'. This implies two important points: first, the city is exclusive to them, and second, they do not see themselves as part of the city. Participants believe that living beside waste has affected their standard of living and devalued them and their area. This gives them a feeling, which participants echoed together during FGD, that though they are part of the city, it feels like living in a village. One of the participants said, '*Kachre ke paas pe rehte hai to wo log humko bhi vaisa hi samjhate hai'* (we live beside garbage, and that is why they think of us as the same). As migrants and waste pickers, this community is surviving on the margins.

Spatial divide and urban inequality lead to the exclusion of dumping-yard waste pickers living on the periphery. They are not only deprived of development, but people from other parts of the city look down on them because they live beside a waste yard. Although the whole city generates waste, those who attach economic value to the waste are identified by the waste, which is quite contradictory, but a reality. These workers were often judged and bullied in school and college. They carry fear in their minds because of the possible humiliation they might face for their work and area of residence. They hide their place of residence when out in the market; instead, they tell people they live behind the Swami Narayan temple, a nearby famous landmark. One college-going student shared that he feels ashamed to say that he lives in this *Basti* (near the waste yard), because people say, '*Kachra Patti taraf ke log hai* (these people are from the dumping yard). Another participant said that *Jab hum city me jate hai, aur vapas aane ke liye auto karte hai to hum use kehete hai Swaminarayan mandir jana hai aur apna jagah ka naam nahi batate'* (when we go to the city, and when we come back, we tell the auto driver to drop us at Swaminarayan mandir and that is how we hide our place of living). This reflects that, even though they are residents of the same city, they receive different treatment. They are forced to hide their identity and detach themselves from their own area of living in order to freely access and enjoy the public spaces, which are maintained and kept garbage-free through their own significant role. This socioeconomically disadvantaged group of waste pickers suffer every day with cuts on their bodies and scars on their social souls. Unlike other categories of waste pickers, dumping yard waste pickers endure a 'double burden'. On the one hand, they suffer physically with injuries and environmental issues, and on the other hand, they suffer socially as they face stigma, exclusion and spatial divide. Coming from the socially backward caste, being migrants and, most importantly, working as waste pickers pushes them to further marginalisation.

Bhandewadi is a *geography of exclusion* (Harms, 2016; Sibley, 1995 as cited in Mishra, 2024), where people live with multidimensional exclusions such as exclusion in the economic sphere (employment, credit, income), exclusion in access to housing and basic amenities, exclusion in health and education, exclusion in political participation and decision-making, and exclusion in public spaces (Mishra, 2024). Core areas of Nagpur city receive the attention of the city administration, with a focus on timely cleanliness, security, order, and beautification. However, *Bhandewadi* lacks even basic amenities such as proper housing, roads, a health centre, and sanitation. A participant said, *'Gandagi ke karan, aisa lagta hi nahi ki hum acche jagah pe reh rahe hai'* (due to the garbage near us, we feel we are not living in a good place). Further, with frustration, one of the participants said, *"Kachre ki paidaish hai 'bhaiya', kachre me hi zindagi hai* (we are born out of garbage; 'brother', we must live in the garbage itself)." Though not properly, it was only in mid-2024 that the road in their area was laid

down after years of an uncleaned, pothole-filled, unmetalled road. Unlike other parts of the city, they do not yet have a connected sewage line and lack cleanliness. Their lives are not being valued as those of other residents of the 'city'. *Kachre ke jaise, kachre me hi pade hai* (like garbage, we are left in garbage). *Bhandewadi* is both a site of survival and of exclusion for these waste pickers.

Informal but Important Agents of Sustainability

The waste mountains are mounting daily as waste generation and collection increase. According to Chakraborty (2025), Nagpur generated 1,200 metric tonnes of waste daily until December 2024, but now generates 1,450 metric tonnes. The large amount of mixed waste dumped at *Bhandewadi* affects groundwater and contributes to air pollution from fumes, which are a frequent occurrence in the yards. As an immediate effect, a waste yard significantly impacts and shapes the lives of people living beside it in economic, health, and social aspects. For instance, they do not worry about cuts and injuries, as they consider them part and parcel of their work. According to Meghani (2023), there are 15 to 40 lakh informal waste pickers in India. One of the participants during the FGD shared that, *Humare jaise lagbhag, vaha daily 1800-2000 log aate honge kachra binne* (like us, as many as 1800-2000 people come daily there to pick up the waste). This reveals an informal army of waste pickers collecting waste in *Bhandewadi*. These waste pickers informally extend their hands to the Nagpur Municipal Corporation not only to manage waste but also to extract economic value from it. However, they are neither recognised nor organised.

Dumping yard waste pickers are not only crucial to the functioning of urban waste management, but they also contribute to environmental sustainability. They collect and sort the waste, which is later recycled by the industries. By doing so, these waste pickers play a significant role in running a circular economy. Without this informal army, recycling industries would run out of raw materials. Their everyday efforts ensure that recyclable items such as paper, iron, plastic, leather, and textiles are recovered and sold to recycling industries, thereby reintroducing the waste into the market. It also supports the market commonly known as the 'second-hand market' or 'thrift market', which sells reusable items such as clothes, shoes, books, and electronic items, thereby promoting 'responsible consumption' and 'sustainable cities'. These waste pickers remove a significant amount of waste from the yard, helping manage the environmental footprint of cities like Nagpur. They also help address sanitation issues in the city by working at the dumping yard, which needs to be cleared every day as new waste pours in.

Moreover, these workers play a direct role in maintaining public hygiene and the health of the city dwellers. While working in the yard every day, they not only ensure that waste is reduced but also that it is reused or recycled. They mitigate the risks of groundwater contamination, air pollution, and the spread of disease. In

short, they play a significant role in maintaining urban sanitation ecosystems. The dumping yard waste pickers in *Bhandewadi* are indispensable to Nagpur's urban sustainability, yet remain largely invisible within formal governance structures. Despite their critical contribution, the lack of formal recognition and protection leaves them vulnerable to economic instability, health hazards, and social stigma, as highlighted by participants' accounts of low and unpredictable earnings, frequent injuries, and the double burden of living and working amidst waste. It is essential to recognise them formally and provide them with economic stability, social protection and basic amenities in their area of living. Recognising them would not only help provide social justice for them but also help achieve sustainability goals in rapidly developing cities such as Nagpur.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the layered realities faced by dumping yard waste pickers in *Bhandewadi*, Nagpur, India. It is evident through qualitative analysis that these waste pickers are migrants and marginalised, facing the double burden of living and working in waste. These pickers are an army indispensable to urban sustainability, yet they remain outside formal waste governance. The current research highlights the significant role of these waste pickers in maintaining the city's circular economy and, in turn, public hygiene and health. Though they have autonomy in unregulated workspaces, they face economic vulnerabilities, health hazards, and persistent stigma. The spatial and social marginalisation they live in is not merely a by-product of growing urbanisation, but it is deeply rooted in the inequalities that shape Indian cities. There is a need to recognise these workers and provide formal recognition to them through policy intervention. They should immediately be provided with basic equipment, such as gloves and boots. Moreover, they should be integrated into municipal decision-making because they have practical expertise in identifying and sorting waste without formal training. Recognising and integrating them is not only a matter of social justice, but it would also be a great help to the city's sustainable development. Recognising them would also send a message that sustainability is both inclusive and equitable, which counts people from the margins as well.

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Nishant Kumar Dongre

PhD Scholar at the Department of Sociology, Pondicherry University, India

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-6758-263, dongrenishant12@gmail.com

Aruna Chinnappan

Professor at the Department of Sociology, Pondicherry University, India

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-0576-3268, aruna.chinnappan@gmail.com

Article: Negotiating trust and suspicion: Doing fieldwork in conflict zones

Author: Isaac L Varay

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Negotiating trust and suspicion: Doing fieldwork in conflict zones

--Isaac L Varay

Abstract

Studying violence in conflict zones is beset with challenges, some of them are of personal, while others are due to the situation of socio-political unrest. It therefore poses some methodological challenges, which include the risk of life, perceived as being a suspect and unwarranted situation of outbreak of violence that can disrupt the research experience. This paper highlights the challenges posed from various angles of positional relationality and contextual situation from the field. It explores the positionality of how does one situate oneself as both an outsider and insider? How does one approach the field in the study of violence? By relating to the field observations and secondary literatures, this paper attempts to highlight how one can study conflict and violence. In this article, I locate friendship as the basis and the channel for negotiating 'trust' and 'suspicion', in violent context. It is through network of friendship that the Meitei and Kuki informants were bridged, the field sites were visited and relief camps were navigated.

Keywords: *Manipur, conflict, violence, relief camps, insider, outsider, friendship.*

Introduction

In studying violence, network of friends provides invaluable help and refuge for fieldwork. It is through my friends, that I was able to access relief camps. Entry to and navigating the field, meeting people across borders, negotiating trust and suspicion, were all done with the help of friends. Violent situation reveals the worst thing about us as human beings, such as, our desire for inflicting pain and retribution, it also reveals our resilience to endure hardships, our capacity to empathize with those who are suffering. Violent situation also reveals that friendship can shift between betrayal and loyalty; friends can become intimate enemy and co-conspirators with the mobs and at best can become protectors from the violent mobs. When ethnic conflict is framed in terms of 'us' and 'them', friendship is tested, betrayal or loyalty become manifested.

During my field work in Imphal, when I was strolling one night with one of my friends, near the 2nd Manipur Rifle (MR) Camp, a group of Meitei men and Arambai Tenggol[1] attempted to loot the weapons at 2nd Manipur Rifle (MR) Camp. Three men each were seated in two-wheelers, their faces were covered with masks or neck gaiter, wearing black or dark green shirts. Others came

[1] Arambai Tenggol is a Meitei organisation founded by titular king Leishamba Sanajaoba, the former member of Rajya Sabha from Manipur. One of its main goal is to revive and promote Sanamahi religion. A group which began as a cultural revivalists is said to be involved in the ongoing Meitei-Kuki conflict in Manipur.

speeding on their gypsies and cars. **A.T (**acronym for Arambai Tenggol**)** was written on their vehicles. They stopped behind and in front of us. They mistook us as being part of their group and one person whose face was covered with a mask asked, "*Moi camp manungda changkhrabra?*" (Have they entered inside the camp?). We responded that we don't know. Within a few minutes, a large mob gathered outside the MR camp and beside the road. Soon sirens of police cars were heard, who came with shields, batons and tear gas to disperse the mob. Given that there were instances of people succumbing to death due to injuries from live bullets and tear gas, the dangers and possibility of being targeted is quite high in being part of the mob, so we moved back to our room.

Jeffrey Sluka (1990) who did his field work in Belfast, Ireland observed the inherent danger of conducting research in violent setting, such as "being shot, threatened or intimidated" (Sluka, 1990, p.118). He further argues that 'danger' should be considered as a 'methodological issue', and develop ways to minimize risks and protecting anthropologists in the field. Despite the danger it involves, Sluka argues field work is possible even in dangerous context (Sluka, 1990, p.124). I would attest the same, based on my fieldwork experience. Similar to what Sluka had observed, Macek (2009) says that in war, "lives are at stake and truth is hotly contested" (Macek, 2009, p.10). Nordstrom and Robben (1996) observed that violence is essentially contested with "vested interest, personal history, ideological loyalties, propaganda and a dearth of first-hand information ensure that many 'definitions' of violence are powerful fictions and negotiated half-truths" (Nordstrom & Robben, 1996, p.4). The experiences and interpretation of violence differ from individual to individual, from community to community. Thus, one gets a conflicting and contradictory narrative while interacting with the respondents, where both sides of the community blame each other. James Clifford (1984) rightly observed that "experiential, interpretive, dialogical and polyphonic processes are at work, discordantly, in any ethnography" (Clifford, 1983, p.142). The encounter with the discordant narratives poses an epistemological challenge in the construction of knowledge. It raises the question on whether or not, should the ethnographer have the final say to some extent? On the other hand, if we are to give voice to the informants, we need to take into their words as they are. Therefore, attention needs to be given to the contradictory and conflicting narratives. Encountering suspicion is a challenge in the field, but more so in the violent context. Nordstrom and Robben (1996) noted that being a suspect, a 'spy' is a common experience among the anthropologists who carry out field work in violent context. Also, Sluka (1990) points out that anthropologists are suspected as spies of some sort because of "the link between anthropology, counterinsurgency, and intelligence agencies" (Sluka, 1990, p.115).

In the first section of the article, I draw a brief historical context of the conflict in Manipur and highlight some of the factors that led to conflict and outbreak of violence. In the second section, I mention the methodology and my positionality both as an "insider" and "outsider", these two concepts are being interposed in

every of the interaction, interrogation and navigation during the field work. In the third section, I mention my entry to the field through relief camps, and how relief works were carried out to the inmates of the relief camp dwellers. In the fourth section, I highlight how trust and suspicion are negotiated in the field. The article concludes by arguing that the dangers and challenges which exist for conducting research in a violent context can be addressed by negotiating with one's identity (be it an insider or outsider), by capitalising on and navigating the field through network of friends and building mutual trust.

The Context

In Manipur, the Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis are the three major ethnic groups. The Meiteis are the "dominant community" in Manipur (McDurie-Ra 2014; Nathan and Babu 2025; Ziipao 2021). Manipuri or *Meiteilon,* the language spoken by Meiteis is recognized as one of the 22 official languages of India. In terms of religious practice, the Meities follow Vaishnavite Hinduism and Sanamahism[2], and a small section within the community follow Christianity. Also, there is also the Meitei-Pangal or Manipuri Muslims who are not involved in ethnic conflict. The Meiteis are confined mostly in the Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Kakching districts of Manipur. This place them in the paradoxical situation of "a demographic majority confined to a geographically restricted space" (Thangjam & Laishram, 2026, p.9). The Meitei as the major community and their confinement to Imphal valley and limitation for access to forest resources and settlement in the hills is often brought up in the ethnic conflict as a part of territorial contestation.

The Nagas and Kukis are the two major ethnic groups inhabiting the hill areas of Manipur. The Nagas inhabit mostly in the hill districts of Senapati, Ukhrul, Kamjong, Tamenglong, Noney and Chandel in Manipur. While the Kukis inhabit in mostly in Churachandpur, Pherzawl, Tengnoupal and Kangpokpi hill districts of Manipur. They have many tribes and their cognates under them. They mostly follow Christianity. In Manipur, the identity/ies is/are contested mostly based on differences, as in terms of "hill and valley", "tribals and non-tribals", "indigenous and non-indigenous" and even nationalistic aspiration or political affiliation is expressed along the ethnic and religious line. However, the case of "Naga-Kuki clash, followed by the Kuki-Paite clash" (Oinam, 2003, p. 2032) and at present the recurrence of conflict between the Nagas and Kukis challenges the neat distinction and dichotomy between the "hill and valley", "tribals and non-tribals". Sometimes, depending on situation, each group try to form ally and ostracize the other. Such instances are manifested during the conflict in Manipur, for example, the Nagas and Kukis sought common ground by emphasizing on being 'tribal' and 'Christians' and exclude the Meiteis. Whereas, the Meiteis try to find common ground with the Nagas by emphasizing on being 'native' or 'indigenous' of

[2] See Duncan Mcduie-Ra's article: Ethnicity and Place in a 'disturbed city': ways of belonging in Imphal, Manipur.

Manipur, while the Kukis are excluded and viewed as an 'outsider' who immigrated to Manipur.

In tracing the historical root cause of the conflict there is a scholarly consensus that the 1949 merger of Manipur with India, in which the Raja Bodhchandra Singh was made to sign the agreement under duress is one of the major causes that led to current crisis (Loitongbam 2025; Nathan & Babu 2025; Thangjam & Laishram 2026). Thangjam and Laishram (2026) argue that, "coerced accession, juridical asymmetries, and constitutional reclassification generated enduring sovereignty claims and incentivized ethnic fragmentation" (Thangjam & Laishram, 2026, pp.2-3). Baruah (2007) contends that this Merger Agreement (1949) continues to haunt the state politics, which led to the rise of Meitei insurgent groups who regard the Merger Agreement as "illegal and unconstitutional" (Baruah, 2007, p.3). In advocating for ethnic homeland, the non-Manipuris, or "outsiders" were perceived as a threat. McDurie-Ra (2014) writes, "Violence and harassment have characterized relations between indigenous and migrant communities in recent decades, mostly orchestrated by underground groups" (McDurie-Ra, 2014, p.376). Also, the Meiteis perceive a sense of threat, of being reduced to a minority within their own state, citing the example of Tripura. Thus, the Meiteis have advocated for implementation of Inner Line Permit (ILP) and National Register of Citizens (NRC). In 2015, the Manipur Legislative Assembly passed the three bills *viz. The Protection of Manipur Peoples Bill, 2015, Manipur Land revenue & Land Reform Bill (Seventh Amendment) 2015, and Manipur shop & Establishment Bill (Second Amendment) 2015* on 31st August 2015 (Roluahpuia, 2017, pp.488-489). It was followed by protest in the hill districts and Churachandpur witnessed more violent protest, such as burning of the house of the sitting MLAs. One of the main reasons for the protest was that the Clause (b) of the Section 2 of *The Protection of Manipur Peoples Bill, 2015* define the *"Manipur people"* as *"persons of Manipur whose name are in the National Register of Citizens, 1951, Census Report 1951 and Village Directory of 1951 and their descendants who have contributed to the collective social, cultural and economic life of Manipur"*[3] The above definition entails including and excluding, who is and who is not a "Manipur people" and by it many tribals would be excluded from the lists in National Register of Citizens (NRC). Thus, the demand for Inner Line Permit (ILP) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) is tied to the present conflict in Manipur.

The outbreak of violence on 3rd May, 2023 was a long result of various simmering factors and tensions such as coerced merger of Manipur into the Indian Union, (mis)governance practices, hill-valley divide, framing of "*other*" and contestation of "indigenous" status and territory, and ethno-nationalistic aspirations. These factors contribute to the conflict and escalation of violence in Manipur. The

[3]See:https://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.Inner_Line_Permit_ILP_Demand.Download_The_Protection_of_Manipur_People_Bill_2015.

relationship among the Nagas, Kukis, and Meiteis is marked by antagonistic rivalry, negative stereotypes and vehement verbal exchange led to building up of tensions. The rivalrous nature of the relationship is as such that any propositions made by Meiteis are met with oppositions by the Nagas and Kukis. This has been witnessed in the case of Meiteis' demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, which is opposed together by the Nagas and Kukis.

Methodology and Positionality

This study is an ethnographic research, based on fieldwork carried out for a period of nine months. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews combined with participant observations. Involvement in the distribution of relief materials to various camps, located in different districts afford a vantage point for making observations and interactions with the inmates in the relief camps. The respondents are selected from the Naga, Kuki and Meitei communities, which include students who witnessed the unfolding of violence, stayed briefly in Police, Manipur Rifles and Assam Rifles camps, and research scholars who worked on conflict, and leaders of civil society and students' body who are at the forefront in speaking up for their respective communities and relief camp dwellers located in different districts in Manipur. Following the outbreak of violence in Manipur on 3rd May, 2023, field sites were visited three months after the eruption of violence. The field sites for this study are in Senapati, Kangpokpi, Churachandpur (Lamka), Imphal, and Bishnupur districts of Manipur. These districts are chosen because it is where most of the relief camps are located and they are inhabited mostly by the Kukis and Meiteis, with the exception of Senapati, for it is mostly inhabited by the Nagas. I visited the relief camps in the month of August, 2023, three months after the outbreak of violence. The displaced families and persons were sheltered in relief camps, scattered in different places in the districts mentioned above.

As to the positionality, the researcher is from the state of Manipur, in this sense, I am an "insider". I am neither a Kuki, nor Meitei, in this sense, I am an "outsider" to the conflict. Though, from within the very state itself, I have no close friends or personal acquaintance with either of the Meiteis or Kukis prior to the outbreak of conflict. Therefore, the researcher is distanced from both the Meiteis and Kukis. My positionality as a Christian also enables me to mediate, negotiate, build trust and navigate the field. This positionality of the researcher gives advantage for navigating the field and engage with both the parties in conflict.

Borrowing the concept of 'insider' and 'outsider' from M. N. Srinivas, this article tries to relate the two concepts with the field in the context of studying conflict and violence in Manipur. Srinivas writes, "the insider and outsider have each advantages as well as disadvantages" (Srinivas 2004, p.415). Srinivas pointed out that rather than being exclusive to each other, being an "insider" and "outsider" can be "complementary" to each other. My relationship with both the Kukis and the Meiteis to a great extent defines and shapes my rapport-building, interaction,

perception, observation and interpretation of the unfolding and prolonging of violence in Manipur.

Navigating the Field

Relief Camp was the entry point to the field. When violence broke out, thousands of people were displaced, and the immediate needs to be attended to were the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). For the relief work in Kangpokpi district, I went with my friend Pao (male/36-years-old) and the driver of the Bolero vehicle. We moved out at 7:30 am from Senapati. After 15 minutes, we reached the first relief camp located. There was only one young Kuki lady, who was cooking food for the entire camp. She was stirring the dal curry pot. Pao greeted her, *"Hello, good morning! where are the others?"* She said, *"They all went to Church for morning prayer."* We shook hands and I asked her name, she said *"You can call me Ting."* She seems shy when we approached her. We told her that we came to distribute some second-hand clothes. She showed us where they stayed. The inmates were accommodated in a big hall, in which 34 people stayed. They sleep on the floor, and ropes were tied from one corner to another corner like spider webs, where they hang their clothes, as it were, in most of the camps.

After half an hour, we reached another relief camp which hosts a total number of 78 people. When we came, some women and children were eating breakfast. In most of the camps they ate only rice and dal, revealing the limited access to diverse food items. Elder men and women came to shake our hands and told us to have food. While two men were making *morah*[4]. They said they are trying to sell in order to earn some money. We took out second-hand clothes from the vehicle, spread it on a carpet, gave to the inmates, and took a group photo with them and set off to Kangpokpi district headquarter. While having our breakfast, we contacted a Kuki person by the name Lian (Male/24-year-old). Before the conflict, Lian's family stayed in Imphal West. He completed his graduation from Guwahati and is now, staying in Kangpokpi, after his house in Imphal was burned by Meiteis. We called him to help us in loading the blankets from Kangpokpi Relief Centre Office. We invited him to a rice hotel and had food together, we had beef innards and fish. I asked Lian, "What are you doing these days?" Lian said, *"I used to go for duty"* and he showed the pictures of him holding guns, guarding the village. Once we earn the "trust" of the respondents, they open up in details with what they do. He continued, *"I used to fire and run. I volunteered for the duty because, I don't want others to face the same pain I faced. Our Pucca house was destroyed. I used to go for duty for ten days and after that we go rotation."*[5]

The civil society organization and students' leaders oversee the distribution of relief material to relief camps located within the Kangpokpi area. After our breakfast, we picked up the blankets and loaded into our Bolero Pik-Up. On the

[4] Morah is a handwoven stool, made out of bamboo and plastic wire.
[5] Interview with Lian, Date: 21-08-2023

way to Saikul, we were joined by a Kuki Pastor, who took us to different relief camps in Saikul. The accompaniment of a Kuki Pastor in relief work made me observe that the relief inmates who face hardships need not only material support but also emotional and spiritual support and this is seen through the community gathering for prayer and worship. After the relief materials were distributed, the Pastor used to pray for the inmates. The office of Kuki Students Organisation (KSO) oversees in distributing relief materials in Saikul area. At Saikul town, we stopped for some time at Kuki Student Organisation's (KSO) Office, to register what we carry, to which camps we will be distributing, and to which camps the Kuki Students Organisation (KSO) have yet to reach out with the relief materials. The involvement of Committee on Tribal Unity (CoTU) and Kuki Student Organisation's (KSO) highlights that civil society organizations are very much part of mitigating, strengthening and fostering a strong sense of community.

While travelling from Senapati to Imphal, "No to Meitei Products" banner put up by the Kukis could be seen beside the road. What is revealing about such words is that, during the conflict, when the emotions of the people are quite strong, they don't want to associate with the people they are in conflict with even in the slightest tangential form. Trust is essential in business transaction, and such words in the banner reveal the Kukis' loss of trust towards the Meities. In most of the Kuki villages which we passed through, women used to check our vehicle such as wine, especially *Sekmai*, a local wine which is brewed by Meiteis. In some instances, women refused to let us go, only when a Kuki Pastor spoke to them in their dialect, they let us pass through, or when we say that we came for distributing relief materials, they will allow us to go through. The presence of the Kuki pastor is important because it shows that "suspicion" is allayed when a revered figure speak up, that too with the same language of the Kukis. What we notice in the relief camps is that, it is women, elderly and children whom we mostly find staying back in most of the camp. Some teenage boys and girls play carom and chess in the camps. Most of the men go for frontline duty. While others go for daily wages, they were paid 350 per day, to buy some basic needs for themselves.

Most of the displaced persons in the camp share beds and the place were far from clean. The rain made it worse, for we have to take inside the blankets from the vehicle to the camp and the mud baked on the sole of our shoes dirtied the floor on which they slept. In a Kuki village, there was no cellular network, most of the vigilantes carry and communicate to one another with walkie-talkie. Every time we distribute blankets and second-hand clothes we clicked pictures with them. And the women came to shake hands thanking and telling us, *"May God bless you abundantly".* Some shook our hands firmly. One Kuki person thanked us with a jest saying, *"Thank you so much. We won't mind even if you come back again."* By afternoon, around 1:30 pm it began to rain heavily till evening. We covered the clothes and blankets with plastics and sat on top of it. We were drenched in the rain. Later, after reaching one of the relief camps we fixed the plastic on the

vehicle and carried out distributing to the rest of camps. Some blankets got wet; some clothes stained with dirt. Nonetheless, we distributed the remaining blankets and clothes.

In Kangpokpi area, a Kuki person, Chon (male/39-year-old) is a thin person helped us in distributing the relief materials. He smoked often. He made tea for us before and after distributing the relief materials. Chon never ceases to make us laugh with the way he narrates stories. *"I am all-rounder. I go everywhere, I stay here in Kangpokpi, I go to the frontline, I go for distributing relief materials in the relief camps."*[6]

We reached out not only to the Kuki community but also to the Meitei community as well, especially who fled from Churachandpur and are now in Imphal settling in houses which were once occupied by the Kukis. Chaoba (male/43-years-old) belongs to Meitei community and is the father of two children. He was born and raised from Churachandpur. He said that Churachandpur is the best place and he wants to go back, but because of the violence he could not. After distributing the rice and dal, I got time to sit and interview him over a cup of tea. During the interview, he often said, *"we thought, we are going to die."* Together with other Meiteis, Chaoba said that they were hiding in one of the Churches for three days belonging to Hmar tribe. It was the church members who protected and provided their needs during those days. After which the Assam Rifles came to rescue them. The protection afforded by the Hmar tribe to some of the Meitei families shows that "trust" is well maintained. Though surviving with bare minimum, without giving in to self-pity or bitterness, he was able to share his story with laughter and he expresses his gratitude that he is alive and is being helped by friends from here and there.

In Bishnupur, the relief materials provided for the displaced consists of rice, flour, masala and cooking oils for the children. These children belong to Meitei community. A middle-aged man from Meitei community looks after the children. He was so grateful that we came right on time when their rice was getting over. He called the children and took photos together, and let us interact with them but they were quite shy. His genuine concern for the well-being of the children is not merely looking after their food, clothing and shelter but also of proper emotional regulation. He said, *"When we look into this situation, definitely bitterness will establish in our hearts. Once bitterness is established in the heart it will take long time to remove."*[7] What he said profoundly important, especially not to let the negative emotions take over our well-being.

The relief camps are shared living condition, where the inmates are called for collective adaptation to the cramped conditions and survive with minimal comfort. In relief camps, it is marked by economic hardship and limited

[6] Interview with Chon, date 13-09-2023
[7] Alex (Pseudonym), Date, 11-10-2023

opportunities. Relief camps reveal a mixture of dependency and determination. Most of the rice and dal are supplied by the government, while church based organisations and Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) also involved to alleviate the suffering and fulfill the needs of the inmates. The involvement of non-state agencies highlights the limitation of the state. Where the state neglects, the non-state agents step in to facilitate distribution of relief materials. Without their support, the inmates would have much difficult life. The inmates have to depend on the supply of relief materials, meanwhile they also have to work for themselves to earn some money as seen in the making of *morah* (stool), selling of tea and puri within the camps, selling of sugarcane juice beside the road for their survival. In interacting with the inmates, through their stories, one gets to learn about the inmates' ordeals, their loss of livelihoods and dependency on external support, the disruption of children's education affect their life. Meanwhile seeing the inmates work and earn within and outside of the relief camps show an aspiration to start anew. The individuals and families living in relief camps face material deprivation, be it food or clothing, it is further exacerbated by overcrowding of space, lack of basic infrastructure such as access to clean water and toilets. They rely mostly on aids supplied by some goodwilled individuals, churches, and Indian Red Cross Society.

Checkpoints as the sites of vetting an 'insider' and 'outsider'

During this conflict, identities were essentialized, meaning that who we are and where we are from were often asked. The evidence of essentializing of identity is setting up of check-points in various inter-district areas, to identify and vet who is an 'outsider' and 'insider' not only by the ethnic groups in conflict but also by the state agents. We are required to produce our ID card, at every check point in front of the Manipur Police or Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) who are at the inter-district borders. The Meitei and Kuki vigilantes, Manipur Police (MP) and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) used to ask similar questions related to our identity. The village vigilantes used to ask "*kai lam dagino*?" (where are you from?), I would reply, "I am from Senapati" or "*kari jati no*?" (which community are you?), I'd respond, "Naga". After verification and asking the purpose of our visit verbally, they will let us go. Whereas, in the check points maintained by the Assam Rifles, we have to produce our ID card (Aadhar Card or Voter ID) and write the purpose of our visit in a register. Our identity, whether it is viewed along the ethnic or religious line, our place of origin and belonging were questioned. The presence of several check-points for identity verification serves as an evidence to the intensification of suspicion. In my case, the term "suspicion" is further employed in the context of violence perpetuated not only by the armed forces but also by the communities who are in conflict. During the fieldwork, I have to constantly negotiate with the armed forces, Manipur Police, also with village vigilantes at various check points.

The concept of "insider" and "outsider" applies even in dealing with the state agents. At checkpoints, it is easier to deal with the Manipur Police (MP) who are from within the state. While the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and Assam Rifles are paramilitary forces who are mostly from outside the state are stricter in their dealing and verification of identity. The Manipur Police (MP), Kuki and Meitei vigilantes who are at the checkpoints are "insider" in a sense that they are from within the state of Manipur. If we are able to communicate properly in *Meiteilon*, they would let us go without necessarily checking our Aadhar Card. Whereas, the paramilitary forces like Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and Assam Rifles are "outsiders", quite distinct in their looks, mode of interaction and dealing. They would often ask for our identification cards, the ones issued and recognized by the state, such as Aadhar Card or Voter ID card. As such, it indicates that identity is viewed and recognised only from the ID cards and documents issued by the state. Checkpoints also highlight the claim and demarcation of territoriality and the limit to which one can and cannot go. The existence of checkpoints illustrates heavy securitization, surveillance, spatial segregation, mutual mistrust, and the interest of each group to assert control over territory. It also shows that surveillance is conducted not only by the state agents but also by the Kukis and Meiteis in their respective domain. It is ironic that at checkpoints, where the surveillance is carried out, it says in a banner, "No Camera Zone".

Negotiating 'trust' and 'suspicion'

Living in the midst of conflict and violence instill fear, distrust and suspicion in people's mind. It therefore disrupts the social fabric, familial and friendship ties and interaction and communication. Nordstrom and Robben (1996) wrote that "fear destabilizes social relations by driving a wedge of distrust between members of families, between neighbors, among friends. Fear divides communities through suspicion and apprehension" (Nordstrom and Robben, 1996, p.105). What Nordstrom and Robben wrote in the context of Gautemala, is relatable to the situation of Manipur, especially having to deal with "distrust" and "suspicion". As Sitlhou (2025) also points out that "trust-deficit is still a major issue between two warring communities" (Sitlhou, 2025, p.3). Thus, in the field these two concepts need constant negotiation, where there is a low level of trust and high suspicion among the communities in conflict.

I use "trust" to mean an intangible asset which has relational value. This trust is negotiated via my friends, and established through distributing relief materials. As for the "suspicion" it is legalized and legitimized in the Armed Forces Special Power Act (1958). Unlike other field sites where anthropologists go to relatively peaceful communities and places, in a volatile state like Manipur, it is marked by high presence of armed forces. Deutsch (1958) defined "suspicion" as "an event whose occurrence is detrimental to the individual's welfare, i.e., in reference to the malevolent or undesired event" (Deutsch, 1958, p.267). Conflict and violence

are "malevolent" and "undesired event" and when one encounter suspicion it has to be negotiated, especially in dealing with the inmates, vigilantes, Manipur Police, Assam Rifles etc. Due to the implementation of Armed Forces Special Power Acts (AFSPA) 1958, the paramilitary and military groups have their presence everywhere in Manipur. The Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) was implemented in Manipur since its enactment in 1958. Initially, it was implemented in Assam and Manipur to counter various insurgent groups and stabilize the Northeast region. It confers impunity to the military forces from legal prosecution. In various instances, the armed forces have claimed the lives of innocent citizens. Even though, the citizens of Manipur have protested against and have sought to repeal the AFSPA and removal of the armed forces. By labeling the state as a 'disturbed area' it acts as a counter-insurgency apparatus. Baruah (2020) calls it "AFSPA regime" wherein which this law is the reality and center of "security order" in Northeast India. The Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) legitimizes "suspicion" as a justification for arrest without warrant, and legitimize use of force thus ensuing in killings. Soibam (2024) argues that the "AFSPA regime" affects the very kinship and friendship relationship. She traces the "suspicion" in kinship and friendship to the workings of "AFSPA Regime" and points out that "mistrust and trust are elaborate and necessary negotiations" (Soibam, 2024, p.246). With the outbreak of violence, some of the Meiteis and Kukis who maintained friendship were broken off, the Meiteis-Kukis who intermarried, their families were separated due to fear of reprisal. In Manipur, with AFSPA in implementation and violence in continuation, mutual suspicion, and low level of trust continue to manifest in most of the interactions. Not only AFSPA but also the ethnic violence disrupts the family ties of mixed marriage.

Under AFSPA regime and in ethnic conflict, there is breakdown as well as continuity in familial and friendship ties. I'd like to elaborate this by citing two examples. Prem (male/46 years old) belongs to a Meitei community, his father is a Meitei and his mother is a Naga, and they reside in Imphal. In Imphal, it was he, who helped us in purchasing rice, cooking oil and potatoes, and distributed to the Meitei families who escaped from Churachandpur. In another instance, a Meitei lady is a nodal officer of one of the relief camps in Kuki areas. Her father is a Meitei and mother is a Kuki. However, she grew up and mingled mostly with the Kukis, therefore she has more affinity with the Kukis than the Meiteis, thus actively involved in looking after the well-being of the inmates in relief camps. While inter-ethnic marriage may have its own challenges, a person of mixed-marriage can also help in mediating and bridging the communities in conflict. Such instances highlight the role of how mixed marriages can help in negotiating trust and suspicion, extend help and cooperation.

