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INTELLECTUAL RESONANCE

DCAC JOURNAL OF
INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Double-blind Peer-reviewed/Refereed)

Dec 2025, Volume 8

DELHI COLLEGE OF ARTS & COMMERCE

(UNIVERSITY OF DELHI)
NETAJI NAGAR, NEW DELHI-110023

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About *Intellectual Resonance*
DCAC Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

The DCAC Research Journal *Intellectual Resonance* is an annual interdisciplinary, double-blind peer-reviewed/refereed journal that provides Faculty and Research Scholars an academic space to submit their unpublished research papers, book reviews, and research essays for publication. The Journal caters to the disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences and is published in English. The Journal was started in 2013, with ISSN: 2321-2594. The Journal has an Editorial Advisory Board comprising scholars from Indian and Foreign Universities and Institutions. The Editorial Board comprises Prof. Srikant Pandey, Acting Principal, DCAC, as the Editor-in-Chief and Dr. Animesh Mohapatra, Associate Professor, English Department as Editor, along with a few other faculty members of the College as Members. The interdisciplinary foci of the Journal enable dialogues and convergences across disciplinary domains ranging from Literature, Cinema, Finance, Public Policy, Media and Cultural Studies, Communication Studies, History, Marketing, and allied subjects to name just a few. This diversity and range provides the readers and researchers a vibrant and rigourous academic opportunity for fostering critical thinking and participate in creating new areas of interdisciplinary research and knowledge dissemination.

About DCAC

Located in the quiet and peaceful enclave of Netaji Nagar in South Delhi, Delhi College of Arts & Commerce began its journey in 1987 as an institution of higher learning offering courses in humanities, social sciences and commerce. Over the years, the College has earned the distinction of being one of the most sought-after colleges in the University of Delhi. DCAC was a pioneer in introducing an Honours Programme in Journalism in the University of Delhi in 1989. The College has thirteen departments, offers eight undergraduate courses and several add-on/certificate courses that work in synergy to create opportunities for interaction and collaboration among different fields of study.

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Editorial

It gives us great delight and satisfaction to present to our readers volume 8 of *Intellectual Resonance: DCAC Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies,* a double-blind peer-reviewed/refereed research journal published annually by Delhi College of Arts & Commerce, University of Delhi. The 20 papers featured in it explore key areas of knowledge such as modes of attaining economic self-sufficiency, demography in the IT-BPO sector, sustainable & inclusive development, sources of economic equality, cultural hybridity, place of royal women in a democratic set up, cosmetics & the environment, indigenous culture, and urban alienation. These papers introduce refreshingly new approaches to various aspects of society, culture and economy, thereby reinforcing the interdisciplinary orientation of the journal.

The large number of submissions to the journal indicates its growing popularity among researchers and academics as a vibrant forum for the generation and dissemination of new knowledge. It will be in order here to acknowledge the valuable contribution of our anonymous reviewers and editorial board members, which has enabled us to maintain and improve the quality of the journal. We report with a measure of pride that *Intellectual Resonance* has been included among "Taiwan and Asia's Select HSS Journals" (https://p.udpweb.com/dac). Another piece of heartening news we would like to share with our readers is that *Intellectual Resonance* is going to be assigned a Control Number (LCCN) by the Library of Congress shortly. These developments will increase the visibility of our journal at the international level and will help our readers reach a wider and more diverse global readership.

We sincerely hope that our readers will find the research articles included in this volume of the journal illuminating and useful. Their suggestions and comments will certainly help us in our effort to achieve academic excellence.

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From Swadeshi to Atmanirbhar Bharat: The Evolution of India's Idea of Self-Reliance

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Abstract

Ever since Covid-19 induced supply chain disruptions and economic shutdown, several economies are rallying towards increasing protectionism. In India, there is a self-sufficiency angle added to that. This paper has tried to delineate the progression of economic nationalism in modern India – tracing its origins from the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements of 1905 C.E to the current Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative. Part I focuses on the epistemology of Swadeshi, emphasizing its economic, political, and spiritual aspects. It highlights the interaction between indigenous production, protectionism, and nationalist fervour during a pivotal period in India's national struggle against British imperialism. In Part II, there is an exploration of the links between Swadeshi and Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative of the current NDA Government, dissecting convergences and divergences. It studies how both movements centre around the idea of self-reliance but acknowledges the temporal and structural disparities that differentiate them. It also questions the necessity of establishing any linkages at all, whether atmanirbharata can be considered a modern iteration of Swadeshi.

Keywords: economic nationalism, *Swadeshi*, *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, self-reliance.

Inroduction

The *Swadeshi* and Boycott Movement, which followed the 1905 Bengal Partition, stimulated a boom in local manufacturing as a key politico-economic and social counter to British colonialism and industrial decline. Centred around economic independence, it formed a foundational element of poverty-stricken India's fight against colonization. By promoting domestic industries and snubbing imported products, *Swadeshi* fused economic nationalism with political disobedience.

Swadeshi: As a Philosophy and a Movement

Much work has been done which elucidates the nitty-gritties and the phenomenon of the 20th Century *Swadeshi* Movement. But as that is not the prime foray of this paper, I will mention a few relevant pointers which will help us in establishing its linkages – convergent or divergent – with 21st century *Atmanirbhar Bharat*.

Swadeshi in 1900s had multifarious layouts, but the most significant one is economic and its consequent political repercussions. Growth and expansion of early capitalism in India was conceived and encouraged. Some principal leaders including Gokhale pointed out that *Swadeshi* was a patriotic movement for 'the expansion of production by the rational harnessing of capital, enterprise and skill.' (Varma, 2006, p. 220). Tilak has also been noted to quote that economic malady wouldn't stop until there was industrial growth and *Swadeshi* was the most straightforward way to achieve that. (Varma, 2006, p. 225)

Clubbed with Boycott, *Swadeshi* was a wholesome, all–encompassing nationalist struggle which claimed more than a simple economic agenda, given its increasing political influences and impacts. (Bakane, Ali, Murlidhara, & Buwa, 2015, p. 108) Tilak's advocacy of boycott of foreign products was not without a simultaneous call for protectionism towards indigenous initiatives. He did recognize that, with political control of the country in foreign hands, much state protection wasn't possible, but people could still work towards cultivating a spirit of protection on their own initiative. V. P Varma writes, "in 1907, at a speech in Allahabad, Tilak pleaded for a protective tariff of our own by the boycott of foreign goods…" (Varma, 2006, p. 221)

Swadeshi's other faces – apart from political and economic – were spiritual and religious, with pioneers such as Aurobindo Ghosh and Bipin Chandra Pal. (Varma, 2006, p. 204) For the first time since 1857, masses were responding to the foreign threat with enthusiasm and vigour which was largely missing in the second half of the 19th century. Obviously, there were abounding reasons for that. Nationalism in India was not a result of just growth of capitalism. But brimming nationalism was a *raison d'etre* for and a consequence of *Swadeshi*. This relation of *Swadeshi* to Nationalism is to be noted here, as it will prove fruitful in understanding another argument later on in the paper.

Atmanirbhar Bharat

Atmanirbhar Bharat [ANB] literally translates to 'self-reliant India' and is used as an umbrella concept with respect to making India "a bigger and more

important part of the global economy", by making administration efficient and resilient and the market more competitive. Concepts of both *Swadeshi* and ANB deal with 'self-generating' to a large extent. However, there is another aspect to *Atmanirbhar* which wasn't even conceptually possible during the 1900s – of 'self-sustaining'.

To elaborate, the primary aim of ANB is to make the country and its citizens independent and self-reliant in every way. Five pillars of ANB as officially outlined rest on – Economy, Infrastructure, Technology Driven System, Vibrant Demography and Demand. In May 2020, the government announced the '*Atmanirbhar Bharat* Abhiyan' in four tranches; (the influx of money amounting to almost 10% of the then GDP). The package emphasized on land, labour, liquidity, and laws, including measures across many sectors such as MSME, cottage industries, middle class, migrants, industry, etc. which would help fulfilling the vision of a self-reliant economy. (*Atmanirbhar Bharat* Abhiyan, 2021)

Review of Literature

Upon reading the existing knowledge of literature, it is abundantly clear that ANB is often read as a contemporary re-articulation of the earlier *Swadeshi* movement rather than a completely new project. For example, Shikhare explicitly frames ANB as "a true *Swadeshi* movement," arguing that Modi's call to be "vocal for local" revives Gandhian *Swadeshi* economics while also warning that self-reliance must mean *glocalisation*—linking robust localisation with, not against, globalisation (Shikhare, 2020).

This is reflective of the fact that the most glaring difference between the status of native production in the Indian economy pre-and-post 1991 LPG reforms was protectionism in a closed economy vis-à-vis more nuanced and cohesive approach towards integrating the Indian economy with global supply chains – which only came to be heightened post pandemic. The slogan 'vocal for local' is accompanied by 'local for global' too.

Kumar (2021) also deepens this genealogy by tracing the idea of *atmanirbharta* from Gandhi's 'Hind Swaraj'— with its boycott of *videshi* goods and insistence on *Swadeshi* production and consumption — to PM's post-COVID stimulus packages, arguing that the slogan "local is vocal" is almost a replica of Gandhian appeals but risks remaining rhetorical if structural inequalities and dependence on foreign capital persist (Kumar, 2021).

Ghosh (2021) similarly sets ANB against the background of Gandhian *Swadeshi*, but places it within a longer political-economy trajectory from Nehruvian heavy-industry planning, the Green Revolution and later liberalisation–globalisation; she asks whether genuine self-reliance is possible in a mutually dependent global economy, using *Swadeshi* as a historical benchmark of moral-economic self-discipline (Ghosh, 2021).

Dalal and Malik (2024) also anchor ANB in Gandhi's ideas of Swaraj and *Swadeshi*, reading contemporary schemes—MSMEs, khadi promotion, Make in India, Skill India—as instruments to operationalise a long-standing quest for *Swadeshi*-based economic sovereignty and reduced import dependence (Dalal & Malik, 2024).

Within this broad consensus, Keshava's chapter makes the linkage most explicit by calling *Atmanirbhar Bharat* a "refined version of the Gandhi *Swadeshi* concept," defining *Swadeshi* through Gandhi's own words and presenting *Atmanirbhar* as a blend of "vocal for local" with openness to FDI and WTO-based trade—effectively re-casting *Swadeshi* for a globalised era (Keshava, 2022).

Taken together, these works construct a layered narrative: *Swadeshi* and Gandhi's vision of decentralised, village-centred, ethically grounded self-reliance provide the ideological and moral template; ANB re-deploys that template through fiscal packages, sectoral reforms and the "vocal for local" discourse while negotiating the realities of global value chains. The interlinkage lies in treating *Swadeshi* not merely as boycott or protectionism, but as a normative ideal of dignified, locally rooted production—an ideal that *Atmanirbhar Bharat* claims to inherit, reinterpret and implement under contemporary constraints of globalisation, technological change and post-pandemic recovery.

What is missing however, is a comprehensive comparative analysis of the whole spectrum of linkages between the two as a contributor to the existing knowledge base. Such a historical analysis is what this paper has tried to fulfil.

Method

Aim

This paper aims to examine the progression of self-reliance in India's nationalist narrative, mapping its path from the *Swadeshi* of the 1900s to the current *Atmanirbhar Bharat* program.

Objectives

Some primary objectives of this research include:

- To trace the historical evolution of self-reliance over the past century, identifying ideological and practical convergences and divergences;
- To analyse the economic foundations of both *Swadeshi* & Boycott and *Atmanirbhar* initiative, focusing on indigenous production and consumption, along with protectionism as drivers of economic nationalism;
- To explore how decolonization narratives in contemporary India draw on *Swadeshi*'s legacy to reframe Indian identity in a globalized context;
- To evaluate the validity and utility of comparing these movements, considering their distinct socio-political and economic contexts;

Research Questions

This study examines past and present forms of self-reliance, addressing these core research questions:

- How do the epistemic and operative aspects of self-reliance in *Swadeshi* align or vary from those of *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, and to what extent is the latter an updated version of the former?
- What influence, if any, has economic nationalism exercised itself on local manufacturing and protective policies in both eras? How have these adapted over time?
- Considering the chronological and institutional gaps between the movements, is linking them essential or beneficial, and what do these parallels reveal about India's nationalist path?

By answering the above mentioned, the research aims to enrich academic discussions on economic nationalism and decolonization, providing detailed perspectives on India's pursuit of autonomy.

Design of the Study

This research adopts a qualitative method of study. Obtaining data from various official and non-official sources, this study was designed to provide an in-depth analysis of the various elements of two policies which are often confused to be very similar, but are quite different in their conceptualisation and implementation. Examples like *Swadeshi* textile sectors and *Atmanirbhar Bharat*'s MSME programs demonstrate real-world applications of seemingly abstract policies.

Data Collection

Sources blended both primary and secondary works including Prime Ministers' speeches, official policy documents of the Government of India, Policy documents of the State Governments etc. Data was systematically collected using a historical review.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using comparative analysis and discourse evaluation. Important dimensions of *Swadeshi* and *Atmanirbhar Bharat* which were analysed included economic (local output, safeguards), political (state involvement, civic engagement), and social (identity-building) realms.

Results

Table 1. Results of Comparative Analysis

Aspect	Tilak's *Swadeshi* Movement	Modi's *Atmanirbhar Bharat* Abhiyan	Similarities / Overlaps
Nature	Political and socio-economic movement against colonial rule, rooted in nationalism.	Economic and developmental policy initiative for self-reliant India in the globalized era.	Both emphasize **self-reliance** and reducing dependence on external forces.
Historical Context	Launched in 1905 during the Bengal Partition by the British, as a resistance strategy against colonial exploitation.	Launched in 2020 amid COVID-19 pandemic and global supply-chain disruptions, highlighting vulnerabilities of external dependency.	Both emerged as **responses to crises** (colonial oppression vs. pandemic & global disruptions).
Purpose	To boycott British goods, promote indigenous industry, revive Indian craftsmanship, and fuel nationalist sentiment.	To strengthen domestic industries, boost manufacturing, encourage innovation, reduce imports, and enhance global competitiveness.	Both aim at **economic empowerment of the nation**.

(Contd...)

Aims	Political freedom through economic self-sufficiency; revival of *Swadeshi* industries; cultural revival.	Economic resilience, technological advancement, job creation, stronger supply chains, positioning India as a global hub.	Both stress **indigenous production** and **empowerment of local enterprises**.
Economic Dimension	Focused on cottage industries, khadi, handicrafts, and local products as symbols of resistance.	Focuses on MSMEs, digital economy, defence manufacturing, renewable energy, and global integration of Indian economy.	Both promote **domestic production**, but scale and sectors differ.
Political Dimension	Instrument of anti-colonial struggle and mass mobilization against British imperialism.	A development vision within sovereign India, not anti-foreign but aiming at balanced globalization.	Both tied to **national identity** and **political legitimacy**.
Cultural Dimension	Strong cultural revivalist undertone: invoking pride in Indian civilization, traditions, and self-sufficiency.	Uses slogans like *"Vocal for Local"* to build cultural pride around Indian goods and traditions.	Both appeal to **cultural pride and nationalism**.
Global Outlook	Inward-looking, emphasizing resistance to foreign rule and goods.	Outward-looking, aiming to make India a global manufacturing hub while reducing overdependence.	Both recognize the need for **domestic strength as the basis of global presence**.
Impact	Laid the foundation for Indian independence movement; created nationalist consciousness and economic resistance.	Shaping economic reforms, industrial policies, and India's global positioning; long-term impact still unfolding.	Both served as **turning points in India's politico-economic trajectory**.

Discussion: Linkages

Convergences

There are obvious linkages between the two: both focus on indigenous production and creating an efficient self-generating economy. Albeit there were political and social ramifications which surrounded *Swadeshi* and have begun to surround ANB, they both are at its core, serving economic needs of a people. Boycott of 1905 can be interpreted as protectionism today which plagues globalisation. It is a characteristic of not just India, but many leading economies of 21st century. As mentioned earlier, protective tariffs in 1900s weren't structurally plausible given the alien government; presently, however, many indigenous budding industries and sectors which cannot withstand the hurricane of free and open market are lent support. ANB albeit doesn't propound protectionism word to word, there is an inherent undercurrent of such a mindset.

Protectionism can only flourish a people when it is compiled with a strong alternative supply to meet the demand. On delineating the overall trajectory of Indian economy, we can say that protectionism as a sentiment and economic

tool, has struck us Indians for the first time since our economy opened post 1991 – the only other relevant modern example coming from Boycott of 1905. That is a long way. Consider the following proposition for pondering over this.

The foundations of manufacturing were definitely laid in 1905 when several businesses sprung up for the cause of nationalism and curbing deindustrialization. Over the decades, post – independence, capitalism balanced socialism delicately with Mahalanobis Model, Indira Gandhi's' nationalization of enterprises, LPG Reforms of 1991 and finally the Make in India era of Prime Minister Modi. The trajectory described above reflects the classic transition from a closed to an open economy. Having been swept into globalisation after liberalisation at the turn of the 21st century, we have only recently – following the pandemic – consolidated a protectionist approach.

Divergences

Once we start to clarify the similarities between the two concepts and jot them down in point format, it becomes complementarily clear what the differences between the two are as well. The major divergence stems from the fact that they took place over almost a century of each other and these very years saw the polity and economy of the subcontinent and the State of India change vastly. *Swadeshi* and Boycott [S&B] took place as a popular uprising against an oppressive government. All facets lead us to the conclusion of a down-to-up approach in whatever capitalism or nationalism followed. ANB has an important feature of government support embedded into it. It is not even close to any uprising against the authorities.

Another divergence which logically follows the coattails of the above-mentioned difference is the leadership of these two movements. While S&B was plentily riddled with several contributors right from Surendranath Banerjee, Anandamohan Bose, Aurobindo Ghose, Bipin Chandra Pal and Rabindranath Tagore in the east to stalwarts like Tilak and Gokhale in the west, ANB – by the virtue of existing in a politically free India – has technically, just one leader: the elected leader of the people. It is he who runs the policy and creates pointers for the areas of expansion of self-reliance. Should ANB expand into varying spheres – education, space, defence etc., it would be because of him and should it put its feet down and rest, it would be because of him. This scenario could be interpreted as grim – that a whole movement relies on one individual alone – were it not for the fact that he is an elected

leader of the masses. Every five years, it is the people of the nation who take decisions – in whatever little way – of the policy that is going to be pursued by the government of the country in the prospective future. In that sense, ANB is much more decentralised than S&B ever was because it now has a centralised leadership, unlike in 1900s when there were pockets of resistance against the British and a spurt of economic nationalism which might/not have witnessed sustainability.

Moreover, the scope of ANB is much more encompassing than *Swadeshi* ever was – obviously the technological changes of a century have to be accounted for. ANB deals with varying expanding industrial and other sectors of a sovereign state while S&B dealt with showcasing frustration of an oppressed psyche towards a government which was exploitative at its very core. In many ways, therefore, S&B can only be said to be a rather primitive precursor of ANB, but never can they be treated on the same footing for compelling reasons of temporal and structural transformations.

Necessity for the Linkages

Given the temporal and temperamental differences of the polity and economy of the subcontinent, it is only right to put in *Atmanirbhar* as *Swadeshi* 2.0 – better and improved – in its nature and scope. But does this exercise lead to any constructive thought formation or is it futile to correlate two phenomena, a century apart and try to read one into and onto each other – even though they have a proclivity for similar results?