In times of conflict and violence, when mistrust and suspicion are very much prevalent, how do we allay suspicion and navigate the field? How do we bridge the gap between the two communities who are in conflict? It is through the channel of friends. My Naga friends helped me connect to their Kukis and Meitei

friends. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) outlined three forms of capital, *economic capital, cultural capital* and *social capital.* Among the three forms of capital, his concept of 'social capital' is particularly helpful in relating to, and navigating the field sites. Bourdieu (1986) defines 'social capital' as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.21). In conflict setting, religious organisations play an important role in reaching out to the affected communities. The religious organisations maintain a rich network of connections which transcend the ethnic divide, thus serves as a form of social capital. I leveraged this network of relationship to carry out fieldwork. I turned to my friends, to inquire about the situation and see the feasibility of doing fieldwork before going to the field, while in the field, I stayed with them.

Drawing from the field, I learned that when the violence broke out in Imphal, it was the Meiteis who were friends with the Kukis, identified the rooms of Kukis in Manipur University hostels, whereby their documents, personal belongings, electronic gadgets and even two wheelers were seized and set ablaze. It must also be acknowledged that the some of the documents and belongings of Kukis were saved and protected by some of the Meiteis before the mob could seize and destroy. Also, some of the Meiteis who took the documents of the Kukis and gave it to the Nagas and helped protect the documents. When I was in Imphal, I was asked to take a trolley bag containing documents belonging to the Kukis, which were saved by some Meitei friends and I delivered the bag to the Kuki person in Kangpokpi. This kind of instances problematizes the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. It can be a potential solution to violence and gives a glimmer of hope.

From the field observation and encounter with the mobs, it must be said that the mobs are potentially dangerous regardless of any community. One can be a potential victim of mob violence inasmuch as from the hands of the state armed forces or from non-state armed groups. The banging of the electric posts serves as a call to assemble. Armed with sticks, stones and catapults, the mob is reactionary and swift in its response. It is risky to be with the mob, for the likelihood of being shot by police with teargas. It is also dangerous to stand on its path, when people march, scream and shout in fury against the state agencies like police and armed forces. It is the mob who sets fire to the buildings, vandalise most of the properties, smashing what is smashable, looting and carrying what is portable, killing the 'other' person who stands on its way. The mobs in protesting against violence can incite violence; in demanding for justice, it can ironically perpetuate much injustice.

During my fieldwork in Imphal, I stayed at one of my friend's rented place belonging to Meitei community. The landlord, upon learning that I am going to stay with him, questioned the purpose of my visit, and for how long will I stay. The interrogation from the owner gives a hint that he was suspicious, even if it

was not outrightly expressed. Jefrey Sluka (1990) who conducted fieldwork in Belfast Ireland mentioned that it was his friends who afforded him protection and accompanied him while conducting his fieldwork in Belfast, Ireland. Sluka (1990) acknowledged that "friends are the best protection an anthropologist in the field can have" (Sluka, 1990, p.121). Brengt G. Karlsson (2017) conducted his fieldwork in "troubled times" during the height of Bodoland movement in Assam, mentioned that he developed friendship with a member of Rabha community who later became his 'key informant.' Karlsson says that being a white man, he was suspected of being a Christian missionary. Making friends and being a 'suspect' are instances an ethnographers do encounter and must deal with it, in their specific context.

As a person who does not speak of the language of Kukis, one is suspected of the purpose of visit. Our movement and entry into the villages were questioned by the village vigilantes. When I visit the relief camps alone, the suspicion is more, as compared to when I visited them with relief materials. Sluka (2018) writes that "suspicion and distrust in local populations are anathema to local-level fieldwork" (Sluka, 2018, p.247). There is a great deal of difference in the way, the inmates of relief camps perceive me. When I come with relief materials, they were happy to receive us for bringing materials needs. However, when I visited alone, without bringing any relief materials, they would ask me, "Why are you here?" I'd tell them that I have been there once for distributing relief materials and I am paying a visit. Only then, they would tone down and say that they have forgotten. While some people are understandably suspicious, some were also very helpful to me. For instance, one evening, when there was no bus service available, some Kuki vigilantes stopped some private vehicles to let me go home. However, I hesitated going by private vehicles. Instead, I told them that I'd prefer to go back by truck, thus they stopped the truck and told the drivers to drop me at Senapati.

In times of conflict between the two ethnic groups, the help of the armed forces is anticipated and sought in desperate times. A Meitei respondent said, "We are very hopeful that the military force will come, hoping that things will settle."[8] When the violence broke out, people anticipate that violence will be quelled by the armed forces who are capable of violence. During my interaction with the respondents, both sides of the community have told me that it was the Assam Rifles who protected them and came to rescue from the hands of the violent mobs. As one of the Meitei respondent who fled from Churachandpur admits that it was the Assam Rifles who came to their rescue. I asked Chaoba, 'Could you tell me how you came to Imphal from Churachandpur?' He replied, "*We were hiding for three days there, after that we called the armies. Without army, it cannot be…the Armies warned the Kuki people, if you come out, we are going to shoot you.*"[9] Nordstrom and Robben (1996) highlighted their experience of being confounded

[8] Interview with Athoi, Date 30-04-2024
[9] Interview with Chaoba, date 10-10-2023

in which the military officers were depicted as "beasts or saviours" (Nordstrom & Robben, 1996, p.87). The armed forces can be beastly in their cruelty, and can be humane in times of humanitarian crisis. They embody a paradox, both a threat as well as protection for the citizens.

Conclusion

This article attempts to show that the ethnic conflict and violence in Manipur is a result of multi-faceted factors such as coerced merger of Manipur into India post-independence, and the rise of ethno-nationalistic aspirations as a response among the Nagas, Meiteis and Kukis. The imposition of AFSPA to curb and suppress ethno-nationalism has made the state of Manipur embroiled in violence by the state. The rivalrous relationship among the three communities has led to cycles of ethnic violence, the passing of the three bills in 2015 in Manipur Legislative Assembly for the implementation of ILP and NRC, the overlapping of territorial claim among the three communities, the claiming of 'native' or 'indigenous' for the Nagas and Meiteis while framing the Kukis as 'outsiders', 'narco-terrorists' are some of the preceding factors contributing to the ethnic conflict and escalation of violence not by state but by the ethnic groups.

Furthermore, in the field, the risk of life comes not only from the armed forces but also from the mob, every movement is being questioned and suspected, therefore subject to scrutiny and verification from the village vigilantes and armed forces which requires constant negotiation with them. Thus, it our positionality that to a great extent offer both advantage and disadvantage in conducting research in violent context.

This article also argues that being in the field, interacting with the various people across communities and professions who witnessed and continue to live in the midst of the state gives a better understanding of the conflict situation, instead of relying on the information and narratives in the news outlets and social media platforms. It is witnessed, that the conflict deepened the social, political and geographical divide, as seen in the Kuki's demand for Separate Administration, cutting off ties with former friends and the setting up of checkpoints and imposition of bandh highlights territorial contestation in specific areas. In such situations, it is through friends, connection is reestablished and the ethnic and geographical divide is bridged. Friendship is fraught with betrayal, but witnessing and experiencing genuine friendship also give a glimmer of hope. Friends serve as a counterpoint to the ethnic and political division. It is with and through friends that visiting of field sites, carrying out relief works, and bridging both the conflicting ethnic groups were made possible.

For all the challenges faced from the field, it is to my friends, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for their help in various capacity, who hosted me, accompanied me, took me to relief camps, connected me to their Meitei and Kuki friends, and

gave me understanding into the local context. To allay suspicion, re/build trust, negotiate as an insider and outsider, circumnavigating the field through friends is one way of studying the violence. I would say that blending in with the friends and befriending with the locals is a way to mitigate and deal with suspicion in the field. The challenges in studying violence such as rumours, fears, mistrust, suspicion, uncertainty require constant negotiation of one's identity and leveraging on available resources and network of friend circles.

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Isaac L Varay is a Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Tezpur University, Assam, India. Email: isaaclvaray@gmail.com

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Article: Caste In The Classroom: An Empirical Study Of Caste-Based Practices Among Higher Secondary Students In Southern District Of Tamil Nadu

Author (S): Elamaran S & S. Ramdoss

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-- Elamaran S & S. Ramdoss

Abstract

The caste system is a hereditary form of social stratification characterized by endogamous groups associated with specific social identities, occupations, and status positions. The existence of the caste system in the society adversely impacts a multitude of factors such as the unity among the population, violence based on particular caste, discrimination based on caste, it creates division in the population especially in the rural setting. Therefore this leads to an increases of many issues like the untouchability, caste based violence, immoral treatment, inequality etc. The continued existence of the caste system is seen as an important social factor affecting the unity and integration of society. Caste-based discrimination and violence increase the gap between social groups and reinforce social divisions and hierarchical inequality, especially in the rural context. Such caste-based social divisions have negative impacts on the social relations and social participation of individuals and lead to persisting problems of untouchability, caste-based violence, inhuman practices, discrimination, and social inequality. This paper focuses on various caste based practices such as tying of threads on their wrist, using vinyl stickers or painting their cycles with colours representing their caste, the stitching of additional clothes in uniforms is done using colours representing their caste, and some even wear vest in these caste-specific colours with some printing the faces of the caste leaders prevalent among students in educational institutions and the adverse impact and discrimination faced by students, it also attempts to find where such behaviours are learned and acquired from by the students. The researchers used a descriptive research design, collected primary data from 142 students by using interview scheduled method. The data was collected from secondary and higher secondary students from classes 10, 11 and 12. The study reveals that the age of the students is an important factor in understanding the caste system. The study also reveals that students from different castes engage in violence both verbally and physically, sometimes they engage in caste violence to support their caste without having a clear knowledge of the situation.

Key Words: *Caste Based Practices, Caste Discrimination, School Students, Isolation, Gang Formation*

INTRODUCTION

Caste is considered a unique form of social stratification. It is characterized by elements of endogamy, hereditary transmission of lifestyle and occupation, and ritual status in social hierarchies. Further, social relations, interactions, and practices of social exclusion are constructed on the basis of cultural beliefs about purity and pollution. This type of organization determines individuals' social status, career prospects, marital relationships, and social participation, and serves as an important social institution that perpetuates social inequalities across generations (Fonseca et al., 2019). In India, so many theories (Religious theory, Biological theory and Aryan context) revealed the origin and development of caste system; In Religious theory people are created from the body part of God and the caste is segregated according to the part of the body, whereas, Biological theory focused on Skin colour, if one has fairer skin they have more advantage in the society, finally the Aryan concept says, Aryans came to India from Southern Europe and Northern Asia, creating the caste system respectively (Deshpande et al., 2010). In understanding the social invisibility and stereotyping that accelerate the caste-based practices within schools, it is essential to consider how caste narratives are constructed in the public domain. Even though the caste system has changed from strict legal separation to more symbolic modern forms, core practices like endogamy, dominance, and exclusion are deeply embedded, often manifesting in everyday institutions like schools, and college in subtle ways (Yoganandham, 2025; Chandru, 2024; Ramachandran, 2009).

According to the 2011 Census of India, approximately 80% of the population follows Hinduism, while 14% follow Islam and the remainder adhere to other religions such as Christianity and Sikhism (Census, 2011). Various sub-castes exist within Hinduism, and these caste divisions have historically played a significant role in shaping social relations, social status, and the distribution of resources. The influence of these divisions continues to persist in contemporary social life. In particular, caste-based violence, restrictions on and opposition to inter-caste marriage, and discriminatory attitudes within social and family contexts remain recurring manifestations of the caste system. Therefore, caste-based social divisions continue to play an important role in shaping individuals' social interactions and life chances.

Fonseca et al. (2019) conceptualize the caste system has been an important social institution in Indian society, deeply influencing social relations, power-sharing, and identity politics, it has often been a "blind spot" in elite public discourse. Caste-based issues are not given the level of attention and in-depth discussions that other social issues receive. This kind of secrecy and public silence, while prohibited by constitutional law, leads to the persistence of caste-based practices in various social platforms, including educational institutions. In particular, these patterns are masked in school groups in the name of tradition, social identity, and cultural traditions, and reproduced through everyday social relationships and

student behavior patterns.

Theoretical Framework: Caste Socialization and Symbolic Reproduction in Schools:

The study is based on various sociological theories that explain how caste-based practices among school children persist and are reproduced. While schools are generally seen as institutions that promote equality and social integration, sociologists argue that educational institutions may reproduce social inequalities through formal and informal processes. The caste identities, caste-based interactions, and symbolic expressions of caste identity among students are understood through the concepts of social reproduction, social identity, stigma, and caste socialization.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is an important theory explaining how social inequalities are transmitted between generations. According to Bourdieu, educational institutions reproduce dominant cultural norms and social structures through symbolic methods. Activities such as tying of coloured threads that symbolize caste, pasting caste identification stickers on vehicles, wearing coloured clothes associated with caste, and forming caste-based peer groups can be considered a form of symbolic reproduction where caste identities are made natural and acceptable. Such practices are deeply rooted in the day-to-day activities of school life and contribute to the continuity of caste consciousness.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar saw caste as a hierarchical social stratification continued through socialization, endogamy, and cultural practices. In his view, caste is not merely an economic or occupational system; it is a social ideology that profoundly shapes the identities and social relations of individuals. The persistence of caste-based practices among students reflects the fact that the impact of caste ideology on families, communities, and educational institutions is still enduring.

Tajfel and Turner explain how individuals derive identity and self-esteem from their connection of social groups to which they belong. Students' use of caste identification codes and participation in caste-based peer groups can be understood as attempts to express their group identity and maintain a positive social identity. Thus, caste-based friendships, student groups, and the formation of symbolic identities are seen as activities undertaken to strengthen in-group solidarity and distinguish themselves from out-groups.

Erving Goffman's theory of stigma helps to understand the difficulty of students from socially disadvantaged castes. Explicit caste identities and social interactions can create processes of inclusion and exclusion in the school environment. Students from historically marginalized communities may face experiences of subtle stigmatization, generalization, or social exclusion. These can affect their educational experiences and psychological well-being.

The concept of hidden curriculum is also important for understanding caste reproduction in educational settings. Beyond the formal curriculum, schools transmit implicit values, norms, and social expectations to students. Through interactions with friends, informal conversations, cultural practices, and social influences, students may learn and assimilate caste identities, even though schools officially emphasize equality and non-discrimination. As a result, educational institutions may unknowingly act as spaces where caste-based attitudes and practices are reproduced. Building on the above theoretical approaches, the study looks at the caste-based practices among school children as outcomes of broader social processes, such as caste socialization and symbolic reproduction, rather than an individual behaviour. This cultural framework helps explain how caste identities are maintained, expressed, and negotiated in educational contexts, as well as the reasons why caste consciousness persists among younger generations.

Urban and Rural Differences

In urban contexts the overt expression of caste is often suppressed by modernization, educational attainment, and legal protections; nevertheless, caste consciousness may persist in subtler forms. In rural areas, caste practices often remain embedded in everyday life, influenced by agrarian livelihoods and long-standing social traditions. Bailwal and Paul (2021) note that in many rural regions, Dalit-majority areas have fewer government schools or institutions with poor infrastructure, illustrating that exclusion begins at the level of access, not just within the school environment. This reinforces the context of the present study where caste-based behaviours continue inside the schools. Factors that sustain caste based practices include limited awareness of anti-discrimination norms and a strong emphasis on caste-based respect and status.

Relevance of the Study:

Caste-based discrimination remains a pervasive issue in Tamil Nadu's educational institutions. A survey by the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF) across 441 schools (government, aided and private) reported instances of caste-based prejudice, including cases involving school staff (December 2023). 'Evidence' a NGO focusing on caste based discrimination, collected data through RTI and complied a report, which indicate that caste-related violence has continued to affect communities across multiple districts of the state in recent years. The report highlighted that an average of 5-6 caste-based murders occur each month in the state. Media reports have also documented student clashes driven by caste identity in the title of "Schools turn battlefields as students clash over caste" (The Times of India, 2017). These patterns underscore the need for detailed investigation into how caste manifests within schools and affects students' psychological and social development. Yoganandham (2025) provides further continuity, showing that caste-based socialisation in schools often

escalates into explicit discrimination in higher education, reinforcing the urgency of early intervention.

Significance of the study

Caste-based practices continue to be a challenge in some parts of India, including Tamil Nadu. Despite various efforts to promote social equality, schools in certain areas still witness instances of caste-based discrimination ranging from social exclusion to biased behaviour and prejudices among students. Addressing and eliminating these practices in schools is not just important, but essential for multiple reasons:

1. **Psychological Aspects:** Students feel accepted and respected, which is crucial for their mental and emotional health in free environment without any discrimination.

2. **Academic Aspects:** When every students are treated equally, they are more likely to feel motivated and confident, allowing them to perform to the best of their abilities.

3. **Social Aspects:** Students are encouraged to understand and respect each other's differences, building empathy and a sense of unity without any discrimination especially to their caste.

4. **Skill development**: Schools give equal opportunity to allow students to work together, enhancing collaboration and interpersonal skills that are key to their future careers.

5. **Long-term societal change:** Guiding students by teaching them the importance of equality and mutual respect from an early age helps shape a generation of responsible, fair-minded individuals.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research demonstrates that caste continues to shape educational access and experiences in India. Bailwal and Paul (2021) found that villages with higher SC/ST populations are less likely to have public schools, pointing to persistent spatial inequalities in school availability. Nambissan (2020) traced the historical roots of educational exclusion to colonial-era policies that reflected upper-caste resistance to Dalit education. Bhattacharya et al. (2021) found that although a family's economic status plays a major role in deciding which school to choose, many middle-class parents still consider caste when making this decision. This shows that caste remains an important factor even for families that have moved up the social ladder.

Bishwakarma (2017) presented a powerful narrative-based account of caste-based discrimination in Nepalese schools. His findings revealed that Dalit students face

segregated seating, denial of access to drinking water, symbolic exclusion from school temples, and discriminatory punishment—all of which resonate with the everyday practices reported by students in his study.

Deshpande and Ramachandran (2020) argued that caste continues to shape educational trajectories independently of wealth. Their study revealed that Dalit and Adivasi students, even when economically well-off, are underrepresented in private schools. This shows that caste discrimination operates beyond economic disadvantage—it reflects deep-rooted social stigma, which continues to affect access, aspirations, and institutional treatment.

Studies on the psychosocial impact of caste-based discrimination show alarming effects. Pal (2015) documented the social isolation and decreased self-esteem experienced by Dalit students, while Nayak (2023) reported exclusion from curricular and extracurricular activities. Reports in the media and civil-society studies (e.g., The News Minute, 2023) suggest that caste ideologies are transmitted to children through family and community networks, reinforcing division in school settings. Singh (2018) asserts that despite numerous policies promoting equitable access, children from SC/ST backgrounds continue to face educational exclusion due to ingrained caste hierarchies, mirroring the caste-based symbolic behaviours and segregation witnessed in Tamil Nadu schools. Interventions proposed in the literature include transformative educational practices that emphasize inclusivity and critical reflection on caste norms (Bishwakarma, 2017).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To examine the prevalence of caste-based practices among higher secondary students.
2. To analyze the association between gender and caste practices
3. To understand students' perceptions regarding caste identity and gang formation

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive survey design to examine the prevalence of caste-based practices among school students in southern district, Tamil Nadu. The target population consisted of secondary and higher secondary students from one school where students from surrounding villages also study. A purposive sampling technique was used, and a sample of 142 students were selected. The primary data were collected using an interview schedule constructed by the present researchers and the interview schedule was not standardized. A pilot study with 20 students was conducted and the interview schedule was translated into the vernacular (Tamil) based on the finding of the pilot study. The main study data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Ethical guidelines were

strictly followed by obtaining informed consent from the students and ensuring anonymity.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Caste-based violence and discrimination have long-standing historical roots and remain particularly visible in rural contexts. This study focuses on students in secondary and higher secondary classes and documents the caste-related incidents they experienced / witnessed or learned about—either directly, through peers, or by observing practices such as coloured threads tied on wrists or symbols painted on their bicycle. Ramachandran (2009) emphasised that these symbolic practices have historical continuities with overt segregation from earlier decades, underlining the persistence of caste identity prevalent even in modern educational spaces. It is very relevant to note here that the current study was done much before the constitution of Justice K. Chandru committee. Some of the findings of the study are in line with the recommendations/observations of the Justice K. Chandru committee.

LIMITATIONS

The researchers knew that caste-based problems occurred in the school chosen for the study and directly observed some of the caste-based incidents in the rural communities surrounding the school. Further, it was felt that secondary school students studying in classes 10 and above would have adequate knowledge and experience of caste-based practices, social relations, and incidents occurred in their school environment. Hence, these students were selected using purposive sampling method and those who were willing to participate in this study alone were included in this study after obtaining their informed consent. Additionally, non-disclosure of community or religion by a substantial portion of respondents may affect the representativeness of certain subgroup analyses. Future research should use multi-site, longitudinal methods to track and understand how caste-related practices in educational institutions change over time across different contexts. It should also be noted that while age is discussed as a contributing factor to caste consciousness, this relationship was not subjected to formal statistical testing in the present study and should be treated as an observational, rather than a statistically confirmed, finding.

Ethical Consent

Prior to data collection, the researchers explained the purpose and procedures of the study to the participants in detail. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection process if they felt uncomfortable or unwilling to continue, without facing any adverse consequences.

ANALYSIS

Demographic Characteristics

The majority of the respondents 56 out of 142 (39.4%) are 16 years old, followed by 17 years old making up 31.6% of the respondents. The gender distribution is slightly skewed towards male respondents making up 54.2% of the total sample. Gender is an important factor to consider in this study as experiences and perceptions might differ. The majority of the respondents 52 out of 142 were in class 11, followed by class 12 making up 50 out of 142 and 40 respondents were in class 10. Most of the respondents (70%) practice the Hindu religion while 22% chose not to disclose their religion. About 32.4% respondents belonged to the Backward Classes, 27.5% respondents belonged to Scheduled Caste and 23.9% respondents did not disclose their community. Out of 142 respondents, the majority reported an annual family income of Rs.80, 000. 37.3% of respondent's fathers and 41.5% of respondent's mothers have completed education up to secondary level.

Table 1. Frequency analysis of Caste-Based Practices experienced / witnessed by the respondents

Response	Tying Threads	Stickers / Paints on vehicle	Colours on clothes	Isolation
Strongly Disagree	31(21.8%)	24 (16.9%)	39(27.5%)	40 (28.2%)
Disagree	10 (7.0%)	10 (7.0%)	13 (9.2%)	25 (17.6%)
Undecided	9 (6.3%)	7 (4.9%)	18 (12.7%)	26 (18.3%)
Agree	37(26.1%)	46 (32.4%)	38 (26.8%)	34 (23.9%)
Strongly Agree	55(38.7%)	55 (38.7%)	34 (23.9%)	17 (12.0%)

Tying Threads:
Tying threads refer to the practice of tying coloured threads on wrists or arms, often associated with specific religious or caste affiliations. A significantly higher proportion of respondents (92) agreed to have followed this practice in the school premises.
Stickers and Paints on Cycle:
Stickers and paints on cycles refer to the use of symbols or colours associated with caste or religious groups on bicycles. Majority of the respondents (101) agreed with this practice.

Colours on Clothes:
Colours on clothes refer to wearing specific colours associated with caste or religious identities. Half of the respondents agreed to wearing colours on clothes, as it is an indicator of their caste identity.
Isolation by Other Caste Students:
This refers to the sensitive issue of social exclusion or isolation based on caste. A notable proportion of respondents (51) witnessed or faced isolation by the other caste students.

Table 2. Chi Square Analysis of Caste-Based Practices experienced / witnessed by the respondents

Null Hypothesis: There is no association between gender and caste based practices (tying threads, stickers / paints on vehicle, colours on clothes, Isolation)

Caste-Based Practices	Chi-Square Value	Degrees of Freedom	p-value	Cramer's V
Tying Threads	16.21	4	0.0027	0.338
Stickers/Paints on Vehicle	9.67	4	0.0463	0.261
Colours on Clothes	9.25	4	0.0552	0.255
Isolation	1.20	4	0.8787	0.092

A number of Chi-square tests were undertaken to study the association between caste-based practices and gender experienced or witnessed by respondents. The test results revealed a statistically significant correlation between the Tying Threads of caste on the hand and gender, $\chi 2$ (4, N = 142) = 16.21, p =. 003, V =. 34. This indicates a moderate degree of correlation. Similarly, a significant correlation was found between the use of stickers / paints on vehicles and gender, $\chi 2$ (4, N = 142) = 9.67, p =. 046, V = 0.261. This shows a small-to-moderate correlation. However, no statistically significant association was found between the use of colours on clothing and gender, $\chi 2$ (4, N = 142) = 9.25, p =. 055, V = 0.255. Similarly, there is no significant correlation between isolation and $\chi 2$ (4, N = 142) = 1.20, p =. 879, V = 0.092. These results show that gender is associated with practices that display some visible signs of caste, such as Tying threads and the use of caste-specific stickers or paints on vehicles. The impact of gender on practices such as colours on clothes, and isolation was not significant.

Table 3. Respondents Views on Caste system

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Getting scholarships	12	8.5
Gang formation based on their caste	16	11.3
Security from other caste students	16	11.3
Maintain respect and reputation	22	15.5
Seeking which caste is best	4	2.8
Has been followed since long back	8	5.6
Total	78	54.9

The above table shows the students' views on caste system. Out of 142 respondents, around 55% of them agreed that the caste system was important because of various reasons. The reasons, *inter alia* a significant percent (15.5%) of the respondents believed in maintaining respect and reputation on basis of the caste system. The remaining 45% of the respondents rejected the notion that caste system is important.

Table 4. Respondents views on Gang Formation

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Avoiding caste related problems	19	13.4
Support and help	18	12.7
Maintain friendship of our caste students	22	15.5
Maintain reputation, gathering strength	15	10.6
Total	74	52.1

From the above table, half of the respondents agreed to prevalence of gang formation in the school and around 1/3 of the respondents being comfortable with the gang formation out of 142. A significant proportion of the respondents viewed gang formation was mainly due to maintenance of friendship among the same caste students.

Table 5. Reasons for Caste-Based gang formation by peer compulsion

The above table (5) reveals the various reasons for which the gang was formed by the peer compulsion. It is evident from the results depicted in the table that a significant per cent (18.4%) of the respondents viewed caste based gangs were formed to support their caste friends and maintain their friendship.

Reasons	Frequency	Percent
Avoid bad comments, scolding	14	9.8
Maintain their dignity and reputation	11	7.7
Show their caste strength	5	3.5
Support for their caste friends, maintain friendship	26	18.4
Total	56	39.4

Table 6. Reasons for restricting same caste students to speak with other caste students

Reasons	Frequency	Percent
Maintaining their caste Reputation and Respect	26	18.3
Social Support and Friendship	15	10.6
Avoid conflict	9	6.3
Perceptions and Differences from Other Castes	11	7.7
Caste Identity and Strength	12	8.5
Total	73	51.4

The various reasons for restricting same caste students to interact with students of other castes have been shown in the above table. The findings reveal that there are several reasons for restricting the students of same caste to interact with other caste students. One of the predominant reasons was found to be maintaining their caste reputation and respect.

DISCUSSION

Symbolic Assertion of Caste Identity

The results of this study revealed that caste identity demonstrates itself in various symbolic forms among school children. Activities such as tying caste-specific threads on hands, using caste-specific stickers or colours on bicycles, wearing caste-specific clothes, and writing or drawing derogatory references to other castes on walls were seen among the students. Such practices show that caste functions not just as a social construct but also in the everyday lives of students as an important component of their identity. These findings overlap with those of Ramachandran (2009) and K. Chandru (2024). They have noted that the colour markings found in schools, the use of caste-specific clothing, seating arrangement, and other symbolic expressions perpetuate the sense of caste among students. The results of the study also indicated that caste identities are continuously reproduced within school campuses.

Peer Networks and Gang Formation

One of the important findings of this study is that caste-based group formation is an influential part of school social life. Students were found to form peer networks based on their caste identities, thereby prioritizing caste-based solidarity over social conformity. Deshpande and Ramachandran (2020) observed that students are already calling into the educational system with socially-segregated relationships. Such pre-existing social classes were further strengthened in school campuses to create a caste-based community. Sometimes they lead to acts of violence. Further, studies by Singh (2024) and Bishwakarma (2017) highlighted that such social categories can influence the educational experiences and continuity of marginalized community students. The study found that age and gender were associated with caste-based practices. Male students and, especially in older age, are more exposed to caste stereotypes. This indicates that caste consciousness strengthens over time through process of socialization.

Psychological Consequences

Another important finding of the study is that caste-based discrimination has a significant impact on the psychological well-being of students. Experiences such as social stigma, caste-based segregation, and group formation negatively affect students' mentality. According to a study by Nayak and Narayan (2023), persistent social isolation can produce consequences such as anxiety, low self-esteem, emotional withdrawal, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Similarly, students facing caste discrimination at the university have been found to experience a

sense of alienation, stigmatization, and inferiority complex. A study by Yoganandham (2025) noted depression, low academic interest, and low self-esteem among students exposed to caste discrimination. The results of the study confirm this, the fact that some students seek to avoid caste-related problems instead of confronting them may be seen as showing an early stage of psychological deviance.

School as a Site of Caste Socialization

The results of this study reveal that schools serve not only as educational institutions that disseminate knowledge, but also as social spaces where caste identities are created and maintained. Caste codes, group formation, and discrimination among students indicate that caste socialization continues to take place on school campuses. Nayak (2023) notes that many authors regard caste-based discriminations as normal practices of society. Similarly, Fonseca et al. (2019) argue that everyday forms of caste discrimination are often glossed over in general social discussions. As a result, many caste-based practices are accepted as normal social behaviours. Some students noted that the school administration and teachers did not pay enough attention to caste-based issues. This shows that the indirect functions of educational systems can reinforce caste identities.

Implications for Education Policy and Practice

The results of this study reveal that caste-based practices still persist among school children, necessitating radical interventions in educational settings. Clear policies to prevent practices such as caste-based discrimination, group formation, symbolic segregation, and social stratification should be implemented in schools. Teacher training programmes should include elements on caste consciousness, social justice, and inclusive education. Awareness programmes, discussions and social awareness activities should be undertaken to inculcate values of respect for diverse social backgrounds among students. Therefore, the caste-based practices found in schools should be understood as a structural problem that is socially and institutionally created and maintained, rather than as an individual-level problem. Countering this will require educational institutions to strengthen approaches centered on equality, inclusion, and social justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study emphasise the urgent need for comprehensive educational reforms to address the prevalent caste-based discrimination and practices in schools. A public education system based on social justice requires effective intervention by the state, teacher training, and active participation of the community (Nambissan, 2020). The historical activities of Ambedkar and the 1930s Starte Committee emphasized both equal access to education and an egalitarian approach in classrooms (Nambissan, 2020). These policies remain

important even today, especially in the present context of continuing appearances of caste identities and informal social divisions among students.

School managements should take precautions to prevent caste-based discriminatory behaviours such as wearing caste-specific threads, using caste-identity stickers or specific colours on vehicles and clothing, social isolation, and so on. These measures should be underpinned by clear anti-discrimination policies, periodic sensitive training for teachers and staff, effective grievance redressal mechanisms, and proper monitoring measures (Ramachandran, 2009), and in line with the recommendations of the K. Chandru Committee (2024). Such measures should be integrated into local and state-scale education policies.

Nayak (2023) emphasizes that pedagogical approaches that foster a critical view of caste should be introduced so that students understand caste-based inequality and its social consequences. Similarly, with the strengthening of government schools. Singh (2018) points to the need to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities through positive measures such as reservation and community participation. Thus, integrating teacher training, anti-discrimination policies, monitoring systems, reservation, and community participation can lead to effective social change.

Overall, to create an inclusive educational environment, caste-based practices were stopped at an early stage. A series of institutional measures are required to identify and respond appropriately. Such activities can change students' social views and help strengthen positive social relationships and reduce caste-based discrimination in educational institutions and the wider society.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that caste-based practices (such as tying threads, paints/stickers on cycle, colours on clothes, and gang formation) are still prevalent among secondary school students in southern district of Tamil Nadu. These practices play an important role in student identity formation. The main finding of the study is that schools serve not only as educational institutions that disseminate knowledge, but also as social platforms where caste identities are learned, expressed, and regenerated. Students develop a sense of social belonging and group solidarity through caste-based codes and group networks. This continues to strengthen social boundaries and caste consciousness.

Furthermore, experiences of caste-based exclusion, isolation, and discrimination have negative impacts on the social and psychological well-being of students. Thus, such practices should be understood as problems created by social and cultural structures, rather than as individual behaviors. Thus, educational reforms must take into account not only systemic discrimination, but also informal cultural practices that reinforce caste identities. Only through teacher training, awareness programmes, grievance redressal mechanisms, and the creation of inclusive

educational environments can schools fully fulfil their mission of promoting equality, social justice, and solidarity.

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Elamaran S is a UGC – Junior Research Fellow, Department of Criminology, University of Madras, Chepauk, Chennai – 600 005.

S. Ramdoss is a Professor and Head, Department of Criminology, University of Madras, Chepauk, Chennai – 600 005.

Article: Ethnic rubric of the Dimasas: *The revivalistic tradition of Daikho (a local institution in North East India)*

Author (S): Kedilezo Kikhi & Prtithibi Pratibha Gogoi

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Ethnic rubric of the Dimasas:

The revivalistic tradition of Daikho (a local institution North East India)

--Kedilezo Kikhi & Prtithibi Pratibha Gogoi

Abstract

This essay looks into the varied notions of identity-making by Dimasas and non-state militant group, i.e., Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) through the institution of Daikho. Daikhos are religious geography where the congregation of sengfong (patri-clan) members offer their prayers to local deities. The uprising militant group, Dima Halam Daogah actively partakes in safeguarding Dimasas' culture and identity, giving a new dimension to the whole idea of Daikho, redefining the notion of the traditional institution. In the route to visualise the pan-Dimasa solidarity, DHD inaugurated ways to adopt and re-integrate the broken matrilineage of Dimasa women marrying non-Dimasa men. This move is built on the idea of collective consciousness to reaffirm and re-emphasise the identity of the Dimasas. The main promoters of the collective identity, DHD brought together the modern practice of ethnic identity and the local notion of identity-based on village and clan systems which mark their social organisation.