One doesn't need careful consideration to realise S&B predates ANB, not just chronologically, but also in other parameters such as scope, general aims and expected outcomes. There is an implicit understanding already present; which makes this paper unambitiously a work towards creating explicit theories and arguments. That is, however, not a complete assessment. There is a recurrent nudge of researchers towards writing contemporary history. History of the present times. There is nothing wrong in documenting one's times, but by looking between the lines, the *raison d'etre* for such a theme becomes clearer – Nationalism. It would be wise to point out here that *Swadeshi* was inherently linked with Nationalism, so much so that they birthed each other. Is it such a shocker then, that ANB turns out to be one too? The next section shall deal with the idea of creating an *Atmanirbhar* identity in the 21st century.

The Atmanirbhar Psyche

What is more important to note than the impact of S&B on ANB is the recent trend in the political consciousness of the country which is striving to become *Atmanirbhar* in its Indian identity. The Prime Minister has mentioned so on many occasions including his 75th Independence Day speech, that India was freed of the colonial yoke in 1947; our minds however, continued to remain subservient to the west. This narrative itself is twofold. The first contains subtle hints of how the world (especially the developed nations) viewed us – as a polity, society and market economy; while the second reflects the self-conceived notions and images about ourselves, i.e., how the Indian middle class viewed themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

Undoubtedly, there were better living conditions and more opportunities that the world had to offer us once. But as India is catching up with the west in terms of quality of life elucidated by several indices, be it in education, pharmaceuticals, GDP and related figures, industrialization and manufacturing, processing and other technology laden advancements and overall improvement in the quality of life, it was only a matter of time when one government or another called out the citizens to embrace their identity as a proud Indian through and through. Gone are the days when it was the routine of the day in middle class households to sit down and list the number of things wrong with the country. Even if they aren't gone, the political narrative currently, is to get rid of such a mindset for good.

Here, we locate the several speeches, given by prime minister at home and the external affairs minister abroad – of how it is the duty of the citizens to be proud of their heritage, remember pre-1757 histories, unearth forgotten heroes from pages lost in translation, decolonise the Indian mind and reinvent the Indian identity. At this stage, I don't need to discuss minutely several policy shifts, renaming roads and cities or list any of the right-leaning newspaper editorials or recent literary productions which enrich our thought processes these days. Anyone who is yet unaware of this not-so-subtle-shift, must be off the internet.

Such a change is neither good nor bad. It is what it is. From a bird's eye view, it can be deemed as positive; given definitions of a nation state, such a narrative does tend to overarch regional and linguistic divisions and hail us all together as one people, surprisingly without harming any individual group/regions' sentiments. As it remembers every local hero [particularly constructive as an

example to my argument is this speech of hon'ble PM on the inauguration of Lachit Borphukan – a forgotten Ahom hero – as reported by DD India (Modi, 2022)] forgotten in the struggle against the British, it unites them in a similar manner as it once did 100 years ago. It would be precise to note, that 75 years on, this recent project of decolonising the Indian psyche, still invokes the same perpetrator as was over a century ago – with the central government taking over the role of haughty pre-independence Congress – colouring the landscape into hues of saffron. Only except, the perpetrator is in our minds.

And it might as well be. Reclaiming a culture and a heritage is never a negative act. It shall become one when we reclaim selectively. For example, the functionality of the Mughal era is a highly contested one among extremes today. But that is a question which we needn't concern ourselves with much for what it was, is our history. And the present day shall become history tomorrow. So, renaming Allahabad with its erstwhile name Prayagraj, shall also be remembered.

Decolonising the Indian psyche is what the subtheme of this seminar is, in actuality. The political consciousness of the country today, strives to become *atmanirbhar*, self-sufficient and self-reliant in its Indian identity – creating a nationalist modern-state oriented identity – looking back in history for answers and correlations which weren't explored before. That *Atmanirbhar* isn't quite new, that it had established linkages with *Swadeshi* which the subcontinent experienced almost a century ago (and that it was Tilak's *Swadeshi*) reverberate the idea of not making the implicit theories explicit, but the need of the polity– for the lay – to establish a self-sufficient identity.

Conclusion

After studying the linkages, it is clear that there are several converging and diverging relationships between the two personifications of economic self-sufficiency. While *Swadeshi* emerged as a grassroots strategy of resistance against colonial exploitation, *Atmanirbhar Bharat* represents a state-led developmental vision aimed at economic resilience in an interconnected global order. Despite their differing contexts, both movements share core commitments to nationalism, indigenous empowerment, and economic independence. The contemporary rhetoric of decolonizing the Indian psyche resonates with *Swadeshi*'s nationalist fervour, reflecting continuity in India's pursuit of sovereignty, even as strategies adapt to new realities.

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A Demographic Exploration of Engagement and Turnover Intent in the Indian IT-BPO Workforce

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between emotional engagement, intent-to-quit, and demographic variables—age, work experience, and gender—among 110 IT-BPO employees aged 22 to 35 years (mean age = 29), with a sample of 71% male and 29% female, and work experience ranging from 5 months to 10 years. It used ANOVA, moderation, and post hoc analyses to determine the difference in Employee Engagement and Turnover intentions among demographic groups. Employee engagement of the IT-BPO companies' employees was measured through a culture-specific measure to enhance its authenticity. The study reveals that age and work experience were positively associated with engagement, while gender differences were found in engagement scores but not in turnover intentions. This highlights that demographic factors, age, and tenure are stronger predictors of engagement than gender in the IT-BPO context.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Intent-to-Quit, Gender, Work Experience, IT-BPO Sector

Introduction

India is an important player in the outsourced market globally, as many big multinational organisations outsource work from customer support to technical assistance to low-cost operating economies like India. The Indian IT-BPO sector significantly contributes to the nation's economy. It generates jobs and contributes to GDP. However, the industry is challenged by high employee turnover rates, which impact organisational performance, customer service continuity, and talent management (Kumar & Patnaik, 2021). Employee engagement signifies the degree of employees' immersion in their roles, tasks, and jobs. It is observed that the engagement of employees not only influences their performance but also has a synergistic impact on the overall organisational

outcomes. In the IT-BPO sector's dynamic and competitive work environments, employee engagement has appeared as a crucial determinant of retention, job satisfaction, and organisational success (Saks, 2006; Albrecht et al., 2015).

Many researchers have suggested that highly engaged employees have lower probabilities of leaving their organisations, show greater commitment, and have higher output (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Contrastingly, disengaged employees experience higher burnout, feel dissatisfied at work, and have higher intentions to quit their jobs. Therefore, employee engagement is a critical construct to be investigated in the Indian IT-BPO sector, where attrition rates are considerably high, with younger employees frequently seeking alternative employment due to job stress, limited growth opportunities, and work-life imbalance (Bhatnagar, 2012; Singh & Raj, 2021).

Additionally, demographic variables such as age, gender, educational qualification, and work experience have a significant role in influencing both engagement and turnover intentions. A few research inquiries in this field reported that the age of an employee is related to their engagement levels and turnover intentions. Older employees who have more years of experience tend to be more engaged and therefore less likely to quit their jobs (Bal et al., 2011; Kundu & Gahlawat, 2021). Gender differences also play a role, with engagement levels of males and females varying depending on professional and personal priorities (Kaur & Mehta, 2022). Despite the growing interest in these associations, there persists a paucity of empirical research focusing on the Indian IT-BPO context, particularly concerning how demographic factors influence employee engagement and intention-to-quit.

Current research seeks to explore the influence of profile factors such as age, gender, and employment experience (in years) on employee engagement and turnover intentions among Indian IT-BPO employees. By doing so, the research aims to provide actionable insights for HR practitioners and organisational leaders to create targeted interventions that enhance engagement and reduce attrition.

Literature Review

Employee engagement is extensively documented as an important driver of organisational success (Gallup, n.d.), particularly in high-demand, people-centric industries such as IT-BPO. In the Indian context, where the IT-BPO sector is a major source of employment and revenue, understanding the factors

that influence engagement is critical for improving retention, productivity, and well-being (Bhatnagar, 2012; Kumar & Patnaik, 2021). Among these factors, profile factors such as age, work experience, and gender have shown potential to shape employee engagement in distinct ways.

Age has been frequently examined in relation to engagement levels, often with mixed findings. Some studies suggest a positive relationship between age and engagement, indicating that an older workforce tends to be highly absorbed in their work due to increased emotional maturity, organisational loyalty, and alignment with job roles (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Bal et al., 2011). The *Employee Engagement Report (2011)* found that workers above the age of 35 were significantly more engaged than their younger counterparts (BlessingWhite, 2011). In the Indian BPO context, younger employees may experience higher stress and lower satisfaction due to unrealistic expectations, long hours, and a lack of career stability (Raina, 2006). Recent evidence from Singh and Raj (2021) reaffirms this pattern, suggesting that younger IT professionals report lower engagement levels owing to job insecurity and work-life imbalance. Kaur and Mehta (2022) also found that employees above 30 were more likely to be emotionally invested in their roles compared to those in the 20–29 age bracket. However, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) highlighted that although age and engagement are statistically significantly related, the relationship is weak ($r = .140$), explaining less than 2% of the variance in engagement.

Work experience, closely related to age, has also been identified as a predictor of engagement. Employees with more years of employment experience often exhibit higher levels of engagement, attributed to their familiarity with job roles, increased adaptability, and established organisational networks (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009). In Indian IT-BPO settings, where job roles can be repetitive and stressful, employees who remain for longer durations may develop coping mechanisms that help sustain their engagement over time (Sandhu, 2005). It has been observed that employees with higher work experience, especially those with 10 years or more experience, have higher engagement levels (Patel and Khanna, 2021). Additionally, long-tenured employees exhibit better flexibility, emotional commitment, and engagement at work (Ahmed and Thomas, 2023). These findings suggest that organisations should consider tailored strategies for newer employees to enhance their engagement levels at work.

The association of gender and employee engagement has produced varied findings, often influenced by cultural and organisational contexts. Schaufeli and

Bakker (2004) highlighted that male personnel report slightly higher engagement levels. In the IT-BPO sector, Fernandes (2010) reported that women often face competing responsibilities outside the workplace, as they have to fulfil family obligations and societal expectations, which can lower their level of engagement at work. On these lines, Kaur and Mehta (2022) also highlighted that, women working in BPOs report lower levels of professional engagement due to caregiving duties and perceived lack of career growth. Contrariwise, male employees, who are typically more mobile and career-engrossed in this sector, show higher scores on engagement metrics. However, these gender disparities in engagement levels of employees can be addressed by providing support and flexibility, especially to female employees (Singh and Agarwal, 2022). Interestingly, in some studies, engagement and turnover intentions do not significantly differ between males and females, suggesting that once engaged, both genders show similar levels of organisational commitment (Gupta & Bhatia, 2023). The literature specifies a connection among employee engagement, intention to quit, and demographic variables. However, this investigation is little explored in the Indian IT-BPO sector. Additionally, most engagement scales are Western-centric and may not capture culturally relevant dimensions of Indian employees. The research investigation aims to deal with this gap by using a culture-sensitive approach to measure engagement more accurately and examine how demographics influence it in the Indian IT-BPO companies.

Objectives of the Study

The review of current literature indicates that engagement and turnover intentions are often influenced by demographic variables such as age, gender, and work experience. However, research exploring these relationships uses instruments that lack the indigenous dimensions of engagement, such as the work's purpose and its meaningfulness. Since employee perceptions, motivations, and workplace behaviours are often shaped by cultural values, the use of Western-developed engagement scales may miss out on important dimensions relevant in the Indian socio-cultural context (Saks, 2022; Bhawuk, 2008). To address this gap, the current study seeks to investigate employee engagement, intention to quit, and demographic factors within the Indian IT-BPO sector, given that these variables are relatively less explored in this sector. The aims of the current investigation are listed below:

1. To assess the overall level of indigenous employee engagement among employees in the Indian IT-BPO companies.

2. To analyse variation in indigenous employee engagement based on profile variables such as age, gender, and work experience.

3. To analyse the variation in Intention to Quit based on age, gender, and work experience.

In light of the objectives, listed below are the Hypotheses:

- Null Hypothesis (H1): There is no significant alteration in indigenous employee engagement (EE) among employees of IT-BPO companies across diverse age groups.

- Null Hypothesis (H2): There is no significant alteration in the level of indigenous employee engagement (EE) of employees of IT-BPO companies across different work experience groups.

- Null Hypothesis (H3): No substantial variation exists in the level of indigenous employee engagement (EE) of IT-BPO companies across genders.

- Null Hypothesis (H4): No substantial variation exists in Intention to Quit among employees of IT-BPO companies across different age, work experience, and gender groups.

Research Methodology

This research analysed the primary data collected from personnel employed with IT-BPO companies located in Delhi. Three key variables were assessed: Employee Engagement (EE) and Intent to Stay/Quit. To measure EE, the Spiritually Harmonised Engagement Scale created by Singh and Kumar (2012) was employed. This tool, grounded in the spiritual definition of EE, includes 15 questions. The test also provides scores on three subcomponents: Workplace Spirituality (WS), Alignment (A), and Psychological Meaningfulness (PM). Intent to Stay/Quit was measured using Bluedorn's (1982) Stay/Leave Index, which consists of six items. The sample comprised employees from various job roles, age groups, and educational backgrounds within the IT-BPO sector in Delhi. Major participants were drawn from Barclays Shared Services Private Limited and American Express India Private Limited. Participation was voluntary, and data were collected using a randomised convenience sampling method. A total of 110 usable filled-out questionnaires were analysed. The

obtained data were analysed using software such as Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20.

Data Analysis

The total sample of 110 respondents was bifurcated into test categories using the demographic information they provided. These test categories are summarized in Table 1. The average age (110 respondents) of participants is 29.15 years, the average commute time and work experience of the sample group were 105 minutes (approximately 1 hr.) and 78 months (6 years and 5 months), respectively. More than 50% (n=58) of the respondents have experience working in the IT-BPO sector for over 6 years. Male respondents are approximately 2.5 times the number of female respondents. Approximately 56% of the respondents are married as against 44% who are single. Also, in the current sample size, only 18% respondents reported that they either live alone or live with a roommate(s), 50% of them said that they live with their parents or extended family. Nearly 60% (n= 63) of the employees in the sample stated that their commute time is 1 to 2 hrs, out of which 28% said that their daily commute time is over 2 hrs, which is very common in a crowded city like Delhi.

The measure's internal consistency was verified using Cronbach's Alpha in SPSS, which is considered one of the most robust tests for reliability. This statistical measure helps determine whether the items within each metric reliably assess the same core construct. The scales measuring Employee Engagement (EE) and Intent-to-Quit depicted positive results. The EE scale, consisting of 15 items, yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.973, representing acceptable consistency. However, Bluedorn's Intent-to-Quit scale demonstrated a weaker internal consistency. Analysis of the inter-item statistics revealed that removing item 6 ("I intend to stay in this role longer than 24 more months") would enhance the reliability of the measure. Upon excluding the item, recalculated Cronbach's Alpha for the revised 5-item scale increased to 0.666—still modest but considered acceptable for exploratory research. Additionally, the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was applied to assess normality. The significance values for both EE and Intent-to-Quit variables were greater than 0.05, confirming that the data were normally distributed.

Table 1: Summary of Frequencies of Demographic Variables (N=110)

Demographic Variables	Category	N	%
Age*			
	22 to 24 years	8	12.73
	25 to 30 years	73	60.91
	31 to 35 years	21	24.55
	over 35 years	8	1.82
Gender			
	Male	78	70.91
	Female	32	29.09
Marriage Status			
	Married	62	56.36
	Single	48	43.64
Work Experience**			
	5- 24 months	13	11.82
	25-72 months	39	35.45
	73-120 months	48	43.64
	Over 120 months	10	9.09
*Age: M= 29.15,SD= 3.92			
**Work experience: M= 78.17, SD= 42.03			

Descriptive Statistics

This section presents the descriptive statistics. Respondents displayed moderate engagement levels for all the components of employee engagement. Workspace spirituality, alignment, and psychological meaningfulness mean scores lie between 14 and 23. The intention to quit mean score is also found to be moderate.

Table 2: Mean and SD of Employee Engagement and Intent-to-Quit

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Intention to Quit	110	17.86	6.12
Employee Engagement	110	55.36	12.75
Workplace Spirituality	110	18.12	4.36
Alignment	110	14.41	3.74
Psychological Meaningfulness	110	22.83	4.93

Table 3 indicates that approximately 73% respondents were found to have high or moderate engagement levels, where the maximum respondents (40%) found to have high alignment with their respective jobs, with workplace spirituality grabbing the second position with 43% respondents reporting high WS. Lastly, in terms of its psychological meaningfulness, only 35% respondents agreed to have experienced high meaningfulness from their job.

Table 3: Assessment and Interpretation of Total Employee Engagement, Workplace Spirituality, Alignment, and Psychological Meaningfulness scores

Variables	Frequency	Percent %	Interpretation	Rank
TEE	36	32.73	High EE	2
	29	26.36	Low EE	3
	45	40.91	**Moderate EE**	1
	110	100		
WS	47	42.73	**High WS**	1
	23	20.91	Low WS	3
	40	36.36	Moderate WS	2
	110	100		
A	54	49.09	**High A**	1
	29	26.36	Low A	2
	27	24.55	Moderate A	3
	110	100		
PM	39	35.45	High PM	2
	28	25.45	Low PM	3
	43	39.09	**Moderate PM**	1
	110	100		

Further, we developed hypotheses that posit Employee engagement (EE) and intent-to-quit do not significantly differ across demographic groups categorized by work experience, age, and gender. The analysis examines each of these variables individually to test for any statistically significant variations.

Age, Employee Engagement, and Intent-to-Quit

To examine differences in employee engagement (SAEE) across age groups, the Welch ANOVA was employed, as the assumption of equal variances was violated. This test is considered more robust under such conditions (Field, 2009). The results, presented in Table 4 (See along with Table 4.1), indicated statistically significant differences in average employee engagement scores among the four age-based groups ($p = 0.000$, $p < 0.05$).

To further investigate these differences, a Tamhane's T2 post hoc test was conducted, which is appropriate when variances are unequal (Table 4.2). The analysis showed significant differences between:

- Group 1 (22–24 years) and Group 3 (31–35 years)**,** with mean employee engagement scores of 41 (moderate engagement) and 60 (high engagement), respectively ($p = 0.014$), and

- Group 1 (22–24 years) and Group 4 (over 35 years)**,** with mean scores of 41 and 64, respectively ($p = 0.003$).

These findings indicate that younger employees in the 22 to 24 years age bracket reported significantly lower engagement levels compared to their older counterparts in the 31–35 and over 35 age groups (Table 4.2).

No statistically significant variation was observed in overall intent-to-quit scores across different age groups. However, a notable association emerged between age and the item "Quitting in 3 months" from the intent-to-quit scale. Specifically, employee engagement (EE**)** demonstrated a significant positive correlation with age ($r = 0.391$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that engagement tends to increase with age. In contrast, the item "Quitting in 3 months" showed a significant negative correlation with age ($r = -0.199$, $p = 0.037$), indicating that younger employees have a higher tendency to express an intention to leave within three months.

Table 4: Homogeneity of Variance Analysis of Employee Engagement and Intent-to-Quit Based on Age

Variables	Levene Statistic	Sig.
TEE	4.052	0.009
INTQ	0.389	0.761

Table 4.1: Summary of ANOVA of Employee and Intent-to-Quit Based on Age

Descriptives					
Variables	**Age Grps.**	**N**	**Mean**	**F-value**	**Sig.**
INTQ	22-24 yrs	8	16.38	1.777	0.156
	25-30 yrs	73	18.03		
	31-35 yrs	21	19.38		
	over 35 yrs	8	13.88		
	Total	**110**	**17.86**		
TEE	22-24 yrs	8	41.38	6.676	0.000**
	25-30 yrs	73	54.49		
	31-35 yrs	21	60.10		
	over 35 yrs	8	64.88		
	Total	**110**	**55.36**		
**significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					

Work Experience, Employee Engagement, and Intent-to-Quit

Total employee engagement scores were found to vary significantly across different work experience groups, with a p-values of 0.002, indicating meaningful differences in mean engagement levels (Table 5 (see along with Table 5.1)). Notably, employee engagement exhibited an upward trend as work experience increased, progressing from a mean score of 46 (low engagement) in Group 1 (5–24 months), to 55 and 54 (moderate engagement) in Groups 2 (25–72 months) and 3 (73–120 months), respectively, and reaching 66 (high engagement) in Group 4 (over 120 months).