Key words: Daikho, Dimasa, Dima Halam Daogah (DHD), ethnic-identity, clan

Introduction

Northeast India which lies at the crossroad of South, South East and East Asia are conferred as a politically complex and geographically strategic region, that is portrayed by the vast variety of ethno-linguistic diversity, cultures and identities (Saikia, 2006; Barkatati-Ruscheweyh & Lauser, 2013; Ramirez, 2014; Haokip, 2018, Kolås, 2017; Saikia & Baishya, 2017; Wouters, 2018; Baruah, 2020). Identity and identity politics have been an important issue in Northeast India. This problematic stance has been looked at through two strands of scholarship, one the colonial anthropological approach and the latter focused around security-entered studies (Saikia & Baishya, 2017). The region comprising the present states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim (the latest addition to the region of Northeast), has a long history of resistance towards the state[i] (Kolås, 2012; Pachuau, 2014; Ramirez, 2014; Wouters, 2018). There have been movements and ethnic assertions of various groups to put forth their exclusive identity (Kolås, 2012; Barkakati-Ruscheweyh & Lauser, 2013; Ramirez, 2014; Wouters, 2018; Chhetri, 2020). And the mobilisation on identity issues in Northeast India, in many instances[ii], have taken a violent turn (Srikanth, 2000; Karlsoon, 2001; Pachuau, 2014; Das, 2015; Baruah, 2020). As reported by Sanjib Baruah (2007), a total of around 109 militant groups were active in the year 2007, and the two states of Northeast which had over 30 groups were Manipur (having about 40) while Assam (having

about 34) (Baruah, 2007 cited in Pachuau, 2014). Kolås (2017) branded Northeast India as a heavily militarized region. Srikanth (2000) stated that the militancy in the state of Assam is the by-product of politics based on identities. The birth of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) paved the path for other ethnic groups who came up with their militant groups to pressure the government and put forth their demands and Dima Halam Daoga (DHD) was one such outfit (Srikanth, 2000; Kolås, 2012). Most of these groups voice their dissent through the politics of identity. Identity movements in the Northeast began active as early as late 1940s led by the Naga National Council (NNC). The Assam Agitation, Boro Movement are the prominent movements which can be regarded as the genesis of the territorial and ethnic identity movements in Assam. However, this essay will not delve into those movements, but rather focus on the ethnic movement lead by the Dimasas.

The non-state actor, the militant group, Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) holds a central part (as seen during their operating days), actively involved in bringing ideas to reaffirm and re-emphasise the identity of the Dimasas. In the route to visualise the pan-Dimasa solidarity, they were involved in various revivalistic works and some of them were to reintroduce the Dimasa women married outside the community to the Dimasa fold anew and consequently opening up channels for the adoption of new non-Dimasa individuals and subsequent rituals leading to purifications of those individuals who were considered impure. This is seen in the push towards celebration of harvesting festival, *busu* on the same day across all Dimasa inhabited areas, to raise the consciousness of a collective identity. Another notable change that they promoted was the establishment of a *Sibarai Daikho*, an institution founded by DHD to knit the broken matrilineage. It has to be understood that Dimasa is a kinship-based community. Yet, the anthropological and administrative category overshadows such aspects of the society. It is therefore, interesting to note, DHD presented their idea of collective identity by reckoning both the modern practice of ethnic identity and the idea to restructure the kinship affinities and clan compositions.

Methodology

The fieldwork for this essay was conducted in multiple phases at different sites from Haflong, a small hill station of Assam to Doyapur, and a Dimasa village near the Assam-Nagaland border. The research sites include the Dimasa villages (such as, Darogajan, Dhansiripar, Doyapur and Amaluma) in Nagaland and Karbi Anglong, and three villages in Dima Hasao. The fieldwork stretched from 2017 to 2020 for approximately over 18 months. The fieldworker was actively engaged as a participant observer for a long period with the local people thereby being a part of the local's everyday life and social affairs.

Identity in general for the Dimasas

The Dimasas were known as a sub-category of the Kachari tribe until the 1961 Census, where they were given the recognition of Dimasa as a separate tribe (Das, 2009; Barman, 2014; Hussain, 2017). The government of India recognises 'Dimasas' as Scheduled Tribe (ST), a listed administrative category. This categorisation gives the community some special provisions and benefits by the government of India. While in the state of Assam, further segregation of the above ST category is recognised, Dimasas of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao are recognised as Scheduled Tribe (Hills) [ST(H)], as they are the hill districts of Assam. However, the section of people living in the plain districts of Barak Valley and Nagaon district are designated by the state of Assam as Scheduled Tribe (Plains) [ST(P)]. The bifurcation of hills and plains people is the product of colonial administrative policy to rule over territories (Scott, 2009; Kar, 2009 cited in Wouters, 2018; Kolås, 2012). Dimasas are officially known as Barman Kacharis and Hojai Kacharis respectively, rather than Dimasas in Barak valley and Nagaon area (the newly formed district of Hojai). Only those living in the hill districts of Dima Hasao (formerly North Cachar Hills) and Karbi Anglong are categorised as Dimasa. On the other hand, the Dimasas living in Nagaland are called Kacharis officially (Bathari, 2014).

A further distinction of the Dimasa community is seen, based on diverse geographical locations. They recognised four prominent territorial regions which are as follows: *Dezuwa* area comprising a part of Dimapur District, Nagaland and a portion of Karbi Anglong (East); *Dembra* area comprises of West Karbi Anglong and Nagaon districts of Assam; *Hawar* comprises of the Cachar District and the remaining region of Dima Hasao District, which is recognised as *Hasao*. The Dimasas living in *Dezuwa*, *Dembra*, *Hawar* and *Hasao* are known as *Dezuwasa*, *Dembrasa*, *Hawarsa* and *Hasaosa* respectively. Vivid variations in the spoken language can be observed among the territorial groups along with some ritualistic disparity (Bathari, 2014; Parmar, 2015; Kolb, 2017; Thaosen, 2018). The ritualistic disparity in most cases observed involves marriage, birth and death. Most people of the Hasao region believe that they are the custodian of the original Dimasa rituals while the Dimasas in the Cachar region are believed to be more Hinduised compared to the others residing in different regions. The reason behind such Hinduisation is pointed to their close proximity to Bengali community (Fieldwork, 2017-2020). The Dimasas of the Cachar area refer themselves as Barmans or Burmans (ibid.). Apart from these broad geographical variations, there are other differential groups with minor variations, for instance, in the spoken language. Amongst them are *Hamrisa*, *Wargongsa* and *Semsa* spoken by the Dimasas residing in Langting, Mandardisa and Semkhor areas respectively (Parmar, 2015). This inter-tribe differentiation highlights that one need to relook at the connotation of the broader term 'Dimasa'. The major aspect of the Dimasas' classification depends on the clan associations. In this regard, the

jaddirao (term referring to matrilineal clan) and *sengphongrao* (term referring to patrilineal clan) membership becomes crucial to the Dimasas' identity.

The entire Dimasa society is structured around clan and village ties. The pre-colonial idea nevertheless is present and extremely relevant in their field of cosmology. Likewise, the clan attachments and loyalties associated with one's *sengphongrao* and *jaddirao* are crucial aspects of their intra-tribal differentiation and identification. Such identification is not marked or concentrated in one or two villages; it is nevertheless relevant for the entire Dimasa community. The differentiation based on a clan is so prominent that the foremost question when you meet a person is, for instance, which *sengphongrao* or *jaddirao* does the person belongs to? The emphasis on clan affiliation is given more importance than to the place or area of belongingness. In the case of the Dimasas, both membership to the matri-clan and patri-clan is of great significance; this membership is reaffirmed through practices of contributing a small amount of money by all the members of the clan.

The upsurge of demands by the Dimasas

In the late part of the 1990s, many groups were formed who took up arms and ammunition against the state to put forth their demands (Kolås, 2012; Wasbir, 2017). The group comprising of Dimasa youths formed towards the end of 1990, came to be called as Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF) whose priority was to 'revive the lost Dimaland', and the group members took their basic training from the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) [NSCN (IM)][iii], the fraction was under Isak-Muivah (Bathari, 2014; Hussain, 2017; Kolås, 2017). But this group eventually laid down their guns in the year 1995, and few members of the dismembered group went on to form another group named Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) in the same year. The prominent figures of the new group were Dilip Nunisa, Pranab Nunisa and Jewel Gorlosa[iv] (Bathari, 2014). Many of the field informants stated that it was from the village of Amaluma, Dimapur where the spark to form an outfit began, to put forth their demand to gain statehood and to bring the Dimasas living separately under one administrative control.[v] It was observed that in most of the households of the three villages (Doyapur, Ganeshnagar and Amaluma) had one or two family members associated with the outfit.

One of the informants from Doyapur village narrated that it was a traumatic experience for his family when his father joined the outfit and took training under the supervision of NSCN. The camp of NSCN is only few kilometers away from their village. It is beside the Dimasa village *Manglamukh*, they commonly referred the camp as 'Colony' by the general people. In another instance, the researcher encountered a young college girl from the same village who narrated that her father joined the outfit in the second batch. She said, 'it was very difficult for them to survive as minority in the state of Nagaland because of which the

locals took up arms.' The population of the Kacharis in Nagaland is only 0.4 percent as against 98.2 percent of the total Naga population (Sitlhou, 2018). In addition to it, the different factions of NSCN and other underground groups levied heavy taxation on the people of Nagaland (Wouters, 2018). The taxation has decreased after the rise of the Dimasa militant group but did not cease to exist; till this day, an individual has to pay a portion of their income to the groups. Many interviewees displayed the same concern as the girl. During the conversation, she pointed towards her neighbour's house and said, 'the person from that house joined the outfit from the beginning, from the day of the inception of the outfit group'[vi] narrating a case that happened in the late 1990s. Another person added that before the inception of the DHD, Dimasas, a minority in the state of Nagaland had to live in fear but when the Dimasas took arms to assert their demands, people living in the area could feel the change of attitude. Dimasas are empathetic[vii] towards the DHD who are locally called *hagrasa*, meaning 'the people of the forest'. This change of attitude towards DHD varied amongst the people living in Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong (Dhansiripar) and Dimapur. Dimasas from Karbi Anglong and Dimapur still have a sympathetic attitude towards DHD and these can be seen in the enactment of few marriage rituals. An elaborate militarised tradition has been observed in the field, where people from both bride and groom sides present a cosplay of armed men. The dressed-up men with fake guns and bombs staged to showcase a struggle of dominance where usually the groom side win and they declared that they will take the bride along with the groom. Such cosplays were not observed in Dima Hasao (Maibang and Haflong). The people from Dima Hasao do not hold the same feelings.[viii]

Up until 1963, when Nagaland was not granted statehood, Kacharis lived in twenty villages in the Dimapur district alongside non-Naga tribes like Kukis, Garos and Mikirs (Sitlhou, 2018). But currently, there are only ten Dimasa Kachari villages remaining and among them, the Amaluma village has all the Dimasa population. [ix] Moreover, the non-Nagas in the State, i.e. the Kacharis, Garos and the Kukis, become the new minority tribals in the state of Nagaland (Haokip, 2020). Ramesh Hasnu in an exclusive interview, voice his sadness over no Kachari representative in the recent elections, as there is still fear among the people due to the killing of the previous candidate in the Legislative Assembly (MLA) election in 1989 (Sitlhou, 2018). In addition to it, Dimasas living in Nagaland are not recognised as Dimasas, but as Kachari and politically deprived as a minority (Bathari, 2014). Kolås (2017) cited similar instances where her informants narrated the hardship and land alienation faced by Dimasas living in Nagaland in the hands of the dominant Naga groups.

The formation of DHD and its uprisings gave a new direction to the Dimasa identity struggle and politics (Barman, 2014). This group took up arms and put forth their demand for a separate state (Kolås, 2012; Barman, 2014; Hussain, 2017). The members of DHD vowed to create *Dimaraji*, i.e., a pre-colonial Dimasa kingdom comprising the districts of North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong

and Cachar and parts of Nagaon District in Assam and Dimapur District in Nagaland (Barman, 2014; Hussain, 2017, Kolås, 2017). While the NSCN-IM proposal of bringing Naga lands under the same administrative and sovereign roof i.e., 'greater Nagalim' formed the ultimate outcome of the Naga struggle (Hussain, 2017; Wouters, 2018), which included the areas of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, made the relation ties between the DHD and NSCN-IM to fall apart (Kolås, 2012; Hussain, 2017).

With the growing differences arising within the DHD group, subsequently came up with two sections: one section under Dilip Nunisa, who signed a ceasefire with the Government in 2003, while the other faction of the DHD didn't comply with the ceasefire and went their separate way. The separate faction under Jewel Gorlosa-DHD came to be known as Black Widow (Bathari, 2014; Hussain, 2017). The DHD(J) finally gave up arms in 2009 (ibid.), almost six years after the previous faction laid down their arms. The growing insurgency problem in the 1990s had a huge impact on the developmental works in the district of present-day Dima Hasao (Kolås, 2012; Hussain, 2017).

The re-naming of the district

In Northeast India, the demand for autonomy is 'politics of recognition' in granting a certain form of self-rule (Kolås, 2012; Haokip, 2020). Many demands were tabled by the outfit to the government and one amongst them was the demand for the recognition of the *Dimaraji*, but they have to just settle with the re-naming of the district. Many were disappointed with the outcome of the peace talks with the government which benefited the Dimasas of an autonomous district. The Dimasas of the other districts were not taken into consideration. In this context, the Dimasas of Dimapur felt they were left out. One of the research participants lament that they don't have any special provisions unlike their community members in Dima Hasao.[x] Ramirez (2007) noted the Dimasas in the district didn't face any threat to their identity. The same cannot be said to the Dimasas who are staying outside the district and are not covered with the special provisions as well.

When the Sixth Schedule was first enacted as a framework of governance for the tribal areas in the Northeast, it was primarily concerned with the indigenous peoples' control over land and forest, and a mechanism to protect such resources from outsiders (Kolås, 2012; Haokip, 2020). The special provisions of the Dima Hasao District were conferred as the Sixth Scheduled area. The pathway to attain autonomy was long felt for the people. The government of India grants special provision to 'tribal' areas to protect the rights of 'tribal' people. According to Article 244(2) of the constitution of India, it provides the Sixth Schedule for the development of the tribals of Northeast India and the idea behind it, was to give administrative powers to the tribals to safeguard their customs and traditions -provide them with autonomy to manage their tribal affairs. The Sixth Schedule in

a way is a comprehensive innovation and one of the important features of administration in Northeast (Sarmah, 2011).

The district of Dima Hasao under the Sixth Schedule gets a few assured special provisions under which the land belongs to the community. Such special provisions include the formation of a district council, a corporate body constituted by the representative members of a tribal group within the allocated area. The council is vested with powers that allow them to make few laws regarding the allotment of lands, management of forests, regulations of shifting cultivation and appointment of village chiefs. But the main power remains in the hands of the governor who oversees the composition of the council, its term of office and other related issues. As a consequence, the special provisions for the community gets severely constrained. The district council becomes a mere stakeholder with no power, for instance, to block the acquisition of land by the state government or nullify its claims (Barbora, 2002; Kolås, 2012; Gogoi, 2020).

These special provisions were not attained overnight; the struggle was long. However, these provisions are territorial specific and can be accessed only by the people living in that area (Dima Hasao district). While others residing outside the district get only the state recognition of ST. Again, the special provisions can be enjoyed only when the person stays in the autonomous district. This constitutional recognition gave the Dimasas, special provisions in the sector of education and job procurement, however, their social practices and kinship structures does not center around such terminology.

Resurrection of the traditions and invention of traditions

Invented traditions are characterised by a set of practices and valued leaden norms and behaviour within the framework of accepted rules performed in a repetitive manner (Hobsbawn & Ranger, 1983). Such repetitiveness of tradition or ritual manifest as the idea of continuity with the past (ibid.). However, it would be incorrect to claim every event or ritual to be invented has no connection with the past. Such overt claims sideline oral history, folklores of an oral community. As Grimes (2000) notes neither imagining nor inventing is carved out of nothing, rather they crop out from previous held cultural values.

DHD as a whole were involved in bringing socio-cultural changes within the community and their idea of bringing back the old customs and ignite the collective consciousness of the community to create alternative histories of their origin. These changes were presented as efforts by the group to connect the community with their past through the practice of rituals. Most of the new traditions were established and promoted in the Dhansiripar area of Karbi Anglong where DHD had their camp set up. DHD under the president-ship of Dilip Nunisa brought in various changes in the Dimasas' culture and tradition.

During the fieldwork in the village of Doyapur, Nagaland, the scholar was told by a middle-aged woman from the same village, who said,

'A*t that time when DHD was powerful, they did what they want'*.[xi] She pointed towards the introduction of new traditions. She brought a piece of a torn pamphlet and showed it to the scholar stating, the new traditions and rituals were made public through such pamphlets.[xii]

During their operating days, they were involved in various revivalist works which included such as, emphasising the clan system, promoting the traditional Dimasa attire and supporting the idea of celebrating the harvesting festival on the day across Dimasa inhabited areas. There was a push towards restoring their old ways and thus, recreating their ethnic identity in contemporary times. This revival movement was not grand like the Hereka movement which crept up among the Zeme Nagas, also the inhabitants of the Dima Hasao district. Hereka movement help in formalisation of their new traditions, and identities were re-enacted amongst the Zeme Nagas who actively partake to bring change within their ritualistic behaviour. The Dimasas on the other hand, neither have any prescribed tradition, nor witness such religious movement like Zeme Naga neighbours. But the insurgent group being active in the late 1990s were involved in bringing such similar ethnic identity movement, though it never gained much momentum. The insurgent group attempted to bring change in the imagined-territory, Dima Halim or Dima Razi encompassing areas of Dimasa population. They acted like a government[xiii] by sanctioning, imposing laws and punishing individuals who do not adhere to their regime and rules of conduct. A middle-aged woman from Dhansiri, Karbi Anglong narrated, during such time, girls were not allowed to wear jean pants, but everyone was urged to wear traditional attires (Fieldwork, Karbi Anglong 2019).

There are local terminologies of dichotomisation of others as an outsider and not a member of their own in likewise terms such as, Mizos referring a non-Mizos as *vai* (Pachuau, 2014), Manipuris referring a non-Manipuris as *Mayank*[xiv]. The Dimasas usually refer to an outsider as *malai ni jaddi*. For that matter, the researcher was termed an outsider by the usage of the phrase '*malai ni jaddi*', which means 'person with other matri-clan'. This phrase is generally used for the outsiders and the ones who are not Dimasas. The context of usage of the term, 'outsider' differs, an outsider is a non-Dimasa in general term. However, even a Dimasa, if he or she does not belong to the area or clan, is also termed as an outsider.

The fear of being assimilated and losing their identity was another pertinent concern among the people. Many stated that, there will be a time where they might be submerged by other tribal groups or communities and leading to their extinction (Field notes, 2017). The most common stated example in this regard was the state of Tripura, as an energetic youth in his mid-twenties asserted, 'the

Tripuris are the minority in their own place. We cannot become like them in our place'.[xv]

In one of the wedding receptions in Dhansiripar, a middle-aged resident of the same village approached the scholar and said,

'*Ami suwali jabo nidiu kintu suwali ahibo pare Jodi he Amar lora loi najai*". 'We don't allow our girls to marry outside, but allow girls from outside to marry into our community if and only if, they don't take away our boy'.[xvi]

Such similar points of view were observed among other research participants and the locals under the study. These viewpoints were echoed by the ex-insurgent group members. There is a pertinent fear among the respondents of losing their lineages, and so the community members adhere to stringent marriage rules which do not allow marriage outside the community. If any case, such an incident happens, then, the woman is out-casted, and the children of such unions are not recognised as Dimasas, following in the breakage of the line of matrilineage. The task of repairing such breakage in the matri-lineage was taken up by the DHD. They felt it was their moral responsibility to safeguard such a collapse of the clan system and losing of matri-clan members. Because of which they created provisions and established reformed social norms for the non-Dimasa men to adopt into the Dimasa social fold. These were the main ideas behind the establishment of the *Sibarai Daikho*. The adoption of new members was done through elaborate rituals where *sengphongs'* affiliations were given to the new members.

The case of Sibarai *Daikho*

Dimasas believed that local deities and spirits rule different localities where they inhabit. As such, *Daikhos* are few designated territorial units where local deities are believed to reside. The majority of the Dimasa population today professes Hinduism while a small percentage have embraced Christianity (Gogoi, 2020; Gogoi, 2022; Gogoi & Kikhi, 2023), however, the community is still structured around the clan system (Gogoi & Kikhi, 2023). The major section of the society still upholds indigenous rituals and practices, which gets reflected in the traditions of *Daikho*. This traditional religion forms a crucial part of their socio-cultural life.

Dimasas considered themselves the progeny of the union of a mystical bird creature named, *Arikhidima* and the gods of earthquakes named, *Bangla Raja*. This folklore states that the union resulted in seven eggs, out of which six eggs came out the 6 gods, namely, *Shibarai*, *Alu Raja*, *Naikhu Raja*, *Waa Raja*, *Gunyung-Braiyung* and *Hamiadao*, who were believed to be benevolent gods. Among them, *Shibarai* is the eldest and most significant local deity, believed to be present in all *Daikhos*. While from the seventh came out the evil spirits. Dimasas worshipped the six gods as their ancestral deities. Over a period of time, the number of deities increased to twelve and so was the number of *Daikhos*

associated with those deities. And with the religious change to Hinduism, some of their traditional deities came to be identified with the deities of the Hindu pantheon. However, it is unclear how the six *Daikhos* became twelve. Anthropologists (Danda, 1978; Ramirez, 2006; Thaosen, 2018) working on the *Daikhos* had found it difficult to explain the increase in the number of *Daikhos* due to the unavailability of any oral accounts or any folklore associated with such fission of the *Daikhos*.

During the fieldwork in the remote villages of Dimasas, the research participants told that there was an establishment of a *Daikho* by the ex-insurgent group of DHD in the Dizuwa area (Dimapur falls under this region) in the late 1990's. Ramirez who had conducted extensive fieldwork in Northeast region since the late '1990s and written on the institution of *Daikho,* however, did not cover any notes on the new *Sibarai Daikho* (termed as the 13th *Daikho*) which was established around the end of the 20th century.

Danda (1978) in his work noted the adoption of individuals (or a child) was within the community, but adoption of non-Dimasa members were not highlighted in her work. While Ramirez (2007) described Dimasas as 'sealed society', where the status of Dimasa is strictly acquired by descent, clan affiliation is an inseparable aspect of being Dimasa because of which adoption within a Dimasa clan is regarded as impossible. Moreover, union with a non-Dimasa is strictly forbidden (Ramirez, 2007; Kolb, 2017). This new *Daikho* on the other hand, provided a space for the non-Dimasa men to become a part of the Dimasa society. Fortunately, the scholar got an opportunity to interview Mr. Kemprai who has been involved with the *Sibarai Daikho* (13th *Daikho*) for a long time. Though he was not present at the time of its inception, yet, he currently holds an important position as a committee member. He is entrusted with the task of keeping records of the new adopted members and their families. In the interview, Mr Kemprai narrated the reason behind the establishment of the *Sibarai Daikho,* as,

Our traditions were intact before the Ahom arrival but after the entry of Ahoms in Assam, there was a disruption in our culture and traditions. The Ahoms were not able to conquer us with manpower but they came up with other ways to conquer us. The Ahoms started to marry Dimasa girls, and make them part of their culture. The Dimasa Raja too, married girls form other communities and those girls were eventually brought within the social milieu through purification. However, the Dimasa woman married off to other communities resulted in the loss of the matri-clan member. This *Daikho* helped us to bring back our women (Interview taken in May, 2019 Karbi Anglong)[xvii]

While in conversation with one of the ex-DHD member who asserted,

Sibarai is the supreme deity and greatest deity. He is present in all the 12 other *Daikhos* along with other titular deities. If any event or incident results in

pollution of the *Daikho*, then *Sibarai Daikho* is there to cleanse the others (Field notes, 2019).

During the conversation, the scholar was told that Madan Langthasa, a resident of Amaluma was another important figure who was one of the few people who contributed to the establishment of the 13th *Daikho* in 2000. An obituary to Madan Langthasa (who died in 2017) was shared through a pamphlet by the DHD.

On further enquiry regarding the location of the new *Daikho*, the research participants could not give discreet answers to the queries. Mr. Kemprai, an active working member of the committee was not able to provide any help in this regard. There are huge discrepancies in the narratives of the informants regarding the exact location of the *Daikho* site and most of the people are unaware of it.

When the scholar asked around the villages about the presence of the *Daikho*, it is a mystery that most of them are unaware of it. Later, the scholar came across two versions of the location of the new *Sibarai Daikho*. One group insisted that the location is in the Dimapur area while there was another group of people who claimed the location is in Karbi Anglong area of Assam. Some pointed to the Shiv Mandir in Doyapur village as the site of the *Daikho*. In conversation with a middle-aged woman in her late forties who said, "the Shiv Mandir (referring to the Shiv Mandir in Doyapur) was not built to cleanse but it was something established by Nunisa to cleanse the state of impurity". To this, another informant present added, "DHD people started all these things. There was nothing like this before in our culture". The Doyapur Shiv Mandir is situated beside the main village road and daily bazar area. The scholar was able to conduct an informal interview with the priest who look after the Mandir and had been residing in the village for the last 10 years. The priest in the Mandir narrated that, he came from Bihar and have been staying in the village along with his family. He stated that the Mandir is open for all and people from all communities such as Dimasa, Marwari, and Nepali who come to offer their prayers. On being enquired about any establishment by the local Dimasa people to offer prayers, he stated that he was unaware of any such establishment. While few informants claimed that the open structure with roof beside the Mandir which holds no image or idol of any deity is believed to be the site of the new *Daikho*. These claims were not supported with any factual information.

Conclusion

Yashmin Saikia (2006) presented the idea of pluralistic identity built by deconstructing and re-imagining the post-colonial local identity development based on history and memory of connectedness and interaction between South and Southeast Asia. To quote Jelle J. P. Wouters' (2018) extensive ethnographic work on the genesis of the ethnic rubric of Naga identity, which is akin to the modern identities was not solely based on a singular category[xviii] is another work

which highlights the pluralistic idea of identity. The cohesive identity of Naga was a colonial construction that presented a stable terminology disregarding the unique differential village republic setup that made up the social structure of pre-colonial Naga society. These arguments of Jelle J.P. Wouters are extended, replicated and qualified by the current research amongst the Dimasas (which is the prime focus of this essay). While, Wouters' work centred around one such Naga village republic where he sees clan as the structural component of the village's identity, this essay is an attempt to study on the clan system amongst Dimasas living in different villages both in the states of Nagaland and Assam.

Therefore, this essay significantly attempted to focus on how identity in general, is addressed, shaped, interpreted among the Dimasas and how DHD's involvement in ethnicizing the category of the Dimasa gave a new outlook of being a Dimasa. In addition to the politics of belongings, it attempted to understand the efforts of a non-state actor to push towards a collective consciousness derived from the social organisation, which is based on clan and kinship networks admixture with new forms of ethnic identity politics. Colonial writings discredited community's idea of collective belongingness and identity at large, which are derived from their local structural make-up based on cultural practices, village, clan or territory (Wouters, 2017). In this regard, Pachuau (2014) rightly states that 'identity' reside in the local 'practices' of the people.

Dimasas categorisation as Kachari during the colonial regime, dissolve the central idea of the community's structural make up i.e., the clan system. Moreover, prior to colonial era, there was no presence of discreet categories to define tribal people (Xaxa, 2005). While the colonial and post-colonial categories tried to appropriate and restructure categories into communities (Cohn, 1996), which currently remain as a bureaucratic term, a mere constitutional provision. The history of the Dimasa-Kachari Kingdom, along with the unique characteristics of Dimasa customs and traditions, is at the core of contemporary Dimasa ethno-politics (Kolås, 2017). The colonial ethnographers laid the foundation of the ethno-politics by categorising the 'tribal' (Kolås, 2012; Saikia & Baishya, 2017; Baruah, 2020).

DHD actively worked to repair the breakage in the matrilineage, hence, established *Sibarai Daikho* to recruit the non-Dimasa into their social fold. Consequently, redefining the criterion of being a Dimasa which is solely based on decent or by birth. The inception of the new *Daikho* has tremendously changed the previously held idea of *Daikho*. *Daikho* which is believed to be a sacred geography, an abode of god, away from every day human has become an institution where recruiting and adoption of new members into the community takes place. This offers a different facet of *Daikho*, as it provides an interesting case study towards broadening the existing sociological discourse on the notions of ethnic identity, sacredness, purity, pollution by adding in the intersecting variable of gender within ritualistic performances (Gogoi, 2020; Gogoi, 2022; Gogoi & Kikhi, 2023; Kikhi & Gogoi, 2023).

Notes

[i] The 'state' here refers to the central government of India.

[ii] The clash between Karbis and Dimasas took the centre stage when the territorial notions of both the groups overlapped (Frontline, 2005) available at https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/article30207231.ece Accessed on 5 November, 2021.

[iii] Kolås (2017) noted that the NSCN [both factions such as, NSCN(IM) & NSCN(K)] were training and providing arms and ammunition to proliferation of militancy in Northeast India.

[iv] Jewel Gorlosa was the founding president of DHD and the Black Widow or DHD (Jewel) or DHD(J) was formed under his guide ship in 2004 (Hussain, 2017).

[v] Field notes, Dimapur 2019.

[vi] The researcher started the fieldwork in Dimapur from 2018, and it was not a continuous stay as she has to travel to and fro from Assam and (Dimapur) Nagaland on the basis of availability of resource persons and field assistants. The fieldwork was conducted within the time frame from 2018 till 2020 in Dimapur (Field notes, Dimapur 2018-2020).

[vii] A small section of the people has close association with the outfit as there are instances of adoption which is discussed in the later part of the essay

[viii] Field notes, Dimapur 2018-2020.

[ix] During the fieldwork, it was found that there were ten Dimasa villages in Dimapur. According to many informants, Dimasas tend to move away from the town areas after selling off their lands (Field notes, Dimapur 2018-2020).

[x] Another informant who was a previous member of the outfit and hold a prominent position with the group (do not want to be named) stated that the outfit had educated members from Assam and they hold higher positions as they were the one having talks with the government (Field notes, Dimapur 2018-2020).

[xi] Most of the interviews were conducted in Dimasa language, whereby two field assistants helped the scholar to take the interviews. The major number of interviews were later translated by a local school teacher named, Jaykey Thaosen of Doyapur village.

[xii] Field notes, Dimapur 2018-2020.

[xiii] The usage of the term 'government' was observed during conversation with many informants who referred the outfit as DHD government (Field notes, 2018-2020).

[xiv] *Mayank* are those people who do not fall under the mongoloid stock (see Khan, 2014).

Source: Khan, M.C. Socio-Cultural and Religious Facets of Manipuri Muslims during the 17th and 18th Centuries. *International Journal of Research*, Vol. 1, 8, pp. 116-137.

[xv] Many individuals living in urban and rural areas voiced out their concern and frequently gave the example of Tripura to make their point (Field notes, 2017-2020).

[xvi] Field notes, Dimapur February 2021.

[xvii] The scholar was accompanied by two local youths who came along with her to Mr. Kemprai's house located in Karbi Anglong. Both the assistants assist the scholar during the interview. The interview was conducted in Dimasa language and the field assistants helped her in translation (Field notes, 2018-2020).

[xviii] Wouters (2017, 2018) conducted his extensive ethnographic work in the Chakhesang Naga village of Phugwumi and Chang village of Noksen in Nagaland. Phugwumi village is situated around 45 kilometers away from the capital of Nagaland. While the Noksen village is in Tuensang district of Nagaland (Wouters, 2018).

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Kedilezo Kikhi is Professor of Sociology at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong 793022. Email id.: kedithejakikhi@yahoo.co.in

Prithibi Pratibha Gogoi is Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology at Tetso College, Sovima 797115. Email id.: prithibigogoi@gmail.com

Article: Nepali Footprint in Manipur: A Historical Analysis of Migration and Challenges

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Nepali Footprint in Manipur: A Historical Analysis of Migration and Challenges

Priya Sharma &
Khangembam Indira

Abstract

The paper explores the historical migration and settlement of the Nepali community in Manipur, tracing it to the colonial period, where their movements were facilitated by the British as soldiers, graziers, domestic workers, and artisans, leading to permanent settlements along the foothills of Koubru-Laimaton hill ranges and parts of the Imphal Valley. Using a qualitative historical research design, the study draws on archival documents, secondary literature, and oral histories to examine migration patterns, settlement, and social and cultural adaptation in the local environment. Theoretically, both Everett Lee's push-pull framework of migration and Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital are used to interpret processes of integration and identity negotiation. The study observed that, despite their long-standing presence, Nepalis in Manipur continue to face challenges of land insecurity, political marginalisation, and identity-based exclusion within the broader socio-political fabric of the state.

Keywords*: migration, assimilation, Nepalis, habitus, capital*

Introduction

The migration of Nepalis to India is argued to have been facilitated by the Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 between the Governments of India and Nepal, which emphasised building relationships between the two countries in terms of military, economic, and geopolitical factors (Nath, 2006; Gurung & Majumder, 2024; Sinha & Subba, 2003). Nepali migrants, referred to as Gorkhas, arrived in the North Eastern parts of India as soldiers, herders, and later as cultivators (Dutt, 1981; Subba, 1992b). The colonial administration, especially under the British East India Company and later the British Raj, also played a crucial role in encouraging the migration of Nepalis to these areas. Their loyalty and military discipline made them perfect for recruitment in colonial armies.

In Manipur, their settlement has historical origins dating back to the 19th century, particularly during British colonial rule. Through the Manipur Durbar, the British strategically facilitated the settlement of Nepalis as a stabilising force along the frontiers and for staffing military or paramilitary roles (Brara, 2016). After their service, a considerable number settled permanently by renting land, marrying locally, adopting the local culture, and integrating into the local socio-economic fabric. Over time, these settlements grew and evolved into significant clusters, particularly in the hill and valley regions of Manipur (Nath, 2006; Meitei &

Arunkumar, 2017). However, this historical development has not been without its complications. The position of Nepalis in Manipur has frequently been challenged in relation to land rights, indigeneity, and inclusion in the local socio-political order of Manipur. These disputes are deeply embedded in the complex ethnic mosaic of Manipur, where identity and belonging are tightly bound to the land and history (Brara, 2016; Zehol, 1998).

Scholarly works on Nepalis in Manipur, such as Chettry (2003), Abrar (2025), and Dutt (1981), provide insights into the historical trajectory of Nepali migration to Manipur, particularly emphasising how their occupational roles were shaped under British colonial administration. The works by Brara (2016), Zehol (1998), and Fernandes (2008) explore and critically examine the challenges encountered, such as lack of job security, contested land rights, identity struggles, and cultural and linguistic marginalisation. The works of Meitei and Arunkumar (2017), and Shiwakoti (2012) explored the ways in which Nepali communities have gradually adapted to their surroundings by adopting elements of the local culture, including language, clothing styles, and social customs, thereby reflecting an ongoing process of cultural accommodation and integration within broader Manipuri society.

However, these topics are often studied separately, and there is no single paper that brings all these aspects together in one place, connecting history, cultural adaptation, and the challenges faced by the community. The majority of studies are descriptive and lack deeper analysis of how these issues are related to each other or how they influence the cultural identity of the Nepalis in Manipur. Methodologically, a qualitative historical research design is employed for the study, drawing on secondary sources such as archival documents, scholarly literature, and oral histories. By analysing and bringing these themes together, it attempts to address existing gaps in the literature. In this paper, we use the terms ‘migrants’ and ‘Nepali settlers’ in Manipur interchangeably to refer to the same group. The primary objectives of this study are 1) to examine the historical development and socio-political construction of Nepali identity 2) the ways Nepali communities in Manipur have adapted to the local environment, and 3) the issues and challenges encountered by the Nepalis in Manipur.

Conceptualising Nepali Ethnic Identity

During colonial as well as in post-colonial period, the term *ethnic* began to reflect a divide between “Us” and “Them.” This perspective entails that the majority population is viewed as culturally neutral, rendering its own identity invisible or non-ethnic, while the minority or immigrants are often labelled as “ethnic,” thereby reinforcing hierarchical cultural distinctions and social othering of “them” (Khaliman, 2012). Over time, several related concepts have emerged, such as ethnic group, ethnic identity, ethnic origin, ethnic boundary, ethnicisation, ethnocentrism, ethnicism, and ethnic nationalism, each reflecting how group

identity and belonging are shaped and understood in society (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996).

The subject matter of ethnic identity has generally been approached from three theoretical perspectives: primordial, constructivist, and instrumentalist, each with its own understanding of how ethnic identity is formed, maintained, and mobilised. All these perspectives often use language as a major sign of a person's ethnic background (Dorian 1980; Giles et al., 1977). Relatively, Nepali-speaking people worldwide are viewed as citizens of Nepal. However, as Shiwakoti (2012) articulated, the term 'Nepali' denotes both the nationality of Nepal and Nepali-speaking people, regardless of their geographic location. Different scholars have different perspectives on the notion of Nepali. Illustratively, Pradhan (1982) in his paper *Pahilo Pahar* elaborately highlights three different meanings of Nepali. First, he posits that the term Nepali indicates a language. Second, it also implies a political designation referring to individuals who speak Nepali and are native citizens of Nepal. Third, the concept also represents those who live beyond Nepal's political borders and are not confined to the political boundaries of Nepal. Similarly, Subba (1992a) uses "Nepali" to refer to a cultural and linguistic identity that extends beyond Nepal's national borders, while "Nepalese" refers more specifically to nationality or citizenship associated with Nepal. Furthermore, when individuals move from Nepal to other countries or states, they often identify themselves as "Nepali" rather than by their specific ethnic group, such as Newar, Rai, or Gurung, because they may not encounter others from their ethnic group in the new state or country, but they are likely to meet others who also identify as Nepali. Identifying as "Nepali" provides a sense of security and belonging because others understand this identity better. Nepali may face unique reactions if they introduce themselves as Magar, Newar, or Gurung instead of simply saying that they are Nepali (ibid). While Bhandari (2017) conceptualised Nepali identity in terms of territoriality and national membership contended that Nepali identity is an 'imagined community', socially constructed through the use of print media and collective memories of people, where an attempt was made to forge a political boundary with the 'outsiders.' This phenomenon is a product of the modern nation-state, which has also helped foster Nepali national consciousness.

In the context of India and particularly the North-East, people whose mother tongue is Nepali are collectively identified as Nepalis, regardless of whether they are citizens of India. This has to do with the historical and migratory dimensions embodied in the identity, as many colonial and post-colonial writings portrayed them as an immigrant community who had ventured as labourer, military service, and other socio-economic factors, leading to their widespread settlement in the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim, and Northeastern hills. Thus, the Nepali ethnonym is often taken as a synonym to denote their ancestral origin from Nepal. For such a reason, based on the linguistic category, Nepalis of Indian origin often articulate to identify themselves as 'Gorkha' as an ethnopolitical identity. However, without much nuance, the terms 'Gorkha' and 'Nepali' are often used interchangeably

across most states in India. The work by Subba (2018) showed the relationship between race, identity and nationality among Nepalis in India, "who are historically, racially, culturally, and linguistically heterogeneous but socially constructed as a homogenous community in India" (p. 6). He further added how borderland communities and their cross-border movements have shaped their identity, with claims of 'origin' vs. 'home' in complex ways.

Migration and Settlement

Globally, one-seventh of the world's population resides in a country different from their place of birth (Tataru, 2019). In recent years, transnational migration has surged, with the number of migrants increasing from 173 million in 2,000 to 258 million in 2017, with over half being migrant workers (150.3 million), according to the International Organization for Migration (2018).

Migration results from a combination of both push and pull factors. Some of the attributing push factors for the Nepalese in the present time are demographic pressure (Kansakar, 2003), economic hardship (Thieme, 2006), low wages and dissatisfaction with political conditions (Joshi, 2022), conflict and political instability (Adhikari et al., 2023; Bohra-Mishra, 2011), environmental stress (Banerjee et al., 2011, 2015), and climate change, disasters, and precarious domestic livelihoods (Adhikari et al., 2023). From a historical standpoint, the coercive and oppressive traditional regime of Nepal, where a prevalent form of serfdom was the main reason for migration (Sinha & Subba, 2003; Pariyar & Lovett, 2016). Sinha and Subba (2003) further pointed out that evidence shows that during the medieval period, defeated Malla dynasty supporters had their ears and noses chopped off. Simultaneously, the dictation of *Dharmaśāstra,* a Hindu text that outlines law, ethics, social conduct and religious duties, over the basic laws made the situation worse, as the offenders were punished according to their position in the caste hierarchy, with harsher conditions for lower caste individuals, including untouchables. Summing up, it can be pointed out here that these aspects played a major push factor since the medieval period.

Factors contributing as pulling effects of Nepalis to British India were mainly as a result of employment opportunities. Subba (1992a) pointed out that plantation work in tea estates and forestry, military recruitment, and other service sectors have historically drawn Nepalis to India. Some of the historical events that acted as precursors to the large-scale migration of Nepalis to India, particularly the Northeastern region, are discussed as follows. During the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–1816, the British recognised the martial qualities of Nepali warriors, leading to their subsequent induction in the British Army as soldiers and other paramilitary staff. The Anglo-Burmese War that took place in 1824–1825, where the British gained control of the entire Northeast Region, facilitated significant Nepali migration and settlement (Sinha & Subba, 2003). Similarly, the formation of the Assam Company in 1838 became the first joint stock company to produce

large-scale tea plantations and export them to Europe. To facilitate the tea plantation process, a trustworthy and cheap labour force was required, and the unskilled Nepali labour force was used to clear the jungle and other tasks (ibid). Other factors include an open border policy (Seddon et al., 2002), cultural and linguistic affinity (Thapa, 2013), and access to education and healthcare (Sharma, 2008). Contextually, the settlement of Nepalis in Manipur was mainly shaped by colonial administrative policies, as Brara (2016) pointed out that the availability of various opportunities such as grazing reserves (The DC News Desk, 2019), agricultural land rights (Aley, 2023), official recognition and legal status of domicile, and proximity and accessibility (Brara, 2016). All these factors enabled the permanent settlement of Nepalis in Manipur.

Migration affects not only individuals but also reshapes the socio-political and economic characteristics of the nation. When people migrate, they bring with them their cultural traditions, practices, and values, at the same time moulding themselves to adapt and fit into the norms of their new environment (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). This process often involves establishing cultural spaces, participating in local festivities, and creating hybrid practices that blend their heritage with local customs. This led to significant cultural transformations for both the migrants and the host community. These processes facilitate cultural exchange, where migrants introduce new traditions, languages, and cuisines, enriching the cultural fabric of the destination. Conversely, migrants often adopt elements of the local culture, leading to acculturation or the creation of unique cultural identities (ibid).

Integration and Settlement Process in Manipur

Nepalis were first brought to Manipur by the British after the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814–1816, mainly as soldiers, servants, and labourers. Their early contact with Manipur began during the Burmese occupation of Assam and Manipur (1819–1826), when Gambhir Singh, the then king of Manipur, sought the help of British to oust the Burmese, leading to the deployment of the 8th Gorkha Rifles to form the Manipuri Levy around 1824 (Abrar, 2025). Nepali labourers also arrived during the construction of the Imphal-Mao Road (ibid). They served in various roles such as soldiers, cooks, milkmen, and baggage handlers under British rule and participated in quelling tribal raids and rebellions.

The first officially recognised Nepali settlement was at Koirengei, approximately 9 km north of Imphal, around 1885 (Ahamed, 2021). Other notable early settlers included Captain Tintai Lama, who later moved to Chingmeirong and was appointed as Mauzadar by the government at that time. Some families were relocated to the Kanglatombi village. Hodson (1908) pointed out that their descendants are still living. A memorial for Subedar Hemchand Shahi, a Nepali soldier of the 44th Gorkha Rifles who died in Manipur in 1881, shows the presence of Nepalis in Manipur from an earlier period (Shiwakoti, 2012). Some scholars

claim that Nepali settlement may have begun as early as the 16th century (Chettry, 2003). The posting of the 42nd, 43rd, and 44th Gorkha Rifles in 1890–91 marked a significant period of population growth among Nepali settlers (Shiwakoti, 2012). Following World War I, historical records document the footprint and settlement of ex-soldiers in Manipur, which contributed to community expansion (Dutt, 1981).

After the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, the then King of Manipur, with the help of the Manipur State Durbar, established grazing reserves for Nepali grazers and retired military personnel. Many retired Gorkhas bought land and commenced cattle rearing and dairy farming in the Kanglatombi-Kangpokpi area of Manipur, which falls in the foothills of the Koubru-Laimaton hill range. Gorkha *goths* (cowsheds) were also established at the foothills of Kangchup, Bishnupur, Irang, and other places in Manipur (Nath, 2006). In 1919, F. F. Pearson, who served as the President of the Manipur State Durbar (Hill Office), allocated an area of 140 square miles to create the Kanglatombi-Kangpokpi Gorkha Reserve. This area was meant to bring together Gorkha settlers and their cowsheds in one place. This decision followed a rise in taxation, as the British administration prioritised revenue collection in the hill areas. Encouraged by the consistent tax income from Nepali settlers, the Manipur Durbar and British officials formalised their presence by legalising settlements and goths. By 1920, 165 such goths were officially recognised in the Irang Valley (Abrar, 2025). In 1933, C. Gimson approved the settlement of 19 Gorkha families in Maram. Later, in 1946, the Kanglatombi–Kangpokpi reserve was repurposed from grazing to a permanent settlement, and Nepali grazers were relocated to the Irang Valley, which was declared a dedicated grazing zone for them (Chettry, 2003). Many Nepalis also took up farming on leased land or through informal agreements with local landlords. Some Nepalis became small landholders, while others worked as tenant farmers (Abrar, 2025).

The creation of the Gorkha Reserved Area and later its expansion into Maram facilitated the emergence of several Nepali villages across these regions (Abrar, 2025). This helped them to take up other agricultural activities, becoming tenants or sharecroppers on tribal lands. Later, Maharaja Churachand Singh (1891–1941) granted them land along the Imphal-Dimapur route, leading to settlements in foothill areas north of the valley. The similarity of the hilly climate and soil to that of Nepal enabled them to cultivate crops such as maize, mustard, potatoes, and produce charcoal (Meitei, 2016; Ahamed, 2021). The retired soldiers and graziers had begun cultivating land and rearing livestock in areas such as Kanglatombi, Koirengei, and Kangpokpi. To administer these growing settlements, a police outpost was established at Sekmai, where Nepalis were appointed as Mauzadars and constables. After India's independence in 1947 and Manipur's integration into the Indian Union, the Nepali community expanded further. They settled in regions like Chingmeirong, Mantripukhri, New Checkon, Pangei, Kanglatombi, and Kangpokpi. Although initially focused on cattle rearing, many later turned to

agriculture after clearing forest lands and began to diversify their occupations (Ahamed, 2021).

They also migrated to Manipur as shopkeepers and traders, often following the path of the Gorkha soldiers. When the office of the Political Agent was established in 1835, the first Agent, Gordon, was accompanied by Gorkha soldiers. Along with them came other Nepali families who worked as cooks, milkmen, traders, and farmers (Abrar, 2025). British records from 1933 also show that some Nepali traders and shopkeepers were allowed to settle in Maram, an area that currently falls under the jurisdiction of Senapati District. The presence of shopkeepers, a headman, and a government employee at that time suggests that several other Nepali families had also settled in and around the Maram area (Shiwakoti & ManiBabu, 2011; Abrar, 2025). Their engagement in various occupations contributed significantly to the region's socio-economic landscape, and it can be argued that the policies adopted by the Kings and colonial administrators of Manipur made an attempt in integration of the Nepali community in the earlier kingdom of Manipur, though unintended.

Table 1. The Nepali's population in Manipur

Year	Male	Female	Total
1961	7,266	6,305	13,571
1971	14,579	11,916	26,495
1981	19,451	17,525	36,976
1991	25,046	21,451	46,497
2001	24,539	21,459	45,998
2011	34,018	29,738	63,756

Source: Census 1961-2011

The demographic trend of the Nepali population in Manipur can be observed in the Census records from 1961 to 2011 (Table 1). The total Nepali population in 1961 was 13,571, which tripled to 46,497 in 1991. However, in the 2001 Census, the population declined slightly to 45,998, and from 2001 to 2011, the population rose sharply to 63,756. This is the largest growth recorded in a decade. Although there is no available interpretation of this demographic shift, nonetheless, exploring various theories and models can shed some light on such transitions. For instance, Everett Lee's Push-Pull Model directs our attention toward the late 1980s and 1990s, where intensive identity-based political mobilisation took place, leading to the formation of ethnic-based organisations and armed militant groups, which eventually broke out to the infamous Naga-Kuki conflict of 1992 with a series of violent clashes lasting till 1997. During this period, many villages of both communities were uprooted. Conjecturally (not validated with field data), the conflict could have indirectly made the Nepali settlers insecure about their lives and livelihood as many of their settlements were in close proximity to either Kuki or Naga villages, leading to temporary seeking shelter in nearby regions, particularly outside Manipur, to avoid loss of lives.

Gender trends indicate that the number of males has consistently exceeded that of females in every census year. However, it is also important to highlight that the female population maintained stable growth compared to the male population, even in the period between 1991 and 2001, where negative growth occurred. The difference in migration patterns has been elaborately discussed by numerous scholars globally, articulating that "migratory movements are highly gendered processes" (Anastasiadou et al., 2023, p. 2).

Socio-Cultural Landscapes and Adaptation-Assimilation of Nepali Settlers

Migration, as a process, is not merely an economic or demographic phenomenon; it has the potential to restructure the socio-cultural fabric of both origin and destination communities. It shapes and is shaped by the cultural practices, social norms, and values of individuals. As Koshel and Yakovenko observed, "migration processes are a challenge to all societies, because the diversity of their ethnic cultures is growing and the familiar life practices have to adapt to new living conditions that are changing" (2020, p. 2). Earlier scholarship on migration centred around the movement of people across geographical boundaries, analysing patterns, distances, and destinations; however, contemporary studies are more oriented toward comprehending the socio-cultural implications of migration rather than just territorial mobility. The emergence of "transnational migrants," who maintain strong ties with their homeland and host society, illustrates how migration produces new cultural categories (Koshel & Yakovenko, 2020, p. 2). This suggests that migration not only reshapes the host communities but also affects the cultural dynamics of origin societies. Rapoport et al. (2021, p. 1) argue that "migration has important implications for the cultural dynamics in the source countries as well as has the potential to alter the cultural architecture worldwide." One of the key factors in this entire process is the mechanism of 'cultural diffusion,' when people migrate, they bring their cultural values, practices, and traditions into the new environment, leading to the blending of cultures and the creation of a more plural cultural landscape. However, diffusion is not uniform for all; some migrants will adapt to host cultures through the process of assimilation, while others may choose to maintain their own cultural identity distinctly, which John W. Berry (1992) calls "separation" in his Acculturation Model. When rejection of the host culture extends to an outright opposition to its dominant values and norms, migrants or cultural groups may form counter-cultural identities or movements (Epstein & Gang, 2010).

The adaptation and assimilation of Nepali settlers in Manipur is a complex socio-cultural process shaped by historical migration, inter-ethnic and cultural interaction, and shifting political conditions. Theoretically, here, Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus and field* provide a useful perspective to examine how Nepali settlers have selectively adopted some of the cultural elements of Manipuri society, and at the same time retaining the core cultural aspects of their own. Habitus, as Bourdieu (1977, 1990) conceptualised, comprises mental and

cognitive structures or socially ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions through which individuals perceive the social world around them and are expressed through both verbal and bodily language. For Nepali settlers, practices such as language, food habits, religion, rituals, and kinship and social values which are the embodiment of their community forms habitus. These dispositions conditioned their behaviour and actions while interacting with the new social setting (Nowicka, 2015).

Historically, the Nepali settlement in Pangei village is considered the first Nepali stream to arrive in Manipur, accompanying the British as sepoys. They settled in Manipur after their retirement with permission from the King (Meitei & Arunkumar, 2017; Dutt,1981). Pangei Nepali Basti is appraised as the oldest Nepali village in Manipur, with successive generations extending into the third or fourth generations. These successive generations continue to celebrate Nepali festivals, such as *Dasai* or *Dashain,* maintain their kinship network, and simultaneously participate in local ceremonies and festivals, particularly those of the Meitei community, such as the *Marjing Lai Haraoba* festival, acceptance of inter-community marriage, and embracing the Manipuri language as the lingua franca. It may be argued here that the adaptation process was partially facilitated as a result of socio-cultural affinities, particularly shared phenotypical traits, religious commonalities, as most Meiteis and Nepalis follow Hinduism (Brara, 2016; Dutt,1981), and shared food habits, which may have reduced the social distance between Nepali settlers and the local Meitei community. Such exemplified processes illustrate the dual negotiation of cultural identity across multiple generations, evidence of cybernetic integration between two cultures serving as a self-regulating feedback system.

Ethnographic studies suggest how this integration manifests in everyday life. Shiwakoti (2012) observed that most Nepalis in Manipur wear Meitei-patterned clothing, Indian styles, or modern attire, especially among younger generations. This observation holds particularly true for Nepali women, who, regardless of age, often wear Meitei-style dresses, specifically *phanek* (a traditional handwoven wrap-around sarong) and blouses, during their daily activities. As the author observed, it is challenging to distinguish between Nepali and Meitei women based on their clothing. The cooking methods and dishes in Nepali meals are similar to those of the Meiteis. Commonly included items are rice, dal, and *eromba* (a dish prepared with boiled vegetables, fermented fish along with chillies). Meitei (2016) also noted that "the Nepali migrants in Manipur are found to be quite integrative. Most of them participate in social and political activities such as protests. Their participation in socio-political life is integral to the neighbouring communities" (p. 734). In contrast, Bachaspatimayum (2011) found no major adaptation of cultural and religious traits, besides the surface-level (symbolic) adoption of Meitei clothing styles by Nepali settlers; instead, a strong retention of their customs and traditions was more evident among them. The cultural individuality of groups such as the Meities, Lois, hill people, and even the Nepalis

(Gorkhas) is largely dependent on these differences. Hodson (1908) observed that despite being part of this diverse population, Nepalis have a unique cultural identity. These findings underscore that assimilation is not about cultural homogenisation but a dynamic process of cultural negotiations, ranging from the retention to the transformation of daily cultural practices.

Thus, Nepali settlers in Manipur illustrate what Glick Schiller et al. (2006) argued, assimilation is not about total absorption but about incorporation without losing ties to the society and culture of origin. Many Nepalis today speak Manipuri fluently, participate in socio-cultural and political activities, and share aspects of Meitei cultural life, exhibiting a certain degree of cultural integration without discarding their distinct markers of Nepali identity through kinship networks, language, and festivals. The outcome is not the erasure of difference but the formation of a hybrid socio-cultural space where origin and host cultures co-exist and interact dynamically.

Issues and Challenges

Manipur flourished culturally, socially, and politically in historical times through sustained interactions with diverse societies, evident in its diverse ethnic composition. However, weak political institutions and misgovernance, patronage politics, politicisation of bureaucracy, corruption, inequitable resource allocation, porous borders facilitating the influx of illegal immigrants, etc. have fractured the social fabric that once bound communities together. The breakdown of the social fabric has given birth to confrontation and violent conflict, with contemporary history being painted by antagonism and bloodshed. Zehol (1998) observes that such contestations are largely rooted in the struggle over unequal access to limited resources.

The relationship between the Nepali community and the indigenous population of Manipur has not always been smooth, with tensions arising over issues such as land ownership and cultural differences. They have faced various challenges related to their identity and have struggled to preserve their culture and traditions while adapting to Manipuri society (Brara, 2016). In India, Nepalis are largely considered foreigners, partly due to their previous inclusion under the Foreigners Act. Although the Act has been revoked, the assumption that they are foreigners has persisted among the people, and a similar supposition continues in Manipur (Brara, 2016; Nair, 2020). Consequently, in the struggle for limited resources, demands for the expulsion of foreign nationals, including Kuki, Bengalis, and Nepalis, have emerged (Fernandes, 2008). In this context, Biswas (2021) argued that in the post-colonial period, there is a growing sense of disappointment among the local population emanating from the notion that they are being marginalised both as a region and in the pace of development. Their frustration and anger are often directed towards the non-indigenous people, which they perceive as a threat to their identity and socio-economic prosperity. However, the resentment is not

one-sided; the migrants themselves, including many third- or fourth-generation settlers who grew up in the region, are confronted with challenges in employment opportunities, particularly with respect to white-collar jobs, due to reservation policies available only for the locals. Brara (2016) noted that the Nepali community in Manipur continues to face job insecurity and often end up in unstable and low-paying informal jobs.

Here, the notion of the *field,* as articulated by Bourdieu (1977), offers a useful framework for understanding these relations. The field, as conceived by Bourdieu, is a structured social space, an arena of struggle, where individuals and groups compete for resources, recognition, and power. It functions like a competitive marketplace, where different forms of capital, such as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic, are deployed by individuals or groups as a social unit, which in turn determines one's position and chances of success. Within the field framework, the Nepali settlers' struggles in Manipur can be seen as a result of the unequal distribution of capital in the competitive social space. While the locals, particularly the Meiteis and dominant tribal groups, possess stronger forms of capital in contrast to the Nepalis. For instance, in terms of cultural capital, many Nepali settlers lack familiarity with indigenous customs and traditions, which restricts their ability to integrate fully socially. In the domain of social capital, local communities often benefit from deeply embedded kinship and ethnic networks that are closely structured with the social and political institutions, which facilitate access to government employment and other state resources; whereas migrants often lack such networks and refrain from competing in state structures. In relation to symbolic capital, indigenous communities derive their recognition and legitimacy by terming themselves as "original inhabitants," while migrants, including Nepalis, are socially constructed as outsiders and foreigners. This lack of recognition and legitimacy reinforced their marginalisation, thus limiting their capacity to claim equal rights and opportunities.

The lack of capital while competing in the social space forced them to struggle in gaining acceptance, access to opportunities, and establishing a sense of belonging. This in turn conditioned them to have limited interest in acquiring the local language and culture or competing in employment and education. Nowicka (2015) highlights the challenges encountered by migrants in navigating unfamiliar social norms and power dynamics, which is particularly relevant in the case of Nepali settlers in Manipur. In contrast, observations suggest that those who adapt more successfully are typically those individuals who possess higher forms of capital, including education, social networks, and language proficiency.

Conclusion

The migration and settlement of the Nepali community in Manipur represent a complex historical process shaped by colonial policies, socio-economic aspirations, and geopolitical agreements, such as the 1950 India–Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty, which institutionalised open border movement. Initially encouraged by the British for their military service, loyalty, and labour skills, Nepalis gradually established permanent settlements in Manipur, engaging in cattle rearing, dairy farming, and other livelihood activities. Despite their long presence, they have continued to face challenges related to land rights, political marginalisation, and questions of ethnic identity. Their integration into Manipuri society has been neither complete assimilation nor rigid isolation, but rather a negotiated coexistence marked by selective adaptation. Through everyday cultural exchange and inter-community interaction, the Nepalis have sustained their linguistic and cultural traditions while embracing aspects of local customs. Today, most Nepalis in Manipur are Indian citizens with full civic documentation; yet, they maintain emotional and cultural ties to their ancestral homeland. This dual belonging underscores the hybrid and dynamic nature of identity formation in borderland societies, where history, geography, and politics intersect to shape evolving notions of community, citizenship, and belonging.

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Priya Sharma is a Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Sikkim University

Khangembam Indira is a faculty member, Department of Sociology, Sikkim University

Article: Moving Beyond the Chalk and Talk Method: The Transformation of India's Education System from 1968 to 2020

Author (S): Balaji Kendre and Pankti Surve

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Moving beyond the Chalk and Talk Method: The Transformation of India's Education System from 1968 to 2020

--Balaji Kendre & Pankti Surve

Abstract

The education system plays a vital role in the social, economic, and developmental change of any society. In contemporary times, human societies worldwide are experiencing unprecedented changes across all walks of life. India has a rich history and traditions in education. Over time, India has evolved into a multicultural and plural society. Naturally, changes in the education system were anticipated to address and cope with revolutionary changes in the world's social, economic, and educational systems. Indian society has its own dynamics, and it has been undergoing rapid social, cultural, and economic transitions for a long time. With the entry of non-Indian religions and colonial power, the changes are viewed as both positive and negative for India. With the advent of the British education system in India and Macaulay's minutes, the Indian education system took the form of creating a class of people who could be reduced to merely clerical jobs. It killed creative and analytical thinking, with an education system that only boosted rote learning and placed greater emphasis on grades and marks. This did not encourage questioning skills, thus killing creative thinking. After independence, we had a sovereign national education policy in 1968 and the National Education Policy 2020. This paper reviews independent India's National Education Policies and examines how the National Education Policy 2020 aims to create globally competitive, skilled, and holistically learned individuals by moving away from rote learning. Specifically, this paper seeks to explain how NEP 2020 breaks away from the "chalk and talk" method by promoting a multidisciplinary, learner-centric environment aimed at meeting global competitiveness and sustainable development. By analysing the evolution from the 1968 and 1986 policies to the current reform, this study identifies systemic barriers to implementation and offers strategic recommendations to bridge the gap between policy intent and classroom reality.

Keywords: *Independent India, National Education Policy, Rote Learning, Sustainable and Holistic Development*

Introduction

The field of education is constantly evolving and spreading across boundaries. Educational development in one society or country influences other societies/countries. In view of this, the present research article reviews the evolution of education policies in India and traces the impact from outside the

country in the past and present. Specifically, this article, titled *"Moving Beyond the Chalk and Talk Method: The Transformation of India's Education System from 1968 to 2020"* offers a critical review of the evolution of educational policies in India, drawing on secondary sources and examining the contemporary issues involved.

To provide a comprehensive analysis, this review traces the major policy milestones that have reshaped the nation's pedagogical landscape over the past fifty years. Starting from the foundational National Policy on Education in 1968, which emphasized national integration and compulsory education, through the 1986 policy's focus on equalizing educational access and vocational education, to the landmark National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the study highlights how policy frameworks have progressively shifted toward holistic, multi-disciplinary, and technology-driven learning models.

Each of these three macro-policy interventions reflects the socio-economic priorities and ideological imperatives of its respective era. The 1968 Policy, formulated in the post-independence decade under the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964–66), primarily sought to establish a uniform structure the 10+2+3 pattern and promote the three-language formula to foster national integration alongside basic literacy. By 1986, as economic expansion and demographic growth demanded greater equity, the National Policy on Education (NPE 1986) shifted the focus toward expanding physical access, democratizing primary schooling through initiatives like *Operation Blackboard*, and introducing vocationalization to align education with national manpower planning. Revised in 1992, the policy increasingly acknowledged the challenges of quality control, rural-urban disparities, and early digital integration.

The introduction of NEP 2020 represents a fundamental paradigm shift away from these earlier frameworks. Rather than focusing solely on physical access and structural expansion, NEP 2020 redefines the core philosophy of Indian education by dismantling rigid disciplinary silos, replacing the decade-old 10+2 system with a 5+3+3+4 foundational-to-secondary structure, and introducing a flexible choice-based credit system in higher education. By integrating early childhood care, continuous formative assessments, vocational training from the school level, and technology-enhanced learning, NEP 2020 seeks to bridge the historic gap between policy vision and 21st-century global requirements. Examining this 50-year evolution reveals how Indian education policy has systematically transitioned from an era of state-led capacity building to a modern, output-oriented framework

focused on critical thinking, institutional autonomy, and international competitiveness.

By examining these structural shifts against global educational standards and regional imperatives, the paper critically assesses how international pedagogical movements have intersected with domestic reform, ultimately evaluating the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead as India seeks to modernize its classrooms for the 21st century.

The Colonial Imprint: A Shift in Purpose and Structure

The year 1835 brought the most profound impact through Lord Macaulay's Minutes on Indian Education, where he criticized the Indigenous Indian education system as labelling it as 'absurd' and 'vicious'. He aimed to establish English as the medium of instruction in India, to create a class of individuals who would merely serve as interpreters between the British and Indians. His proposal to introduce English as the medium led to the marginalization of local languages, especially Sanskrit and Hindi.

This pivotal policy shift, codified under the English Education Act of 1835, fundamentally redirected colonial funding away from traditional institutions of learning, such as patshalas, Gurukuls, madrasas, toward Westernized institutions centered on Western science and literature. As Chandwani (2019) argues, the indigenous Gurukul framework emphasized holistic character building, moral ethics, and experiential knowledge transmission, values that were systematically displaced by a colonial syllabus prioritizing administrative servitude over individual self-realization. By institutionalizing Macaulay's deliberate strategy—famously aimed at creating a class of people "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect", the colonial administration established a lasting socio-linguistic hierarchy. Consequently, access to administrative opportunities, legal systems, and social mobility became strictly contingent upon English literacy. This economic and structural prioritization of English alienated vast segments of the population from formal education and disrupted centuries-old traditions of local scholarship, leaving a deeply entrenched linguistic divide that continues to influence educational reform debates in the Independent India.

S.N. Mukherji, in his work, stated:

"The Proclamation marks a turning point in the history of education in India... brought about the dawn of a cultural renaissance after centuries of confusion and darkness" (Mukherji, 1974, pp. 73–74).

This minute effectively sealed the fate of traditional Indian educational institutions, which were systematically starved of state funding and support, leading to their decline. The focus was to create a class of conformists who would never question, and therefore killed critical thinking amongst the Indian population for generations ahead. The impact of Macaulay's minutes is still visible, with most classes considering English a sign of intelligence and giving it supreme importance, rather than treating it as any other foreign language. As documented in seminal historical reviews of colonial educational development (Nurullah & Naik, 1951; Basu, 1952), state patronage was deliberately concentrated on elite, urban English-medium institutions, ensuring the steady atrophy of the expansive network of vernacular village schools.

This was further supported by the Wood's Despatch of 1854, which recommended a comprehensive system of education, from primary schools to universities. It recommended the establishment of universities in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay Presidencies, modeled on the affiliating system of the University of London. Keeping itself aloof from research, these institutions began to concentrate on standardizing the curriculum. This structure created an examination-centric, rote-learning approach. It prioritized the production of a class of clerks and civil servants for the colonial administration who later fully accepted the British principles and way of life as superior to their own indigenous culture (The Despatch of 1854, on "General Education in India.", 1854, pp. 38–40). Subsequent attempts at reorienting the colonial structure, such as the Hunter Commission of 1882, sought to incentivize local managerial initiative and bifurcate secondary education into distinct academic and vocational streams (India Government Press, 1882); however, these measures failed to arrest the pervasive dominance of rote, examination-driven credentialism.

The Indian Universities Act of 1905 was enacted during Lord Curzon's tenure as viceroy of India. It aimed to curb political activities on campuses by increasing government control over higher education institutions, making affiliations stricter, and providing for the appointment of university professors and lecturers for research and teaching, marking a slight shift towards a more teaching-oriented model within the affiliating structure. Despite these occasional and rare attempts

at reform, colonial rule left an Indian higher education system largely separated from the country's socio-economic realities, often characterized by a focus on conformity, a limited emphasis on scientific research, and an inherent bias towards the elite.

Even after more than 75 years of independence, we still, to a greater extent, believe in the principle of conformity in education, where students are expected to conform and focus more on rote learning than on questioning. Questioning is often seen as a sign of disrespect. The focus is more on grades and marks, rather than on critical thinking. By evaluating academic worth primarily through quantitative marks, the traditional framework has long disincentivized intellectual risk-taking, curiosity, and original problem-solving in the classroom. NEP 2020 seeks to break this rigid paradigm by restructuring curricula to emphasize conceptual understanding, multidisciplinary inquiry, and formative assessment methods. By replacing heavy content loads with experiential learning, art and sport-integrated pedagogy, and competency-based evaluations, the policy aims to transition the classroom from a venue of passive information absorption to a dynamic environment where analytical reasoning and independent thought are actively cultivated.

Reconstruction and National Education Policies in Independent India

With India attaining independence in 1947, the country faced one of the greatest challenges of reconstructing its education system to meet the aspirations and needs of a newly independent nation, which focused on development, equity, and self-reliance. The first significant step in this direction was the appointment of the University Education Commission (1948-49), which was chaired by the eminent philosopher and later President of India, S. Radhakrishnan. This commission's report was foundational, emphasizing that universities must be autonomous, uphold academic freedom, expand access to higher education to a wider population, and integrate teaching with rigorous research to drive national progress (University Education Commission, 1949 pp. 600-650). This dual imperative directly mirrored the classical Humboldtian model of higher education (Raitz, 2018), which posits that genuine university advancement relies on the indissoluble synthesis of teaching and original scientific inquiry within an autonomous scholarly environment. With this, came the recommendation to establish the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1956, which is entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining standards of university education, as well as providing grants to universities (University Education Commission, 1949 pp. 600-

650). The UGC became the central regulatory and funding body, playing a significant role in the expansion and standardization of higher education.

Drawing up from the S. Radhakrishnan Commission's insights, the Education Commission (1964-66), which was led by D.S. Kothari, provided an even more comprehensive blueprint for the entire educational system, from primary to higher education. Its landmark report, "Education and National Development," viewed education as a powerful instrument for national progress, aiming to bring about social and national integration, enhance productivity, and accelerate modernization (Education Commission, 1966, p. 5). For higher education, the Kothari Commission highlighted the importance of science and technology, and advocated for a stronger link between education and national development goals. It suggested significant qualitative improvements, greater emphasis on research, and the equalization of educational opportunities for all sections of society, regardless of their ascribed status (Education Commission, 1966, pp. 277-338 for higher education, and pp. 583-620 for equalization). At this time, there were four major patterns of educational structure in India, namely: 10+2+3,10+2+2,11+3, and 11-12+1+3.

The Kothari Commission proposed a standardized 10+2+3 structure for the entire educational system, which became a foundational policy for decades, aiming to ensure uniformity and a coherent progression from school to university (Education Commission, 1966, p. 32). Furthermore, it strongly recommended improving the quality and service conditions of teachers at all levels, recognizing their significant role in achieving the proposed reforms (Education Commission, 1966, pp. 207-276). These wide-ranging recommendations laid the foundation for India's first National Policy on Education in 1968.