Table 4.2: Post hoc Analysis of Employee Engagement Based on Age

Multiple Comparisons

Variable	Comparison between categories		Mean Difference	Sig.
TEE	22-24yrs	25-30yrs	-13.12	0.100
		31-35 yrs	-18.72*	**0.014**
		over 35yrs	-23.50*	**0.003**
	25-30yrs	22-24yrs	13.12	0.100
		31-35 yrs	-5.60	0.120
		over 35yrs	-10.38*	**0.015**
	31-35yrs	22-24yrs	18.72*	**0.014**
		31-35 yrs	5.60	0.120
		over 35yrs	-4.78	0.563
	over 35yrs	22-24yrs	23.50*	**0.003**
		25-30yrs	10.38*	**0.015**
		31-35 yrs	4.78	0.563
*. Significant at the 0.05 level.				

Further analysis discovered statistically significant differences in engagement scores between specific pairs of experience groups (Table 5.2):

- Group 1 (5–24 months) and Group 4 (over 120 months) ($p = 0.001$),
- Group 3 (73–120 months) and Group 4 (over 120 months) ($p = 0.028$).

These results suggest that employees with longer tenure demonstrate markedly higher engagement**,** particularly participants with more than 10 years of work experience.

Table 5: Homogeneity of Variance Analysis of Emotional Intelligence and Intent-to-Quit Based on Work Experience

Variables	Levene Statistic	Sig.
TEE	1.121	0.344
INTQ	0.943	0.423

Table 5.1: Summary of ANOVA of Employee Engagement and Intent-to-Quit Based on Work Experience

Descriptives					
Variables	**Work Experience**	**N**	**Mean**	**F-value**	**Sig.**
INTQ	5- 24 months	13	18.46	2.267	0.085
	25-72 months	39	17.46		
	73 to 120 months	48	18.92		
	over 120 months	10	13.60		
	Total	110	17.86		
TEE	5- 24 months	13	46.85	5.155	**0.002**
	25-72 months	39	55.95		
	73 to 120 months	48	54.83		
	over 120 months	10	66.70		
	Total	110	55.36		
**. Significance level is 0.05 (2-tailed).					

Table 5.2: Post hoc Analysis Employee Engagement Based on Work Experience

Variable	Comparison between categories		Mean Difference	Sig.
TEE	5-24months	25-72 months	-9.10	0.093
		73-120 months	-7.99	0.155
		over 120 months	-19.85*	**0.001**
	25-72months	5-24 months	9.10	0.093
		73-120 months	1.12	0.973
		over 120 months	-10.75	0.064
	73-120months	5-24 months	7.99	0.155
		25-72 months	-1.12	0.973
		over 120 months	-11.86*	**0.028**
	over 120months	5-24 months	19.85*	**0.001**
		25-72 months	10.75	0.064
		73-120 months	11.86*	**0.028**
*. Significance level is 0.05.				

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the differences in mean Employee Engagement (EE) scores among the four work experience groups are statistically significant, whereas the differences in Intent-to-Quit scores across the same groups are not statistically significant.

Gender, Employee Engagement, and Intent-to-Quit

The table below presents the outcomes of the independent samples t-test administered to assess gender-based differences in Employee Engagement (EE) and Intent-to-Quit. The analysis included 78 male and 32 female respondents. The findings reveal a statistically significant difference in EE scores between genders, with males reporting higher employee engagement (Mean = 58.36) compared to females (Mean = 48.06), as indicated by a p-value of 0.000. This suggests that male employees in the sample report significantly higher employee engagement than their female counterparts.

Table 6: Comparison of Employee Engagement and Intent-to-Quit Between Males and Females

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F-value	Sig.
INTQ	Male	78	17.35	5.879	0.137	0.167
	Female	32	19.13	6.588		
TEE	Male	78	58.36	11.137	2.558	**0.000****
	Female	32	48.06	13.626		
**. Significance level is 0.05 (2-tailed).						

From the above analysis, it is evident that while demographic variables such as age, gender, and work experience do not have a direct impact on intent-to-quit, they are significantly associated with Employee Engagement (EE). These variables influence the level of EE among employees, and in turn, EE demonstrates a moderate association with intent-to-quit. This suggests that EE may act as an intermediary factor linking demographic characteristics to employees' turnover intentions in the IT-BPO sector. Will now test the association between employee engagement and Intent-to-Quit.

EE and Intent-to-Quit Moderated by Gender

Based on the above findings, we hypothesized that the negative relationship between employee engagement and intention-to-quit is moderated by gender, such that the relationship would be stronger among men than women**.** To test this, a moderated regression analysis was conducted using an interaction term (gender × employee engagement**)** in the regression equation. The results, presented in Table 7, indicate whether the multiplicative impact is statistically significant, thereby revealing the presence or absence of gender as a moderator in the relationship between engagement and intent-to-quit.

Table 7: Regression Analysis of Employee Engagement, Intent-to-Quit with Gender as Moderator

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	S.E. of Estimate
1	0.376[a]	0.141	0.117	5.748
Coefficients[a]				
Model	**B**	**S.E.**	**T**	**Sig.**
(Constant)	16.321	8.33	1.959	0.053
TEE	0.101	0.163	0.297	0.767
GENDER	0.517	5.148	1.346	0.181
TEE x GENDER	-0.816	0.096	-1.398	0.165
a. Dependent Variable: INTQ, Gender: 1=male,2=female, p=.001.				
a. Predictors: (Constant), TEE				

As shown in the above table, the overall regression model was statistically significant and explained 14.1% of the variance in intention-to-quit. However, the variable gender (β = 0.157, p = 0.181) and the interaction term between gender and employee engagement (β = -0.816, p = 0.165) had no statistically significant effect on intention-to-quit. These findings do not support the proposed hypothesis**,** indicating that gender does not act as a moderator between employee engagement and turnover intentions. Therefore, the study concluded that there is no significant moderating effect of gender on the relationship between the two variables.

Results and Findings

Analysis demonstrated that age is positively associated with employee engagement (r = 0.39). While no significant difference was found between age group 1 (22–24 years**)** and group 2 (25–30 years**)**, engagement scores differed significantly between group 1 and both group 3 (31–35 years) and group 4 (over 35 years**)**. The mean engagement score for group 1 was 41 (low engagement), whereas it increased to 60 for group 3 and 64 for group 4, both indicative of high engagement. These findings suggest that employee engagement increases with age. Age is associated with one item of the turnover intention scale, that is, the intention to leave in 3 months. The study discovered that young employees have a higher intention to leave in 3 months than older employees.

Similarly, work experience was also found to influence engagement levels. Employees with over 10 years of experience had a mean engagement score of 66, significantly higher than the score of 46 reported by those with 2 years or less of experience (low engagement). Additionally, those in the 73–120 months experience range had a moderate engagement score of 54, which was again lower than those with more than 120 months of experience.

Gender-wise comparisons showed that male employees (N = 78) had a significantly higher mean engagement score of 58, compared to female employees (N = 32), whose mean score was 48, suggesting that gender influences employee engagement levels in the IT-BPO sector.

However, the analysis also examined whether gender moderates the connection between the variables employee engagement and turnover intention. A moderated regression using an interaction term (Gender × Employee Engagement) revealed that the interaction was not statistically significant, indicating that the relationship between engagement and turnover intention does not differ by gender. In other

words, both male and female employees exhibit a similar inverse relationship between engagement and their intention to quit.

Discussion

This study set out to examine the key demographic variables, employee engagement, and intent to quit within the Indian IT-BPO sector. We will discuss these findings one by one.

The findings suggest that as employees in IT-BPO companies grow older, their levels of engagement tend to increase. Both older and middle-aged employees were found to be more involved in work compared to their younger counterparts. This pattern aligns with the observations reported in BlessingWhite (2011)**,** which highlighted a strong association between age and engagement, noting that aged employees are generally more engaged than younger ones. Similarly, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), in a large-scale study involving 9,516 participants, examined the relationship between age and work engagement and found that older employees reported higher engagement levels. However, the relationship was statistically weak ($r = 0.140$), with age accounting for less than 2% of the variance in work engagement. These findings indicate that while age may be positively related to engagement, it is not a dominant predictor, and other factors may also contribute significantly to engagement levels in the organisational work environment. However, in the current study, employees who were in their early twenties were less likely to experience psychological meaningfulness, workplace spirituality, and alignment compared to their counterparts in their early and mid-thirties.

Further, workplace tenure appears to have a meaningful influence on employee engagement. In the present study, employees with over 10 years of work experience reported significantly higher engagement levels compared to those with 2 years or less. This finding aligns with the work of Richman et al. (2008), who found that engagement of employees at work mediated the relationship between perceived flexibility and anticipated retention. Their study provides evidence that organisational flexibility of employees can increase their engagement levels, which may, in turn, contribute to lengthier tenure. Similarly, it was found that employees working for an organisation for continuously seven years or more show higher engagement levels at work (BlessingWhite, 2011). We can say that long years of work in a single organisational environment may foster deeper alignment with workplace values and expectations. It is

also possible that as employees spend more time in the IT-BPO organisation, which is marked by a fast-paced and demanding work environment, they develop adaptive strategies and greater resilience to manage job demands. The acquired familiarity and flexibility with the work culture may facilitate a stronger sense of purpose and psychological investment in their roles, thereby enhancing overall engagement. This can be supported by the findings of Patel and Khanna (2021), who found that organisational tenure positively correlates with emotional commitment and engagement among Indian IT professionals. Likewise, Ahmed and Thomas (2023) observed that long-tenured employees exhibit higher levels of intrinsic motivation and adaptability, both of which are associated with continued engagement in turbulent work environments.

The current study also found the gender differences in employee engagement scores of IT-BPO companies' employees, with males reporting higher engagement levels compared to females in the Indian IT-BPO sector. The evidence for low female engagement has also been found earlier (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Singh and Raj, 2021; Kaur and Mehta, 2022). The levels of engagement of female employees in the Indian IT-BPO context may be influenced by various socio-cultural and familial priorities that females assume easily compared to their male counterparts. As Fernandes (2010) notes, female employees readily leave their jobs, stating work-life imbalances as a reason for their decisions. It seems that females are more involved in their marriage, child-rearing responsibilities, and family relocation. In contrast, male employees are most likely to quit their professional roles for motives such as pursuing a better job profile or securing higher compensation. This suggests that, for many women in India, life choices and commitments outside of work may take precedence, potentially reducing their professional engagement when compared to men (Chauhan et al., 2022). We can also say that for females, alignment, psychological meaningfulness, and spirituality are often influenced by personal rather than professional life factors. There lies a greater conflict for females between personal and professional roles, which restricts their workplace involvement (Singh and Raj, 2021). Similarly, Kaur and Mehta (2022) state that work-life balance and caregiving responsibilities continue to impact women's engagement levels, particularly in high-demand sectors like IT and BPO. Although the gender-based differences in engagement were present, the current study found no significant variation between male and female employees' intention to quit their jobs**.** This suggests that while engagement levels may differ by gender, turnover intentions appear to be independent of gender in the Indian IT-BPO context.

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

The current study enhances the growing literature on employee engagement and turnover intentions by probing key demographic variables, age, tenure, and gender, in the Indian IT-BPO sector. The findings reveal that age and work experience are positively associated with engagement, with older and tenured employees exhibiting significantly higher engagement than younger and less experienced employees. Gender-based differences were also observed, with male employees showing greater engagement than female employees; however, gender is not the moderator in the relationship between engagement and intention to quit. These results suggest that employee engagement in the IT-BPO sector is shaped by both individual and contextual factors. Younger and less experienced employees seem more susceptible to disengagement and to early turnover intentions, whereas older and long-tenured employees show better alignment with organisational values and flexibility in managing work pressures. Gender disparities in engagement reflect broader socio-cultural realities in India, particularly the competing demands women encounter in harmonising professional and personal roles.

The findings suggest that organisations in the IT-BPO sector should adopt demographic-sensitive strategies to strengthen engagement and reduce attrition. For younger and early-tenure employees, organisations must provide avenues so that they can seek meaning and purpose from their work; their job roles should be better aligned with their inner goals. Companies can aim to provide tailored onboarding, mentorship, career development opportunities, meditative guidance, and flexible work arrangements to young hires to foster early alignment and commitment while reducing short-term turnover risks. Long-tenured employees, with their higher engagement levels, can be leveraged as mentors and cultural anchors who can teach what meaning they seek from their work and how this can be mirrored by the young adults. At the same time, addressing gender-specific challenges through inclusive HR policies, such as flexible schedules, career continuity backing, and leadership development programs for women, can help bridge engagement gaps.

Limitations of the Study

There are a few limitations of this study. First, the use of convenience sampling may hinder the generalisation of the results to the wider population within the IT-BPO sector. Additionally, while the study employed basic statistical analyses,

the application of more sophisticated techniques such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), by incorporating all the relevant demographic variables (such as commute time, educational qualifications), could have provided a more nuanced understanding of the relationships among variables. Furthermore, the study did not account for other demographic and organisational factors, thereby constraining the scope of interpretation.

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Dividend Announcements Impact on Share Price Volatility: Selected Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index Companies in India

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Abstract

Dividend announcements are a key factor influencing investor decision making in equity markets, as they directly influence investor wealth and reflect a firm's financial performance. Most of the existing literature focuses on large-cap or developed markets, which does not give sufficient evidence on the relevance of dividend announcements on the share price volatility in the Indian mid-cap companies. This highlights a research gap in the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index where market dynamics and volatility patterns could provide different answers than large-cap segments. The core objective of the research is to examine the effect of announcements of dividends on stock price fluctuations of 15 identified companies that are registered in the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index during the financial year 2024-25. The research employs secondary data gained from NSE and Money Control websites. The investigation of average abnormal returns (AARs) and cumulative average abnormal returns (CAARs) was calculated in a ten-day period of pre and post the announcement period, in order to capture the market reactions. The empirical outcomes show that the reaction of the market is substantial and positive on the dividend declaration day indicating that investors use dividend declaration as a high signal of corporate fiscal status and future outlook. Abnormal returns also stabilize in after announcement period and this shows that the market will adjust to the newly acquired information. Also, a paired t-test performed on different windows of events (-1, +1) to (-10, +10) to test the hypothesis proving that cumulative abnormal returns concerning dividend announcements are significant. The overall CAAR is on an upward trend as event window extends but the average CAAR daily is declining marginally which is the concentrated effect with respect to the announcement phase and normalization of the market. These findings support the signaling hypothesis and point towards the vital aspect of dividend announcements in determining shareholder expectations and the share

price volatility in the Indian Nifty mid-cap 150 segment companies. The study provides practical implications for investors in emerging markets seeking to understand the stock price dynamics related to corporate dividend policy.

Keywords: Cumulative average abnormal return, Dividend Announcements, Nifty mid-cap 150 index, Share price volatility, National Stock Exchange

1. Introduction

Dividend action plays a key role in determining perceptions of investor and financial strategies, prompting the behaviour of stock prices in capital markets. It states the choices a business makes about paying dividends to its investors from its earnings or the retention of earnings for reinvestment (Brealey, Myers, and Allen, 2017). Theoretically, according to Modigliani and Miller's (1961) dividend irrelevance argument, a company's value should not be impacted by its dividend policy in a market. However, real-world markets are far from perfect due to factors such as data asymmetry, taxes, agency complications, and transaction costs which propose that dividend strategy can have significant impacts on share price behavior (Lintner, 1956; Baker and Powell, 2000).

The empirical studies have shown mixed results concerning the association between dividend announcements and share price fluctuations. Some researchers contend that dividend announcements take vital data about the company's financial health and upcoming prospects, thereby reducing uncertainty and stabilizing stock prices (Bhattacharya, 1979; Aivazian, Booth, and Cleary, 2003). On the other hand, others suggest that dividend changes could increase volatility due to market speculation and signaling impacts (Palepu and Healy, 1988). The Mid-Cap segment of the market, especially represented by the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index in India, is characterized by higher growth potential but also increased risk and volatility compared to large-cap stocks, making it an interesting case for reviewing the dividend policy impact on stock price movements.

This research's main purpose is to empirically analyze the announcements of dividend influence on share price movements of the selected 15 companies registered in the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index. Using an event study methodology, the study examines share price movements in the period surrounding dividend announcements to capture abnormal returns and volatility changes. By focusing on the mid-cap space, which often receives less analytical attention compared to large-cap firms, this study contributes to understanding how dividend decisions affect investor confidence and market stability in a developing market context (Jain and Kini, 1994; Basu, 1983).

2. Review of Literature

Goud (2023) evaluated 260 listed firms for the financial years 2014–2015 through 2020–2015 founded on the dependable dividend practices of non-financial corporations registered in the Bombay Stock Exchange. The empirical outcomes exhibited that while dividend and share price movements are positively associated, dividend payment and stock price movements are significantly linked negatively. Dharmananda and Anjali Ganesh (2020) examined the connection between dividend policy and share price volatility, looking at the effects of various payout types on stock prices. It seeks to determine, in light of market conditions, the connection between share price and dividend announcement. Batta and Duwal (2021) studied the association between the dividend announcements and share price movements taking eight articles during the period 2010 to 2020. They found that management of banks and by increasing dividend yield and payout, publicly traded manufacturing companies are able to reduce stock price volatility.

Shetty and Sajeevan Rao (2020) attempted to investigate Indian nationalized banks' dividend policies and stock price volatility. Our sample consists of twenty nationalized banks that remained floated in the Bombay Stock Exchange through the financial years 2013–14 to 2017–18. The results differed when comparing the stock price changes prior to and following the dividend announcements of the selected companies. Kumaraswamy et.al. (2019) observed at the connection between dividend announcements and stock price fluctuations of 116 textile businesses that were chosen for the study registered on the Bombay Stock Exchange in India between the study period from 2008 to 2017. According to empirical findings, dividends have an impact on changes in Indian stock prices. Indian investors would rather demand higher dividends from companies than maintain retained earnings for reinvestment because of the market's volatility.

Mahato (2022) investigated how the National Stock Exchange's large and mid-cap companies reacted to announcements of bonus shares from January 1, 2006, to September 30, 2022. The research indicated that there was a considerable shift in stock values about the time of the event. Additionally, the research demonstrates that during the event, the CAAR of companies in the Nifty Mid-cap 100 index (6.472) was larger than that of companies in the Nifty 100 index (4.483). Marisetty and Babu (2021) in their study emphasised that various dividend rate announcements affected Indian stock market values. The sample stocks were chosen from the 2008–2017 study period and the S&P BSE 500 index. They found that small-caps respond favourably across

all categories, but large companies' average abnormal returns are additionally susceptible to various rates of dividend. As a result, the effects of various market capitalization final dividend actions on Indian equities vary depending on the dividend rate categorization. Ram (2018) emphasized the connection between share price volatility and dividend announcements, concentrating on firms from eleven different industries that are listed on the NSE. The study's empirical findings found that there is a substantial positive connection between stock price movements, leverage and earnings volatility, and a substantial adverse connection between DPR, share price movements and firm size. Matharu and Changle (2015) tested the semi-strong form of market efficiency to examine how stock prices responded to dividend announcements. It examined the 2013 dividend announcements made by 25 firms from a range of industries that are registered on the Bombay Stock Exchange. They found that the dividend policy influence on stock price movements of the chosen firms varied significantly between the before and after announcement periods.

3. Statement of the Problem

The mid-cap segment in developing economies like India is a dynamic element in the evolution of the economy due to a distinct growth potential and risk exposure. Companies that announce dividends are regarded by the market as significant signals, which may reflect economic health and future scenarios in the company. Although there has been much research done in the developed markets, the dividend policy impact on stock price fluctuations in the Indian mid-cap setting has minimal empirical evidence. While extensive research exists in developed markets, limited empirical evidence is available on how the dividend policy affects the share price fluctuations in the Nifty Mid-cap 150 index of emerging markets such as India. The most significant research gap is to find out the announcement of dividend aid in the reduction of the data asymmetry and stabilization of the share prices or more volatility as a result of speculation and uncertainty among investors.

4. Objective of the Study

To analyse the announcements of dividend influence on share price fluctuations of selected firms in the Nifty Mid-cap 150 index during the year 2024-25.

5. Hypotheses

H_{01}: Dividend announcements are not significantly influence the CAAR's of the choose companies in the event period from (-one to +one) days.

H_{02}: Dividend announcements are not significantly influence the CAAR's of the choose companies in the event period from (-two to +two) days.

H_{03}: Dividend announcements are not significantly influence the CAAR's of the choose companies in the event period from (-three to +three) days.

H_{04}: Dividend announcements are not significantly impact the CAAR's of the choose companies in the event period from (-five to +five) days.

H_{05}: Dividend announcements are not significantly influence the CAAR's of the choose companies in the event period (-ten to +ten) days.

6. Research Methodology

This research implements an event study method to analyse the dividend policy influence on share price fluctuations among the constituents of the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index. The analysis focuses on the announcement of dividends made by 15 chosen firms during the financial year 2024-25. The study utilized secondary data gathered from the Money Control and NSE official websites. For selecting a sample of 15 companies out of 150 companies listed in the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index, the purposive sampling method was adopted. The 15 companies that are chosen among the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index are selected because they form a broad range of industries and have a fine representation of energy, automobiles, financial services, cement, engineering, real estate and consumer goods and thus the industry is diversified and well represented. The selection of these companies was limited to the end of dividend declaration of the 2024-25 financial year to give a similar time reference to measure the instant market responses and volatility impacts.

The presence of firms of different market capitalizations, and liquidity factors in the mid-cap segment enables a broad study of the dividend announcement across sectoral lines. This multicultural and time-constrained sample makes this study more reliable because various market forces are reflected. By using the data share price volatility will be assessed through calculating average abnormal returns (AARs), cumulative average abnormal returns (CAARs), and paired

t-test analysis around the announcement date. The expected returns will be derived from the market's performance using the market model. To analyse a standard event window of (-1 to -10 and +1 to +10) trading days surrounding the dividend announcement day (designated as day zero) to capture the immediate market reaction. The event day represents the zero day, i.e., the final dividend announcement. The earlier announcement phase will encompass the ten trading days before the announcement of the dividend (-10 to -1) days, while later the announcement period will cover the first ten trading days following the announcement (day +1 to day +10). The total estimation window is 130 days. In total, the event will span 21 transaction days, with day zero serving as the focal point of our analysis.

Average Abnormal Returns (AARs)

It is typically analysed to evaluate the overall effect of an event on a share or portfolio. It provides insight into the average effect of the event across multiple observations.

The formula for calculating AAR is:

$$AAR = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{t=1}^{N} ARt$$

Cumulative Average Abnormal Returns (CAARs)

$$CAAR = \sum_{t=1}^{T} AARt$$

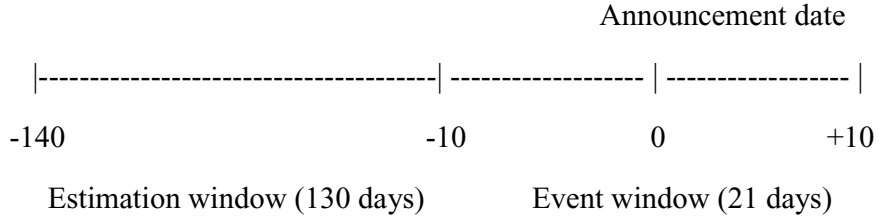


Table 1: Selected Sample 15 Companies of Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index with Dividend Announcement Days

S. No	Name of the Company	Dividend Announcement Dates
1	Bharat Forge Ltd	08-05-2024
2	Exide Industries Ltd	30-04-2024
3	NLC India Ltd	15-05-2024
4	Steel Authority of India Ltd	21-05-2024
5	Sona BLW Precision Forgings Ltd	30-04-2024
6	HDFC Asset Management Company Ltd	19-04-2024
7	JK Cement Ltd	13-05-2024
8	Escorts Kubota Ltd	09-05-2024
9	Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd	09-05-2024
10	UPL Ltd	13-05-2024
11	K.P.R Mill Ltd	02-05-2024
12	Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd	21-05-2024
13	Prestige Estates Projects Ltd	29-05-2024
14	Polycab India Ltd	10-05-2024
15	3M India Ltd	28-05-2024

Source: https://www.moneycontrol.com/company-facts/dividends/BL03/

A sample of 15 firms from the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index is shown in Table 1, with particular attention paid to the companies' April and May 2024 dividend announcement dates. These businesses are from a variety of industries, including energy (Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd, Exide Industries Ltd), cement (JK Cement Ltd), pharmaceuticals and chemicals (UPL Ltd), financial services (HDFC Asset Management Company Ltd), and heavy engineering (Bharat Forge Ltd, Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd). The fact that the days of the dividend announcements are dispersed over the course of two months suggests that different company strategies and timeframes for dividend declarations exist. Interestingly, a number of businesses declared dividends in early May, indicating a clustering tendency that was probably connected to board meetings or financial reporting schedules at the time. The foundation for examining the effects of dividends is this dataset.

Table 2: The Selected 15 companies of Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index for AARs and CAARs

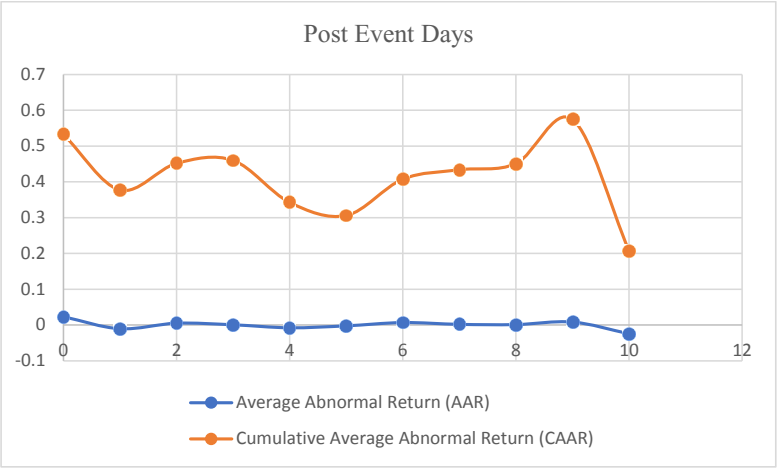
Post Event Days	Average Abnormal Return (AAR)	Cumulative Average Abnormal Return (CAAR)	Pre Event Days	Average Abnormal Return (AAR)	Cumulative Average Abnormal Return (CAAR)
10	-0.024480107	0.207150966	0	0.023130693	0.532707039
9	0.008229853	0.574352573	-1	0.005643128	0.185746642
8	0.001147791	0.450904778	-2	-0.000583882	0.101099726
7	0.001750388	0.433687907	-3	-0.006789005	0.109857962
6	0.006769433	0.407432092	-4	-0.007075451	0.211693043
5	-0.00244419	0.305890595	-5	0.013002801	0.317824808
4	-0.007822196	0.342553444	-6	0.00261337	0.122782792
3	0.000559392	0.459886379	-7	-0.001474281	0.083582237
2	0.004957498	0.451495492	-8	0.000397374	0.105696459
1	-0.010371601	0.377133021	-9	0.008385842	0.099735842
0	0.023130693	0.532707039	-10	-0.001736786	-0.026051788

Source: Compiled from NSE Data

Table 2 highlights the (AARs) and (CAARs) for the selected 15 companies of the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index over a 10-day period before the event and 10-day after the event period, where the event is the dividend announcement (day 0). A strong market response to the dividend announcements is indicated by the AAR's notable positive value of 0.0231, which contributes significantly to the CAAR of 0.5327 on the announcement day (day 0). While the CAAR progressively increases, indicating a little positive building, the AARs vary with minor positive and negative values before the event, indicating a mixed investor mood before the announcement.

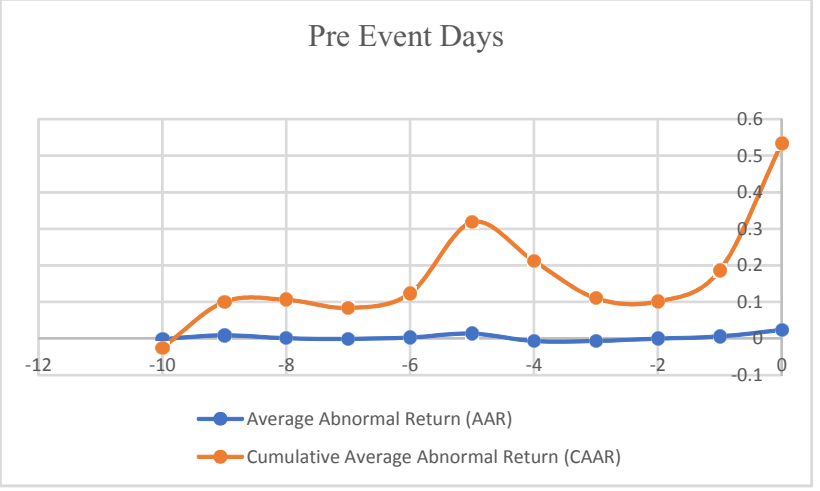
AARs often decrease after the announcement, especially by day +10, when the CAAR falls to 0.2071, and the AAR turns negative (-0.0245), indicating that the initial positive reaction levels out and that investors gradually reposition themselves. Overall, the analysis indicates that dividend announcements significantly influence abnormal returns, in line with signaling theory and efficient market hypothesis.

Chart 1: Post Event Days of AAR and CAAR



Graph 1 shows that it has been increasing steadily, which means that general performance has been getting better with time. These have slight fluctuations but they are very significant in the sense that they do not have a negative impact on countering the positive growth. This implies that the system or companies in the data are stable and can maintain development, despite the short-term fluctuations.

Chart 2: Pre-Event Days of AAR and CAAR



In the case of the graph 2, it is evident that there is an upward trend and this captures a continual improvement throughout the period under consideration.

Although there are short-lived fluctuations, the net trend is positive which indicates stability and robustness in terms of performance. This means that the entities in the data have been developing at a healthy pace and adjust to minor differences thus endorsing the long-term prospects of steady improvements.

Table 3: Selected Event Windows with Paired T-test Values

Event Period	CAAR	Average CAAR	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	T- Values	Result
(-1, +1)	1.095586702	0.3651955	0.173787964	0.100336528	3.63970705	H_{01} Rejected
(-2, +2)	1.64818192	0.329636	0.181160513	0.081017444	4.068708746	H_{02} Rejected
(-3, +3)	2.217926262	0.3168466	0.18046195	0.068208206	4.645285778	H_{03} Rejected
(-5, +5)	3.395888152	0.3087171	0.143704983	0.043328683	7.125005576	H_{04} Rejected
(-10, +10)	5.855162012	0.2788172	0.172686535	0.037683291	7.398961961	H_{05} Rejected

Source: Compiled from NSE Data

The results analyses that of a paired t-test applied to the (CAARs) for the chosen 15 firms on the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 index over different event windows around dividend announcements are presented in Table 3. The computed t-values are significantly high (varying from 3.64 to 7.40) for all examined event windows: (-1, +1), (-2, +2), (-3, +3), (-5, +5), and (-10, +10). In each of these cases, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected. Hence, the announcement of dividends has significantly and favourably influenced the share price fluctuations of the sample companies, as the CAARs are statistically significant across all event periods. Additionally, the data indicate that the CAAR rises as the event window lengthens, indicating the market's optimistic response to the dividend policy extends beyond the immediate announcement period and reflects ongoing investor confidence and market adjustment.

7. Results and Discussion

The AAR is noticeably positive at 0.0231, which helps to cause the CAAR to spike to 0.5327 on the day of the dividend announcement (day 0). AARs show no discernible trend during the 10-day pre-event window, ranging from positive to negative values. From a negative number (-0.0260 at day -10) to a positive 0.5327 by day 0, the CAAR progressively rises. The AARs exhibit a downward

trend after the announcement, with the CAAR dropping to 0.2071 and the AAR turning negative by day +10 (-0.0245).

The analysis of the chosen 15 Nifty Mid-Cap 150 companies indicate that dividend payments are influential determinants of volatility of the share prices, which is in line with the hypotheses of Signaling Theory. In India, mid-cap investors seem to treat the announcements of dividends as plausible indicators of company stability and future success, and thus, are prompting the appearance of short-term price changes. This reaction is especially high in firms with greater liquidity and strong involvement of the retail investors, and indicates the behavioural predispositions of Indian investors to respond intensively to dividend details in more predictable middle-capital stocks. Also, the results are consistent with the Clientele Effect Theory because various groups of investors appear to react based on their income needs and risk-aversion, and dividend-seeking investors exhibit greater trading activity in the timing of announcements. The research is successful in capturing these dynamics as in the Indian mid-cap setting, dividend announcement is both a signaling mechanism and an aspect that affects investor behaviour and hence forms part of the observed dynamics in price volatility.

The empirical findings of this research indicate that the t-values of all the event windows analysed (−1, +1), (−2, +2), (−3, +3), (−5, +5) and (−10, +10) are between 3.64 and 7.40, which are much higher than the critical value of 1.96. It means that the impact of dividend announcements on share prices is significant both in the short-term and in the medium-term. All the windows rejecting the null hypothesis are also further evidence that abnormal returns are not random fluctuations and are systematically related to dividend announcements. The results are highly in line with the signaling theory (Bhattacharya, 1979; Miller and Rock, 1985) according to which dividend announcements convey essential information regarding the financial status and future of a company. They also coincide with the semi-strong version of the Efficient Market Hypothesis (EMH), since the stock market responds quickly to the new information carried in the news about dividends.

The results when compared with the most recent studies support more extensive international evidence. To give an example, Prakash and Yogesh (2021) found that Indian companies experienced a considerable cumulative abnormal return (CARs) in response to dividend announcements during the pandemic, with service-based companies particularly responding strongly to it. In like manner, Mallesha and

Archana (2023) discovered that the S&P BSE 100 showed evidence of minimal response to dividend announcements during crisis situations but strong responses when there were no crises. The existing results that indicate high t-values in the short and the long windows are an indication that in India, mid-cap companies have a good dividend signaling effect in different market conditions.

However, a significant difference can be noticed with the analysis conducted by Mallesha and Archana (2023), who found muted market responses in the pandemic. In contrast to their results, the current study indicates high abnormal returns, even in larger windows (−10, +10), implying that investor responses in the Indian mid-cap space are not merely the immediate ones but also persistent in the long-run event space. This tenacity can be an indication of semi-inefficiencies or slower assimilation of information in the mid-cap market, which is less evident in large-cap markets.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of the chosen 15 companies among the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index discloses that the dividend strategy has a powerful influence on the share price movements. The abnormal return analysis specifies that the market responded strongly on both the announcement day with a positive reaction, and then it stabilised gradually after the event. The empirical outcomes of this research confirm that dividend announcements exert a strong effect on share price movements of the Nifty mid-cap 150 index on Indian market. The paired t-test results validate that the cumulative average abnormal returns (CAARs) have significant differences across all event periods analysed, providing an indication in support of the signaling theory.

These results show the signalling effect of dividend announcement, which means that it is a vital signal of the financial soundness of a firm, and therefore it affects shareholder behaviour and stock price changes in the Indian Nifty mid-cap 150 segment. It was therefore resolute the dividend announcement has high influence on share price fluctuations of the selected companies across different event windows categories. In this way, the dividend announcement information should be taken into account during the investment decision making process of these 15 selected companies of the Nifty Mid-cap 150 index.

9. Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations although it offers some useful insights. The sample size of 15 companies out of 150 companies in the Nifty Mid-Cap 150

Index is purposive and limits the generalizability of the results to the mid-cap segment, or to the market indices, in general. In addition, the attention on the recent time frame around the final dividend announcement during the financial year 2024-25 may be insufficient to reflect the effects of the longer period and changing patterns in the volatility of share prices. The research also fails to consider any external markets or macroeconomic variables or even overlapping corporate events that may affect the stock price trends. Also, investor behaviour is indirectly deduced based on the market reaction which may ignore undertones of sentiment-driven or psychological influences in trading decisions. These restrictions indicate that although the study provides insight into how mid-cap investors react to dividend announcements, the findings should be viewed with caution and supplemented with longer-term, more extensive research for a more thorough understanding.

10. Scope for Future Research

Based on the findings and shortcomings of this study, future studies can broaden the research by involving a larger and more varied sample of mid-cap firms in the Nifty Mid-Cap 150 Index or any other indices to have better generalisability. Multi-year longitudinal studies would be more likely to capture the long-term effects of dividend announcements on the volatility of share prices and to consider the effects of changing market dynamics. It is also possible to use the macroeconomic variables, events related to a particular industry, and other corporate activities in further research to isolate the effect of dividends on stock prices more precisely. Furthermore, a combination of the direct indicator of the degree of investor sentiment, a survey or a behavioural experiment, would add to the understanding of the psychological and behavioural elements that affect trading reactions. These studies may provide a wider perspective of dividend signalling, the effects of clientele on investors and volatility in the Indian mid-cap equity market.

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MSMEs in Focus: How Budget 2025-26 Fuels Sustainable and Inclusive Development

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Abstract

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) form the backbone of India's economy, contributing significantly to GDP, exports and employment generation. Despite their critical role, MSMEs continue to face persistent challenges including inadequate access to credit, barriers to digital transformation, regulatory bottlenecks and increasing global competition. The Union Budget 2025-26 introduces a series of reforms and initiatives aimed at addressing these constraints while fostering innovation, inclusivity and competitiveness. Key measures include revised MSME classification norms, enhanced credit guarantees, the introduction of MSME Credit Cards, targeted funds for startups and first-time entrepreneurs and export promotion missions. The study is based on a qualitative and descriptive research design using secondary data sourced from government budget documents, policy reports, institutional publications and relevant academic literature. A thematic analysis approach is employed to evaluate the policy measures introduced in Union Budget 2025-26 and their implications for the MSME sector. Additionally, the budget emphasizes support for labor-intensive sectors, digital integration and alternative financing mechanisms. This paper analyzes these initiatives within the broader policy framework and highlights their potential to strengthen MSMEs as engines of economic transformation. It argues that while the budget provides a strong foundation for sustainable and inclusive growth, effective implementation, institutional coordination and entrepreneur awareness will be crucial to unlocking the sector's full potential and advancing India's goal of becoming a $5 trillion economy.

Keywords: MSMEs, union budget 2025-26, economic growth, credit support.