National Education Policy, 1968

The recommendations of the Kothari Commission directly informed the formulation of the National Policy for Education (NPE) 1968 (hereafter NPE 1968), which was the first formal policy document on education in independent India. Post-independence, there was a dire need to impart a sense of common culture and citizenship among the citizens of India. Taking a significant step, the government of India under the leadership of Indira Gandhi in 1968, based on the recommendations put forward by Kothari Commission, reconstructed the entire education system by improving the quality, by emphasizing the importance of science and technology and at the same time, by giving importance to the cultivation of moral values amongst its citizens (Government of India,

Department of Education, Ministry of HRD, New Delhi,1998). Its core objectives were to promote national progress, cultivate a sense of common citizenship and culture, and strengthen national integration. The NPE 1968 acknowledged the crucial role of higher education, research, and the nurturing of a scientific temper for achieving these goals. It also formalized the 10+2+3 educational structure across the country (10 years of school, 2 years of higher secondary, and 3 years for a bachelor's degree), which largely remained the standard for decades (Government of India, 1968). Many centers for advanced studies were set up. The most notable feature of this policy was to make education free and compulsory till 14 years of age, followed by adopting a 3-language formula: learning a regional language, Hindi as the national language, and an International language, English. It also focused on the equalization of education for all, irrespective of their ascribed status. A policy of 10+2+3 was adopted, placing special emphasis on science and math, as well as agriculture and industry. It was also proposed to begin part time and correspondence courses especially for the working classes. Teacher training was also taken into consideration. The NEP of 1968 proposed increasing education expenditure to 6% of national income (Govt of India, 1968). The NPE, 1968, strived to bring about equality by proposing the removal of disparities and equalizing educational opportunities for those who were deliberately kept away from the entire system. Women, scheduled caste, scheduled tribes, minorities, handicapped were all made a part of the educational process. Adult literacy, too, gained special importance. Programmes of distance learning, establishment of educational centres, workers' education, promotion of libraries and reading rooms, and creation of learner groups and organizations were important programmes proposed to boost adult education. However, this policy was not very successful due to a shortage of funds, as education, at that time, was the subject of the State. The Constitutional amendment of 1976 incorporates education in the concurrent list, which indicates the sharing of responsibilities between the Union and the State government with regard to the subject of education. This led to the formulation of another education policy in 1986 under the Rajiv Gandhi government. This policy period witnessed a substantial increase in the number of universities and colleges, particularly in engineering and medical fields, to meet the trained manpower needs of a developing economy.

National Education Policy, 1986

The National Education Policy of 1986, passed under the Rajiv Gandhi Government, also followed the same 10+2+3 system. It strived to remove disparities from the education system in every possible way, by providing special

provisions in the form of reservation schemes for the SC, ST, OBC, Women, and the differently abled. It started providing scholarships, mid-day meals, and hostels to reduce dropout rates in every possible way. It encouraged research and innovation at all higher education institutes. (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Higher Education, 2020). Education was seen as a tool to strengthen the worldview of वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्, meaning the world is a family. By removing age-old prejudices and promoting equality and equity, the National Policy of Education aimed to teach students to cooperate with one another and believe in peaceful coexistence. It provided scope for the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) to cater to students' needs through open and distance learning. Education was made a tool for cultivating social and moral values amongst the children. This is consistent with Bourdieu's view of education being a means for cultural reproduction, as education was used as a means to inculcate the values of national integrity, democracy, and principles enshrined in the constitution, which helped to eliminate violence, superstition, and inequality (Ministry of Human Resource Development & Government of India, 2020). With regard to higher education, all courses were restructured at the Undergraduate Level, along with the establishment of advanced study centers for Postgraduate education and research. The NPE 1986 proposed the availability of books at lower prices, as well as providing accessibility to the same. Improving existing libraries and establishing new ones, fostering environmental consciousness, providing scientific knowledge, imbuing sports and physical education, and promoting yoga were among the important elements of the educational process. The new parameters in the policy were expected to be reviewed every five years. However, this NEP was revised in 1992 by the then HRD minister, Arjun Singh, under the chairmanship of Acharya Ram Murthi, with a focus on development and quality enhancement, keeping in mind the 1991 economic policy. Later, due to the New Economic Policy of 1991, with India's engagement in the globalized world, a new and revised policy was needed to address India's global needs. This led to the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 getting minor modifications introduced in 1992. This policy addressed population growth and economic reform through liberalization, privatization, and globalization. It resolved to respond to these through the commitment to universal elementary education and emphasized providing equal access to education for all, especially for marginalized groups such as women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, through affirmative action and targeted programs (Part IV, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986). In higher education, the policy focused on improving academic quality, promoting autonomous colleges and departments to encourage innovation, redesigning courses to make them more

relevant, and strengthening research capabilities. Vocational education received substantial support through government initiatives which aimed to direct many secondary level students into career training programs for immediate employment opportunities (Part V, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986).

With the immense potential and the dire need to expand access to higher education, the policy actively encouraged the growth of distance education and open universities. This led to the significant expansion of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and the establishment of state open universities, bringing higher education within the reach of millions who could not attend regular classes and access conventional institutions (Part VII on Higher Education and Research Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986). The policy further stressed that, to improve teaching and research, there was a need for continuous professional development for teachers through orientation and refresher courses. However, with the importance placed on the opening of privatized institutions, concerns began to emerge about graduates' employability skills and the need for greater industry alignment. The policy was further revised in 1992 with minor modifications.

The National Education Policy, 2020

The National Education Policy, 2020 (hereafter, NEP 2020) is the most recent (approved by the Union Cabinet on 29th July 2020) and arguably the most ambitious reform in the field of education that seeks to transform every educational level in India, including basic education through advanced learning to meet the 21st century requirements. With its core principles- access, equity, affordability, accountability, and flexibility, and holding a vision for a holistic, inclusive, and flexible education system, the policy strives to fuel the growth of young minds. The world's population of young people over the next decade, and their ability to access high-quality educational opportunities, will determine the future of our country. (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Goal 4 (Sustainable Development Goals) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by India in 2015, seeks to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). India has seen an increase in GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) to 28.4 in 2021-22 from 27.3 in 2020-21 and 24.6 in 2017-18 (Ministry of Education, Department of Higher Education, New Delhi, 2022). Under NEP 2020, India aims to increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio to 50 per cent by 2035 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). As theorized by Trow (1973), the transition from an elite to a mass and approaching universal

system of higher education fundamentally transforms institutional governance, curriculum diversity, and pedagogical delivery, requiring universities to cater to an increasingly diverse student demographic rather than a homogeneous elite.

The Policy not only takes into account the social and economic implications, but is based on scientific principles of the cognitive development cycle of a child. With this approach, learning outcomes drastically improve in the growing years. With its foundation pillars of Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability, and Accountability, its vision is to transform India into a “vibrant knowledge society" and a "global knowledge superpower" (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020, Introduction, para. 0.1). Perhaps one of the most significant transformations for higher education is the shift towards a broad-based, multidisciplinary, and holistic undergraduate education. It proposes flexible curricula along with creative combinations of subjects (e.g., arts with science), integration of vocational and skill-based education, multiple entry and exit points (allowing students to receive certifications at various stages of their degree, enhancing flexibility and relevance) (MHRD, 2020, Chapter 11). The policy establishes the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) as a unified regulatory entity that operates through four separate verticals for regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standards. The policy aims to minimize fragmented governance and enhance institutional independence. (MHRD, 2020, Chapter 18).

With its strong emphasis on robust research, NEP 2020 proposes the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF) to catalyze and facilitate research across all disciplines, aiming to boost India's research output and innovation capabilities significantly (MHRD, 2020, Chapter 17). Further, it actively encourages internationalization of higher education by facilitating Indian universities to set up campuses abroad and also allows top global universities to operate in India, promoting cross-cultural learning, global collaborations, and making India a more attractive global study destination (MHRD, 2020, Chapter 12). This integration reflects broader global patterns documented by Altbach et al. (2009), who argue that 21st-century higher education systems are undergoing an unprecedented academic revolution shaped by global academic mobility, cross-border institutional branch campuses, and the need to balance global competitiveness with domestic social equity. In order to increase accessibility and affordability, the policy acknowledges the importance of technology for bringing about transformation in education. Digital tools for education, promoting online learning, digital content creation in various languages, alongside the National

Educational Technology Forum (NETF), are used to boost the use of technology in education (MHRD, 2020, Chapter 23).

Giving importance to holistic learning, it focuses on inculcating right sets of skills, training, values right from preschool to higher education, at every stage of learning. It focuses on developing intellectual curiosity along with individual character, inculcating ethical and Constitutional values, critical thinking skills, scientific temper, creativity, spirit of service, and 21st-century capabilities across disciplines, including sciences, social sciences, arts, humanities, languages, as well as professional, technical, and vocational subjects. Much like medieval European corporations of masters and scholars (Verger, 1999) and classical Islamic academies such as the House of Wisdom in Baghdad (House of Wisdom in Baghdad, 2025), which thrived as multidisciplinary centers of translation, philosophical inquiry, and cross-cultural scholarship, ancient Indian centers of higher learning served as global residential hubs. As documented in classical historical studies of ancient Indian pedagogical traditions (Altekar, 1944) : centers of higher learning such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi, and Vikramashila accommodated thousands of scholars across disciplines from around the globe in residential, multidisciplinary environments: a civilizational paradigm that NEP 2020 explicitly seeks to revitalize in modern higher education clusters. This policy therefore proposes moving to large, multidisciplinary universities and Higher Education Institutional clusters. The policy also proposes multiple entry and exit points, and also gives a boost to lifelong learning to enroll the learners who have been left out of the education system.

With Lifelong learning as an important feature, the NEP 2020, through the “Academic Bank of Credits” (ABC Id) tries to boost flexibility and allows the mobility of students across multiple Higher Education Institutes. The ABC ID digitally stores students' credits, making it easy for them to take academic breaks and resume education as per their circumstances. By providing centralized academic records, verification, and a lifelong digital identity, it serves to curb any of the malpractices in Higher education (The Gazette of India, 2021). Despite NEP 2020 being so impactful and most discussed amongst educators today, it has also brought about certain challenges. We will analyse the difficulties of the educators and stakeholders in our upcoming chapters through the primary research data that we have collected in this research.

One of the goals of NEP 2020 is to ensure that skill-based and vocational education is implemented by as early as Grade 6, with compulsory internships, ensuring children get real-life experiences along with classroom experience. They

will learn skills like carpentry, coding, gardening, digital literacy, and many other life skills. Under this policy, the higher education system will establish top-tier skill-based programs in the fields of translation and interpretation, Art and Museum Administration, as well as Archaeology and Artefact Conservation, Graphic Design, and Web Design. The preservation and promotion of art and culture through creating superior Indian language materials, artefact conservation, and developing skilled museum and heritage site management professionals will also boost the growth of the tourism industry. Under the "Ek Bharat, Shrestha Bharat" programme, students will be sent to 100 identified tourist destinations to study them and explore their history, contributions, literature, traditions, etc. (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). In its three-language formula, Sanskrit will be mainstreamed with strong offerings in school - including as one of the language options in the three-language formula - as well as in higher education. It also strives to collect, translate, and preserve thousands of manuscripts in different classical languages. (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

With regards to technological intervention, NEP 2020 focuses on the adoption of technology for enhancing multiple educational aspects, and depends on thorough and open evaluation of these interventions in their specific contexts before implementing them at larger scales. It proposes for an autonomous body, National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) which will function as an independent body to create a discussion space about technological applications that improve learning and assessment as well as planning and administrative processes for schools and higher education institutions. NETF will support decision-making processes regarding technology introduction and implementation for education institutions, government bodies, and other stakeholders (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

It clearly states that teaching-learning e-content will continue to be developed by all States in all regional languages, as well as by the NCERT, CIET, CBSE, NIOS, and other bodies/institutions, and will be uploaded onto the DIKSHA platform, which can be further utilized for Teacher' s Professional Development through e-content. It is constantly boosting the integration of e-content in the teaching learning process along with technology integrated education platforms like DIKSHA/SWAYAM. To expand its accessibility, NEP 2020 aims to boost online education and set up a number of digital infrastructures, online teaching platforms, Content creation, digital repository, virtual labs along with blended models of learning. As per the policy the committee of experts at the Central and

State levels will be set up for developing detailed implementation plans for each aspect of it in accordance with its principles to achieve the goals of the Policy in a clear and phased manner. However, as Bates (2019) emphasizes, effective technology integration requires far more than digitizing traditional curricula; it demands a deliberate pedagogical redesign that leverages media affordances to foster collaborative problem-solving, learner autonomy, and active student engagement rather than merely automating didactic instruction. Even though NEP 2020 lays down a progressive vision, its implementation is still one of the greatest challenges. It is an undeniable fact that the state and center together have to work closely to ensure its effective implementation.

Challenges and Opportunities for National Education Policy, 2020

Despite the significant developments made in the Independent India, along with the ambitious vision of the NEP 2020, Indian higher education faces a complex set of persistent challenges and immense opportunities in the current global scenario. According to the World Bank, India has the third-largest higher education system in the world, followed by the United States of America and China. Ironically, a significant number of its institutions struggle to meet global quality benchmarks and feature consistently in top international rankings. Issues like outdated curricula, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of focus on research often hinder their global competitiveness. We will be discussing this in detail in the next chapter where we analyze the various problems of Higher Education Institutes.

Another persistent and critical challenge is the significant gap between the skills acquired by graduates and the demands of the modern workforce. Many graduates, especially from non-elite institutions, lack the analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills required by industries, leading to widespread underemployment or unemployment. The disconnect between academic curricula and industry needs remains a major concern (The Future of Jobs Report 2020 | World Economic Forum, 2020, pp. 40-50). One of the major reasons for this is greater emphasis on grades and marks, which not only supports, but reinforces rote learning.

This misalignment arises from higher education frameworks that prioritize theoretical knowledge accumulation over practical skill application. When academic evaluation centers on memorizing textbook content for terminal exams, institutions fail to cultivate soft skills, adaptability, technological literacy, and real-world execution abilities. Consequently, businesses must invest heavily in

post-hire training programs to bridge the entry-level competency deficit. Global assessments of higher education similarly emphasize that institutional vitality and workforce readiness require agile curriculum redesign, micro-credentialing, and pervasive digital infrastructure to match accelerated industry demands (Kuzemchenko, 2025). To resolve this structural issue, universities and colleges must integrate industry-aligned internships, project-based learning, and continuous curriculum reviews into their degree programs, ensuring that academic success directly mirrors professional readiness in a rapidly evolving global economy.

Further, many public institutions, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, suffer from inadequate infrastructure, including dilapidated classrooms, poorly equipped laboratories, insufficient library resources, and unreliable digital connectivity, which hampers quality education and research. Not only these, but getting the learners in the classroom itself has become one of the greatest challenges. The plight of faculties and teachers and their set of problems is a different issue contributing to the overall quality of education at all levels. Research and innovation remain underdeveloped in many Indian higher education institutions. There is insufficient funding for research, a lack of world-class research infrastructure, and often a weak research culture. This impacts India's ability to drive indigenous innovation and address complex societal challenges through cutting-edge research. Attracting and retaining talented academics, providing continuous professional development, promoting a research-oriented culture, and addressing issues of heavy teaching loads are critical challenges that impact the quality of instruction and research output.

Access to a good quality of higher education continues to show substantial disparities among various socio-economic groups, genders, and across geographic territories despite its claim of providing equitable chances for all. With the digital divide, providing fair educational opportunities for students from marginalized backgrounds, including those with disabilities, stands as a top priority (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, Part I, Chapter 6 on Equity and Inclusion).

These systemic inequities are often magnified by structural barriers such as the high cost of quality private education, inadequate infrastructure in rural institutions, and persistent socio-cultural biases. The rapid acceleration of technology-driven and blended learning models—while promising on paper—threatens to further alienate students in remote regions who lack reliable internet connectivity, hardware access, or digital literacy. Furthermore, institutional

facilities frequently fail to accommodate learners with special needs, limiting both physical and digital accessibility. Addressing these deeply ingrained disparities requires targeted financial support, subsidized digital infrastructure, inclusive pedagogical training for educators, and robust affirmative policies designed to ensure that educational expansion translates into genuine socio-economic mobility for historically underserved populations.

Despite the proposed reforms in NEP 2020, the current regulatory framework is often criticized for being overly centralized, bureaucratic, and fragmented, leading to inefficiencies, delayed decision-making, and a lack of institutional autonomy. Issues of accountability and transparency also need to be addressed. Public spending on higher education, while increasing, is still often insufficient in order to meet the growing demands of a rapidly expanding and evolving sector.

This administrative and financial bottleneck creates a sharp divergence between policy intentions and ground-level execution. Multi-layered approval processes and rigid compliance mandates frequently constrain universities, inhibiting their ability to modernize curricula, recruit top international faculty, or establish interdisciplinary research programs independently. Concurrently, while NEP 2020 envisions raising total education expenditure to six per cent of GDP, public funding allocation continues to lag behind this target. This fiscal shortfall strains physical campus infrastructure, limits state-funded research grants, and restricts faculty-to-student ratios across state and federal institutions. To build a resilient and self-governing academic ecosystem, governance must transit from heavy-handed command-and-control oversight toward light-but-tight accreditation standards, paired with sustainable, merit-based public financing mechanisms.

Even after facing a number of challenges, India continues to find opportunities as the country's population presents an unparalleled demographic dividend. Investing in quality higher education for the youth population unlocks tremendous human potential, generating economic growth and innovation that is sustainable. One of the ways to do this is by strategically investing in online learning platforms, digital content creation, and technology-enabled pedagogy. India can expand access, improve quality, and offer flexible learning pathways on a massive scale (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, Chapter 23). The NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive and forward-looking roadmap for transformational reforms.

As India's economic and geopolitical influence grows, it can strengthen its position to foster greater international collaborations, student and faculty

exchange programs, and joint degree offerings. This will result in attracting foreign investment in education and exposing Indian students to global best practices (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, Part II, Chapter 12). The NEP 2020's emphasis on vocational education and skill integration aligns well with government initiatives like the "Skill India" mission. These combined efforts can create a more employable workforce, bridging the industry-academia gap effectively.

One cannot ignore the fact that proper monitoring and regulation of the private sector can ensure quality and affordability, and can play an important role in addressing the funding gaps, expanding capacity, and introducing innovative practices into the higher education sector. The proposed National Research Foundation, coupled with increased funding, and a focus on interdisciplinary research, has the potential to significantly boost India's scientific and technological performance thus fostering indigenous innovation and addressing societal challenges. Recently, the Indian Economy ranks 5th in the world's developing economies. If we invest six per cent of the GDP in the educational sector, as it was anticipated in the national education policy of 1986, echoed again by the Kothari Commission, India could potentially bridge the 'extensive learning crisis' and witness the transition from a labor-intensive economy to a high-value global knowledge superpower by the year 2035.

Realizing this ambitious path demands a strategic alignment between state regulation, private capital, and research infrastructure. While private higher education institutions have expanded access rapidly, robust oversight mechanisms are essential to prevent commercialization and ensure that academic standards, equity, and fee structures remain aligned with public interest. Simultaneously, operationalizing the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) provides a critical bridge between academia, government laboratories, and industry, creating a collaborative ecosystem for high-impact research and development. By backing these structural mechanisms with a sustained commitment to the 6 per cent GDP budget target, India can systematically upgrade public university infrastructure, incentivize faculty retention, and nurture a culture of indigenous innovation. Ultimately, translating policy vision into fiscal and regulatory reality is the prerequisite for converting India's vast demographic dividend into a sustainable foundation for global knowledge leadership.

Conclusion

The journey of higher education, across the globe and in India, is often characterised by continuous evolution, driven by the dynamic societal needs, rapid advancements in technology, and philosophical shifts at every stage. From the ancient centers of wisdom like Nalanda and Takshashila, to the colonial imposition of a bureaucratic system, to later post-independence national education policies, and finally to the extremely ambitious vision of the NEP 2020, India's experience reflects a complex interplay of historical forces. The global network of connections demands Indian higher education institutions to develop their abilities for adaptation as well as innovation and equal access, and produce globally competent, socially conscious, critical thinkers in order to achieve their goal of becoming a global knowledge power. India's higher education system will face its ultimate evaluation during the upcoming decades to demonstrate both its endurance and capacity for transformation.

This historical continuum highlights a decisive inflection point where traditional values must synthesize with modern global imperatives. While ancient learning hubs exemplified holistic, interdisciplinary scholarship and international intellectual exchange, subsequent colonial frameworks dismantled these indigenous networks in favour of rigid administrative utility. Today, navigating the demands of the 21st-century knowledge economy requires a deliberate departure from this restrictive legacy. To fulfill the transformative mandate of NEP 2020 and position itself as a Vishwa Guru (global knowledge leader), India must simultaneously dismantle systemic inequities, modernize research infrastructure, and foster an institutional culture grounded in critical inquiry rather than compliance. The true measure of this evolution will lie not merely in structural policy declarations, but in the sustained capacity of its educational framework to cultivate ethically grounded, creative, and resilient leaders capable of addressing complex global challenges.

To operationalize this overarching vision, higher education institutions must urgently bridge the gap between abstract policy formulation and on-the-ground institutional execution. This requires a fundamental restructuring of pedagogical priorities, transitioning from passive content dissemination toward experiential, inquiry-based learning models. Furthermore, cultivating a vibrant research ecosystem necessitates dismantling long-standing bureaucratic barriers, streamlining public and private funding allocations through frameworks like the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), and actively incentivizing cross-disciplinary innovation. Simultaneously, institutions must aggressively

address the digital divide and structural socio-economic disparities to ensure that mass higher education does not compromise quality or perpetuate exclusion. Ultimately, India's role as an emerging global knowledge hub will depend on its ability to nurture autonomous, accountable universities capable of generating high-impact scholarship, fostering industrial synergy, and producing graduates equipped to lead in an increasingly complex and interconnected global economy.

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Balaji Kendre is a Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai, Mumbai

Pankti Surve is a PhD research Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai, Mumbai

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Article: Politics of Maternal Health and the rise of Caesarean Deliveries in India: A Study in Telangana State

Author: D. Veerababu

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Politics of Maternal Health and the rise of Caesarean Deliveries in India:

A Study in Telangana State

--D. Veerababu

Abstract

India's public health is currently concerned about unnecessary caesarean deliveries. Caesarean deliveries at the desire of the mother have become a contentious topic in recent years. Given the diversity of India, there are significant disparities in terms of geography, religion, caste, and other socioeconomic factors, all of which have an impact on women's health, education, and livelihood. It is interesting to note that increased access to healthcare, education, and knowledge of the advantages of institutional births and caesarean sections are major contributing factors to the rising incidence of C-section deliveries. The prime objective of the paper is to critically analyse the implications and maternal motivations for choosing caesarean delivery in the absence of medical necessity in India.

Keywords: *Maternal Health, Caesarean Deliveries, Telangana State*

Introduction

Socioeconomic factors are one of the many components that lead to the worldwide disparity in the availability of critical support and care for expectant mothers. Desipite the great efforts made by concerned public health departments as well as civil organizations, the majority of expectant and nursing mothers worldwide still struggle to receive the required attention and care. The social and economic standing of women and girls, their level of education, their diet, and the availability of family planning and health services within the community all have a direct impact on the outcomes of pregnancy. Recent developments in the medical sciences have had a major role in lowering the risks associated with childbearing. Despite these encouraging developments, there were about 810 women lose their lives globally in relation to pregnancy complications and childbirth emergency cases per day; about 94% of these deaths take place in underdeveloped nations (World Health Organization, 2019). At least 25% of maternal deaths reported worldwide have occurred in India, despite the implementation of numerous efforts aimed at promoting safe motherhood. India has come a long way in the last two to three decades in terms of economic improvement and programmes, but it is still far from reaching its target of fewer than 100 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. Maternal mortality varies across states in India due to its large geographic area and diverse sociocultural population, and implementing health-sector changes consistently has proven to be difficult.

Interestingly, pregnancy and childbirth are conditions that exclusively affect women and may worsen existing health issues. However, there are ways to lower the dangers to one's health during pregnancy and childbirth by using competent birth attendance appropriately in conjunction with supportive emergency obstetric care. Maternal illness has serious adverse effects that extend well beyond the mother's condition during pregnancy and childbirth. These outcomes may result in her demise, additional illnesses, or impairment during the protracted (up to a year) postpartum phase. These will negatively impact not just the family's social and financial standing but also the health of her unborn child.

Most women have some kind of issue during their pregnancy, delivery, or after giving birth, which leads to more difficulties, many of which might be potentially fatal and necessitate immediate obstetric treatment. Since 2000, the global maternal mortality ratio, or MMR, has dropped by 38% (World Health Organization, 2019). Additionally, according to the data, the global MMR dropped from 385 in 1990 to 216 in 2015. In 1990 and 2015, the MMR for developed nations was 23 and 12, respectively. Conversely, in emerging nations, the MMR dropped from 430 in 1990 to 239 in 2015. The statistics provided by the Registrar General of India (SRS-Statistical Report, 2020) statistics indicate that India's maternal death rate decreased from 167 in 2013 to 113 in 2020 per 100,000 live births. The country's growing institutional delivery percentage- which increased from 26% in 1992–1993 to 79% in 2015–16 could be the source of this 54-point drop in just 7 years (IIPS and ICF, 2017). Because of this success, India has attained the fifth Millennium Development Goal (MDG), which aims to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters between 1990 and 2015. Fewer than 70 deaths for every 100,000 live births is the target mortality rate by 2030, but this is still a long way off from being achieved, according to Sustainable Development Goal 3.1. According to UN MMEIG forecasts, in order to achieve this, nations such as India would need to lower their MMRs by at least 6.1% annually between 2016 and 2030 (United Nations et al., 2020).

When compared to many developing nations with comparable or even lower income per capita, India's maternal and child health (MCH) care outcomes are regrettably appalling. Women are more likely to have serious maternal problems after childbirth and to die and suffer from morbidity in the postpartum period. The slow progress in reaching the MDG targets continues even after the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) provided a fresh chance to witness gains in maternal health in all circumstances in 2015 (World Health Organization, 2018).

The Indian government's early 2005 launch of the Janani Suraksha Yojana JSY) and the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) projects has significantly impacted the nation's overall use of maternal health care. Giving rural communities, especially the most vulnerable groups, access to high-quality, fairly priced healthcare is the main objective of these projects. Community health volunteers assist in facilitating and providing healthcare services like ANC care,

diagnostic facilities, institutional deliveries, and other outpatient and inpatient care in the nation. Examples of these volunteers include accredited social health activists (ASHAs), Indian village-level female health worker, and auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs).

In addition, the project lowers the MMR, particularly in states with a high rate of maternal mortality, and offers financial incentives to ASHAs and expectant mothers in order to promote institutional births. Numerous scholarly works suggested that JSY had an impact on institutional deliveries (Gupta et al., 2012). There is evidence to show that the introduction of JSY led to an increase in institutional deliveries. However, given that maternal morbidities are still rising, it might not produce an MMR reduction to the same degree (Jain, 2010). Surprisingly, the alarmingly high number of caesarean births in India in recent years may have something to do with these growing morbidities among mothers. Despite the fact that caesarean sections are performed to treat obstetric emergencies, women frequently choose them over vaginal deliveries because of concern for potential problems for the mother.

Materials and Methods:

Relevant data was gathered using a variety of techniques, such as a review of the literature, secondary data analysis from Telangana state public health records, and data from national program management information systems. Stakeholders, health officials, social activists, and other important informants in the study have all been interviewed. The National Family Health Surveys (NFHSs), Household Surveys (DLHS), facility surveys, national government publications, and websites were also sources of data. The 5th round of the NFHS (NFHS-5, 2019–2020) state-level fact sheets and the compilation of the fourth round (NFHS-4, 2015–2016) are the data used for this study (IIPS, 2020; IIPS and MoHFW, 2017). The survey offers data on the major indicators of mother and child health, mortality, and fertility. From March 2023 to September 2023, through the execution of descriptive qualitative research tools, the study conducted in-depth interviews with 40 expectant mothers who had attended prenatal care in selected public and private hospitals in Hyderabad city and preferred caesarean delivery. Data analysis was done using content analysis. Data analysis was conducted using pertinent socioeconomic and nutrition parameters. Before the data were used for analysis, they were thoroughly cleansed and filtered.

The reasons why mothers prefer caesarean delivery have been categorised into several groups. Superstitious ideas about auspicious birth dates, fear of childbirth, safety concerns regarding perceived health risks, unfavourable experiences from previous births, favourable views towards caesarean delivery, and access to skewed information on social media and other platforms are a few examples. The majority of women choose caesarean delivery for multiple reasons. Prior to their inclusion in the study, every participant provided written informed consent.

Participants were carefully chosen in order to learn about their opinions and experiences with C-sections. They stated that their preferred method of delivery was a caesarean section. A guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality was given, along with an invitation to participate in the study. The reasons underlying pregnant women's preference for caesarean delivery were investigated through in-depth interviewing.

Births by C-section increased in India between 2015 and 2020. The percentage of C-section births is high in more than half of the Indian states. In the first round of NFHS-5, 2019–2020, Telangana had the highest percentage of C-section deliveries in India (60.7%), while Nagaland had the lowest (5.2%). Thus, a descriptive qualitative study was carried out in the Hyderabad city of Telangana state to investigate the reasons why pregnant women preferred caesarean deliveries.

Schemes in Telangana state

One of the significant measures required to reduce maternal mortality is to ensure institutional deliveries in the hospitals. On the other hand, home deliveries are associated with socio-economic and cultural factors, and they are becoming a major sociological reason for maternal mortality in the Indian context. In many rural households, women tend to deliver at home due to the social determinants of health and there is an inordinate delay in receiving the healthcare facilities during emergencies. To address this concern, the Telangana state has launched the KCR KIT scheme[i] on 2nd June 2017 to promote institutional deliveries in order to address the alarming trends of maternal mortality rates particularly among marginalized women. This scheme was also intended to prevent malnourishment among children. The Telangana state government has made encouraging safe institutional deliveries a top priority due to the high rates of infant and maternal mortality. An estimated 10.85 lakh beneficiaries accessed the programme in 2020–21, and a further 7.95 lakh recipients used it until November 2021. The Aadhaar-based Mother and Child Tracking System (MCTS) software is used by the health workers to track women during all stages of pregnancy and post-delivery periods. The Kit consists of 16 items that are necessary to keep the baby warm and hygienic such as mosquito net, baby mask cap, dress, two towels, Baby napkins, Johnson’s baby powder, Baby shampoo, Baby oil, Baby soap, Toys, Plastic buckets, and two sarees for mother.

As per the eligibility criteria for availing the benefits of the scheme, the woman should give birth in the government hospitals, and she is eligible to receive compensation for only two deliveries. This programme aims to compensate the wage loss throughout the course of the pregnancy. Incentives are provided under the KCR KIT programme to both beneficiaries and front-line healthcare providers, such as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), in order to encourage institutional deliveries at public hospitals. With incentives being one of

the sources of earning, the ASHAs ensure that they are with women during the pregnancy period, and ASHAs take these women to government hospitals for institutional deliveries. ASHAs also take the child for immunization, and make the lactating mother to seek health services from Anganwadi, primary health centres etc. ASHAs are given directions to identify the pregnant women and ensure that they enroll under the scheme. This scheme provides the financial incentives to the pregnant women who give birth to the child in the Government hospitals and Primary Health Centres (PHCs). Financial Assistance of Rs. 12,000 will be provided to the women for Baby Boy and Rs. 13, 000 for Baby Girl. This incentive is intended to make up for the time that women lost from work during their pregnancies and the postpartum period. However, this incentive measure is not given at once rather it is provided in installments, and the last two installments will be paid after vaccinating the child. There is a direct link with the Aadhaar card of the beneficiary, and the amount is directly deposited in the bank account of the pregnant woman.

Impact of the Scheme:

An effect of the KCR Kit programme that has been beneficial is the rise of institutional deliveries at government hospitals. Out of 29,20,906 institutional deliveries that have taken place since the launch of KCR Kit scheme, there were 16,14,207 deliveries took place in Government hospitals which is close to 55.2% of total deliveries in the Telangana state (2017-2022). While the remaining 13,06,699 (44.7%) deliveries have taken place in private hospitals. Telangana's MMR dropped by 43% in the last ten years, from 110 in 2010–12 to 63 in 2016–18. From 2015 to 2016 and 2019 to 2020, respectively, the National Family Health Surveys NFHS-4 and NFHS-5 measured the infant mortality rate (IMR), which fell from 27.7 to 26.4 (per 1000 live births). Both institutional birth rates (from 91.5% to 97%) and government hospital birth rates (from 30.5% to 49.7%) improved between NFHS 4 and NFHS 5. Incentive mechanisms play a crucial role in influencing motivation and health behaviour of the pregnant women and their families towards admissions in government hospitals. The use financial incentives has become a strategy to cultivate and motivate healthy behavior among the people which has become routine practice in India over the years now. Adequate financial incentives can influence the discrete behavior of the individuals, however, these incentives serve only short run, and they alone cannot address all issues and challenges linked with health seekers and health providers.

C-sections in Telangana state:

The rise in Caesarean deliveries was highly correlated with both biological and socioeconomic factors. There is a widespread perception that women from rural areas have lower rates of C-sections than women from metropolitan areas. However, this has been proved otherwise in the context of Telangana state. With the implementation of schemes such as KCR KIT, the number of institutional

deliveries among the poorer women has increased, however, the majority of those institutional deliveries in the government hospitals were caesarean deliveries. This is one of the major concerns in the public health where the state-sponsored schemes were directly and indirectly influencing the growth of caesarean deliveries under the guise of institutional deliveries.

Over time, caesarean sections (C-sections) pose a major risk to the health of mothers. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that a caesarean section can be performed in emergencies in order to save the lives of mother and child. Therefore, the process needs to be limited to complex pregnancies (Betrán et al., 2017). Over time, caesarean sections (C-sections) pose a major risk to the health of mothers. In order to deliver the baby, a Caesarean delivery requires cutting the mother's abdomen and uterus. On the other hand, C-sections are prevalent in developed countries and, this trend is emerging in developing nations as well. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends caesarean section only during emergencies and when it can be performed for medical reasons for saving the lives of mother and infants. The shockingly high C-section rates in India compared to the WHO standard of 15% pose serious public health issues.

Some of the factors that have contributed to this increase include maternal requests, reimbursement systems, financial incentives, and the policies that encourage repeat caesarean sections (Betrán et al., 2018).

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) conducted in India found that 17% of live babies were delivered by caesarean surgery. Additionally, 45% of C-section deliveries were scheduled after labour pains began, according to the NFHS-4. For the past ten years, this has climbed by about 9%. From 2015 to 2020, there was an increase in C-section births.

Over 50% of the states in India have high rates of C-section deliveries. In the first round of NFHS-5, 2019–2020, Telangana had the highest percentage of C-section deliveries (60.7%), while Nagaland had the lowest (5.2%).

It is generally understood that caesarean sections are only performed when pregnancy difficulties arise. Contrary to this popular belief, the findings of the study show that women with few or no difficulties are increasingly having caesarean sections performed. It has been found that women from higher social groups, with higher levels of education, and those residing in urban areas of Hyderabad city accept and undergo caesarean sections.