Introduction

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are companies that are relatively small in a comparison with large companies but are an important

part of the economic development. These businesses are categorized according to their level of investing in plant, machinery or equipments and the turnover per year. The classification assists in giving specific policy guidance, financial aid and incentives to various business sizes. MSMEs are contributing close to 30 to the GDP and they also employ more than 11 Crore individuals (AMBIT Finvest, 2025). They are critical towards promoting entrepreneurship, regional development and economic inclusivity. These are not only economic entities, but the pillars of societies and they provide jobs and enhance inclusive growth especially to the working poor, women, youths and marginalized communities. The industry promotes entrepreneurship since someone can easily set up their own businesses with low capital. The MSMEs are encouraging the industrialization in the less developed regions and in this process contribute to the alleviation of the regional economic development inequalities.

The MSMEs are largely concentrated in rural India, with 32 million of the total 63 million MSMEs located in rural India. These small companies are very important in the economic growth of the rural areas as they bring about ripple effect of prosperity and growth. The MSME sector in India has been a silent social worker in improving rural India, economic growth, employment and low capital entrepreneurship. The Agra footwear industry is a bright illustration of how the MSME sector has transformed the face of rural India since 28% of footwear exported globally comes out of the MSME sector in India. These small and medium enterprises are very important in increasing the total exports of India with the contribution of about 45 percent to the export earnings of the country (Agnivesh Kumar, 2024). According to government reports, women have more than 20 percent MSMEs (13.5 million businesses). These types of enterprises, which are oriented towards traditional crafts and food processing, as well as modern technological start-ups are MSME run by women and are also an indicator of the flexibility and strength of the Indian woman. (IIFL Finance, 2024).

What is MSMEs

MSMEs are businesses that are characterized with their boundaries of investment in equipment and the yearly turnover. They are employed in manufacturing, service and trade. Concerns MSMEs are significant to the Indian economic system, because they generate employment, encourage entrepreneurship and improve innovation. The classification criteria have over the years been modified depending on the existing business reality based on the team of originally established classification criteria in the MSMED Act of 2006. (India Filings, 2025).

MSMEs New Definition

MSMEs are very significant in economic growth in India as they contribute a lot to the GDP, exports and people created. The government has realised their importance and, at regular intervals, updated the MSME classification criteria to be more relevant to the dynamic business environment and enable entrepreneurs to get the necessary benefits like loans, subsidies and tax incentives. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Union Budget 2025 made significant changes to the New MSME classification, raising the investment threshold by 2.5 times and doubling the turnover threshold. The new MSME requirements can be implemented since April 1, 2025. The rationale behind this move is to create momentum of growth, spur innovation and provide a more facilitating environment in which MSMEs can thrive. In this article, we shall consider the MSME New Definition. The new definition of MSME, which was announced in the Union budget 2025, could take effect on April 1, 2025. After the application, the new investment and turnover threshold will be applied to categories businesses into Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (IndiaFilings, 2025).

Why budget 2025 has presented the new MSMEs definition criteria

- **Fostering Innovation and Growth:** Through the provision of the opportunity to invest more in plant and machinery or equipment, but without going beyond the MSME boundaries, the government promotes modernization and the use of technologies as well as infrastructure development.

- **Global Competitiveness:** The recent thresholds of the MSME classification allow the medium-sized businesses to compete on the international arena. Having increased turnover limit (₹500 crore), they can magnify the production and explore the international markets without sacrificing the benefits of being an MSME.

- **Employment Generation**: MSMEs are the best job generators particularly in semi-urban and rural locations. Increased thresholds will allow bigger businesses to employ additional employees which would lead to a stronger domestic work force.

- **Streamlined Compliance & Governance:** One, revised framework within the new MSME category reduces the amount of paperwork and promotes ease of doing business which is one of the main goals of recent economic reforms in India.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design based on secondary data. Data are collected from Union Budget 2025–26 documents, Government of India reports, policy briefs and existing academic literature related to MSMEs. A thematic and content analysis is used to qualitatively describe and interpret how Budget 2025–26 supports sustainable and inclusive development of MSMEs.

Addressing Challenges Faced by MSMEs

- **Limited Access to Finance:** According to recent reports, formal credit is only available to 14% of India's 63 million small businesses. The estimated $530 billion credit gap in the MSME sector is highlighted by this figure. Strict collateral requirements and inadequate credit histories for many MSMEs, especially those in rural and underserved areas are the obstacles causing this restricted access (The Economic Times, 2025).

- **International Threat:** International players, who frequently enjoy economies of scale, cutting-edge technologies, and improved access to capital, are becoming more and more competitive with Indian MSMEs. Domestic MSMEs may struggle to maintain their market share both domestically and internationally due to this increased competition. Due to factors such as new markets, shifting consumer preferences, and technological breakthroughs, the global market is constantly evolving. For MSMEs to stay competitive and relevant, they must quickly adjust to these changes.

- **Barriers to Digital Transformation:** Many MSME owners and employees lack the necessary skills to utilize digital tools effectively. This gap in digital literacy can prevent businesses from adopting e-commerce platforms or digital payment systems. Inadequate internet connectivity and technological infrastructure in many rural areas hinder the ability of MSMEs to adopt digital solutions.

- **Regulatory Cholesterol:** Policies may not be uniformly implemented across different regions or sectors, leading to disparities in support received by MSMEs. Frequent changes in policies can create uncertainty and increase compliance costs for MSMEs. Many entrepreneurs are unaware of the various schemes available for financial assistance or capacity building. This lack of awareness prevents them from taking advantage of government support.

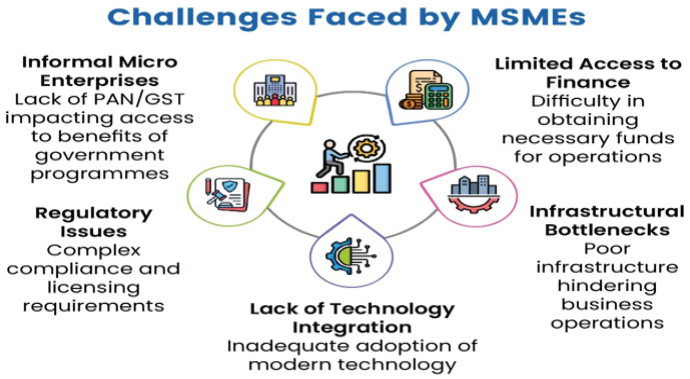


Fig 1: Challenges of MSMEs

Source: *(Vision IAS, 2025)*

The MSMEs Budget 2025-26 Initiatives

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman introduced several initiatives that focus on supporting the MSME sector in the Union Budget 2025-26 on February 1, 2025. These policies will aim to improve access to credit, facilitate innovation and boost growth in this essential sector of the economy. The following are the key highlights:

a) **Revised MSME Classification:** Another change of high importance in the budget is revision of the limit on investment and turnover of MSMEs. The new classification criteria include the following:

ENTERPRISE CATEGORY	CURRENT INVESTMENT LIMIT	REVISED INVESTMENT LIMIT	CURRENT TURNOVER LIMIT	REVISED TURNOVER LIMIT
MICRO ENTERPRISE	₹1 crore	₹2.5 crore	₹5 crore	₹10 crore
SMALL ENTERPRISE	₹10 crore	₹25 crore	₹50 crore	₹100 crore
MEDIUM ENTERPRISE	₹50 crore	₹125 crore	₹250 crore	₹500 crore

Fig 2: New MSME Classification Criteria as per Union Budget 2025

Source: *(Press Information Bureau, 2025)*

- **Micro Enterprises:** Micro units are now allowed to invest up to 2.5 crore and make an annual turnover of up to 10 crores (previously micro was restricted to 1 crore of investment). This growth encourages them to grow without the risk of being reclassified now.

- **Small Enterprise:** The gap between 10 crore and 25 crores in investment and 50 to 100 crores in turnover gives room to the micro-enterprise to easily migrate to the small category.

- **Medium Enterprises:** Since medium-sized businesses are permitted to operate with up to 125 crores in investments and 500 crores in revenue, they may enter the export market and draw in larger domestic and foreign investors.

b) **Enhanced Credit Availability:** Micro and small businesses' credit guarantee coverage was increased from 5 crores to 10 crores, allowing for an additional 1.5 lakh crore in credit over the course of five years. By increasing it to 20 crores with a 1 percent fee on loans in 27 priority sectors, Startups Guarantee Coverage was doubled. International trade is promoted by the Rs 20 crore term loans with higher guarantee coverage available to all exporter MSMEs (Drishti IAS, 2025).

c) **Introduction to MSME Credit Cards:** A new Micro Enterprise Card (ME-Card) is introduced in the budget to improve credit availability for microbusinesses that have registered on the Udyam portal. To issue 10 lakh cards in the first year, each card will have a ₹5 lakh credit limit. It is anticipated that this initiative will lower administrative barriers and expedite small business loan access. (India Filings, 2025).

d) **Funds for Startups & Scheme for First-Time Entrepreneurs:** To give start-ups in a variety of industries financial support, a fund of ₹10,000 crore has been established. By improving access to capital, these funds hope to help startups grow and spur innovation. In the 2025 budget, the Indian government unveiled a new program to assist new business owners, with a special emphasis on women and members of scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST). Over the next five years, the program hopes to help 5 lakh women, SC, and ST first-time business owners. Term loans up to ₹2 crore are available to qualified business owners to launch and expand their enterprises (TCS iON BizHub, 2025).

e) **Focus on Labour - Intensive Sectors:** The production of non-leather footwear, component manufacturing, and design innovation will all be supported by a dedicated Focus Product Scheme for the footwear and leather sector. It is anticipated that this initiative will contribute to a turnover of ₹4 lakh crore and create 22 lakh jobs. Furthermore, a new initiative for the toy sector seeks to strengthen skill development and cluster-based growth, establishing India as a major global center for toy production. A National Institute of Food Technology, Entrepreneurship and Management will be founded in Bihar to support the food processing industry in the eastern region by encouraging innovation, entrepreneurship, and industrial expansion.

f) **Export Promotion Mission & Bharat Trade Net:** The ministries of finance, MSME, and commerce will work together to create an export promotion mission with sectoral and ministerial goals. The objective of this mission is to integrate MSMEs into international supply chains and improve India's export capabilities. A centralized platform for trade documentation and financing solutions will be established with the launch of Bharat Trade Net (BTN). By lowering non-tariff trade barriers that prevent MSME participation in international markets, this initiative seeks to increase the effectiveness of international trade procedures.

Policy Recommendations for MSMEs

a) **MSME: the Past and the Prospect:** In the manufacturing environment in India, a marked change in sector composition has occurred over the last ten years, which has experienced high growth in MSMEs. The consumption-based goods such as automobiles, wood products, furniture, pharmaceuticals have experienced a lot of growth and the production-based ones such as machinery, chemicals, non-metallic minerals, rubber and plastic products have had a balance. Enhancement of efficiency, skills and flexibility of MSMEs is essential in order to support the industrial growth. They can also be more developed by encouraging research and development investments, formalizing smaller manufacturing, solving supply chain problems, improving access of markets and reducing compliance costs. Industrial growth of 9.5 in FY24 provided 8.2% economic growth. Better productivity and use of resources also showed improvement in the form of 5.9% growth in the number of unincorporated enterprises in India between October 2022

and September 2023. The introduction of the Udyam Registration portal in July 2020 has played a key role in formalizing MSMEs, by offering an easy online self-declaration-based and free registration procedure.

b) **Credit Guarantee Schemes (CGSs) :** Credit Guarantee Schemes (CGSs) are a popular policy instrument to deal with the financing issues of MSMEs, which tend to have difficulties in accessing formal credit because of the absence of collateral or the inclusion of high risk by the bank. In these schemes, a government-sponsored entity or a government agency guarantees in part, 50-80 percent of the loan amount, of the loan granted to MSMEs. This system lowers the credit risk of the lenders and allows them to reduce their collateral demands and finance otherwise underserved firms. The effects are enormous, since they open more opportunities to borrowing and promote entrepreneurship and business. Some of the most notable cases of this are the Credit Guarantee Fund Trust of the Micro and Small Enterprise (CGTMSE) in India and the Credit Guarantee Fund (KODIT) in Korea that have contributed to the growth of MSME financing. Nevertheless, the CGSs need to be properly designed: they should be able to support the long-term viability, provide mechanisms to mitigate the moral hazard and have sufficient monitoring and evaluation to track the performance. CGSs when well-designed offer a compromise between financial inclusion and financial system stability (Beck et al., 2010a).

c) **Alternative Finance:** Alternative finance presents MSMEs with a wider range of capital options that is not limited to traditional bank loans, which is more flexible and inclusive in the access to capital. Venture capital and private equity are more appropriate in growth-oriented businesses, particularly in technology-based industries since they provide financial capital, but also strategic advice and managerial skills. Peer-to-peer (P2P) and digital lending are additional fintech lending platforms that have lowered bureaucratic barriers by cutting down on unnecessary paperwork and hastening the process of disbursement, which is particularly helpful with small companies in urgent liquidity requirements. Instead, crowdfunding enables MSMEs to raise financial capital directly through communities or investors, without using intermediaries and extending the participation and democratizing finance. Governments are known to play a key role in making these innovative mechanisms sustainable and reliable, by setting

fair rules on fintech, providing tax breaks to entice them and building investor protection frameworks. All these efforts contribute to robust financial systems and more chances of MSMEs operating successfully in competitive markets (Bruton et al., 2015a).

d) **Interest Subsidies:** Interest subsidies are a significant policy tool that aims at alleviating the financial burden on MSMEs to reduce the effective borrowing costs. In this mechanism, the government will be absorbing part of the interest charged on loans enabling MSMEs to obtain credit at cheaper rates. This method is of particular importance when economic stress (the COVID-19 pandemic, inflationary shocks or natural disasters) makes liquidity supplies scarce, and reducing revenues severely limit the capacity of MSMEs to repay loans. To remain efficient and financially viable, however, interest subsidies should be sharply targeted, i.e. targeted to particular industries, company sizes, or less prosperous regions, to ensure that as much impact is achieved as possible with minimum burden on the budgetary books. As an example, the Targeted Longer-Term Refinancing Operations (TLTROs) by the European Central Bank served as a proxy stimulus to MSME lending by encouraging the banks to give credit during the COVID-19 crisis. These specific interventions underscore the value of interest subsidies as a transitional relief program and an analytical instrument to ensure financial sustainability and growth in the inclusive MSME to remain sustainable (Juergensen et al., 2020a)

Limitations of the Study

Despite providing a comprehensive policy-oriented analysis, this study has certain limitations. First, the research relies exclusively on secondary data, which restricts the ability to capture real-time responses and ground-level experiences of MSME owners and stakeholders. Second, as the Union Budget 2025–26 is a recent policy intervention, the study cannot empirically evaluate the actual outcomes or long-term impact of the announced measures. Third, variations in implementation across states and sectors are not empirically examined, which may influence the effectiveness of budgetary provisions. Future research may address these limitations by incorporating primary data, such as surveys or interviews with MSME entrepreneurs, financial institutions, and policymakers, and by conducting longitudinal studies to assess the real-world impact of budgetary reforms on MSME performance and growth.

Conclusion

The Union Budget 2025-26 underscores the government's recognition of MSMEs as the engines of economic dynamism and inclusive growth. By revising classification norms, enhancing credit access through innovative measures such as MSME credit cards, creating targeted funds for startups and first-time entrepreneurs and introducing export-oriented missions, the budget lays down a robust framework for strengthening the competitiveness and resilience of the sector. These measures represent a significant step toward addressing long-standing challenges of credit scarcity, limited scale, and inadequate integration into global value chains.

The conclusions drawn in this study are firmly grounded in existing literature on MSME development and public policy effectiveness. Prior studies have consistently emphasized that access to affordable finance, regulatory simplification and integration into global value chains are decisive factors influencing MSME sustainability and growth (Beck et al., 2010b; Bruton et al., 2015b). The Union Budget 2025-26 reinforces these empirically supported pathways by expanding credit guarantee mechanisms, promoting alternative financing models and introducing export facilitation platforms such as Bharat TradeNet. Unlike earlier policy interventions that largely focused on short-term relief, the present budget reflects a strategic evolution toward long-term structural empowerment, aligning closely with scholarly findings on inclusive industrial growth and financial resilience among MSMEs (Juergensen et al., 2020b).

The findings of this study are consistent with prior empirical and policy-oriented research that highlights access to finance, regulatory simplification and market integration as critical drivers of MSME growth. Earlier studies emphasize the role of credit guarantee schemes and alternative financing mechanisms in reducing credit constraints for small enterprises. The Union Budget 2025-26 builds upon these insights by expanding credit guarantees, introducing MSME credit cards, and promoting fintech-enabled financing, thereby reinforcing established policy recommendations with stronger fiscal backing.

Similarly, previous empirical evidence suggests that MSMEs integrated into global value chains exhibit higher productivity and resilience. The export promotion mission and Bharat TradeNet initiative align with these findings by facilitating international trade participation and reducing non-tariff barriers. Compared to earlier budgets, which largely focused on short-term liquidity

support, Budget 2025-26 demonstrates a more structural and forward-looking approach, emphasizing scalability, innovation and global competitiveness. This progression marks a significant advancement in MSME policy design and strengthens the scholarly contribution of the present study by situating it within the continuum of existing empirical research.

From a policy standpoint, the budget reflects a strategic shift from short-term relief to long-term structural empowerment. The emphasis on alternative finance, credit guarantee schemes and interest subsidies demonstrates a clear intent to diversify financial channels while lowering the risks associated with MSME lending. Likewise, initiatives focused on digital adoption, skill-building and cluster-based development in labor-intensive sectors illustrate a holistic approach that goes beyond financial incentives, aiming to create sustainable ecosystems for entrepreneurship.

However, the success of these initiatives will depend on effective implementation, simplified compliance mechanisms and improved awareness among entrepreneurs, particularly in rural and underserved regions. Strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring equitable access to schemes and aligning state-level policies with central reforms will be critical for maximizing impact.

In essence, the budget positions MSMEs not merely as recipients of support but as active contributors to India's transition into a $5 trillion economy. Their empowerment will be vital for achieving broader policy goals such as employment generation, regional balance and global competitiveness. By combining financial inclusion with structural reforms, the Union Budget 2025-26 provides a blueprint for transforming MSMEs into powerful agents of economic transformation and social progress.

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Democratic Institutions and Economic Inequality: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This paper explores the causal relationship between the state and extent of democracy with economic inequality, with an attempt to explore proxies for the robustness of democratic institutions. While the large proportion of literature on this relationship has attempted to explore how economic inequality relates to and shapes the democratic strength of a country, the reverse relationship of how democracy affects inequality has received scarce attention. This paper aims to contribute to the literature by examining whether the empirical patterns support the hypothesized reverse relationship, using multiple proxies to measure democratic strength, and situating modern democracies in the paradigm of neoliberal capitalism. While the paper conducts an exploratory empirical analysis, it explicitly acknowledges methodological limitations that prevent strong causal claims. After establishing a set of measures that could be identified as proxies to measure the extent and robustness of democracy, the paper then attempts to study the relationship of these proxies with the Gini coefficient, a statistical measure of income or wealth inequality within a population. The empirical analysis reveals a consistent negative correlation in the 2024-2025 data, indicating that countries with stronger democratic freedom display lower levels of economic disparity. These findings are interpreted as exploratory associations rather than causal evidence. However, the paper also critically examines the flaws in the methodological construction of causal relationships between complex social phenomena like democracy which is a dynamic process and context specific, and income inequality. The paper also highlights the reductiveness of voting rights as sole bargaining power with the citizens, and the intertwined relationship of democracies with systems of neo-liberal capitalism. Drawing from theoretical frameworks of Sen's impossibility theorem and Graeber's conception of democracy as a core-periphery negotiation process, the study argues that modern democracies have deviated from the original principles of public participation and engagement. The study suggests that strengthening democratic institutions and addressing information asymmetry when accompanied by active policy efforts to reduce income and wealth disparities could result in improved outcomes for reducing inequalities.

Keywords: Democracy, Economic Inequality, Gini Coefficient, Political Economy, Institutions

1. Introduction

The idea of democracy is not a static one. Not only has the popular understanding of the term changed over time, but its dynamic nature comes from the multiplicity of ways in which individuals and groups experience it and perceive it. Its metamorphosis over time comes from the historical evolution of the idea of democracy. The roots of the word 'democracy' can be traced back to the Ancient Greek civilisation of the 5th century B.C. Cleisthenes, the leader of the city of Athens, was the first to use the word 'demokratia' to denote the system of political rule prevailing in Athens. Demokratia is a combination of 'demos', meaning people, and 'kratos', meaning rule. Democracy, therefore, in its first ever conceptualisation meant the rule of people. The principal tenet of this concept was the idea of 'participation'. This meaning of democracy, however, has undergone changes, both in epistemology and in practice, with the evolution of different forms of political organisation and governance, and in the context of modern nation states. The second aspect of democracy's dynamic nature, which is also the subject matter of this paper, is the prevalence of inequality, of several natures and of varying magnitudes. While the idea of democracy was founded on the principle of equality, of people having equal rights and freedom, of them being equal citizens in front of the law, even a cursory glance at the newspaper is enough to inform us that how 'democracy' interacts with people depends on their relative social position and is exacerbated by inequalities. Some people have more rights than others, and some are not even allowed a chance to take part in the functioning of democracy. The purpose of this paper is therefore not only to study this association between democracy and inequality, and how one affects the other, but also to question the idea of democracy itself, the manner of its manifestation in modern nation states, and to investigate whether a possibility exists for democracy to ever achieve equality.

This study makes three contributions to the scholarship on democracy and inequality. First, it revisits the often-assumed direction of association by empirically examining whether greater levels of democracy are associated with reductions in economic inequality, rather than the reverse relationship that dominates existing research. Second, it employs multiple proxies of democracy, including political rights, institutional quality, media freedom, and internet accessibility to capture the multidimensional character of democratization. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how different facets of democracy interact with distributive outcomes. Third, the paper situates the empirical findings within a broader conceptual critique of modern democracy's entanglement with neoliberal capitalism, thereby connecting quantitative

trends with structural explanations. By bridging empirical investigation with theoretical reflection, the study extends debates in comparative politics and political economy and underscores the importance of reassessing assumptions about democracy's equalizing potential.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between democracy and inequality, given the severity of impact it has on the material conditions of people's lives, has been of interest to scholars across the world. The direction of this relationship that has received the maximum attention has been on how the presence of inequality affects the practice of democracy. Boix (2003), whose work on this subject is one of the most widely cited and read, in his quest to understand how stable democracies are achieved, argues that democratisation is more probable in societies where the level of inequality is low. Acemoglu and Robinson (2001, 2006), another group of scholars who've done the most pioneering work on this relationship, predict that inequality and democracy have an inverted U-shaped relationship where the level of democratization is highest at middling levels of inequality. A common assumption in both these studies is that democratization is a function of the social elite's fear of revolution and unrest and hence they tend to introduce democracy in a country when the levels of inequality are highest.

Along the same lines, Levin-Waldman (2016) studies income inequality in the United States and concludes that rising income inequality poses serious threats to the functioning of a democracy and undermines it. Muller (1988) finds a two-way relationship between the two, arguing that a longer stable democracy reduces the prevalence of inequality, whereas high inequality, especially in relatively newly transitioned democracies, pose threat to its credibility and stability.

Democracy functions and is practised via its allied institutions and this crucial role of institutions is highlighted in the work of Besley and Burgess (2002). They posit that a democracy with credible institutions, a critical mass media, and symmetric information across its polity increases the propensity of government responsiveness to crisis situations and thereby establish that equality, not only in material distribution, but also in the spread of information, helps in ensuring the practice of democracy. Burgess et al. (2015), in a study on road building in Kenya, established the value of democracy in ensuring equality and found that in the absence of democracy, ethnic favoritism prevails and resources for building roads are distributed unequally among the Kenyan citizens.

While attempts have been made to establish this negative correlation between inequality and democracy, there have been scarce studies contrarian to this hypothesis as well. Ansell and Samuel (2009) study the likelihood of democratisation in relation with land and income inequalities and find that autocracies with high income inequalities are more likely to democratise. Krauss (2015) has highlighted the limitations in studying this relationship and reaching generalisable conclusions with regards to the impact of one on the other, more of which will be highlighted in a later section. In reviewing the literature on democracy and inequality, we find that this has been a topic of concern for many scholars, and rightly so, given the harsh consequences of both less democratic regimes and high inequality. However, there continues to be a dearth of work studying the other direction of this relationship: how does the presence of democracy and democratic institutions affect the level of inequality in a country, and this paper is an attempt to address this question.

3. How to Measure the Extent of Democracy?

As mentioned above, democracy is not an entity that remains static in a particular timeframe. It's a constantly evolving complex social phenomenon, transforming its meaning and the way in which it manifests, and therefore measuring the extent of democracy is itself a difficult task. While some would argue that the existence of an established democratic constitution in a nation that promises equal rights and freedoms to its people can be regarded as a democracy, I argue that democracy is not merely a set of principles but rather a process, one which takes place through the interaction between the citizens and the institutions of a country. In continuation with this and to make the work simpler, while keeping in mind the limitations that accrue to such a reduction, there are four proxies that I consider here to measure the extent of democracy. I will attempt to explain how these proxies are calculated and the rationale behind selecting them. The two sources I draw these proxies from are the indexes constructed by '*Freedom house*' and '*Reporter's without Borders*'.

Global Freedom Index - This index rates countries on the basis of people's access to political rights and civil liberties. Countries are given a score out of 100, where 40 points is for political rights and 60 for the extent of civil liberties, the sum total of which is the country's overall score. Rights and liberties are the two foundational aspects of a democratic setup and hence we choose this index to approximate the level of democracy.

Democracy Score - This score is calculated for 29 Central European and Asian countries, rating countries based on national and local governance, electoral

process, independent media, civil society, judicial framework and independence, and corruption, where countries are given a score out of 7 based on the level of criteria. We use this index because the credibility of institutions is of utmost importance in establishing a democratic regime.

Internet Freedom Score - The symmetry in and ease of information dissemination is an important estimator of modern democracy, since it is one of the ways to hold governments accountable for faltering from democratic principles. The three components of this index are a) obstacles to access, b) limits on content, and c) violation of user rights, with 25, 35, and 40 points respectively.

Press Freedom Index - The press and mass media, institutions which are otherwise referred to as 'fourth pillar of democracy', are extremely crucial to the functioning of a democracy, given that they hold governments accountable directly and indirectly by informing citizens, and therefore the freedom of these institutions is of utmost importance. Countries are given a score out of 100, with the lowest scores given to countries with the highest freedom of press.

The first three indexes are calculated by Freedom house, the last one is done by Reporters without borders. While this is not an exhaustive list of proxies that could measure the extent of democratisation in a country, we will try to ascertain if there is a link between democracy and income inequality, which is measured by the Gini coefficient, which we take from the *'World Inequality Database'*. Gini coefficient is a statistical measure of dispersion in income/wealth in a country, thereby representing the extent of inequality present in that country. The range of the coefficient is between 0 to 1, with 0 indicating perfect equality and 1 representing a state of absolute inequality.

4. An Empirical Attempt to Measure the Extent of Democracy

In an attempt to find a relationship between democracy and inequality, I plot the Gini coefficients against the indices (in increasing order) to see whether an increase in the extent of democracy (measured by these indices) leads to a decrease in income inequality.

Sample Selection Rationale:

The selection of countries for this analysis was guided by three criteria:

1. Data Availability: Countries were included only if complete data was available for all four democracy indices and the Gini coefficient for 2024-2025.

2. Geographic and Regime Diversity: We deliberately selected countries spanning different geographic regions and regimes (autocracies, transitional democracies, and established democracies) to examine whether the hypothesized relationship holds across diverse political contexts.

3. Time Period Selection: The year 2024-2025 was chosen because:
   - It represents a recent snapshot of democracy-inequality relationships
   - Complete comparable data was available across all indices
   - The cross-sectional nature of this analysis acknowledges that 2024-2025 data provides correlational evidence only, not longitudinal causal evidence

Limitations: The non-random, availability-driven sample selection limits generalization. Different country samples might yield different patterns. Future work should employ panel data spanning multiple years to address causal identification.

5. Global Freedom Index

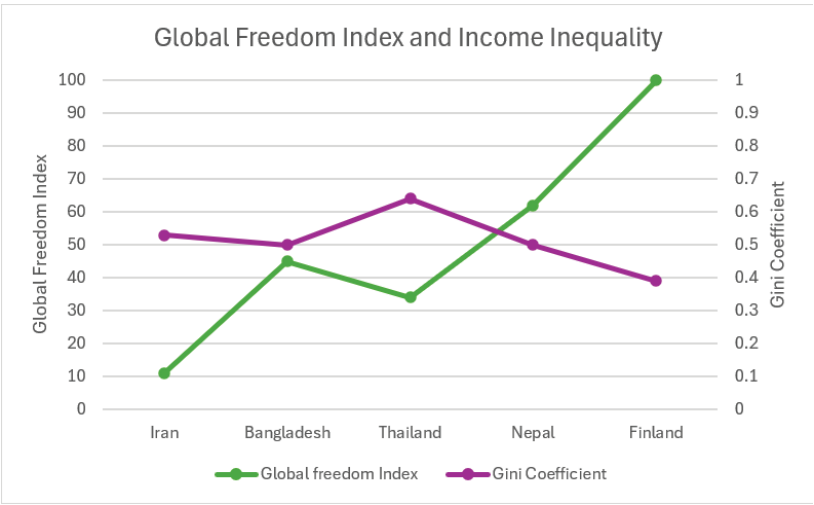


Figure-1, Global Freedom Index Score against respective Gini coefficient, 2024-2025

Source: Based on Data from Freedom House & World Inequality Database

We plot the Global Freedom Scores of five countries: Iran, Thailand, Bangladesh, Nepal and Finland, in an increasing order, with their respective Gini coefficients

and observe a downward trend in income inequality as the extent of political rights and civil liberties in the country increases.

6. Democracy Score

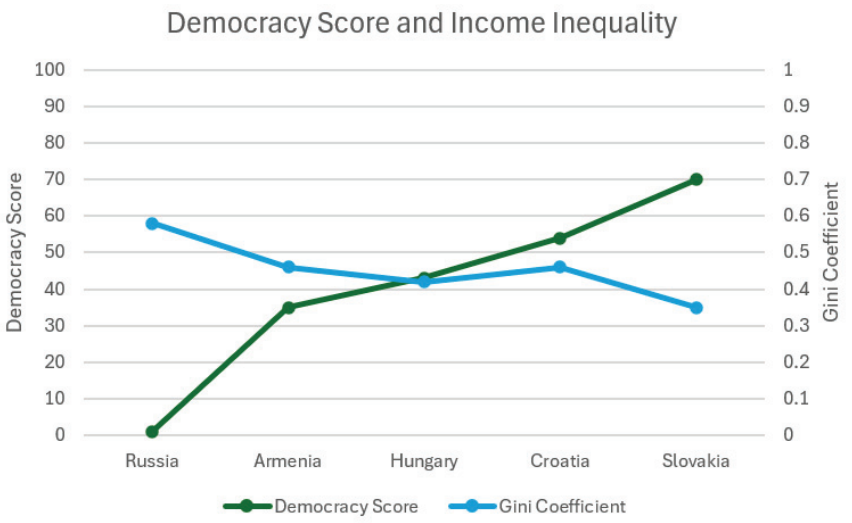


Figure-2, Democracy Score against respective Gini coefficient, 2024-2025

Source: Based on Data from Freedom House & World Inequality Database

A similar trend is observed in the relationship between the democracy index and Gini coefficients. An increase in the democracy score is observed to be coincident with a decrease in the Gini coefficient. Among the chosen countries, Russia has the lowest democracy score and the highest Gini coefficient whereas Slovakia has the highest democracy score and the lowest level of income inequality.

The observed inverse relationship between democracy and inequality becomes clearer when considering the mechanisms through which democratic institutions operate.

7. Press Freedom Index

Press freedom and internet access, in particular, play a central role. Independent media and a free press enhance government accountability by exposing corruption, misuse of public funds, and policy failures. Such scrutiny pressures

governments to respond with redistributive policies, social welfare measures, or reforms that benefit broader sections of society rather than narrow elites.

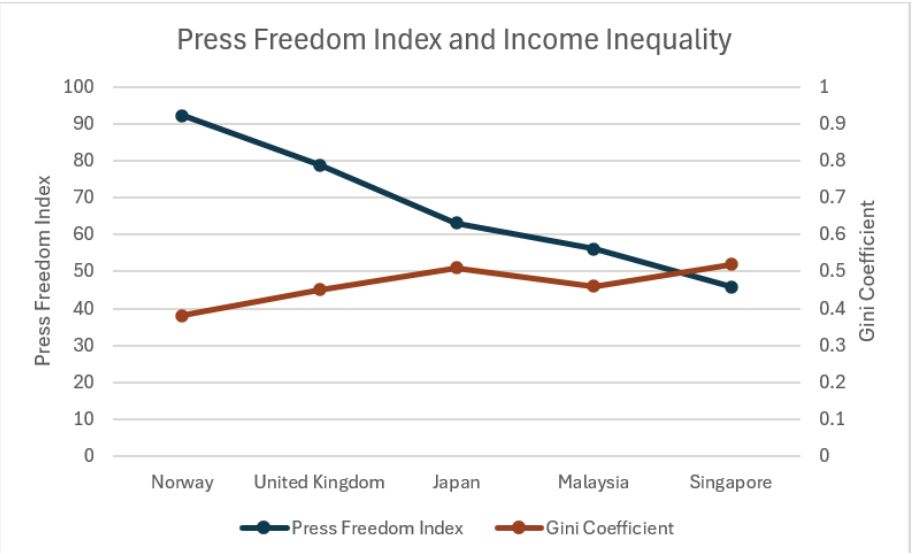


Figure-3, Press Freedom Index against respective Gini coefficient, 2024-2025

Source: Based on Data from Reporters without Borders & World Inequality Database

Press Freedom Index, for which the lowest value represents the highest freedom, exhibits a positive relationship with the Gini Coefficients of the respective countries. As the Press freedom of a country decreases, the level of income inequality in that country increases (except for Malaysia).

8. Internet Freedom Score

Similarly, internet freedom reduces information asymmetries between citizens and state institutions. By lowering barriers to information access, it empowers marginalized groups to mobilize, articulate demands, and hold leaders accountable. Online platforms also amplify citizen voices that are often excluded from traditional political channels, thereby widening participation in the democratic process. Over time, this broader participation can translate into more inclusive policymaking and a reduction in economic inequality.

A downward trend line is found again in plotting Gini coefficients of countries in the increasing order of their respective internet freedom scores. While this inverse relationship is not absolute, given that Cambodia has higher internet

freedom scores than both China and Iran, and still has higher income inequality than them, the downward trend line tells us that an inverse relationship between the two is the best fit for the data.

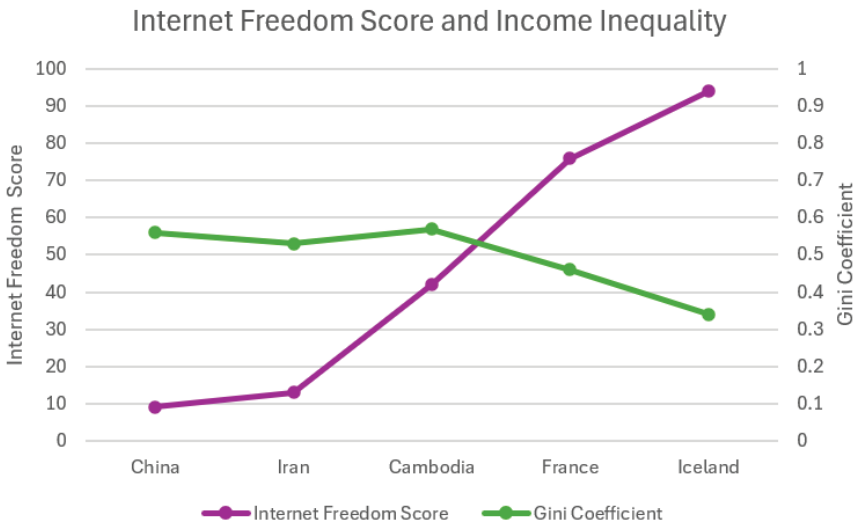


Figure-4, Internet Freedom Score against respective Gini coefficient, 2024-2025

Source: Based on Data from Freedom House & World Inequality Database

These mechanisms suggest that the inverse correlations observed in the data are not coincidental but are underpinned by institutional processes that connect freedom of expression and information access with distributive outcomes.

In all four of our chosen indices to measure the extent of democracy in a country, we find an inverse relationship between the level of democracy and the level of income inequality, thereby confirming that as the level of democracy in a country increases, the inequality in that country tends to decrease. While we do see a pattern of decreasing inequality with increasing democratisation, this evidence is not complete and hence not generalizable.

9. Why is it difficult to measure the relationship between democracy and inequality?

While it is possible to ascertain a causal relationship between democracy and inequality using proxies, it is extremely difficult to find a robust relationship between the two which transcends country wise differences and is worthy of

generalisation. There are many factors endogenous to both the phenomenon of democracy and inequality which always escape empirical investigations about a potential relationship between the two.

Krauss (2015) identifies multiple methodological and empirical limitations in assessing this potential relationship. Most common approaches for studying this relationship employs per country per year data, which have several drawbacks. A per year analysis has the limitation of evaluating democracy as a phenomenon fixed in time, whereas democratisation is better understood as a process (d) evolving (Muller, 1988).

With the advent of globalisation, government and governance have also assumed a role transcending national boundaries and so has the prevalence of inequality. A per-country analysis not only fails to incorporate the subjectivity of conditions in different countries but also ignores the phenomenon of exogenous inequality creation that occurs due to power imbalances in trade relations.

Another limitation that plagues an empirical analysis is the difficulty in assessing whether promised democratic rights and freedoms in a constitutional document are actually realised and experienced by the citizens. Democratic institutions may also suffer from the problem of distributing *de jure* political power but failing to ensure *de facto* realisation of that distribution, which in turn might affect inequality and also become hard to assess empirically.

Authoritarian regimes in the past have been seen to enact radical land distribution reforms, leading to a more equitable distribution of land and other resources, and liberal democracies have passed laws cutting down on taxes of the top income earners of the country, thereby failing to address the already wide inequality. While the causal relationship between democracy and inequality can be identified by employing proxies, the complex entanglement of these two phenomena makes it difficult to find a strong association which could then inform policy decisions.

A critical limitation of this analysis must be explicitly noted: the cross-sectional design cannot identify causality. Three specific threats to causal inference are present:

1. **Reverse causality:** While this paper hypothesizes that stronger democracy reduces inequality, the reverse could be true - more equal societies may find it easier to maintain democratic institutions.

2. **Omitted variable bias:** Unmeasured factors (e.g., natural resource wealth, colonial history, education systems, or regional trade patterns) may simultaneously influence both democracy levels and inequality, creating spurious correlations.

3. **Endogeneity:** Democracy proxies (press freedom, internet access) may themselves be influenced by inequality levels or by common underlying factors, confounding the relationship.

Without a research design explicitly addressing these issues (such as instrumental variable analysis, natural experiments, or causal inference methods), the empirical patterns presented should be interpreted as descriptive associations rather than evidence of causal effects.