Numerous studies have shown that mothers who are obese have a higher likelihood of delivering their babies via caesarean section (Srivastava et al., 2020). Most of the respondents knew that substantial risk factor can endanger the foetus at risk and result in an unsafe vaginal birth. Among them were biological problems (obesity and advanced age), infertility, and even the mother's diabetes

mellitus-related notion of having a large child. They believed that the baby would suffer harm because they might not have the strength to force the baby out due to their illness. A number of risk factors, such as age, infertility, medical issues, and the mother's perception of a large baby, have led to the decision of other respondents to have a caesarean delivery. Most women who underwent caesarean sections spent six days or longer at the hospital. Nonetheless, women who gave birth vaginally chose to return home sooner. In a way, the expenditure on C-Sections is higher when compared to the normal deliveries. Treatment for birth-related problems requires prompt postnatal care for both the mother and the child. The length of a woman's stay following childbirth is closely correlated with the provision of pertinent information to the mother about self-care and infant feeding.

The study revealed that the pregnant women were also strongly impacted by prior bad birth experiences. Women who have had traumatic births fear giving birth in the future because they think it would be harmful to both them and their unborn child. Another issue is inadequate analgesia throughout labour, which can lead to fear of pain during delivery. Many women felt that caesarean deliveries were preferable to vaginal births because they were more convenient, and did not cause labour agony. Compared to vaginal birth, caesarean sections are believed to be a safer technique with less blood loss and less excruciating agony. Sometimes, women who had fibroids also wanted to have them removed during a caesarean delivery.

The term "muhurt C-sections," which is rapidly gaining popularity because "muhurt" in Sanskrit refers to a fortunate time, describes a larger trend in India where tens of thousands of women are choosing to have surgical caesarean sections in the hopes of giving birth on a date and time that their astrologers have deemed fortunate. In addition, C-sections surgeries that were formerly limited to emergency cases and high-risk pregnancies are now being used as a common substitute by women who wish to avoid the discomfort and resume their careers sooner. Indians from middle-class and upper-class backgrounds, who have access to some of the greatest medical care available worldwide, are increasingly choosing this particular treatment. One of the many justifications given by the respondents for choosing C-sections was that the families had pressured the doctors to do the procedure so that the kids would be delivered during a specific auspicious hour, or ‘muhurthams’. Seconds are used to indicate the time. It has become a new trend catching up fast with the expectant mothers and their families. A few expectant mothers also insisted the doctors deliver the baby in the seventh month of pregnancy in order to meet the timings for auspicious periods. Nonetheless, the physicians stated that caesarean sections were only done when the infant was safe and fit enough to meet the standards of medical urgency. The women respondents have learned the benefits of C-Sections through social media, and from family and friends. Their selections may have been influenced by personal resources such as comments, experiences, or guidance from friends or

family regarding their favourable or unfavourable birth experiences. This could potentially impact the decisions made by women. The traditional beliefs and practices are putting the health of the women and new-born children at risk. Paradoxically, increased access to healthcare, education, and knowledge of the advantages of institutional births and C-sections can be largely credited for the rising number of C-section deliveries.

Discussion:

The majority of the institutional deliveries that have been taken place in the government and private hospitals in Telangana state were caesarean deliveries. Many things, such as a woman's culture, prior experiences, interactions with medical professionals, and fear of pain during labour and delivery, can affect her readiness to undergo a caesarean section delivery. Women who preferred caesarean birth gave several explanations. The numerous reasons for selecting caesarean sections were identified by this study, including biased knowledge about C-sections, superstitious beliefs about auspicious birth dates, fear of giving birth, safety concerns during delivery, bitter experiences with previous births, and more importantly, positive attitudes towards caesarean birth.

Effects of C-Sections:

Various studies have argued that caesarean birth is linked to poor new-born outcomes, such as weakened respiratory and gastrointestinal systems and mortality (Gondwe et al., 2020). Postpartum problems are more common after caesarean deliveries than after vaginal births, and most of them are linked to obesity (Loverro et al., 200). Symptoms such as swelling, dizziness, visual abnormalities, perspiration, and restlessness were warning signs of preeclampsia among the pregnant women. Remarkably, diets heavy in fat, salt, and fried meals were identified as a contributing factor to the development of pre-eclampsia. Positive attitudes towards caesarean birth have a big impact, and this could be related to low health literacy. Women were grateful for the ease, speed, and lack of agony associated with caesarean delivery. Unaware of the potential for major difficulties in subsequent pregnancies, some respondents thought the treatment was safe. The choices among women about C-sections were largely impacted by the social and cultural milieu of their households. Numerous studies have demonstrated a correlation between the incidence of C-sections and mother and child mortality in low-income nations where a sizable fraction of the population lacks access to basic obstetric care (Hofberg, 2003). Living a healthy lifestyle is essential to sustaining oneself, and when women get more obese owing to eating choices and a lack of physical activity, particularly in urban areas, they become more likely to give birth through caesarean deliveries. Furthermore, women with secondary infertile fear a normal delivery because it could mean losing their opportunity at a live birth (WHO, 2010; Kirchengast and Hartmann, 2018). Research suggests that high C-section rates may have negative consequences on

the health of the mother and child. C-section rates over a specific threshold have not been shown to provide any significant benefits for the mother or child. In comparison to vaginal delivery, maternal and neonatal mortality rates were increased with caesarean section (Chongsuvivatwong et al., 2010; Kamilya et al., 2010).

It is a misconception among women who have never given birth that a C-section is painless. It takes mothers and babies months and even years to recover from the complications of C-sections. In certain cases, a caesarean section can save the lives of both mothers and new-borns. Yet, it may result in unfavourable effects for the mother and the foetus (Kheir et al., 2016). Women who had had one prior caesarean delivery and those who had had several caesarean deliveries without labour were more likely to experience uterine rupture. It has also been reported that doctors were performing caesarean sections for time management and financial benefit without any medical rationale. It is no secret that a C-section delivery is more expensive than a normal birth. Without a doubt, a caesarean delivery is more expensive and requires less time and effort than a typical vaginal delivery (Basu et al., 2012).

Conclusion:

There is a widespread perception that women with higher education levels were more likely to have caesarean sections than those with lower education levels. With the implementation of schemes such as KCR KIT, the number of institutional deliveries among the poorer women has been increased, however, majority of those institutional deliveries in the government hospitals were caesarean deliveries.

The findings of the study argue that increasing women's literacy alone won't be enough to lower the number of needless Caesarean deliveries. In order to increase social and health awareness and educate the public, maternal and child health literacy must be provided in addition to general education and public health discourse. To discourage home deliveries, the state government is encouraging pregnant women to opt for institutional deliveries. However, the promotion of institutional deliveries alone is not sufficient to address the health crisis among women. There is a need to discourage C-section deliveries in the hospitals. Community health providers, women, families, and society at large need to be educated about the significance of normal deliveries for pregnant women. The post-partum health effects of routine deliveries among healthy mothers require greater public awareness. It is crucial to provide appropriate advice during antenatal care for women who are afraid of giving birth, such as analgesics for pain management and the advantages and disadvantages of vaginal and caesarean delivery. One's opinions or beliefs may be shaped by information gleaned from the media. Individuals differed in how they perceived and interpreted things based on their logic, experiences, and convictions. False information can propagate

through one-way communication. Therefore, obstetricians should enlighten expectant mothers about misconceptions or false notions. Women's attitudes towards the mode of birth may be changed and the number of on-demand caesarean births could decline if they had access to accurate, professional, and educational information.

Along with women, their families and the community should be more informed and educated about maternal health, and the side effects of C-sections on the mother and child. In order to increase maternal health literacy among women, the government should prioritize educating the public about the significance of routine births for healthy expectant Mothers. The frontline health workers are the main source of initial contact at the community level for providing services such as prenatal care, regular health check-ups, and other medical services for maternal and child healthcare. This frontline force must be educated about the health complications of C-sections for mother and new born. Once they receive proper health training, they will educate the local communities and families about the importance of natural deliveries. The primary care physicians can educate mothers about normal deliveries and their medical consequences during these check-ups, empowering them to make an informed decision.

Superstitious ideas about auspicious birth dates emerged as a remarkable cause in our study. Certain individuals hold fervent convictions in destiny, wherein their life path is predetermined by their date of birth. They would have terrible luck all their lives if they were born at an inauspicious time and would have strong astrological beliefs. If there is a moment when giving birth is auspicious, parents would choose that time because they want to give their kids the greatest chance possible. In addition to educating people about the negative effects of elective caesarean delivery on mothers and their unborn children, addressing personal beliefs and ideologies should be taken into consideration while designing and implementing healthcare policies for women and children.

There is a need to raise awareness of the value of a normal birth through various campaigns and social communication channels. Thus, it is imperative to create a mandate and public health decision specifying that caesarean sections can be performed only when there is a medically advisable reason in government and private hospitals, and to put the mandate into effect in the state of Telangana where the rate of caesarean sections is excessive.

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[1] The flagship programme was launched by then the Chief Minister Kalvakuntla Chandrashekar Rao who is popularly known as KCR, and hence the scheme is named after him the KCR KIT. After the formation of Congress government in 2023, the state government of Telangana has continued to implement the scheme by renaming the KCR KIT scheme as Mother and Child Health (MCH) Kit.

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D. Veerababu is an Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad

Article: Disability and assistive technology devices: negotiating identities among persons with locomotor disabilities

Author (S): K. Pavani Sree and C. Raghava Reddy

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Disability and assistive technology devices: negotiating identities among persons with locomotor disabilities

--K. Pavani Sree and C. Raghava Reddy

Abstract

This paper explores how assistive technology devices mediate the social construction of disabled identities, focusing on the impact of stigma on their adoption among persons with disabilities in India. Previous studies have documented significant physical and psychosocial challenges following limb loss or deformity; however, the link between identity and assistive technology usage remains underexplored. Although stigma has long been associated with the presence of a disability, research on its relationship with assistive technology use is still in its infancy in India. Drawing on a phenomenological approach in sociological research, this study conducted in-depth interviews with forty individuals with locomotor disabilities. Findings highlight the role of assistive technology devices in negotiating identity along gender lines, particularly among unmarried women, who view these devices beyond mere functionality. In the Indian context, identity is not always self-constructed by the individual intending to use assistive technology, rather, family members, especially in the case of unmarried women, often ascribe identity in a forceful or externally imposed manner. The study further reveals that both the use and non-use of assistive technology devices stem from a pervasive sense of helplessness and diminished morale, shaped by limited mobility and prevailing sociocultural perceptions of disability.

Key words: *Assistive Technology Devices, Disability, Lived Experiences, Gender, Stigma.*

Introduction

Research on the subjective experiences of individuals living with impairment or lack is limited to date. In particular, personal narratives and their associated social and psychological implications are often overlooked within the broader field of disability studies. Although scholars often prioritize objectivity to avoid subjectivity, disability studies are enriched by engaging directly with personal narratives to understand how individuals experience and negotiate disability in their daily lives. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how assistive technology devices (ATDs), as tools of empowerment, intersect with sociocultural stigma and identity negotiation. It examines the lived experiences of forty orthopedically challenged respondents using ATDs, exploring how these technologies are shaped by sociocultural stereotypes beyond their functionality and how individuals manage identity through their use.

The central argument of the disability scholarship is that disability is not merely a physiological condition but a socially mediated experience shaped by familial roles, emotional responses, infrastructural limitations, and access to ATDs. Stigma, while not always overt, emerges through subtle forms of exclusion, over protective behaviors, and societal expectations, particularly around gender and productivity. The use of ATDs is complicated by the social factors. While ATDs serve as instruments of autonomy and mobility, they also carry symbolic weight, often marking users as "other" in social spaces. Perceptions of these devices vary, influenced by familial ingenuity, economic capacity, and design accessibility. Navigating through highly interconnected themes; disability, stigma, and technology, this study makes an attempt to highlight how they converge in the lived experience of respondents, illuminating how structural conditions and personal resilience shape the ongoing negotiation of self and social belonging.

ATDs and Stigma

Stigma is a universal experience, cutting across gender, class, caste, race, and region (Crocker, Major, and Steele, 1998). Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma offers critical insight into how the identity of persons with disabilities is socially constructed. Stigma, defined as an attribute that discredits an individual, reducing them to a "tainted, discounted" status, often stems from visible impairments and bodily differences, rooted in cultural notions of normalcy. Goffman's (1963) concept illustrates how visible impairments attract negative stereotypes deeply rooted in cultural notions of normalcy and deviance, with significant consequences for ATD uptake. Devices such as wheelchairs, canes, crutches, and walkers, while designed to enhance mobility and participation, may serve as visible markers of difference, amplifying perceived deviance in social encounters. For persons with disabilities, ATDs like wheelchairs or crutches, while enhancing mobility, can amplify perceived deviance, marking users as "other" in social spaces. This "assistive device stigma" leads many persons with disabilities to avoid or abandon ATDs to escape social scrutiny, a phenomenon particularly pronounced among unmarried individual. Beyond individual experiences, stigma extends to familial and psychosocial dimensions, with caregivers resisting ATD adoption due to fears of social exclusion, especially in educational settings (Smith-Lewis, 1992).

In Indian contexts, where family plays a central role, many persons with disabilities are enthusiastic about incorporating ATDs into their routines, but decisions are often mediated by family members, particularly for unmarried individuals, due to cultural concerns about social visibility and marriageability (Brookes, 1998). Research indicates that caregivers may resist ATD adoption due to concerns about increased visibility and potential social scrutiny in public or educational settings (Smith-Lewis, 1992). Moreover, apprehensions persist that early dependence on ATDs may obstruct the development of normative skills, especially in children, reflecting a medicalized assumption that independence is

preferable to assisted functioning (Allaire et al., 1991; Berry, 1987). Brookes (1998) highlights that ATDs often function as social cues, instantly distinguishing the user from perceived norms, thereby altering interpersonal interactions. Thus, ATDs may play the role of empowering as well as stigmatizing. They may improve function and at the same time also carry symbolic weight that create a negative social interaction and internal self-image (Scherer, 2000). Although stigmatization of persons with disabilities has been well researched (Hahn, 1988), there is limited focus on the social shaping of stigmatization and its impact on ATD adoption, partly due to the early stage of development within the field of assistive technology (Edyburn, 2000).

The sociocultural challenges of stigma highlight the need for assistive technology device developers to move beyond technical solutions and address the cultural and social dynamics that shape ATD adoption, ensuring devices are in tune with users' lived experiences and promote social inclusion. Assistive technology experts develop devices for persons with locomotor disabilities. The assistive technology developers play a very important role in bridging the gap between technological innovation and the lived realities of individuals with disabilities. Sociologists argue that the technology experts should not merely consider technical aspects of the devices but also incorporate the social complexities comprising institutional structures, cultural norms, and interpersonal dynamics that shape experiences of persons with disabilities with the devices. Disability is not solely a medical condition but a product of exclusionary social structures and cultural attitudes. It may be said that the effectiveness of ATD interventions is contingent upon more than just device functionality. Cultural beliefs, family expectations, and social perceptions significantly influence technology adoption and usage. Studies reveal that assistive devices often carry social meanings that may stigmatize users or reinforce dependency narratives (Shinohara and Wobbrock, 2011). Assistive technology device developers must therefore adopt a socio-technical approach, one that considers not only the mechanical utility of devices but also their integration into users' social worlds. In this context, assistive technology device experts must strive to develop inclusive devices by customizing technologies that enable access to education, employment, and independent living (Nierling and Maia, 2020).

It is also equally important to note that decision-making around ATD is not made by the persons with disabilities alone, rather it involves family, kin group, peers, neighbors, etc. each interpreting assistive technology through distinct perspectives and priorities. Research highlights a lack of cultural competence within assistive technology device developer teams, leading to mismatches between technological solutions and users' lived contexts (Alper, 2017). The abandonment of assistive devices, despite their technical adequacy, is often rooted in users' feelings of alienation or discomfort in social settings. The sociological imperative for assistive technology device developers lies in their potential to transform assistive technologies from mere tools into devices which pave way for social inclusion.

By embedding cultural sensitivity, user agency, and social awareness into their practice, assistive technology device developers can ensure that technology serves not just functional needs but also the broader goal of equity and empowerment.

A range of decision-making frameworks have been developed to guide assistive technology experts in selecting appropriate devices and services for individuals with disabilities. Bowser and Reed's (1998) Education Tech Points model offers a structured approach for integrating assistive technology into individualized education planning. Similarly, Chambers (1997) provides a comprehensive guide for Individualized Education Program teams to systematically consider assistive technology interventions. Despite these contributions, Watts, O'Brien, and Wojcick (2003) emphasize the scarcity of empirical data validating the reliability and effectiveness of such models in real-world decision-making contexts. This challenge is compounded by the integration of family expectations and the necessity for user participation, elements that are central to many assistive technology frameworks but often lack standardized implementation. Kemp and Parette (2000) point at a research gap in cultural competence among assistive technology experts, noting that limited attention is paid to the cultural and familial dynamics that critically influence assistive technology adoption and outcomes. However, there is a significant gap in Indian scholarship addressing how cultural and familial dynamics shape assistive technology decision-making, limiting the applicability of global frameworks in diverse Indian contexts. The scarcity of Indian-specific research on culturally competent assistive technology frameworks highlights the need for localized studies that account for India's unique social structures and kinship networks.

Methodology

The study, guided by sociology of disability scholarship, was carried out using qualitative research methods laying emphasis on capturing lived experiences of respondents. Primary data was collected from individuals with locomotor disabilities who use assistive technology devices like wheel chairs, tricycles, crutches, stick, calipers, ankle-foot orthotics (AFOs), knee-ankle-foot orthotics (KAFOs); with mild to moderate deformed limbs; and artificial legs (amputees). Forty respondents participated in the study including children and adults with locomotor disabilities. All respondents are either currently using or had used/attempted to use ATD meant for locomotive disabilities. The researcher approached the Institute of Medical Sciences – Artificial Limb Manufacturing Unit (IMS-ALMU), a state-funded organization that provides ATDs free of cost, and a not-for-profit private organization, 'Pro-Fit' (pseudonym), located in Hyderabad, to identify potential respondents. Respondents were selected through a series of interactions with persons with locomotor disabilities who visited these two units to acquire ATDs. After detailed conversations and a briefing about the study and its objectives, some individuals voluntarily agreed to participate in the research.

The researcher directly engaged with respondents at two research sites, namely IMS-ALMU and 'Pro-Fit' for primary data collection. Interview questions were carefully designed to elicit detailed responses, enabling participants to articulate their self-perceptions and their views of others, particularly family members, in relation to the use of ATDs. Informal conversations provided rich insights into how identity of the locomotor disabled member evolves and constructed, highlighting how disability is interpreted through social and cultural frameworks within the household. These interactions also brought out how their extended kin networks perceive disability and the adoption of ATD, revealing complex dynamics of acceptance, concern, and adaptation. The narratives were deeply shaped by the places they live in, the support or lack thereof around them, and the everyday challenges of recognition, mobility, and belonging highlighting the social contexts that influence the identities and participation levels of individuals with disabilities using ATDs. The conversations took place in Telugu or Hindi ensuring that their voices, pauses, and choices of words carried their full emotional weight. Each respondent was free to choose a private setting where they felt at ease, which lent a quiet intimacy to the dialogue. With their consent, the conversations were recorded, most lasting between thirty and forty-five minutes, not simply to capture words but to hold space for their meanings, silences, and expressions. The interviews were transcribed with attentiveness to tone, inflection, and embodied emotion. Through a phenomenological lens, what emerged was not just 'data', but insight into how disability is lived, interpreted, negotiated, and internalized.

Social construction of disability and ATDs

The loss of a limb can drastically alter the trajectory of a person's life. It is probably unrealistic to expect a sudden disability to come with no inconveniences whatsoever, but of special importance to this study is the profound psychological impact noticed in the respondents. It may not be surprising for maintaining their original lifestyle to be difficult, but many respondents felt they were completely unable to access their own lives. Generally speaking, the respondents found that their disabilities were being reinforced by societal influence rather than being mitigated. The scope of what they could and could not do was diminished, but so too was their general sense of autonomy and authority. The respondents experience a state of existential uncertainty and exert significant effort to reintegrate themselves into society. It was found through conversations that the respondents make efforts to restore their previous lifestyles with grit and determination, while also grappling with their transformed identities due to their physical impairments.

The disability necessitates a shift in both the individuals' role and perception of themselves. The limited physical mobility inhibits the ability of respondents to engage in their usual responsibilities in daily life, consequently resulting in a more passive and receptive role. This newly assigned position is regarded as

lacking in significance, causing individuals to make efforts to uphold their personal dignity and balance in social interactions. Acquiring proficiency in novel approaches for managing daily tasks is a crucial milestone towards reaffirming a renewed and commendable societal position. It is important to note that, the individual's bodily awareness undergoes alterations in the case of a leg amputation or deformity. According to respondents, individuals are encouraged to adapt to their altered physical condition through the use of ATD and by acquiring supplementary competencies in operating home appliances that facilitate adjustment to limb loss or deformity.

The study finds that the degree of stigma varies across genders. Devices such as hip-knee-ankle-foot orthosis, knee braces, walker, stick, etc., are perceived as stigmatizing by most of the respondents. A nineteen-year unmarried woman, who wears hip- knee-ankle-foot orthosis shares, w*hen I want to wear the device outside my dress, my mother always says that it doesn't look good. My mother often says that I'm unmarried so I can't go out as I like. My outfits were specially stitched so that I can wear the device inside. My parents wanted me to undergo corrective surgery to remove this device permanently.*

The choice to wear assistive devices like a hip-knee-ankle-foot orthosis, knee braces, or using a stick or walker is influenced by social factors like attracting stare, stigma, etc. Using ATDs has strong implications for one's self-esteem. Preparedness for the use of ATDs is mostly psychological as the individual is influenced by what others feel about the device and physical appearance. A twenty-three-year-old woman respondent, who used AT for some time and now stopped using, observes that *the months that came* [after being fitted with an ATD] *were demanding, the recovery and rehabilitation were long and slow. I was never sure whether I will be able to walk without assistance. I was dependent on many orthotic devices like ankle foot orthosis, knee brace, and spine brace, walker and stick to correct my ankle deformity. Luckily the orthotic devices I used were temporary. I must be thankful and grateful to God. Though I limp I am fortunate enough to feel that I am not dependent on any devices now. I don't like when people stare at me. It makes me feel weird and uncomfortable. Slowly, I have recovered and now have only a little functional impairment.* The effectiveness of ATDs is not solely determined by their mechanical design but also by the support system that evolves around their use. Often, ATDs are recommended by medical experts or distributed without considering the availability of essential services such as user training, general maintenance, and repair services.

Journey with ATD

Adjustment to ATDs is a nuanced and personal journey, shaped by emotional, social, and functional factors. Saradijan, Thomson, and Datta (2008) emphasize that acceptance develops gradually, as users learn to integrate the device into their daily routines and self-perception. Comfort levels vary, while some quickly

embrace ATDs as empowering tools, others struggle with feelings of dependency, public visibility, or altered identity. Respondents in the study reflect these complexities, highlighting the importance of empathy, peer support, and individualized training. True adaptation is not just technical mastery, rather an emotional reconciliation, social integration, and a redefinition of autonomy through lived experience. A twenty-eight-year-old male user of a prosthesis notes that adjustment requires patience, *you need to adjust the prosthesis by wearing it for limited periods of time initially. Then you start going for short walks. When you stand for long hours, you have to bear with back pain.* Similarly, a twenty-year-old female prosthetic user shares, y*ou need to trust your body. You must trust the other leg so that you can stand on it and walk. You can't remain dependent on crutches or a wheel chair for a lifetime.*

Not all respondents are comfortable with the prosthetic. A nineteen-year-old female orthotic user explains, *the hip-knee-ankle-foot orthosis is such a large device that you cannot handle the brace. Since it is not flexible, you have to carry such a heavy weight along with your leg. In summers, I develop skin sores around the entire leg. Since I have to wear it inside my leg, my outfit is specially stitched as I don't get ready-made outfits.* The cultural conditioning of women's wear also becomes important in the lives of PWDs. A twenty-three-year-old woman respondent shares her discomfort, *I like to wear the traditional Indian attire, saree. Whenever I wear a saree, I try to see that my deformed parts are covered properly. It is not only about covering but makes me very uncomfortable while walking. I want to wear a saree but I am afraid of falling down.* The study finds that the respondents have negotiated the ATDs in their own way by adjusting themselves to the ATDs. Some customized their ATDs and some started by using it for short periods of time. Common complaint across the respondents is the discomfort caused by the ATDs during hot summers in India. They reported that ATDs are heavy and thus added weight and also leads to increased sweating due to summer heat. It was reported by many respondents that the ATDs provided by the state institutions are heavy and rigid with little scope for adjustments and modifications. They also noted that the ATDs made available by the Pro-Fit, although superior in quality and are light weight, are designed in the West considering their weather conditions which are therefore not suitable to hot climatic conditions in India.

Disability, ATDs and Self-image

Self-image, defined here as one's perceived value and importance within their social circles, emerged as a central theme among all respondents. It remains a complex and evolving subject, with various contributing factors still under active investigation. While some scholars, like Adamson (2003), propose that self-worth solidifies early in life and remains relatively stable, others argue that ongoing socialization plays a crucial role in maintaining a positive self-image. As Ferrari, et. al. (2024) suggest, 'for people with physical disabilities, high self-esteem is

influential so that they can act better and not feel inferior when communicating with their surroundings, though they have physical imperfections'.

Horgan and MacLachlan (2004) identify factors that influence responses to amputation, including age, education, social class, amputation type, and time since amputation. The emotional impact was profound. A twenty-year-old woman respondent shares the shock; *initially it was a huge shock. I was confused to see my missing body part and I really criedfor my helpless situation*. A twenty-four-year-old woman reflects w*hen doctors asked me to use orthosis for lifetime, initially, I was always conscious about what others were thinking about me*. While many respondents experienced dismay, some approached their situation with pragmatism. A twenty-one-year-old woman described, *the metal rods encircling my limb were visually unappealing and uncomfortable. I even asked my mother if I'd still be able to wear high heels. In a strange way, the amputation gave me a new perspective on beauty.*

All the respondents seemed to be hyper-aware of their changed physical appearance with the loss of limbs and with the usage of ATDs. Miller and Deathe (2004) highlight the importance of aesthetics and the impact that amputation can have on a person's self-image. Women respondents especially wanted to know that they would still be able to wear feminine clothes such as heels and sarees. Men, by stark contrast, were mainly concerned with their ability to work and support their families. A fifteen-year-old girl respondent states, *being a woman, I want to make sure that the prosthetics look appealing, especially if I am wearing a skirt.* A thirty-five-year-old male respondent describes the loss of a limb, saying, *it made me feel inferior, because I could no longer be my family's breadwinner.* This suggests that men place more importance on the functional aspect of the limb and their ability to provide financial support to their family. While female respondents were concerned with loss of function, they showed a higher sensitivity to how they would be perceived by others aesthetically.

Studies have shown that loss of limb is not only a physical trauma but also a disruption to familial roles, emotional bonds, and social perceptions. The adjustment to limb loss is deeply personal and varies across individuals, but it is also shaped by the responses of close family members. The study finds varied reactions from the respondents to limb loss in accidents. A thirty-five-year-old male respondent recalls how his daughter initially seemed to be afraid of him, though she came around and quickly realized that he was still her father. Another respondent, a twenty-one-year-old unmarried woman, highlights her mother's discomfort, pointing out that her mother had often been preoccupied with the judgmental comments of others. A twenty-eight-year-old male respondent says, *my parents took it really badly. Especially my father, who had never wanted me to ride a motorbike for fear of an accident.* A twenty-three-year-old unmarried woman respondent felt emotional, saying, *every time I cry, she (my mother) cries*

with me. The difficulties parents faced mirrored the difficulties that their children endured. It was a trauma for the respondents and also for their family members.

Amputation is a clinical procedure followed in extremely critical conditions, particularly in cases related to accidents. The respondents who underwent amputation reported a significant loss of independence, at times leading to feelings of helplessness as they were forced to increasingly rely on others. A forty-year-old woman respondent observes, *it is really difficult! You have to depend on many people, including strangers at times. I hate it when I can't do something myself.* Those who previously enjoyed sports and other physical activities specifically cited the absence of such activities as stressful and emotionally debilitating. A thirty-five-year-old male respondent says, *the worst thing of them all is imagining not being able to run and play with my children.* The return home after amputation marked a shift from comfort to exclusion for many respondents. Spaces once associated with safety and routine became environments of struggle. Ordinary elements of the home, like stairs, doorways, and furniture, transformed into obstacles. For wheelchair users particularly, the home could feel unmanageable without prior environmental modifications. A respondent, forty-year-old grandmother expresses, *after amputation, everything becomes difficult. It is very painful when my grandson asks for a glass of water. I can't get it for him. I have a bloody wheelchair that doesn't fit into my kitchen.* Inaccessible design reinforces feelings of exclusion, as noted by respondents who compared their homes to prisons due to immobility and spatial constraints. This was especially true for users of prosthetics and orthotics. A twenty-one-year-old unmarried woman respondent describes her experience: *for me, watching television, reading, moving in the house, doing bits and pieces is an easy task, yet I'm confined to four walls. I lack confidence in using my other leg and going out.*

Post-amputation, many respondents adopted unfamiliar roles as passive dependents. This transition often produced feelings of inadequacy and damaged their sense of self-worth. However, reintegration into everyday social life was widely recognized as essential to psychological recovery. A women respondent, unmarried, in her twenties reflects, *reintegrating after a long break can be difficult and time-consuming. I made an effort to reach out to my friends and family members. I found it important to maintain my social life.* Family involvement during rehabilitation has been supportive as well as depressive. Encouragement from loved ones was appreciated, yet pressure to relinquish mobility aids could cause strain. A twenty-one-year-old unmarried woman recalls, *I was encouraged to abandon my mobility aids (like wheel chair) as time went on, with family and medical professionals applying pressure to rely on the prosthesis.* Acceptance of ATDs is shaped significantly by family expectations and cultural norms. Rural families, in particular, sometimes impose unrealistic timelines for recovery, pressuring users to abandon their devices prematurely. Scholars such as Pippin and Fernie (1997) note that family perceptions can critically influence long-term ATD adoption. However, respondents were quick to point out the

importance of support, especially from family and friends. Social support within their peer groups and from the staff members at the hospital had a profound effect on the perspectives of the respondents, with many implying that this support was one of the most important aspects.

The coping process following amputation was often facilitated by family members, particularly in cases where technical ingenuity intersected with emotional support. A twenty-eight-year-old unmarried male respondent shares, *I was fortunate that my father was able to customize my prosthesis by affixing an electric motor that has been of great assistance.* This illustrates the potential of familial agency in enhancing ATD functionality. It also reflects broader trends in prosthetic innovation, where user-specific modifications, such as motorized components, can significantly improve mobility and autonomy.

While support was generally appreciated, some respondents expressed discomfort with overprotective behavior from family members. A twenty-three-year-old unmarried woman respondent recounts, *the last time my mother observed me ascending the ladder to replace a light bulb, she became distressed and implored me to descend due to the fear I would fall.* Amputation prompted a profound shift in self-perception among respondents. Themes of role redefinition, lifestyle adaptation, and the pursuit of wholeness emerged consistently. An eighteen-year-old unmarried woman reflects; *I used to easily stand on one leg. I can't even balance now. I can't stand on one leg at all.* Initial attempts to use ATDs were often hindered by fear and lack of confidence. Yet, some respondents found hope in the procedure itself. A thirty-five-year-old married male respondent shares; *I couldn't walk properly because of the pain. It was constant and I was afraid of even going to bed, because I would wake up minutes later in so much pain. It was a nightmare and something had to be done.* Despite the challenges, most respondents maintained a sense of optimism. They viewed mobility not just as a physical goal but as a symbol of regained freedom. Each milestone, however small, became a source of renewed confidence.

Among prosthetic users, the desire to return to work and reclaim an active lifestyle emerged as a powerful motivator. A twenty-five-year-old unmarried woman respondent shares; *my goal is to return to work someday. Even if people call it unrealistic, I have to have a goal. Otherwise, I would just give up.* A twenty-one-year-old unmarried woman respondent echoed this determination, says, *my aim is to be able to walk again with the aid of a prosthesis. I am aware that I will likely not be able to achieve this entirely on my own, yet I am determined to do as much as feasible.* Treatment delays and financial barriers were recurring themes. Respondents described unaffordability as a vacuum, an indefinite pause in life's momentum. These constraints not only stalled physical recovery but also eroded optimism and stamina. Mobility aids such as automobiles and tricycles were seen as tools of liberation. Yet, for those without access, the absence of such amenities intensified feelings of isolation. A twenty-

five-year-old unmarried woman respondent expresses, *despite having my wings clipped, I still want to explore the area I grew up in, to traverse around the block. I want to explore my neighborhood independently.* Women respondents, particularly those older, from underprivileged backgrounds, reported systemic exclusion from the design of assistive technologies. A thirty-eight-year-old married woman respondent laments, *it is written in my destiny to be born as poor. I don't have any option except for depending on the devices given by the IMS-ALMU.* A forty-year-old married woman respondent reflects on her social positioning, saying, *I was bound to the wheelchair as I was not considered the breadwinner of our family.*

Table 1: ATD Use: Experiences of respondents

Theme	**Contextualizing responses**
Aesthetics	The visibility of disability through ATDs often triggers stigma rooted in ableist norms. Respondents' desire to conceal devices reflects internalized social pressures to conform to normative bodily aesthetics. Orthotics, in particular, are perceived as markers of difference, reinforcing exclusion.
Emotional Reception	Initial emotional responses like shock, sadness, anxiety, etc. highlight the psychological toll of sudden bodily change. The compulsion to use devices, despite discomfort, highlights the tension between medical necessity and emotional readiness. These reactions are shaped by both personal trauma and societal attitudes toward disability.
Lifestyle Changes	Amputation and ATD use disrupt daily routines, transforming mundane tasks into sources of discomfort. The home, once a site of autonomy, becomes a space of negotiation.
Social Exclusion	Respondents' narratives of confinement and guilt reflect how inaccessible environments and social perceptions reinforce exclusion. The inability to navigate spaces freely, both physically and socially, creates a sense of being "othered," especially for wheelchair users and those with visible impairments.
Social Intervention	Support from family, peers, and professionals emerges as a critical enabler of ATD use. However, the need to "look normal" by concealing devices reveals the persistent influence of social acceptability. Acceptance is not merely functional, rather performative, shaped by cultural expectations of normalcy.
Perceptions on Self-Image	Economic access and familial encouragement foster experimentation with new devices. Yet, the psychological drivers such as hope, will, positivity, etc. are central to reclaiming agency. These perceptions affirm disability as a social construct, where empowerment is contingent on relational and material support.
Gender, Age and Class	Intersectional oppression is vividly illustrated. Women prioritize aesthetics and face compounded barriers due to gendered expectations, economic precarity, and caste/class hierarchies. Men, positioned as breadwinners, access better technologies.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that stigmatization remains a principal deterrent in the continued use of ATDs more than physical discomforts and functional inadequacies. Respondents highlighted that mechanical solutions, while functionally adequate, often fall short of addressing the broader sociocultural constraints that define lived realities. For instance, although a wheelchair may enhance ambulation, it cannot, in itself, reconstruct an inaccessible built

environment, one replete with architectural barriers such as stairs in lieu of ramps. Moving beyond functional limitations, there emerges a critical imperative to reframe the public perception of ATD users. Contrary to assumptions that "aesthetics" are secondary in device design, the study reveals a palpable psychosocial dimension, particularly among female respondents, who expressed reluctance to utilize visibly bulky or aesthetically unappealing devices due to the adverse impact on self-perception. This insight challenges prevailing assumptions and calls for a paradigm shift, that ATDs must be reconceptualized not only for function but also for form, contributing to the user's dignity and self-image.

Crucially, respondents conveyed a profound sense of constraint in mobility, which, they argued, influenced their psychological well-being more than the physical limitations themselves. This points at the necessity of evaluating disability not merely through the lens of impairment but also through the interactional and environmental contexts in which individuals reside. Taken together, the narratives highlight a sobering critique, i.e. the structural and cultural foundations of Indian society have not evolved to the needs of persons with disabilities and they remain exclusive. Inclusive transformation must also extend beyond sociocultural and attitudinal change to encompass tangible reforms in housing, public infrastructure, and workplace accessibility. The respondents' reflections on family were largely affirming, suggesting strong kinship-based support systems. However, the conspicuous absence of mentions concerning friends, neighbors, and broader community members prompts inquiry into social isolation. It is plausible that individuals with disabilities experience constrained social networks, or alternatively, that interactions beyond the familial sphere may lack the warmth and inclusion offered by immediate kin.

This study also reveals that limb amputation or malformation significantly curtails spatial agency and undermines autonomy. As individuals negotiate multiple forms of loss, the emotional toll becomes increasingly pronounced, demanding sustained psychological and physical support. The convergence of impairment and environmental limitations places a compounded strain on the individual, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support structures. The study finds that the interrelation between societal perceptions and the utilization of ATDs is profound and impactful. Not only the individual who uses the device, but also their family members ascribe meanings to it, shaping both its interpretation and adoption. These interpretations are often screened through the lens of stigma, which continues to pervade institutional and interpersonal discourses. Table 1 presents the findings of the study along certain key themes. Each theme reflects not only personal narratives but also point at broader structural and cultural dynamics that shape disability in contemporary Indian society. When viewed through a sociological lens the contents in the table affirm that disability is not just a medical condition but a lived experience shaped by aesthetics, emotion, infrastructure, and identity. The data suggests that access to ATDs is not simply technical, it is deeply political, shaped by deeper structural inequalities. Given these complexities, further

research must critically engage with ATD manufacturers, medical professionals, taking into account the sociocultural complexities involved in the adoption and use of these devices within the Indian context.

Future research should expand its geographical and demographic breadth, encompassing diverse regions across India. A follow-up study, employing a stratified questionnaire that parses interactions with distinct social categories, viz. friends, family, neighbors, authority figures, and community leaders, would yield deeper insights into the genesis and propagation of stigma. Such an understanding could help locate the most stigmatizing factors within the social structure.

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K Pavani Sree is a Post-Doctoral Fellow, Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad

C Ragava Reddy is a Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad

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Author (S): Abhinandan & Abha Chauhan

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Stars, Faith and Profit: The Moral Economy of Astrology in Contemporary Hindu Practice in Jammu

--Abhinandan & Abha Chauhan

Abstract

The ancient and enduring Indian astrology has undergone significant changes in contemporary cultural contexts. This paper examines the convergence of consumerism, modernity, and tradition and its ethical consequences for Hindu astrological practice. First, it analyzes Hindu astrology as a form of 'commercial modernity,' arguing that long-standing, temporally oriented modes of knowledge are increasingly reorganized according to market logic, reshaping practitioner-client relationships. Second, it examines how commodified practitioners are perceived, which ethical practices are recognised, and how these are negotiated. It focuses on the manner in which commercial activities lead to a decline in morality and ethical values, the accountability of practitioners, and the truthfulness of the counselling they offer clients. Third, the paper investigates the digital shift in terms of the increasing dissemination of astronomical knowledge through social media, mobile applications, and the internet, which simultaneously heightens financial demands and diminishes sustained ethical engagement. Finally, it situates these developments within broader changes in cultural authority and legitimacy, showing how digital infrastructures and commercial strategies reshape religious experience and the conditions under which expertise and authenticity are recognized. Drawing on close textual interpretation and qualitative interviews with astrologers and their clients in the Jammu district, the study frames contemporary Hindu astrology within a "moral economy" framework. It argues that while commercialisation and digital innovation broaden participation and visibility, they also require a more nuanced account of how religion, trade, and moral accountability interact in modern astrological practice.

Keywords: *Indian Astrology, Commodification, Moral Economy, Digital Space, Religion, Ethics and Contemporary Hinduism*

Introduction

In the realm of the religious and cultural life of Hindus, astrology plays a consistent and complex role, serving both as a cosmological theory and a ritualistic practice, as well as a moral hermeneutic theory. According to Pingree (1981) and Fuller (2004), Hindu astrology has a long ethical history entrenched in *Jyotisha* philosophy, one of the six *Vedangas*, and is closely associated with the control of everyday social activities, as well as those related to marriage, birth, education, and economics. As part of the symbolic systems that impart power through ecclesiastically approved knowledge, astrology had traditionally been a moral guide rather than a prophecy (Pingree, 1981; Fuller, 2004; Bourdieu, 1991).

This strength exists by virtue of hereditary legitimacy and ethical social worth as symbolic capital, which empowers practitioners to provide legitimate understandings of fate and obligation (Bourdieu, 1991).

In Bourdieusian terms, symbolic capital becomes effective when particular forms of knowledge, reputation, lineage, credentials, or recognition are collectively acknowledged as legitimate. In the Jammu setting, such resources are unevenly distributed across practitioners. Temple-based practitioners draw authority from lineage, ritual knowledge, reputation, and long-standing community relationships, whereas commercially oriented practitioners may draw more heavily on credentials, organisational presentation, client testimonials, and professional visibility. Digital practitioners add another resource: platform visibility, expressed through followers, engagement, responsiveness, and continuous online presence. These resources should not, however, be treated as equivalent forms of authority. Visibility can enhance recognition without necessarily producing moral legitimacy. The analytical question is therefore not whether traditional authority has simply been replaced by digital authority, but how different forms of capital are converted, contested, and evaluated in practitioner–client encounters (Bourdieu, 1991).

However, there has been a radical transformation in contemporary India under the pressures of modernity, commercial growth, and digital mediation. As a result, astrology's social and institutional setting has changed substantially. Importantly, this shift does not displace religious practice; rather, it reworks religious logics through new forms of institutionalization and ethical emphasis (Asad, 2003; Taylor, 2007). Today, astrology is often provided as a fixed-price, marketing-driven, branded service tailored to consumer choice, embedded in temple-based economies and personalized ritual engagements. This change is an indication of a new reconfiguration of religion: spiritual practices are restructured as commodified services, and religious power becomes negotiable through market performance rather than through ascetic credibility or lineage-based legitimacy (Beteille, 1991; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). Taken together, these trends suggest an ongoing renegotiation of moral standards, not necessarily their erosion, and they raise sociological questions about how morality operates within capitalist and ostensibly secular economic arrangements (Thompson, 1971; Sayer, 2007; Lynch, 2012).

This paper examines Hindu astrological practices as a form of 'moral economy' in the Jammu District, a social setting that has received comparatively little scholarly consideration. Strong religiosity, visible in its temples, the expansion of market capitalism, increasing digitalization, and a growing culture of religious consumption place Jammu squarely at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. Amid the pressures of commercialization and online platforms, astrology continues to shape family business, morality, and everyday decision-making. By situating astrology within Jammu's specific socio-cultural context, the study also

shows how regionally grounded discourses of religion and economics may develop differently from metropolitan centers.

The paper follows three linked aims. First, it analyses the situatedness of Hindu astrology between tradition and modern commerciality. The question of how 'cosmic information' circulates in the market is compelling many practitioners to rethink how they deliver knowledge, thereby reshaping both the ethical dimensions of long-standing client relationships and the transactional processes that structure them. Alongside shifts in the moral obligations traditionally associated with astrological practice, time-based costs increasingly replace personalised guidance with standardised services (Fuller, 2004; Rudnyckyj, 2010). A balance between market demands and moral commitments encourages the commodification of spiritual knowledge and the professional roles of practitioners.

Second, the paper investigates when actors regard monetary transactions in astrological rituals as an acceptable religious exchange and when such interaction is thought to jeopardize the practice's holiness, morality, or ethical integrity. Exaggerated predictions, expensive ritual prescriptions, and fearful reactions are examples of practices that go against the question of moral responsibility and exploitation. According to a study (Derne, 1994), there exists a tension between faith, cynicism, and professionalism, and the investigations reveal the hypocrisy of spiritual help using customer testimonial accounts. Third, it explores digital spaces as critical points of transition. Social media, astrological apps, and online practices provide unprecedented access, visibility, and competition, often accompanied by financial pressure. These practices transform how religious knowledge is experienced, privileging brevity, slick presentation, and algorithmic data over morality, reflection, and ethical consideration (Campbell, 2013; Eisenlohr, 2018).

Astrology in Jammu is not generally an institutionalized profession with standardized certification, a regulating agency, or an agreed-upon jurisdiction. As a result, the term 'professional astrologer' is used in this context to represent a process of professionalization rather than a fixed position. Abbott's sociology of professions centres on jurisdiction: occupational groups stake claims to specialized knowledge and seek authority over expert activity (Abbott, 1988). This viewpoint is especially pertinent to astrology, since authority is divided across temple traditions, individual practitioners, commercial consultations, and online platforms. As a result, practitioners engage in boundary work by discriminating between ethical consultation and activities that they consider exploitative, excessive, or inadequately anchored in recognized knowledge (Gieryn, 1983). The concern is not whether astrology is 'professional,' but how practitioners establish knowledge, credibility, and legitimate authority where formal credentialing and institutional control are fragmented (Freidson, 1986).

Boundary-work methods can help define the bounds of genuine astrological competence. Practitioners differentiate between ethical and irresponsible advice, traditional and commercial practice, and serious vs. spectacular claims. Clients assess practitioners based on reputation, personal referrals, past experience, and web exposure. Credibility is therefore relational rather than intrinsic, based on the apparent blend of knowledge, behaviour, and social recognition.

Lastly, the study shows how technological change reshapes Hindu ideas about religious authority, cultural acceptability, and lived experience. In arguing that astrology fits within the moral economy of Hindu practice in the modern context, this paper maintains that despite increased privacy and accessibility, commercialization and digitalization nonetheless strain long-standing norms. Rather than assuming that commodification produces moral decline, the study asks when actors treat monetary exchange as legitimate religious exchange and when they interpret particular forms of commercialization as exploitative. This method keeps actors' own views of fairness, accountability, and proper conduct at the center of the study. Jammu's socio-cultural context distinguishes these findings from Hindu astrology across India. The paper shows how wider trends of commercialization, professionalization, and digitalization are handled locally in a non-metropolitan setting.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine how astrology is practiced, appraised, and ethically negotiated in the Jammu district. The aim is not to establish the prevalence of particular beliefs, but rather to understand how practitioners and clients construct meanings around competence, legitimacy, payment, accountability, and ethical conduct. Fieldwork was conducted between March and August 2025 in Jammu city and its neighbouring semi-urban areas. Data were collected through case studies, narrative accounts, in-depth interviews, and observation methods. Purposive sampling was used to capture the diversity of astrological practices and consumption patterns.

The sample comprises thirty-six respondents. Out of this, fourteen were astrologer respondents, including traditional temple-trained practitioners engaged primarily in *seva* (service) and scriptural consultation (n=5), semi-modern astrologers combining ritual knowledge with paid consultations (n=4), digitally active platform-based astrologers (n=3), and hybrid practitioners operating across online and offline settings (n=2). The remaining twenty-two respondents are clients: homemakers (n = 6), students (n = 5), salaried professionals (n = 4), small company owners (n = 4), and retirees (n = 3). All respondents have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study.

This sample size was selected to support an in-depth qualitative description and the identification of recurrent patterns and divergent views, and was considered sufficient and representative of both service providers and service consumers. Selecting the sample on the basis of classifications like caste, class, or gender was avoided, so that the study could remain focused on its central questions rather than pursue demographic variations. Practitioners were included where they were actively offering astrological services, and clients were included on the basis of first-hand experience of astrological consultation within the study area. This sampling enabled comparative analysis of ethical standards, practitioner-client interactions, and the moral economies shaping traditional, market-oriented, and digitally mediated astrological services, while supporting sensitivity to regional socio-cultural diversity. Throughout fieldwork and analysis, the researchers remained attentive to their own positionality, particularly their social location, familiarity with the region's culture, and the dynamics of interaction with participants, in order to limit the influence of pre-existing assumptions on the interpretation of respondents' narratives.

The paper also examines technologically mediated astrology, specifically consultations and practitioner exposure via online platforms and mobile applications. The digital dimension is analysed in relation to offline practice rather than as a distinct religious domain. Digital platforms supply new resources for the construction of astrological authority. Followers, exposure, testimonials, speedy communication, and platform engagement can all function as markers of value. An online presence, however, does not guarantee credibility. Clients continue to assess practitioners through multiple channels, including personal referrals, perceived competence, prior experience, and web presence. Digitalisation therefore does not displace conventional authority so much as divide and reconfigure it.

Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect respondents' identities and personal information. Given the intimate and potentially sensitive nature of conversations about religious belief, astrological practice, and financial transactions, using pseudonyms helped preserve anonymity and encouraged participants to speak freely.

Hindu Astrology, Cosmology and Ethical Order

Instead of treating Hindu astrology merely as divination, Hindu astrologers have located Hindu astrology within broader cosmological and culturally ritualised Hinduism. As an inseparable element of the Vedic intellectual tradition, *Jyotisha* can be seen as classical literature foreshadowed by the theory of *karma*, ceremony, and ethical guidelines, and later institutionalised (Pingree, 1981). In this sense, astrology fulfilled a moral and interpretive role at the interface between social life and the cosmos: it helped people navigate uncertainty through rituals

that were corrective and ethically restraining, rather than through deterministic fatalism.

This perspective is supported by anthropological studies of popular Hinduism. Ethnographic work by Fuller (2004) shows that consultations with astrologers have become embedded in everyday moral reasoning, particularly in matters pertaining to marriage, pregnancy, disease, and financial risk. Rather than drawing on explicit ethical theories or abstract moral principles, astrology provides a culturally intelligible framework for understanding personal misfortunes through causal associations. In this way, it functions as a justifiable system for explaining tragedy and allocating blame. Besides prediction, its interpretive meanings offer moral solace, reinforcing family-supportive roles and broader societal morals. Earlier ethnographic studies of South Asia also show that the ethical authority and dignity of astrologers were grounded in the old predicaments of customary understanding, caste-based legitimacy, and their role as guardians of planetary direction within everyday social life. Bennett (1983), for example, in her study on Hindu ritual experts, shows that the power of astrologers was based more on reputational belief, austerity, and ancestry than on direct material gain. Similarly, Mines (2005) argues that the power of astrologers was associated with moderation and carefulness, while later commercialization of the practice was frequently regarded as unscrupulous, and in some accounts, even morally wicked or irreverent toward divinity.

Astrology is often examined through a sociological lens that links ethical discipline to cosmic explanations. Building on Weber's (1963) concept of religious rationalisation, this approach suggests that astrology did not eliminate human action; rather, it structured agency within a broader moral system through astrology. From this standpoint, astrology can help explain contemporary trends because it offers a normative framework through which both professionals and consumers judge commodification and digitalisation as either moral or immoral. However, much of the existing scholarship focuses on pre-liberalisation contexts or early postcolonial settings. The role of astrology within late-capitalist regimes, particularly in peripheral towns such as Jammu, remains underexplored. Moreover, the literature is often incremental rather than discursive: it rarely addresses the ethical dilemmas produced by professionalisation, commercialisation, and digital mediation. There is therefore, a need to reassess astrology as a moral practice in light of shifting political and economic structures, going beyond questions of belief alone.

Religion, Moral Economy and Commercialization

One of the key issues in sociology and anthropology is the commodification of religion, especially the ability of capitalism to redefine moral and cultural life. Thompson's (1971) theory of moral economies provides a critical framework for evaluating the morality of human cultural practices in relation to economic action.

Building on this, scholars such as Thompson (1971), Illouz (2007), and Sayer (2007) conceptualize commodification not only as the buying and selling of religious goods and services, but also as the redefinition of emotional, moral, and symbolic relationships. In this view, assurance, hope, and fear can themselves become marketable values, packaged, exchanged, and consumed. In addition, Beteille (1991) argues that markets that were once restrained by ethical obligations become increasingly rationalized in modernity. As religion adopts more transactional forms, selfless obedience and economic survival may come into tension, undermining earlier moral commitments. Finally, Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) show how religious and cultural identities are converted into commodities that circulate through markets, often producing moral ambiguity.

This trend is supported by research on the Hindu religious economy. Rudnyckyj (2010) shows how practices with deep spiritual significance can adapt to capitalist logics without fully relinquishing their spiritual character, albeit with moral reorientations and 'rebound' effects. More broadly, as late capitalism increasingly commodifies emotion, these dynamics can take distinctly 'astrological' forms: emotional services - care, reassurance, and guidance are packaged and purchased in the form of a service (Illouz, 2007). Indian-based empirical research suggests that there are growing concerns about moral erosion within commercialised religious practices. Derne (1994) argues that power is negotiated through ethical discourse among Hindu cultural groups and states, suggesting that religious knowledge may be converted into symbolic power. In this context, fear-driven astrological predictions and costly ritual prescriptions may exploit vulnerable clients, raising serious questions about moral accountability and ethical misconduct. Srinivas (2010) argues that religious services are becoming more corporate, shifting attention away from moral content toward consumer satisfaction and brand identity. In this setting, worshippers are recast as customers, and trust is treated less as a relational value and more as something that can be produced, marketed, and exchanged. However, existing scholarship remains limited at the micro-level, often relying on metropolitan contexts rather than on practitioner narratives and clients' accounts.

This paper attempts to fill these gaps by investigating how astrologers in Jammu navigate the commodification of astrology under market constraints. It examines whether astrologers interpret commodification as an opportunity or a threat and explores how clients perceive and evaluate these dynamics. By placing astrology within the framework of moral economy, the paper challenges the tendency to reduce religion to either 'belief' or 'superstition'. It therefore offers a way to critically analyze religious knowledge as an ethical bargain in everyday life.

Digital Media, Religion and Ethical Change

The emergence of digital media has significantly weakened the authority, lived experience, and everyday practices associated with traditional religion. Campbell

(2013) argues that 'digital religion' among people emphasises that online spaces are not separate existences; rather, they shape and reframe offline experiences of religion. In this context, online spaces tip the sacredness toward media logics, such as consumption, spectacle, and mediated display, while religious authority increasingly shifts to what is visible, emotive, and performative rather than to institutional legitimacy (Eisenlohr, 2018; Lynch, 2012).

Related research also shows how media technologies transform the religious aspects of morality and sensuality. According to Eisenlohr (2018), the reorganisation of trust, emotion, and attention through mediation reconstructs religious experience. In addition, digital representation practices (for example, in astrology) can make complex interpretive processes easier to access and may even allow algorithmic systems to function as substitutes for ethical judgment. An example of this dematerialization is algorithmic astrology software, which delivers instantaneous predictions without creating any meaningful link to accountability or responsibility. According to Campbell's study (2013), digital religion restructures offline religious practice rather than operating as a stand-alone activity confined to online environments.

Recent qualitative studies on Indian youth suggest that online sources of religious information restore authority, but not in a way that privileges experts. Instead, trust is often transferred to media-savvy and charismatic leaders who present knowledge with confidence and visibility. In research on online Hinduism, scholars describe the emergence of 'platform religiosity', a form of devotion shaped by the logic of commerce and entertainment as much as by worship (Hodkinson, 2017). Within this environment, astrology content shared on social media tends to emphasize spectacle. Such posts typically operate through transient fascinations and intensified emotions like panic, desire, and awe, rather than through sustained reflection or reliable verification. Moreover, the professional context surrounding these platforms is highly competitive, which can encourage practitioners to exaggerate claims and, at times, to act unethically.

Digital spaces also create a moral dilemma. Sociology highlights that anonymity and easy access can enable clients to participate while weakening the force of ethical regulation. In this way, online sites may appropriate astrology's moral seriousness, which is the concern of experienced astrologers who are now bound by traditional norms (Campbell, 2010). As a result, customers often alternate between distrust and trust in 'good' technology itself, treating the medium as both a promise of reliability and a source of manipulation.

Astrology is still a subject of scholarly criticism, even though the topic of digital religion is more extensively covered. Semi-expert industries such as astrology, which occupy the intersection between religion and business, are usually ignored in the more favourable industrial and religious faiths or worship. This study identifies the importance of astrology in the field of digital religion as it

foregrounds astrology as the venue where ethical authority is reframed with the assistance of media infrastructure. Access and anonymity are granted to clients, and the ethical regulations are undermined. Online sites steal the seriousness of morality in astrology, which is the concern of such experienced astrologers who are now bound by traditional norms (Hjarvard, 2008). Customers are alternating between distrust and trust in good technology. This study identifies the importance of astrology in the field of digital religion, as it foregrounds astrology as the venue where ethical authority is reframed with the assistance of media infrastructure.

Authority, Legitimacy and Lived Religion

The substitution of physical by electronic astrology represents more profound changes in modern Indian religious experiences. In contrast to dogmatic rationalism, lived-religion research is concerned with the daily activities, narrations, and discussions on morality (McGuire, 2008). Contemporary astrology represents the practice of fluidity that swings between computer screens, business offices, and temples. Astrological authority has slowly become unbounded and is floating along with popularity, ratings, and internet presence. Astrologers who have a large fan base on the internet are given credit by the younger generation of astrologers, who equate publicity with authority. In his redefinition of legitimacy, Giddens (1991) suggests that the development of religious dominance in late modernity has changed.

Such developments create moral distress for clients and practitioners. Digital practitioners consider innovation dynamic, but traditional astrologers believe that the trends are unethical. Clients are pragmatic and request solutions while regretting over-commercialization. According to Sayer (2007), these ambivalences are manifestations of moral doubt that emanate from daily economic activities. Recent Indian sociological studies have emphasised the need to study religion within local contexts. According to Gupta (2000), non-metropolitan environments have a range of modernization and tradition that tend to be neglected in metropolitan research. This paper places astrology within the moral economy of modern-day Hinduism by using qualitative reports from astrologers and customers in the Jammu district. It shows that the evolution of astrology is a bargain between moral considerations, the needs of living, and technological mediation, rather than a gradual sanctification of profane customs. The existing body of knowledge offers helpful theoretical resources, but there is a lack of empirical studies devoted to the subject of astrology as a moral practice. In this direction, therefore, this paper aims to bridge this gap through a sociological examination of astrology concerning ethics, profit, and religion.

Theoretical Contribution

The sociology of religion can draw on the concepts of rationalisation, commercialization, and digital mediation in order to theorise contemporary Hindu astrology as a form of moral-economic activity. Based on Weber's framework, this analysis demonstrates that astrology is becoming increasingly rationalised as routine expert work, characterised by fee charges or stipulated consultation time, but which still upholds value-rational orientations grounded in *dharma* and *seva*. Rather than treating commercialisation as a process of secularisation, the findings show that rationalisation is a source of long-lasting moral issues with regard to religious practice.

The paper adapts the concept of moral economics, originally developed by E. Thompson (1971) and advanced by Sayer (2007), to a modern religious setting. It shows that responsibility, honesty, and temperance are recurring criteria of ethical judgement used both by patients and astrologers in Jammu on a regular basis when assessing business arrangements. In this account, moral standards are not simply eroded by market logic; instead, they are actively contested, clarified, and made visible through ordinary religious life.

Besides this, the paper shows that moral reasoning unfolds within market and digital practices rather than outside them. It uses Sayer's concept of immanent criticism to argue that, even without traditional control schemes, practitioners and consumers still evaluate harm, responsibility, and moral legitimacy. In this way, moral reflexivity and platformisation come to function like a form of 'digital religion'. Lastly, positioning the study in the non-metropolitan North Indian context helps diffuse metro-based and techno-determinist assumptions about technological change. Localities become analytical centers, shaping how commodification and globalization in the digital world take place, rather than serving as marginal settings.

The results indicate that Hindu astrology in Jammu is a moral activity embedded in social networks. It can be contested through ethical argumentation, economic rationalization, and negotiations between cultures, as opposed to a belief system. Rather than pointing to a uniform change, respondents' accounts reveal a stratified moral world differentiated by class, generation, and everyday practices.

The research examines shifting forms of astrological authority by combining Weber's (2002) concept of rationalization with Thompson and Sayer's thoughts on moral economy. Bourdieu explains how lineage, ritual knowledge, reputation, and growing digital visibility gain symbolic worth. Weber highlights the growing calculability and professionalism of astrological advice, while Thompson and Sayer investigate how economic transactions are appraised using concepts of justice, accountability, and moral validity. A digital-religion study clarifies how these processes are mediated by online platforms. Together, these views enable us to evaluate astrology as a sector where religious authority, economic trade, and moral judgment converge.

The Politics of Moral Obligation and the Market Power

Among the most important sociological findings was astrology's transformation from a divinatory practice to a religious service (*seva*) based on moral regulations and, at the same time, professionalized expert labour. Temple astrologers, now understood as 'hormonal' (i.e., institutional) specialists, presented traditional astrology as an activity governed by a moral economy. In this account, discretionary payment, humility, and moral self-control were treated as conditions for validity.

According to "Pandit Ramesh" (62):

"Astrology was not meant as a commercial enterprise. It was aimed at instructing people according to dharma."

This statement facilitates the emphasis of astrology as a moralised form of exchange: it frames what counts as a legitimate transaction in moral-economic terms, aligning with Thompson's (1971) and subsequently Sayer's (2007) concept of moral economy. In contrast, semi-commercial astrologers reworked the meaning of astrology into professional work, valued for efficiency, time management, and stable remuneration. Instead of rejecting morality outright, these practitioners reformulated it according to professional ethics, rather than through religious compulsion.

This negotiation also takes place with clients. Among the middle-class respondents, most accepted monetary compensation as legitimate, though many expressed dissatisfaction that economic considerations were being prioritized over moral honesty.

"Neha" (29) working in the private sector, said:

"Getting fees is fine, but it will become not spiritual anymore when all is predetermined and has a time limit."

This account illustrates a sociological friction between use value and exchange value within religious and quasi-religious practices, where commercialization reshapes trust relationships and reframes perceived competence. As a result, astrology emerges as a hybrid organization, partly secular and partly religious, serving as a mechanism to 'correct' or realign a moral code that is not fully either one thing or the other (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Srinivas 2010).

Production of Fear and Moral Decadence

A second critical observation concerns undermining morality, particularly in the name of fear and ritual prescriptions. Planetary afflictions (*dosha*) were

exaggerated in some documents involving clients, and the proposed remedies were closely tied to expensive treatments.

"Sunita" (46), a homemaker, recalled:

"*They made us think that in the absence of ceremony, destiny itself went against us*".

Practices like these were used to pressure women and other families grappling with marriage or health problems, and they were therefore regarded as ethically exploitative. These practices were harshly condemned by traditional astrologers, who viewed them as practices that violate *dharma*.

"Pandit Mohan" (58), stated:

"The practice of astrology should not frighten people to buy the products nor fall prey to criminal acts."

These narratives reveal how religious professionals exercise symbolic power (Derne, 1994) and how commodification increases inequalities between practitioners and weak consumers. Instead of abandoning astrology, consumers practiced moral differentiation, that is, differentiation between ethical and commercial astrologers, which implies that consumption of religions is associated with moral judgment (Sayer, 2007).

The Reimagining of Ethical Accountability via Digital Mediation

The internet has significantly changed astrology in Jammu, specifically among the youth. The depth of relationships comes at the cost of instant anonymity on mobile applications and social media. For example, one student, "Rohit" (24), described his experience this way:

"The internet astrology is more pleasant and the one that is comforting."

Even some digital astrologers recognise that visibility, not introspection, is promoted by the influence of algorithms. As an online astrologer, "Karan" (34), stated:

"It does not grow if it is no longer the subject that scares and entertains people."

This observation corresponds to the literature on digital religion regarding the reorganisation of religious power that is centered on effect, velocity, and action (Campbell, 2013; Eisenlohr, 2018). In this context, the ethical dimension of accountability is weakened: the lack of sustained, long-term relationships between practitioners and clients turns astrology into a product to be consumed, rather than a form of moral or spiritual guidance. Clients may have once been skeptical about

convenience, but they do not always prioritize authenticity. As a result, online astrology intensifies economic competition while simultaneously undermining ethics, an ongoing main concern in contemporary religious markets.

Living Faith and Shifting Authority

The last result highlights a shift in how legitimacy and power are transformed in practice. Astrology increasingly places power in sight, fame, and even the rights of the Internet over family ties, education, or ethics. Many young respondents, in particular, equated large online followings with trustworthiness. "Pooja" (22), noted:

"They need to be authentic because they are being followed by so many."

While respondents were happy to acknowledge this shift as unavoidable, it was viewed by traditional astrologers as a moral disaster. Clients now realistically browse the Internet and personal astrologers, as well as temple visits. This resulted in astrology being a useful instrument of religion that was utilised in making rational decisions rather than to sustain the authority of astrology as a 'sacred science'.

The trend is indicative of a larger-scale change in lived religion in which authority is contingent, negotiated, and dependent on the media rather than anchored primarily in institutions (McGuire, 2008; Burroughs & Feller, 2015).

Astrology, Moral Economy and Late Modern Hinduism

Collectively, the findings suggest that contemporary Hindu astrology in Jammu is better understood as a reconstructed moral economy rather than as a mere fallacy of religious faith. Evaluating and contesting claims to moral authority in astrology by adjusting conditions of eligibility, commercialization, and digitization does not necessarily invalidate it. Ethical concerns arise less from participation in market relations in itself and more from how the responsibilities that normally bind transactional and algorithmic logics become detached from one another.

Moreover, the depiction of practitioners and clients in the context of moral critique makes dichotomous definitions of sacred and profane difficult. Tradition acts as a criterion in evaluating excess, exploitation, and faux authenticity, as opposed to a fixed inheritance. Digital spaces, in their turn, widen power disparities, with increased visibility often outpacing ethical accountability, intensifying doubts about validity, control, and the potential for moral degradation.

Finally, sociological attention to these dynamics indicates that religion can be reshaped to function within the milder capitalistic systems of late modernity, where profit, fear, and faith coexist in unusually close combination. By showing

how modern Hindu astrology is operating as an ethical negotiating process rather than simply secularising or commercialising belief, this study facilitates scholarship on Indian sociology in contextualising these developments at a regional level.

Gender, Class, and Unbalanced Ethics of Moral Susceptibility in Astrology

It is also revealed in the study that gender-class interactions result in the creation of moral vulnerability, which then becomes unequal in contemporary astrology. Astrological attention to late marriage, fertility problems, marital discord, and even 'patience' tends to be coded with female bias, particularly when the focus falls on mothers and daughters.

In these interpretations, women's lives are framed as sites of *karmic* blockage, requiring ritual sacrifice in order to protect themselves. As one of the homesteaders, "Meena" (41), remarks:

"Most of the subjects relate to women, marriage, womb, and patience. A male chart is hardly ever believed to be flawed."

Taken together, these narratives suggest that astrology reinforces gender moral standards rooted in Hindu traditions of kinship and family. Men are treated as comparatively autonomous, while women are positioned as moral agents whose bodies and choices determine family fate. This framing is promoted by what feminist scholarship has described as an unequal distribution of moral responsibility and control over women's bodies and actions (Derne, 1994; Srinivas, 2010). At the same time, statistics show emerging opposition; gendered moral control is becoming increasingly contested. This shift is reflected in women's practices of seeking second opinions, declining costly solutions, and expressing distrust in astrology. The paper has explored this pattern of resistance between imposed interpretations and reflexive responses through moral critique and the economics of a moral economy.

The moral vulnerability is further divided along class lines. The ability to cross-check astrologers, using both online and offline information sources, and to detach oneself from anxious interpretations depended largely on socioeconomic status. The middle- and upper-middle-class respondents reported greater empowerment, while those from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds more often experienced increased pressure and fewer variety of choices. As one small business welfare respondent, "Raju" (37), put it:

"We cannot disregard negative predictions made by an astrologer. We cannot resist doing it at the moment."

These results show that there is variation in the operation of moral economy with respect to social status. Even when individuals have some capacity to preserve

moral judgment within social structures, moral agency remains constrained by material resources. Thus, the symbolic economy of astrology is shaped by tensions between cultural authority and the economically unstable political context, which produces higher moral risk for those who lack the means to access resources and manage uncertainty. In conclusion, these classified factors of ethical vulnerability are reiterated within an increasingly commercialised setting.

Lack of Ethical Control, Fragmented Authority, and Emotional Support

The findings highlight a lack of institutional management of ethical issues and the expansion of the sphere of astrology to include emotional labour and affective care. A number of respondents have explained astrological consultation as emotional disbursement, especially at the time of uncertainty or crisis. One of the employees in the private sector, named "Vikas" (36), confirms:

"All I need at times is a boost of confidence. Astrology assists in giving my anxiety a name."

With its emotional role of operation, astrology has the possibility of supplementing or even replacing counselling, particularly with stigmatised mental health care. Nevertheless, there are ethical issues with this emotional aspect. Comfort, according to the practitioners of astrology, easily turns to dependency. According to a semi-commercial practitioner, named Amit (38):

"Human beings are very vulnerable, and unless taken care of well, they end up being dependent on us."

Astrologically, as well as sociologically, this practice is consistent with an affective work of late modernity, in which emotional comfort is a commercial good. Ethical responsibility goes further than prediction to take care of an emotional dependency. This criticism is interwoven with Weberian rationalisation and with Sayer's argument, which emerged from immanent moral critique.

"Anjali" (31) noted that clients rarely relied on a single astrologer or on a single source. Instead, they combined guidance from multiple astrologers, various online materials, family members, and their own intuition.

This movement is based on the increase in moral pluralism and the rupture of religious jurisdiction. As McGuire (2008) observes, this tendency has intensified in recent years through the movement toward individualised moral orders built from personal judgments rather than institutional authority. The results are often uncertainty about where responsibility or blame should properly be assigned when harm occurs.

This issue is made more serious by the lack of official regulation: the practitioners and the clients do not have any institutional means of addressing the complaints. Neha (29), observes:

"When you are lied to by an astrologer, there is no machinery to protest, but you just pass by."

This regulatory loophole increases the risk of immorality within an ultra-commercialised, digitalized economy in which morality is increasingly privatised. Such regulatory absence is characteristic of broader neoliberal trends toward deregulation, where market expansion proceeds without institutional or ethical constraints.