10. Are modern democracies fundamentally unequal?

While the empirical trends presented earlier suggest that higher levels of democracy are often associated with lower levels of income inequality, these findings are not absolute and resist easy generalization. This tension points to a deeper structural issue: even where democratic institutions correlate with more equal outcomes, modern democracies may still fail to deliver substantive equality. Their entanglement with market forces and neoliberal economic arrangements often undermines the redistributive potential of democratic institutions. Thus, the normative critique that follows should be read as an extension of, rather than a departure from, the empirical evidence, explaining why the observed correlations might be fragile or inconsistent across contexts.

In our entire study and all other studies that have attempted to find an association between the two, a key assumption is the possibility of democracies being equal. All countries in the world are plagued by one or the other form of inequality, and this inability of seemingly democratic nation states to establish equality raises a question: Is inequality intrinsic to the conceptualisation of modern democracy?

When Cleisthenes proposed democracy in the city of Athens, he did it in opposition to the existing political setup at the time, Aristocracy, the rule of the elite. Modern democracies, more or less, are closer to an aristocracy than to democracy. The principal idea of democracy was that every citizen gets to participate and takes an active role in the governance process through their elected representatives. However, modern-day democracies have invisibilised this idea of democracy as a 'process' of and have reduced it to an institution of

'one vote per person'. During the speeches leading to the writing of the American Constitution, the governor of Virginia in his speech said, "There's a real danger of democracy breaking out", and that happening during the constitutional convention of the most 'liberal' democracy in the world is very telling in itself.

The failure of modern democracy in ensuring equality also needs to be seen in light of its marriage with capital and the market economy. The logic on which modern capitalism is premised as a zero-sum game: that there will always be losers and winners in the market (due to different levels of endowments and 'merit'), and inequality therefore becomes a non-issue. While authoritarian inequality is created due to the lack of state willingness to address it, and such regimes are expected to be unequal due to an absence of the promise of equality, democratic inequality is primarily a creation of capital and the phenomenon of capital requires inequality for its survival.

Another marker for a democracy, which was also one of the first, is the access to voting rights. While voting rights encourage the citizens' participation in the process of forming the government, it is also a limit to their participation. While the importance of voting rights cannot be undermined, its efficacy in ensuring fair elections is questionable. The Gibbard-Satterthwaite theorem of social choice states that every voting rule is manipulable, and instances of this have been observed in the election processes of major democracies in the world, thereby raising questions about voting rights as a measure of democracy. Graeber (2013) conceptualizes democracy as a core-periphery process, where the core is the elected representatives and the periphery is its citizens. He argues that the process of democracy is essentially a negotiation between the core and the periphery and the purpose of the periphery is to question, criticize and hold accountable anyone who assumes the position in the core. This idea of democracy as a continuous process was also shared by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his teacher John Dewey. While democracy for them and many others was to be a bottoms-up process, with the citizens at the periphery making rules through participation, modern democracy has become a top-down process, with the core dictating the rules to the periphery, very often without any consultation or negotiation.

Sen (1970), in his seminal text on the impossibility of Paretian liberal, states that it is impossible to achieve the conditions of pareto optimality (equality) and liberalism (democracy) together, and while he talked of this in context of individual preferences, an analysis of modern democratic states indicate the generalizability of this paradox.

11. Conclusion & Policy Implications

While I had set out to investigate the relationship between democracy and inequality, only one thing has been firmly established in the course of this paper: democracy is a complex phenomenon. This complex nature of democracy makes it not only hard to study its relationship with inequality but also raises concerns about the possibility of equality.

Most literature that has attempted to assess this relationship has done so to understand whether policy reforms addressed to reduce income and wealth inequality can lead to an increase in robustness of democratic institutions and an increase in political freedom. However, as noted earlier, such an attempt assumes a principle of equality embedded in the systems of modern democracy. This paper not only attempts to study the reverse relationship, i.e., how and if the extent of democracy in a country shapes the state of economic distribution, endowment, and earnings, but it also attempts to change the fundamental assumption that modern democracies are inherently based on a principle of equality.

The findings of this paper carry significant implications for policymakers seeking to strengthen democracy while addressing inequality. First, they suggest that fostering robust democratic institutions like independent media and internet freedom can act as indirect mechanisms of redistribution by enhancing transparency and government accountability. Second, the evidence highlights that democratization alone is insufficient to ensure equality unless it is accompanied by policies that directly tackle wealth and income disparities, such as progressive taxation, social safety nets, and equitable access to education and healthcare. Third, the study underscores the need to reconceptualize democracy as a participatory process rather than a static institutional arrangement. Policies that expand citizen engagement beyond periodic elections, such as deliberative assemblies or participatory budgeting may create avenues for more inclusive and equitable governance. Ultimately, while structural constraints tied to neoliberal capitalism limit the extent to which democracies can eradicate inequality, incremental reforms that strengthen accountability and redistribute resources can mitigate its extremes and preserve the legitimacy of democratic regimes.

While there is a sense of pessimism to the conclusion, it does not indicate hopelessness. It might not be possible to achieve absolute equality in a democracy, or any political regime for that matter. Our goal should be to ask for reforms to reduce inequality as much as possible. The hope for democracy in addressing inequality, therefore, lies only in the practice of its core principles:

active participation of the citizens in the process of policymaking, a process of continuous negotiation to hold governments accountable, increasing attempts to check the concentrations of power, and involving themselves proactively in ensuring democratic institutions remain robust.

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Political, Economic and Military (PEM) Framework for Reciprocal Tariff Based on Machine Learning: A Novel Approach

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Abstract

The unprecedented escalation of reciprocal tariffs between global superpowers has redefined the silhouette of modern trade diplomacy. This study employs a deep learning algorithm to identify the evolving nodes of non-conditioned long-term consequences of the retaliatory tariff policies in the US-China trade war, serving as a primary case study. The results of the study determine the impact of reciprocal tariff shaping trends on Political, Economic, and Military (PEM) facets of the modern world, which collectively shape the future of humankind. The analysis of trade data, macroeconomic indicators, and international sentiment patterns through Google Trends from 01/01/2024 to 04/09/2025 reveals how protectionist measures can lead to new constructionist dynamics in the political, economic, and military scenarios amid volatile, changing landscapes. The study leads to detailing the existence of such clusters in the PEM framework. The metaphor of "gradual and nonlinear' has been used to demonstrate the often creeping, often nonlinear nature of these long-term impacts. Furthermore, the LDA method in topic modelling has been deployed to identify sentiments on the political, economic, and military impact of reciprocal tariffs on the global economy.

Keywords: Deep Learning, Global, PEM Framework, Reciprocal Tariffs, Trade Diplomacy

1. Introduction

The increasingly interconnected global economy encourages trade relationships among different nations, including major economic powers, significantly impacting both regional and international economic stability. Amongst many such trade scenarios, US-China trade hostilities have been visualized as a global repercussion event that has been witnessed for an extensive time duration,

notably from 2018, when the United States enforced a series of import tariffs on Chinese goods, alluding to unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, and a growing fiscal deficit. Counterresponse from China in the form of its tariffs, including a set of trade barriers, manifested geopolitical conditions, reshaped global supply chain networks, disrupted existing financial markets, and remodified the nature of multilateral trade agreements (Bown & Kolb, 2021). Reciprocal tariffs are often used as tools of provocative counter-trade measures that are often meant for the protectionism of domestic industries by mitigating international pressures, leveraging negotiations, but may often lead to long-term destabilizing effects such as market inefficiencies, inflationary pressures, and the erosion of cooperative trade norms (Evenett & Fritz, 2019). The continuing US–China trade war elucidates a complex pattern of reformation tied to fallout from tit-for-tat tariff exchanges to broader geopolitical struggles, technology supremacy issues, intellectual property management, and matters of national security. This case study delves into the dynamicity of slithering or creeping and the persistent influence of reciprocal tariffs on bilateral relations between the United States and China, extended to political, economic, and military implications over a longer duration of time. These counterproductive approaches can also lead to a ripple effect with different third-party nations being indirectly dragged into the post-tariff impact conditions of protectionism, supply chain reconfigurations, and global trade alliances shifting in the international economy (Fajgelbaum et al., 2020). The study explores historical perspective, Chinese perspective, US perspective, Competitive strategies, and future outcomes in the literature review section. Discussion on deep learning tools, such as the Lateral Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) method, was included in the same section. The Research Methodology section includes details of data collection sources and method discussion for analysis and interpretation. This was followed by the Analysis section that included a search for dominant topics, creation of a network graph, and calculation of Coherence score, Topic diversity score, and perplexity score to test the fitness of the model for the applied dataset. Finally, the implications of the results were highlighted in the Implications of results section.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Perspectives

The historic progression of US-China relations must be prioritized for a comprehensive understanding of the real outlook of the present times. Post World War transformation of US-China ties emerging from distinct cultural

perceptions and ideological divergence was explored by Simei Qing (2007) in her book "*From Allies to Enemies"*. Contrasting visions of modernity and identity may have been instrumental in continual misunderstanding and strategic mistrust. Events such as the Korean War and continuing debates over Taiwan between the two countries continue to shape independent foreign policies of both the US and China (Simei Qing, 2007). The concept of U.S.-China relations can be difficult to comprehend without acknowledging the historical facts of origin. In her research, Christina L. Davis (2009) discussed the concept of "linkage diplomacy", stating the combined influence of economic and security concessions to strengthen strategic partnerships during the analysis of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. The framework can help understand how modern powers like the U.S. and China can align or negotiate across multiple domains of trade, cybersecurity, and military postures to mitigate existing rivalry and form durable agreements. America's foreign policy during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was mainly driven by "economic nationalism" rather than "free trade imperialism", where protectionist tools were deployed by Republicans to leverage foreign markets for American goods and secure imperial footholds. The legacy of the established method in contemporary trade wars has persisted as America's deployment of economic policy as an instrument of geopolitical power in the world, with strategic decoupling from China as a major competitor. (Marc-William Palen's, 2014). Further, A Congressional Research Service report by Vladimir N. Pregelj (2001) prioritized the discussion on the shift of U.S. policy from "most-favoured-nation" to "normal trade relations". Continued political tensions and legislative debates were categorized as major transformers over concerns of human rights and strategic competition, including domestic undercurrents shaping U.S. economic policy toward China.

1.2 China's Perspective

From China's perspective, its continued elevation is framed as a strategic and peaceful path seeker towards development. In the words of Bai Gao (2022) the concept of "reciprocal openness" seeking mutual liberalization in global trade, envisions China's engagement in international markets to promote domestic innovation, attract investment, and ensure long-term growth, with respect to mutual embracement of openness among collaborative partners rather than unilateralism. Complementary studies by Tao Liu and Wing Thye Woo (2018) identified trade imbalances, China's technology acquisition strategies, and concerns over national security as the three major reasons for US grievance seeking monopolization of international markets. Furthermore, the need for

cooperation and reform tactics is suggested from China's perspective for economic competition and facing strategic threats. The protectionist point of view as a diplomatic posture seeks fair competition by avoiding containment or blanket hostility from other parties in international markets. Liu and Woo studied a development framework that de-escalates rising tensions and encourages cooperation on mutually beneficial issues such as innovation, climate change, and global health.

1.3 U.S. Perspective

US policies continue to highlight the multifaceted nature of challenges framed in terms of competition for global influence. Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2020), during his analysis of "Power and Interdependence," highlighted the multifaceted complexity of the U.S.-China relationship in terms of competition for global influence. In his research, he further reiterated the possibility of both cooperation and conflict arising from the relationship between economic, technological, military might, and norm capacities between the two countries. A study by Garrett Hinck and Tim Maurer (2019) investigated the role of "persistent enforcement" strategies, such as indicting state-sponsored hackers from China and other nations for blame attribution, deterrence of future attacks, and reinforcement of international norms against malicious cyber activity consistently. Technological superiority acts as a central battleground stage of competition with concerns for trends in intellectual property theft, forced technology transfers, and the growing influence of Chinese firms in critical infrastructure. American policy, directed at safeguarding strategic industries while preserving its leadership in global innovation, forms a critical part of its overall strategy.

1.4 Competitive Strategies

A study by Satoru Mori (2019), with a detailed analysis of U.S.-China technological rivalry, revealed military advancement, industrial competition, and digital infrastructure dominance as the three primary domains of contestation. He further added that the boost in investments in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and synthetic biology is part of the strategic goals of securing long-term leadership in emerging global systems for both the US and China, respectively. The emerging competition over digital networks in 5G infrastructure, amplified with strategic growth and control, can lead to economic, strategic, and normative consequences shaping the behaviour of other states. Furthermore, restrictions have been imposed on Chinese firms' access to global markets, citing security concerns, while promoting alternative suppliers.

Retrospective impacts, such as domestic innovation programs and expansion of digital footprint through initiatives like the Digital Silk Road, were seen from the Chinese side (Hinck & Maurer, 2019). Complementary research by Mori's analysis provided an in-depth analysis of Strategic competition in cyberspace and data governance in pursuit of sovereignty, governance, geopolitical alignment, and extension beyond military hardware into the architecture of information and connectivity.

Recent studies have highlighted the complex impacts of tariffs on international trade, financial markets, and policy reactions. The vulnerability of financial markets to trade policy shocks is shown by Gaies (2025) and Yilmazkuday (2025), who argue that US tariffs have asymmetric and substantial effects on stock prices. Gao and Song (2025) emphasise the influence of trade frictions on China's photovoltaic industry, illustrating the vulnerabilities and adaptive restructuring within renewable energy sectors. This phenomenon is extended to regional economies by Almazán-Gómez et al. (2025), who model varying exposure to new trade wars and underline different implications across regions. Zhao et al. (2024) offer a climate-policy perspective, demonstrating the interaction between carbon tariffs, cap-and-trade regulations, and product tariffs, and their impact on cost efficiency in trade conflicts. Contractor (2025) illustrates how multinational corporations adjust their supply networks and trading tactics to reduce tariff expenses from the standpoint of business strategy. Klomp (2025) hints that the security-economy interconnections are a result of the Trump-era tariffs, which are associated with changes in the US defence industry. Felbermayr, Hinz, and Langhammer (2024) position tariffs within wider geopolitical considerations, stating that US trade policy decisions after 2024 will have an impact on Europe's economic and political standing. These studies indicate that tariffs function not only as fiscal tools but also as drivers of financial volatility, industrial restructuring, regional disparities, and geopolitical shifts, necessitating comprehensive policy strategies.

2.5 Future Outcomes

The future of the global economy shall depend on the ease or unease in strategic competition between the U.S. and China. Weakened multilateral economic cooperation on account of the rise of populism, economic nationalism, and protectionist sentiments further underscored isolation strategies shaping global economic governance. Amongst such rivalry, some possibilities for coexistence and recalibration may still exist. Frameworks for rethinking the U.S.-China

relationship were deliberated by the studies of Nye, Liu, and Gao, who portrayed the current environment as a complex, dynamic, and interdependent competition beyond a Cold War-style zero-sum game. Results of the work raise the importance of economic concerns, institutionalizing dialogue, and fostering a rules-based order that accommodates pluralism. Likely, Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley (2012) promoted the establishment of a new power relational approach based on mutual respect and realistic cooperation by defueling misperception, unmanaged tensions, and reactive policymaking and replacing them with diplomatic innovation and sustained communication to mitigate strategic risks. In due course, the past events related to U.S.-China relations can reconfigure the future of global order. A "competitive coexistence" or strategic hostility shall depend on the policy choices made by them in the coming decade. A more positive approach with collaborative effort, sharing global responsibilities, can be the key to navigating a more stable and constructive future.

The existing literature lacks a systematic, data-driven analysis of political, economic, and military sentiments in U.S.-China relations as exhibited in internet news media. While historical and policy-oriented studies (e.g., Qing 2007, Davis 2009, Palen 2014) explore strategic tensions, they have overlooked real-time sentiment tracking of diplomatic rhetoric, trade war narratives, and military posturing in digital news sources. Lack of comprehensive research on sentiments arising due to political statements, economic reports, and defense-related news evolving across U.S. and Chinese platforms highlights the necessity for initiating the current investigation to discover sentiments around such highly pertinent issues.

Most research examines political, economic, and military (PEM) factors separately; therefore, sentiment analysis lacks a holistic framework. Traditional sentiment analysis approaches, comprising VADER, LIWC, and SVM, often neglect domain-specific interdependencies in geopolitics, trade, and defense. In addition, current approaches focus primarily on polarity detection (positive, negative, or neutral), offering limited explanatory power for understanding how hierarchical issue clusters, such as reciprocal tariffs, grow across domains. The PEM-based framework in the present research fills this gap by concurrently modeling political, economic, and military speech and assessing it using coherence, diversity, and perplexity benchmarks. Comparison with typical sentiment approaches highlights the PEM approach's enhanced interpretability

and multidimensional insights, strengthening its value to academic research and policy analysis (See Appendices, Table 4).

In this research, we have aimed to fulfill objectives such as:

1. To identify political, economic, and military sentiments surrounding reciprocal tariffs of the US and China.

2. To identify key terms in sentiments and analyze their inter-relationship using deep learning sentiment analysis.

3. To test the validity of the sentiment model using metric scores.

Relative assumptions include:

1. H1: Trade-related terminology, particularly concerning tariffs and reciprocity, leads political discourse, resulting in a concentrated focus on protectionist policies and leadership strategies.

2. H2: Economic discourse is exemplified by broader and more diverse thematic coverage, encompassing both macroeconomic uncertainty and global trade relations.

3. H3: Military discourse integrates strategic and geopolitical considerations, with a strong emphasis on regional power dynamics and security threats linked to international trade disputes.

3. Research Methodology

In the initial stage, extract the most prominent keywords from Google News during the period of 01/01/2024 to 04/09/2025, which includes 19 URLs (uniform resource locator) resources for 'Political issues based on reciprocal tariffs', 60 URLs resources for 'Economic issues based on reciprocal tariffs', 60 URLs resources for 'Military issues based on reciprocal tariffs' (See Appendices-Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3).

KeyBERT function performs keyword extraction by first embedding the entire input document using a transformer model, such as all-MiniLM-L6-v2 from the sentence-transformers library. It then generates candidate keywords or phrases—typically in the form of n-grams—directly from the document

text. Each candidate phrase is also embedded using the same transformer model to ensure consistency in the semantic space. The model then computes the cosine similarity between the document embedding and each candidate keyword embedding, quantifying how semantically close the keyword is to the overall context of the document. Finally, it ranks the candidates based on their similarity scores and returns the top N keywords or phrases that best represent the document's content (Grootendorst, M.,2020).

KeyBERT function was used in Python 3.0 on Google Colab platform to extract the most prominent keywords from Google News during the period of 01/01/2024 to 04/09/2025 for 'Political issues based on reciprocal tariffs. Traditionally, KeyBERT itself is composed of a combination of mathematical formulas, since it's an application of transformer-based embeddings (like BERT) with cosine similarity rather than a formula-driven model. However, the core mathematical operation behind KeyBERT is keyword extraction via cosine similarity between document and candidate phrase embeddings (Grootendorst, M.,2020).

a. Document Embedding

KeyBERT creates a document embedding using a transformer model (like BERT). This is usually the mean-pooled output of the last hidden layer:

$$d = BERT_{mean}(D) \quad \text{- (1)}$$

b. Candidate Phrase Embeddings

Subsequently, document D, a list of candidate key phrases {P1, P2,…, Pn} is produced (using simple n-gram extraction or more advanced phrase models). Each phrase needs to be embedded:

$$p_i = BERT_{mean}(P_i), \forall i \in \{1, \dots, n\} \quad \text{- (2)}$$

c. Cosine Similarity Scoring

Each candidate phrase vector is counted vis-à-vis the document vector using cosine similarity:

$$score(P_i) = cos(d, p_i) = \frac{d \cdot p_i}{\|d\| \cdot \|p_i\|} \quad \text{- (3)}$$

d. Ranking and Selection

The top k key phrases are selected based on the highest cosine similarity scores:

$$Keywords = Top\ k(\{score(P_i)\}_{i=1}^{n}) \quad \text{- (4)}$$

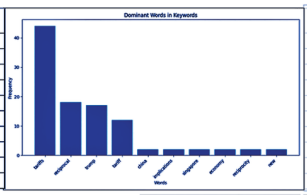
Therefore,

KeyBERT = (BERT Embeddings + Cosine Similarity + Candidate Filtering + Ranking).