In general, these results support the main argument of this paper: in the modern context, Hindu astrology does not function as a single, unified institution. Instead, it operates as a multi-faceted moral space in which different individuals face unequal moral stakes. These differences are shaped by factors such as gender, social status, and attachment to particular persons, fragmented authority, and an underlying regulatory deficit. Astrology can be supportive and meaningful, and it does not create a simple discontinuity in lived practice. At the same time, it puts women and low-income people at greater moral risk. These conditions are evaluated in the conclusion through an analysis of astrology's normativity via banality, rather than through a strict dichotomy between sacred and profane, or between belief and superstition, within contemporary Hinduism as part of the moral economy.

Case Studies

The four cases described below are analytically contrasted examples selected from a larger qualitative dataset. They are not meant to represent the 36 participants statistically. Instead, each scenario condenses a recurring tension discovered throughout the analysis: the conflict between *seva* and payment; the gendered effects of ritual counsel; the interaction between digital visibility and economic pressure; and the disintegration of authority among younger users. The instances are therefore read with, rather than instead of, the larger interviews and observational material.

Case 1: Limitations on Commercialization and Moral Authority

Pandit Ramesh (62) is an astrologer who was also trained in a *guru-shishya* (teacher-student) family tradition. His practice is inextricably connected with the religious reputation, the timekeeping in temples, and the annual calendar of the community without charging any fees. Salaries are paid in the form of voluntary *daksina* (honorarium or offering), and the informal discussions typically take

place after the morning service. In keeping with this stance, he frequently criticizes the internet and advertisements, labelling them as immoral.

In the interview, Pandit Ramesh stated:

"*Astrology does not aim at frightening or attachment. It is aimed at leading them into a compromise. The quality of what one has to offer should not be guaranteed with money in any way*."

Though unapologetic, Pandit Ramesh admits that he was losing out on some of his clients, particularly among younger people. He attributes this decline to the emergence of digital astrologers and to a broader social preference for quick solutions. However, he opposed the change in his practice, arguing that the theoretical constraints of online consultations and fixed pricing would undermine the moral boundaries that he regards as essential to astrology.

A critical interpretation of this situation suggests that, in Ramesh's framework, astrology has a value-rational character: moral legitimacy is prioritized over monetary calculation. His influence is therefore not rooted in market exchange but in moral constraint. Yet in present conditions, this form of moral economy appears increasingly fragile, contributing to the erosion of his relevance. This case also supports the paper's argument regarding ethical resistance being challenged within processes of Weberian rationalization, thereby questioning the durability of such resistance in formal terms.

Case 2: Ritualised Conformity and Gendered Fear

Suman (46), a homemaker from the lower middle class, first consulted an astrologer about her problems around five years ago, after her daughter postponed getting married. She was diagnosed with many of the astrological conditions after she consulted a personal astrologer. The astrologer recommended a comprehensive sequence of ceremonies and presented the disease as a *karma* disorder, more precisely, that which runs through the maternal lineage.

Suman recalled:

"He explained that such karma of the past was not supporting the future of my daughter. I felt accountable."

To cope with this burden, Suman went beyond social conventions by borrowing money from relatives, even though her finances were already strained. A couple of months later, she sought the opinion of another astrologer who rejected the previous prognosis. The ability to keep on with the feeling of guilt and to point to herself as the source of that guilt brought relief to her.

This case highlights how gendered expectations of morality can be emphasized through the idea that women, particularly mothers, are responsible for protecting family virtue and, by extension, shaping the family's fate. In this narrative, astrology functions as a mechanism of moral control, and the burden and responsibility of a mother rise accordingly. It is worth noting that Suman was not against astrology but was instead differentiating the right practitioners on the one hand and those who failed to meet the norms on the other hand, suggesting a form of evaluation rather than blind faith.

Overall, the case supports the paper's argument that consumerism and related market-driven practices undermine women, especially in family-related matters such as marriage, which are sensitive and emotionally charged issues. The enlarged explanation in the conclusion critically examines how the ethical impact of astrology has changed, as it is not a uniformly experienced phenomenon across society.

Case 3: Digital Visibility and Moral Ambiguity

Karan (34) is an astrologer who works online, primarily through Instagram and WhatsApp. His exposure, engagement, and immediate response determine his income because he has more than eighty thousand followers. To monetize this attention, he offers tiered consulting services, emphasizing quick solutions.

Observations from his online sessions show that his communication style is oriented toward urgency and emotional appeal.

Karan also thought about his practice: *"Lack of daily posting leads to the loss of readers. The algorithm determines the survival time. Anything regarding ethics is non-existent."*

However, Karan said that he was uncomfortable making predictions based on fear and apprehension. He argued that he was pressured to produce specific predictions to sustain audience attention, not because he wanted to, but because business demands it. This situation demonstrates how moral compromise can be mediated by platforms, where ethical considerations take a back seat in favour of algorithmically driven goals. In this environment, power is grounded less in traditional moral or familial standing and more in visibility and image. Karan's discomfort suggests an instance of ethical 'corruption', even when practiced by the players but painted as a necessity.

Sociologically, the case supports the broader claim that digitalization can promote moral reflexivity while simultaneously reducing individual responsibility. This tension is the paper's main theoretical input, discussed in the paper with reference to the concept of immanent criticism developed by Sayer.

Case 4: Fragmented Authority and Rational Beliefs

Rohit (24) is a postgraduate who uses social media and mobile applications to access astrology. Although he is not certain whether he is a religious person, he relies on astrology to help him choose his vocation and to manage stress during examinations.

He clarified: *"Although I do not necessarily hold all of this, it puts me at ease. I take what I do and leave the rest of it."*

Rohit adopts a comparative and selective approach to astrological knowledge despite approaching astrology as a fixed body of doctrine. He does cross-platform forecasting, comparing his own evaluation and discussion with peer evaluation and those of astrologers. He has also paid for premium services on Apps rather than relying on traditional rituals. In this case, there is moral pluralism and pragmatic religiosity. For Rohit, astrology functions less as an authority and more as a symbolic language that enables personal expression. It is not coercive; its meaning depends on interpretation and on the individual who 'holds' it. This shift reallocates moral responsibility away from the authority of astrologers and reduces the likelihood of exploitation. The case of Rohit shows that younger users transform astrology into modular content rather than a moral authority, which exchanges moral responsibility and exploitation. Such disjointed power as developed in the conclusion reassembles religion in lived experience without destroying moral concern.

More broadly, these case studies highlight the heterogeneity of contemporary practices in astrology in Jammu. They show that astrology functions according to several moral principles, such as platform-based compromise, moral restraint, and astute consumption. Rather than indicating a single trajectory of development or continuity, the cases reveal a pattern of moral negotiation alongside unequal exposure to ethical and moral risk. They support the paper's main argument: contemporary astrological practices in Jammu should be analysed through the sociology of moral economy, where faith, fear, profit, and ethics are continually reconstructed.

Conclusion

This research investigated the moral economy of astrology using qualitative data from Jammu. The results show that astrology's role within contemporary Hinduism is not simply disappearing, but being re-established and reconfigured. While harmonious practices, guided by *dharma*, service, and lineage, remain visible, they coexist with forms that have become professionalised, market-driven, and digitally mediated. As a result, astrology occupies a distinct social space in which customers and astrologers actively debate the morality of the practice, the

acceptability of financial transactions, and the appropriate use of astrological knowledge.

With the emergence of market logic, moral thought does not lose its influence; instead, it prefigures ethical judgment in ways that are observable, interrogative, and public. Drawing on Weberian frameworks of rationalisation, the analysis shows how the art of astrology has evolved and increasingly taken on the features of a standard profession emphasising calculability, fixed pricing, and time-limited consultations. At the same time, it implies that the persistence of value-rational orientations rooted in moral duty generates a tension between moral obligations and instrumental efficiency.

Grounding in Thompson's concept of moral economy, the findings suggest that, in Jammu, personal relations between astrologers and clients persist, supported by values of moderation, sincerity, and responsibility. At the same time, when transactions are structured to avoid exaggerated claims, fear-producing projections, or aggressive monetisation, clients are more likely to interpret exchanges as legitimate and normal trade instead of as ethical offences. Sayer's notion of 'immanent critique' further clarifies how ethical reasoning operates from within markets and digital networks, rather than standing outside them. Digitisation does not eliminate ethical practice; instead, it reshapes it. Algorithms may increase competition and weaken traditional forms of responsibility, but they do not wholly remove moral constraints from the relationship between provider and client.

The results indicate that astrology in Jammu functions as a diverse moral economy that combines religious authority, professional practice, market trade, and digital mediation. Commercialization does not inherently replace moral thinking; rather, it produces new contexts in which players assess justice, accountability, and legitimacy. Traditional lineage and ritual expertise continue to give symbolic authority, but professionalization and digital exposure provide new sources of recognition. The presence of stratified spiritual economies in the region indicates that commodification is negotiated locally rather than unfolding as a uniform, universal process. Contemporary Hindu astrology continues to function here as a moral economy, shaped and pressured by the internet, capitalism, and broader cultural dynamics. These forces reconfigure struggles over moral authority, underscoring the central role of ethical argumentation in the religion's ongoing survival.

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Abhinandan is an Assistant Professor in Sociology at Government Degree College Bochahan, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, (completed Ph.D. from Department of Sociology, University of Jammu), drabhinandandadhichi@gmail.com, ORCID-0009-0006-9962-3276

Abha Chauhan is a Professor, Centre for Kashmir Studies, Central University of Himachal Pradesh), abhaveer@gmail.com, ORCID- 0000-0002-5223-4699

Book Review: Work Appropriation of Low-wage Workers in the Service Sector: The Reproduction of Society

Author: Ipsita Pradhan

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Book Review

Work Appropriation of Low-wage Workers in the Service Sector: The Reproduction of Society. By Antonia Kupfer, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024, (ISBN: 9781035321674), 164 pp.

--Ipsita Pradhan

Who are the people who put food items on display in supermarkets so that consumers can pick up with ease? Who cleans the aisles? Who does the billing? How do these workers perceive their own work? In answering these questions, Antonia Kupfer underlines the workers in supermarket chains of the food retail sector who are often invisibilized amidst the never- ending rows and stacks of food in supermarkets. This visibilizing of the workers at the lower end of occupational hierarchy, characteristic of Kupfer's scholarship, becomes crucial in a post pandemic context which has experienced their indispensability. The book's focus on workers in Germany and the United States (U.S.) in the low-waged service sector foregrounds the workers' perception of their work, going beyond the narratives of capitalist exploitation of labour in the service sector.

In contemporary times where the world is grappling with food shortage, worsened with external circumstances such as wars, forced displacement, environmental catastrophe, draughts, the reader is compelled to think about the food on her plate. Kupfer then, turns the gaze towards the labouring body in the supermarket. She employs a comparative, Marxist perspective to understand the linkages between the labouring bodies and the economic regimes of Germany and the US which are different in the way retail work and its training is organised. The intensive review of literature makes it convenient for the reader to understand the concepts and theories used in the book. Work appropriation, worker subjectivities, use-value and exchange value are thoroughly discussed, thereby providing an engaging read.

Kupfer emphasises the social and political contexts in which the work appropriation takes place which is why the U.S. and Germany become relevant. She broadens the understanding of work appropriation by emphasising the design of work's content wherein recognition and remuneration become important. The vivid qualitative research design in the methodology section is crucial for linking theories and the empirical data that are unpacked systematically in the chapters. The rich description compels the reader to invest in the workers' biographies. The social status of retail work in both the countries is also underlined. In the U.S. work in the service sector reflects instability and low-ended nature whereas in Germany this is marked by career aspirations because of institutionalised professional training which gives a sense of valorisation with prospects for growth.

How do employees think about their work? Kupfer argues that use value forms a crucial part of their thinking about their work. Use-value forms work

appropriation through different modes- evident in professional knowledge, labour power and work ethos thereby actively constructing the importance and respectability of their work. She recognises that work activity is crucial in subject formation of the workers. There are two broad patterns of activity- continuity and change- found in the US and Germany respectively which relate to the work and living conditions of the workers with regards to their rights, their knowledge, nature and components of work. 'Continuity' in the U.S. context refers to the perseverance of workers in the working conditions in the face of hardships and unsatisfactory working conditions. This is also marred by the fact of lack of other options. 'Change' in the German context refers to the attitude of the workers towards their work, possibly due to the scope of upward mobility.

Kupfer argues that work appropriation is not a unidimensional process. It is an amalgamation of individual, political and social processes, explicated in her work through the many accounts of supermarket clerks. While she points at the embeddedness of the workers in the societal and political contexts which shape them, there is a paucity of engagement with multiple identities beyond work. For instance, an engagement with the gendered realities and expectations of service work in the life of these workers would have been useful in gauging the gendered everyday lives. Attention to emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and aesthetic labour (Warhurst et.al, 2000) in service work would have pointed at the underlying gendered processes that constitute and reconstitute appropriate masculinities and femininities through and of labour in the service sector. Similarly, connotations of work appropriations would have been richer with analyses of migrant workers' experiences with customers and plausible marginalisation.

However, it is an essential read in the field of sociology of work, given its in-depth engagement with literature in the domain of work prioritising worker's voices and lived experiences and providing a lucid description of methodology which can guide students on their own projects. This focus on worker's voices and perception about their work is a strong critique to the idea of bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018). It opens up exciting possibilities of similar work in the context of Global South where work appropriation might have very different connotations with the intersecting realities of caste, class, gender, religion, language and ethnicity to name a few.

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Ipsita Pradahan is an independent Scholar

Book Review: HYDERABAD THEN AND NOW "Film City and Urbanism in India-Hyderabad from Princely City – Global City 1890-2000"

Author: Senbaga Priya

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Book Review

HYDERABAD THEN AND NOW

"Film City and Urbanism in India-Hyderabad from Princely City – Global City 1890-2000" by C. Yamini Krishna Cambridge University Press, (ISBN 100958382)

--Senbaga Priya

To know a city, one may attempt at bringing perspectives from its visible structures-monuments, culture, economy, history, markets, people etc, but the author of "Film City and Urbanism in India-Hyderabad From Princely City – Global City 1890-2000 " Yamini Krishna brings the lens of understanding the transition and origin of the city of Hyderabad from a Princely city through the emergence and expansion of films as a culture and practice of the Nawabs and the Colonial population to that of the common people further deriving urbanism to the geography. The book, through its chapters, establishes a shared relationship between the socio-cultural, economic, and political institutions of films and the city. The narrative begins with the introduction to the historiographies of the colonial sub-continent of India, where the imperialists introduced films and cameras, but their impact refrained from establishing stories of the nation and kept many locations, as Yamini mentions in reference to Richard Eaton's work on "A Social History of the Deccan", the cities as Hyderabad, as '*insignificant geographies*'. It emphasizes throughout the book to *reimagine film histories* beyond stacking few films into textual analysis, through various examples of film's emergence in the late colonial period into the princely city of the Nawabs which for many travelling was a '*fantasy land'*, then into the cantonments and stations of Secunderabad for the officers and sepoys and other locations of Secunderabad which were slowly becoming commercial with addition of railways, photography, etc. The book, with all its profundity, brings in the details of how Hyderabad got identified by the British, the establishment of the British Residency at Chandarghat, influenced local traders into expanding business, films were being introduced by the orientalists while travelling, and creating networks of patronage. In the first two chapters, the use of archival sources of newspaper cuttings, film posters, advertisements, author's recreated maps, pictures, etc visually represent the content discussed on how the printed or published sources were dynamic of information with regards to the languages used to print, the images/ caricatures and designs of the advertisements and plans and layouts of the respective maps of palace, cityscapes, residencies and even film studios / previously known cinemas. From the themes of finding a city as a

capital for films to its alternatives and agendas for representation and profit maximisation, the book, in its initial chapters, delves widely into the *upper-class caste* and princely or colonially *powerful, influential demography of the male identity*. The regulatory bodies, like the Department of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, ultimately controlled which films would be distributed and viewed, with the ultimate powers of what to be viewed and where, along with the British officials. In the late colonial period,films focused on local relevance due to the wide range of audience, and before that, they were integrated to cater to the networks of the princes, colonials, and other Europeans in the Deccan region. Reasoning its initial days, the film business in most parts of the country ran on the patronage of the noble patriarchs of the Princely geography, with advantages being given to companies with '*Mulki'* (of the state/ local) status. The rent for establishing the capital also depended on the stability or mobility of films; the touring tents of film projection cost *three annas,* and a permanent cinema house cost 6 annas. Several projectors noted how touring tents were perfect for the people of India, as they liked that this system belonged to a *barbaric age,* and all the money collected was sent as war funds. Subsequently discussion extends to the creation of a modern city, from identifying consciousness as a state through the creation of urban spaces in reference to colonial civility and the use of 'moving pictures as a *powerful political weapon'* controlled by the state.

There existed a tension between the Nizam, his nobles, and the British officials, with accusations concerning a lack of etiquette and decorum in the theatres. The Britishers emphasized *reforming the existing traditions* of behaviour and etiquette inside the theatres, performing the *powers of conduct* that can be witnessed in the PVR INOX's cinema chains, which have constructed a culture of regulation on how to behave, sit, speak, view, eat an and perform inside cinema halls. The films we watch today are colonially designed within a capitalistic setup of control and regulation. Losing power over spaces was a source of anxiety for the British, who created a narrative of standards and hygiene to instil panic. This narrative was used in their civilizing missions for the people of the Deccan. With the surging issues between the Nawab and the British officials, an incident of fire in the Moti Mahal Cinema, and the reactions to it by the Nizam, blaming the women's morality and desires to watch films by subscribing to *Western pursuits* to have killed many in the fire.

With time, films became a part of the state, influencing urban planning. The city of Hyderabad was never directly under colonial rule; its urban spaces were largely governed and influenced by the princely state. Post the decolonization episode, the heads of state wanted to keep it far from the solutions of India and Pakistan, as independent by itself, *resisting the story of*

communalism. The attention of conflicts extended to religion, language, and territory, the most critical one being the one over the national language, as either Hindi or Urdu. The Hyderabad state abstained from taking either side of the debates, accepting the mother tongues of *Urdu, Telugu, Marathi, and Kanarese* (Kannada). The chapters then discuss the historicity of language and its different descriptions and compositions, specifically Urdu. The state of Hyderabad became spatially violent with the police action and national attention of the community into the categories of Hindus and Muslims. And amidst the chaos, film production centres in Bombay and Madras were well established and competing, and Hyderabad was a tabula *rasa,* requiring the production of culture. Madras was the hub for productions of all the South Indian languages, including Telugu, and it wasn't until the 1950s and 60s films began getting produced in Hyderabad. During the same period, *linguistic markets* were being created for screening films in the Deccan.

Then, with the recommendations of the States Reorganisation Commission, Andhra Pradesh was formed as a state on linguistic lines with Hyderabad as its capital. By the 1960s, the state government cultivated a space for cinema through strategic combinations of *subsidies, awards, and infrastructure incentives*. The government encouraged the Telugu film industry to move from Madras (Chennai) to Hyderabad, which Yamini discusses in great detail in the second half of the book. The formation of Andhra Pradesh somehow overshadowed the history and culture of the region from and above Hyderabad, leading to the Telangana Movement in 1969, countering the Telugu identity represented by actors like NT Rama Rao (NTR).

Cinema is an industry and an institution that constitutes an identity, bringing all the migrants from different networks together to make films, like the regulatory boards, costume designers, renters, and electricity, with many other allied The new city and the westernized capital of Hyderabad, with the coming of liberalisation, have become not only a regional capital but also a business capital, where even today most spaces are owned by upper caste men or foreign capitalists. The city slowly became a tourist attraction with old monuments and museums from the Nawabi and Colonial times, and the modern constructions like IT parks, Film Nagar, Ramoji Film City, HITEC City, etc, transformed the cityscape of memory and modernity, travelling via the old city where the Charminar, Salarjung Museum, etc resides to that of surreal glass buildings in the new side of developments. Somewhat parallel to the colonial capital of Secunderabad and Hyderabad, the centre of attention has shifted towards the HITEC; the spaces in between remain confused with transitions of old people and moralities with new structures. The new space has INOX PVRs and IMAX theatres, with 3D options and huge screens projecting big-budget films, and a culture of *private-public leisure*. Now, the

movies are openly propaganda-based, political, social, and problematic, catering to box-office hits and unimaginable profits. A clear transition of the Princely city to a Global city, where women remain hidden inside the masculine capitalist structures, films depict misogyny and casteism, the sons of the father actors become the new rising stars, and yet the tall glass pillars remain high on the metropolis of Hyderabad, its performativity of westernization floats, and the reality remains on land of being artificial to its own people with conservatively new culture bring produced by these urban infrastructure of modern feudal-capitalists defined by their caste identities in the screen and outside the screen. This comprehensive historiographic account of the contemporary urban spaces, with exhaustive references to accounts from the archives, has designed a new lens one would look at the city of Hyderabad today via stories of films and its voyages in the Deccani region. There existed a tension between the Nizam, his nobles, and the British officials, with accusations concerning a lack of etiquette and decorum in the theatres. The Britishers emphasized reforming the existing traditions of behaviour and etiquette inside the theatres, performing the powers of conduct that can be witnessed in the PVR INOX's cinema chains, which have constructed a culture of regulation on how to behave, sit, speak, view, eat an and perform inside cinema halls. The films we watch today are colonially designed within a capitalistic setup of control and regulation. Losing power over spaces was a source of anxiety for the British, who created a narrative of standards and hygiene to instil panic. This narrative was used in their civilizing missions for the people of the Deccan. With the surging issues between the Nawab and the British officials, an incident of fire in the Moti Mahal Cinema, and the reactions to it by the Nizam, blaming the women's morality and desires to watch films by subscribing to Western pursuits to have killed many in the fire. With time, films became a part of the state, influencing urban planning. The city of Hyderabad was never directly under colonial rule; its urban spaces were largely governed and influenced by the princely state. Post the decolonization episode, the heads of state wanted to keep it far from the solutions of India and Pakistan, as independent by itself, resisting the story of communalism. The attention of conflicts extended to religion, language, and territory, the most critical one being the one over the national language, as either Hindi or Urdu. The Hyderabad state abstained from taking either side of the debates, accepting the mother tongues of Urdu, Telugu, Marathi, and Kanarese (Kannada). The chapters then discuss the historicity of language and its different descriptions and compositions, specifically Urdu. The state of Hyderabad became spatially violent with the police action and national attention of the community into the categories of Hindus and Muslims. And amidst the chaos, film production centres in Bombay and Madras were well established and competing, and Hyderabad was a tabula rasa, requiring the

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Cinema is an industry and an institution that constitutes an identity, bringing all the migrants from different networks together to make films, like the regulatory boards, costume designers, renters, and electricity, with many other allied businesses striving and occupying the spaces.

The new city and the westernized capital of Hyderabad, with the coming of liberalisation, have become not only a regional capital but also a business capital, where even today most spaces are owned by upper caste men or foreign capitalists. The city slowly became a tourist attraction with old monuments and museums from the Nawabi and Colonial times, and the modern constructions like IT parks, Film Nagar, Ramoji Film City, HITEC City, etc, transformed the cityscape of memory and modernity, travelling via the old city where the Charminar, Salarjung Museum, etc resides to that of surreal glass buildings in the new side of developments. Somewhat parallel to the colonial capital of Secunderabad and Hyderabad, the centre of attention has shifted towards the HITEC; the spaces in between remain confused with transitions of old people and moralities with new structures. The new space has INOX PVRs and IMAX theatres, with 3D options and huge screens projecting big-budget films, and a culture of private-public leisure. Now, the movies are openly propaganda-based, political, social, and problematic, catering to box-office hits and unimaginable profits.

A clear transition of the Princely city to a Global city, where women remain hidden inside the masculine capitalist structures, films depict misogyny and casteism, the sons of the father actors become the new rising stars, and yet the tall glass pillars remain high on the metropolis of Hyderabad, its performativity of westernization floats, and the reality remains on land of

being artificial to its own people with conservatively new culture bring produced by these urban infrastructure of modern feudal-capitalists defined by their caste identities in the screen and outside the screen. This comprehensive historiographic account of the contemporary urban spaces, with exhaustive references to accounts from the archives, has designed a new lens one would look at the city of Hyderabad today via stories of films and its voyages in the Deccani region.

Senbaga Priya is an Independent Scholar

Reflexive Essay: Tribute to my teachers

Author: Sujata Jha

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Tribute to my teachers

-- Sujata Jha

Bio-note:

Dr. Sujata Jha was Assistant Professor in Sociology at Christ Church College [2010-11], Miranda House [2013], Kamla Nehru College [2013], as in Amity University Patna [2021] and Jamia Hamdard University, New Delhi [2024-2026]. She has been awarded gold medal for her masters in Sociology at Jadavpur University by Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi in University convocation. She has been awarded ICSSR Post-doctoral fellowship in Sociology at IIT Patna. The shift of her ICSSR Post-doctorate to IIT Delhi has been approved by Ministry of Education on 10th September 2026.

This is a tribute to my parents, my first teachers, to all my school and University teachers and all my students through all the years of schools to university, It also attribute to all the philosophers who have pulled me up through their thoughts, who have taught me and supported me through thick and thin, thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Happy teacher's day (5th September)... Here is to life, the best teacher I have had.

I was going through the goodbye letters by students of class 5 and 6 from Delhi Public School, Kanpur from 2011 in my Facebook history and they warmed my heart for their genuineness and the regard with which they ask me not to leave. They have written poems and heartwarming words of remembrance and gratitude inside the cards made by them for me while leaving, asking me not to leave which I hold onto with fond remembrance. The positive reviews of students of Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Nursing and International Relations from Jamia Hamdard whom I taught Sociology, UGC Value added Course 'Understanding India' and Digital Technology and World Politics from 2024-2026 bring a lot of pride to my academic sense of being.

My mother

A special thanks to my first teacher, my mother, Shrimati Sheela Jha, who has been with me through thick and thin and in true sense, the strongest woman I know. In face of difficulties, she stood like a pillar beside me, encouraging me to take the professional path in Sociology at Jamia Hamdard where I taught as Assistant Professor Sociology from 23rd September 2024 to 30th June 2026. The late nights I used to study for my exams at Presidency College and Jadavpur University in Calcutta, my mother would not sleep till I slept. If I came back late from work at The Telegraph, she never questioned why or never held any boundaries which prohibited me from working in media or teaching. My nanaji, her father, was late Shri Parmeshwari Dutt Jha, an advocate by profession, who stopped practicing due to persistence on truth. My nanaji was one of the best practicing Gandhians I have seen. Wearing a simple dhoti in a simple village called Kisanpur in Jharkhand; he used to teach village children the path of Bhagvat Gita. Soot kaatte the (he used to spin cotton thread using a charkha as is seen in the Gandhian logo, a path which Gandhi ji used to propagate in his urge for village reliance and self-sufficiency. As told by my mother, in the well around his village, there was no one practicing casteim, no one was prohibited to drink water from the same well. He gave up

several acres of his land during Bhoodan movement; he was highly influenced by Vinoba Bhave ji.

My father

A special mention to my father Late Shri Gyanendra Kumar Jha without whose support I wouldn't be where I am today. One of the most feminist men known to me, ever encouraging, even though he is not with me in this world, he will forever be guiding me in spirit and soul. He was the one who first took me for the entrance exam of Sociology at Presidency College Calcutta and waited outside while I wrote the exam. When I received the Gold medal in Sociology at Jadavpur University for my masters in Sociology, from the stage I could see the tears of joy and pride in my father's eyes. Ever encouraging in my career, when I found it difficult, he took me to Gandhi Maidan bus stand so that I could take a bus to IIT Patna for my ICSSR post-doctoral fellowship at IIT Patna. He was more proud of me than I was. Even when it was easy to judge me he never did, never made me feel bad for being the revolutionary spirit that I was. I respect his journey as much as I respect him as a personality. My grandfather Late Shri Lakshmikant Jha was the first Chief Justice of High Court of Patna after independence.

My guide

Special mention of my Ph.D. supervisor, Professor Arvinder A. Ansari who patiently took me through the journey of my Ph.D. thesis of Sociology at Jamia Millia Islamia . She took special efforts to connect to me at Patna for me to teach at Jamia Hamdard when people from prospective work place could not reach me. Had it not happened to me, I wouldn’t have believed a Ph.D. supervisor can connect to her friend in Magadh Mahila, Patna so that she could send a driver to my house in Patna, get in touch with my mother in order to send information that I had gotten through Jamia Hamdard as Assistant Professor Sociology, I had stopped checking emails. Guides in life should be like her, supportive for her students and taking the extra effort when it really matters.

Professor Neshat Quaiser is an esteemed sociologist, retired Professor of Sociology from Jamia Millia Islamia. He was very supportive when I had joined as a Ph.D. scholar in Jamia Millia Islamia, he was Head of Department then. He gave me the chance to teach Sociology to BA programme students in 2016 1st semester in Jamia Millia Islamia and gave me an excellent letter of recommendation for my teaching and sociology presentations. He still enquires at times about where am I teaching and his number is given at places where I want to teach as a reference. While trying to finish my Ph.D., the way he motivated on phone calls, I will never forget. His elegance as a Sociology professor is unmatched.

Sometimes when we used to go to get our Ph.D. fellowship documents signed, daant dete the, "bhago yaha se, bandar ke bachche", out of affection he would scold us, if we would go while he was writing papers or while doing some departmental work. We never used to mind after getting scolded after coming out of his office, me and Dr. Badre Afshan, my phd batch mate at Jamia Millia Islamia. When we respect teachers, we give them the right to scold us. One should not demean the authority of professors by taking away the right to scold.

Some Ex-students of him, Rashid Ali said about Professor Quaiser in regard, "He is indeed one of the finest minds. I have learnt a lot from him despite not being his direct student." He added with admiration, " other than what he does to Sociology or Sociology does to him, he is one of the rarest persons in India who has commanding authority on English, Urdu and Hindi". Scholar and Author Dr. Faizal Nazir wrote, "He is very kind soul." Claudia Preckel, a German academic added, "He is a very kind person and supported our project on Unani Medicine! I enjoyed reading many of his publications!".

Meer Iqbal Meer an ex-student added in glee about Professor Neshat Quaiser, "He is a pure love and one of the best professor that I have come across." One of his old friends Sumant Sharan, activist from Patna with affection, adds, "आपके प्रो० Neshat Quaiser मेरे बहुत पुराने मित्र हैं - पटना से ही। वे अपनी अकादमिक हैसियत के अलावा उर्दू साहित्य के बड़े गहरे जानकार एवं रचनाकार भी हैं। आपने उर्दू, हिन्दी तथा अंग्रेजी (इसमें बांग्ला भी शामिल कर सकती हैं) पर उनकी स्वाभाविक पकड़ के बारे में जो बात कही है, उसमें मैं एक दिलचस्प तथ्य जोड़ना चाहूंगा। वह चाहे उर्दू में बोल रहे होते हैं या हिन्दी में, यदि आपने उन्हें ज़रा भी उत्तेजित कर दिया तो वे सीधे अंग्रेजी पर उतर आते हैं! आपने उनकी इतनी तारीफ की है, दोस्त के नाते मुझे भी बड़ा फ़ख़्र होता है।"

(Your Prof. Neshat Quaiser is a very old friend of mine—from our time in Patna. Beyond his academic standing, he is also a profound scholar of Urdu literature and a writer in his own right. Regarding your observation about his natural command over Urdu, Hindi, and English (to which one might even add Bengali), I would like to share an interesting detail: whether he is speaking in Urdu or Hindi, if you happen to provoke him even slightly, he immediately switches to English!)

You have spoken so highly of him; as his friend, I feel a great sense of pride.

Another particular moment of learning, one can learn from SRK Bollywood actor Shahrukh Khan the ways of secularism. Married to a Hindu woman, the way he dances in Holi with her as seen in a video on Facebook is not just a moment of love but a moment of saying: your faith is as much mine as yours. When I saw in a video that his children know and practice both faiths, practicing Muslims come and correct him and children while reading the Quran and at that moment, he wants to be the 'good Muslim' and that is respect worthy. His look at that moment is don't question me whether I am a good Muslim even if am married to a Hindu and I think that's very strong. At the same time Gauri made sure children practice the Hindu dharma as well, not giving up their individuality for each other. He doesn't just awe on stage or movies but there is an undeniable genuineness to him, a rawness which is a bit rare.

I believe in a single life, with no space for marriage or men in it. I am happy co living with my mother, my first teacher, this feels like the best way to be. When did it become the normal to leave our mothers and opt for marriage? A special mention to my parents, my first teacher, my ma, Sheela Jha and my father, Late Shri Gyanendra Kumar Jha. I thank all my teachers in my school G D Birla, special thanks to Ms. Sunanda Das , my English teacher who taught with so much patience and grace, Ms. Sujata Bhattacharyya for being our l class teacher with immense grace and teaching us geography brilliantly till Class 12, Sangeeta Mukherjee for being our class teacher in class 7 and teaching us Biology and English. A special mention to my Sociology teacher in class 11 and 12 in GD

Birla, Professor Urmimala Sarkar, who was the reason I took up Sociology, she taught with finesse and by just being herself. She made being strong a lesson I took away from school from her, we were very lucky to have her as a Sociology teacher. Ms. Anjana Saha for being our class teacher in class 11 and teaching us English in a way that we wanted to read Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and Nehru's Discovery of India, not because we had to but because we looked forward to her classes. A special thanks to Mrs. Meena Sharma who taught us Hindi in Class 11 and 12. I remember she used to write 'Prayas achcha hai' when we used to write decent answers in hindi while interpreting Mahadevi Verma and Premchand, we looked forward to this comment from her and it meant a lot. Getting back our Hindi copies meant asking each other in class "tujhe mila kya, prayas achcha hai"? I took away the lesson that it matters whether you do well, but it matters more that 'Prayas achcha hona chahiye'.

A special gratitude to my college Presidency University, Kolkata where I did my graduation in Sociology and received National Merit Scholarship Scheme award from MHRD for my results in Graduation in Sociology in 2006. Gratitude and respect to teachers in Jadavpur University where I did my masters in Sociology, we were the first batch of Masters in Sociology at Jadavpur University, Calcutta (2006-2008). A special thanks to Professors in Jadavpur University who thought I was worth the gold medal for my masters in Sociology recieved in 2008 from then Governor of West Bengal, Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi in University convocation. Special thanks to Professor Dalia Chakrabarti, HOD, Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University Professor Bipul Kumar Bhadra, Professor Ruby Sain, Professor Bula Bhadra, Professor Maitreyee Bardhan Roy who taught us Sociology in Jadavpur University from 2006-2008.

A Special mention to my PhD supervisor Professor Arvinder Ansari, Department of Sociology, JMI and Prof. Neshat Quaiser, retired from Department of Sociology Jamia Milia Islamia for being supportive during and after my Phd. A tribute to to my students in Universities Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi , Amity University where I have taught, colleges Christ Church College, Kanpur Miranda House Kamla Nehru, colleges where I have taught and school Delhi Public school Kanpur, where I Have taught. I profusely thank Ministry of Education for awarding me with ICSSR Postdoctoral fellowship award in 2021-22 and trusting me with IIT Delhi in 2026. I thank IIT Delhi for showing faith in me as their erstwhile Postdoctoral fellow, the honour is entirely mine.

Sujata Jha, ICSSR Postdoctoral scholar, IIT Delhi