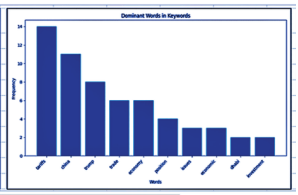
4. Analysis

4.1 Word frequency, Keywords, and Dominant words

Word (Political)	Frequency
tariffs	44
reciprocal	18
trump	17
tariff	12
china	2
implications	2
singapore	2
economy	2
reciprocity	2
new	2



Words (Economic)	Frequency
tariffs	14
china	11
trump	8
trade	6
economy	6
position	4
issues	3
economic	3
dhabi	2
investment	2



Word (military)	Frequency
military	11
taiwan	10
china	9
drills	3
warning	3
deter	2
ban	2
netanyahu	2
concludes	2
baltic	2

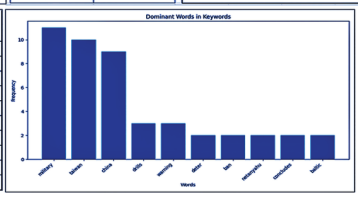


Figure 1. Combined Word frequency, Keywords, and Dominant words for the PEM model

(Source: Author analysis)

Preliminary investigation revealed a comparative analysis of keyword frequencies for three thematic domains (Political, Economic, and Military) that consisted of a frequency table with corresponding bar chart emphasizing the most dominant words within each category. The term *"tariffs* "evolved as the most frequently mentioned word across all three domains, indicating its focus on matters related to international affairs. Likely, "tariff" leads in frequency, followed by terms such as "reciprocal" and "Trump," projecting a focus on trade policies and leadership narratives. Correspondingly, words such as "China," "Trump," "trade," and "economy" are more persistent and indicative of thematic

congruence and the interrelated nature of universal economic and security matters. These common appearances of related words Overall indicators suggest the integral role of trade-related thoughts in molding contemporary political, economic, and military dialogues.

4.2 Keyword Network Graph

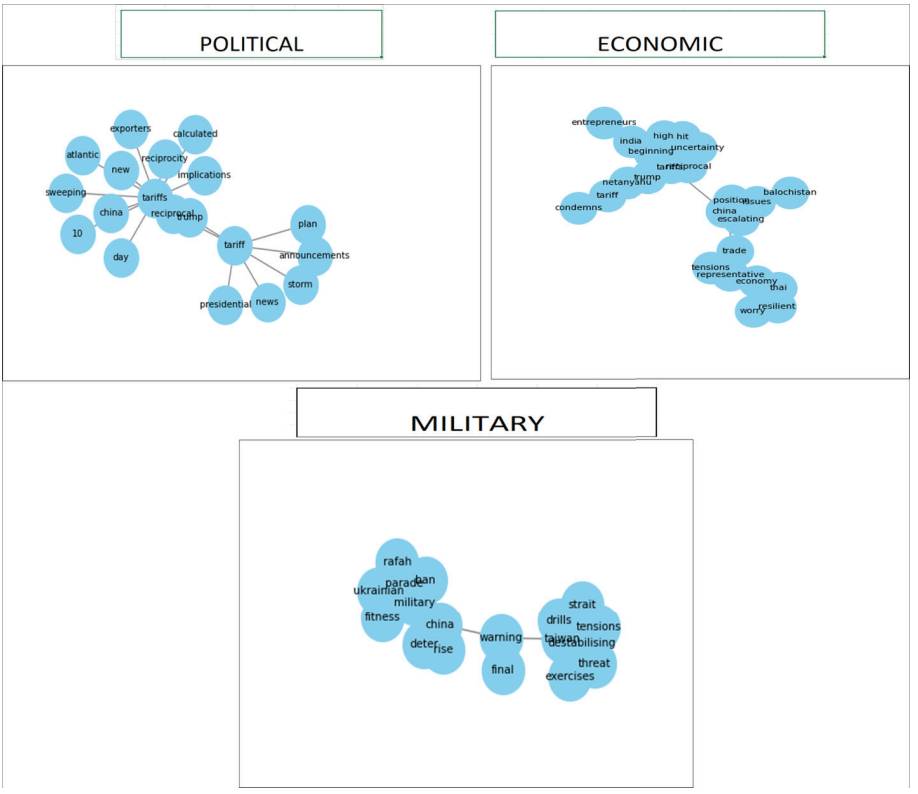


Figure 2. PEM Cluster for political, economic, and military situations

(Source: Author analysis)

Distinct clusters of keywords grouping related terms belonging to the PEM framework—Political, Economic, and Military have been visually represented in the above diagram (See Figure 2). The Political section includes words such as "tariffs," "reciprocity," "China," and "presidential news," suggesting deliberations comprised of such words, in matters of diplomatic tensions, trade policies, and executive announcements. Regions like India, China, and

Balochistan found relevance on account of unpredictable markets, economic policies, multi-lateral treaties, as indicated by keywords such as "entrepreneurs," "uncertainty," "trade," and "resilient" belonging to the Economic cluster. The third cluster of Military segments had high significance levels for strategic posturing, military readiness, and regional security tensions, as indicated by the terms "deterrence," "drills," "threat," and "Ukraine". Collectively, geopolitical discourse encircled around political decisions, economic conditions, and military maneuvers has been appropriately captured by these three prominent clusters, showcasing its multi-layered focus on global developments (See Figure 2).

4.3 LDA Parametric Results

(Political analysis) Coherence Score	Perplexity Score	Topic Diversity
0.7896799411426279	-3.18241	25

(Economic analysis) Coherence Score	Perplexity Score	Topic Diversity
0.7675284243706982	-4.800828062	45

(Military analysis) Coherence Score	Perplexity Score	Topic Diversity
0.7536525056312062	-5.21304	45

Figure 3. Calculated Parametric results for the PEM model

(Source: Author analysis)

A comparative evaluation of the performance of topic modeling for LLM data in three domains - Political, Economic, and Military has been made using Coherence Score, Perplexity Score, and Topic Diversity metrics (as seen in Figure 3). The Political analysis for reciprocal tariffs reveals the highest coherence score (CS 0.7897), signifying well-formed and interpretable topics while demonstrating the lowest topic diversity score (TDS:25), implying a narrower thematic spread. A Similar topic diversity score (TDS: 45) for both Economic and Military cluster analyses emphasizes wider coverage of topics with marginally lower coherence scores, CS of 0.7675 and CS of 0.7537, respectively. Moreover, the lowest perplexity score (PS -5.2130) was generated for the Military segment, hinting at better model fit and predictive capacity in comparison to the Economic (PS -4.8008) and Political (PS = -3.1824) models. The larger picture draws a balance between coherence and diversity as implicated

by the clarity and cohesiveness of political models and greater topical breadth with better probabilistic modeling, mirroring lower perplexity scores for both the economic and military models, respectively.

5. Findings and Conclusion:

1. The hypothesis (H1) is supported by the high coherence score (0.7897) and the low topic diversity (25) in the political domain, demonstrating an intently focused but semantically strong topic cluster. Frequent keywords such as "tariffs," "reciprocal," and "Trump" bolster the centrality of trade policy in political narratives.

2. The H2 hypothesis is verified by a higher topic diversity score (45) and a relatively strong coherence score (0.7675) for the economic cluster. Keywords such as "uncertainty," "entrepreneurs," "India," and "trade" highlight the multifaceted nature of economic conversations, pointing toward ongoing concerns about global market stability and trade policy shifts.

3. High topic diversity (45) with the lowest perplexity score (-5.2130) in the military cluster demonstrates a well-fitted model that captures complex and varied discussions, supporting H3 hypothesis. Defense readiness and geopolitical positioning are contextually determined by the presence of frequent terms like "navy," "army," "China," and "missile," which are often contextualised within broader economic and political frameworks.

Based on the hypothesis evidence, a hypothesis-based PEM framework has been created (See Figure 4):

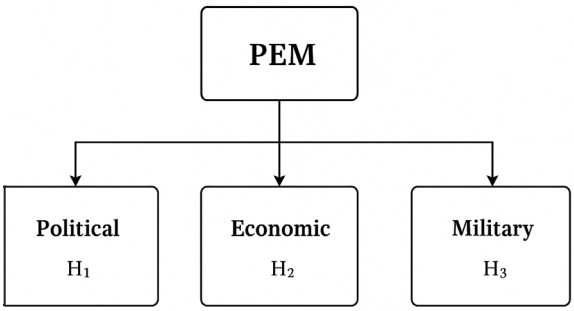


Figure 4. PEM sentimental model framework for reciprocal tariffs

(Source: Author analysis)

The diagram illustrates a hierarchical structure labeled PEM, which stands for Political, Economic, and Military dimensions. It shows that PEM is divided into three main components: Political (H_1), Economic (H_2), and Military (H_3), each representing a distinct hypothesis or analytical dimension within the overall framework. This structure suggests that the PEM model is used to categorize and analyze issues or phenomena through these three interconnected but individually assessed lenses (See Figure 4).

6. Implications of the Research

According to supporting evidence derived from analysis for the hypothesis-driven PEM model framework, the research presents numerous substantial implications. At first, the occurrence of strong coherence and narrow topic diversity in the political domain (H_1) advocates that political discourse, particularly around reciprocal tariffs and trade policies, is extremely well directed and ideologically unified, often positioned around prominent figures like "Trump." This further suggests that political discussions in the mass media or public conversation may be placed around specific trade-related issues for tactical or nationalistic positioning.

Secondly, higher topic diversity and solid coherence in the economic domain (H_2) suggest a wide band of concerns that includes entrepreneurship, trade uncertainty, and country-focused dynamics like India and China. This reveals that economic discussions are more epistemologically diverse and interpretatively complex, characterized by both domestic policies and international changes, whose inclusion may impact policymaking and investment navigation in volatile global markets.

Finally, the military domain (H_3) is mirrored by high topic diversity and the lowest perplexity, which reflects a well-modeled but complex thematic space centralized around the aspects of interplay between defense readiness, military exercises, and geopolitical tensions. The presence of key terms like "missile," "deterrence," and "navy" underscores the strategic signaling and security dynamics at play, frequently connected with economic and political considerations. In aggregation, these results validate the existence of the PEM framework as an efficient and robust tool for identification, classification of sentiments, and acknowledging the actual trends that determine the geopolitical discourse, offering special insights for policymakers, security analysts, and economists as well. The findings further demonstrate that the political narratives around tariffs and reciprocity remain extremely focused, highlighting the importance of governments communicating trade policy explicitly to avoid

escalation in diplomatic tensions. The growing diversity of economic dialogue indicates policymakers need to adopt resilience-building strategies that include the promotion of entrepreneurs, the diversification of trade partnerships, and minimizing the impact of market uncertainty. The military dimension underlines the significance of integrating defense considerations with broader policy agendas, since it demonstrates an intense focus on deterrence, readiness, and geopolitical signals. The PEM framework illustrates that political, economic, and military factors are not distinct, but rather strongly interconnected, in their impact on global discourse. This implies that policies need to be developed using a multidimensional approach that achieves a balance between the requirements of commerce, economic resilience, and security. This approach allows governments to align public sentiment with strategic goals, thereby enhancing stability in international relations.

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Appendices

1. Political news for reciprocal tariffs

Table 1. Sources of Political News for Reciprocal Tariffs (Source: Author analysis)

Si. No	Political URLs
1	https://ustr.gov/issue-areas/enforcement/section-301-investigations/section-301-china
2	https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/international/Pages/China-Manipulator.aspx
3	https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china
4	https://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases
5	https://www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2020-annual-report-congress
6	https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-china/
7	https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/cyz0z8w0ydwt/us-china-trade-war
8	https://www.scmp.com/topics/us-china-trade-war
9	https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade/publication/the-economic-effects-of-the-us-china-trade-war
10	https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2020/09/18/US-China-Trade-War-49729
11	https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/15/us-china-trade-war-more-than-just-tariffs-pub-80076
12	https://www.nber.org/papers/w25672
13	https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/the-us-china-trade-war-what-we-know-and-what-we-dont
14	https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/us-china-trade-war
15	https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations
16	https://www.history.com/news/us-china-trade-war
17	https://www.thebalance.com/us-china-trade-war-timeline-4159971
18	https://www.marketplace.org/tag/us-china-trade-war/
19	https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news19_e/ddis_26jul19_e.htm

2. Economic news for reciprocal tariffs

Table 2. Sources of Economic news for reciprocal tariffs (Source: Author analysis)

Si. No	Source URLs
1	https://www.bignewsnetwork.com/news/278154149/full-text-china-position-on-some-issues-concerning-china-us-economic-trade-relations&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQIBxAC&usg=AOvVaw1zKLXguFarahgCZgiLH4iW
2	https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/events-and-conferences/abu-dhabi-investment-group-highlights-global-economic-challenges-and-shares-perspective-on-industry-60-at-aim-congress-2025-o4z5wj7p&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQIChAC&usg=AOvVaw2r_9H-IhIaU8mfhhFbRhgY
3	http://www.ecns.cn/news/economy/2025-04-09/detail-iheqkzvr4030740.shtml&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQIAxAC&usg=AOvVaw0imEZYhXO2-5brCnM-Oauw
4	https://www.fxstreet.com/news/chinas-white-paper-willing-to-communicate-with-us-on-important-issues-in-economy-trade-202504090720&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQIBhAC&usg=AOvVaw0wBLSlhPokNBCgmSXQmYUB
5	https://www.forexlive.com/news/china-white-paper-on-us-trade-says-willing-to-communicate-on-issues-such-as-economy-trade-20250409/&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQIARAC&usg=AOvVaw2rcu88f_KTg_T_jyPmyi1b
6	https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-04-09/China-issues-white-paper-outlining-stance-on-economic-ties-with-U-S--1CqH8oO3BSg/p.html&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQIBBAC&usg=AOvVaw0cqRdYZplhDR5n0iNvsyBD
7	https://m.economictimes.com/news/international/world-news/netanyahu-trump-meeting-reveals-unexpected-gaps-on-key-issues/articleshow/120110032.cms&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQIBRAC&usg=AOvVaw0nw4TzkioDKME8OLaStNIZ
8	https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2025/04/09/thailand-grapples-with-economic-issues&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQIAhAC&usg=AOvVaw0USiTip8nYKXvNBLWVUADQ
9	https://www.newsbreak.com/disismyability-318266304/3954195454105-escalating-u-s-china-trade-war-intensifies-global-economic-concerns&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQICRAC&usg=AOvVaw3DvHH0UfxOs1m0FsP9nMLP
10	https://www.investing.com/news/economy-news/easter-consumer-spending-in-us-likely-to-rise-despite-economic-concerns-93CH-3974773&ved=2ahUKEwis2M7vzcqMAxXSLtAFHQuuEtAQxfQBegQICBAC&usg=AOvVaw2wenmNIyo-_yxDOa2VPwl8
11	https://www.bignewsnetwork.com/news/278154149/full-text-china-position-on-some-issues-concerning-china-us-economic-trade-relations&ved=2ahUKEwjKmYXxzcqMAxUjLdAFHdsXOo8QxfQBegQIARAC&usg=AOvVaw1KVxlGfaFHRiLJ320DhR9z
12	https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/events-and-conferences/abu-dhabi-investment-group-highlights-global-economic-challenges-and-shares-perspective-on-industry-60-at-aim-congress-2025-o4z5wj7p&ved=2ahUKEwjKmYXxzcqMAxUjLdAFHdsXOo8QxfQBegQIChAC&usg=AOvVaw0Ij3dGvMcJuvzlI-8jX1uU
13	http://www.ecns.cn/news/economy/2025-04-09/detail-iheqkzvr4030740.shtml&ved=2ahUKEwjKmYXxzcqMAxUjLdAFHdsXOo8QxfQBegQICRAC&usg=AOvVaw0jid752nSaN5ywqL6X3h3Z

14	https://www.fxstreet.com/news/chinas-white-paper-willing-to-communicate-with-us-on-important-issues-in-economy-trade-202504090720&ved=2ahUKEwjKmYXxzcqMAxUjLdAFHdsXOo8QxfQBegQIAxAC&usg=AOvVaw0gKfE2YUSNKSzgCeFGBou0
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16	https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-04-09/China-issues-white-paper-outlining-stance-on-economic-ties-with-U-S--1CqH8oO3BSg/p.html&ved=2ahUKEwjKmYXxzcqMAxUjLdAFHdsXOo8QxfQBegQIBRAC&usg=AOvVaw0oxGA1uwo0MH8e1I3dC9VY
17	https://m.economictimes.com/news/international/world-news/netanyahu-trump-meeting-reveals-unexpected-gaps-on-key-issues/articleshow/120110032.cms&ved=2ahUKEwjKmYXxzcqMAxUjLdAFHdsXOo8QxfQBegQIBxAC&usg=AOvVaw2AfJGQrupD2JUc48yGBozC
18	https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2025/04/09/thailand-grapples-with-economic-issues&ved=2ahUKEwjKmYXxzcqMAxUjLdAFHdsXOo8QxfQBegQIBhAC&usg=AOvVaw3zarw0wQRa5-MMAh87qPhg
19	https://www.newsbreak.com/disismyability-318266304/3954195454105-escalating-u-s-china-trade-war-intensifies-global-economic-concerns&ved=2ahUKEwjKmYXxzcqMAxUjLdAFHdsXOo8QxfQBegQICBAC&usg=AOvVaw3vLXePLMUFpyAhn8XrNl4g
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26	https://english.news.cn/20250408/ee3ebc0ed8334f57aa7f80faf4b42eb8/c.html&ved=2ahUKEwjU5NvxzcqMAxWk78kDHTa1JjI4ChDF9AF6BAgDEAI&usg=AOvVaw3N5aQ3h7H8JEn4pfcM4y9L
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35	https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/govt-fails-to-appoint-nrb-governor-amid-worsening-economic-challenges-80-28.html&ved=2ahUKEwjjzbXyzcqMAxWL48kDHZYMOZw4FBDF9AF6BAgEEAI&usg=AOvVaw2k4hLBlBEEV3OKqbApqOWO
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39	https://www.foxnews.com/world/jd-vances-warning-europes-future-shines-spotlight-continents-growing-list-problems&ved=2ahUKEwjjzbXyzcqMAxWL48kDHZYMOZw4FBDF9AF6BAgHEAI&usg=AOvVaw1Q7B3izhxKQPVJMWTTiOXU
40	https://theprint.in/world/ancient-rome-used-high-tariffs-to-raise-money-too-and-created-economic-problems/2579934/&ved=2ahUKEwjjzbXyzcqMAxWL48kDHZYMOZw4FBDF9AF6BAgJEAI&usg=AOvVaw14eS6kp7zbzcVZBqJtPWaZ
41	https://odi.org/en/insights/us-implements-sweeping-reciprocal-tariffs-igniting-global-economic-challenges/&ved=2ahUKEwjS7Z7zzcqMAxWd5ckDHcTsCR44HhDF9AF6BAgEEAI&usg=AOvVaw1vi6Akig-n71m1t-eWQhj0
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43	https://kpfa.org/episode/economic-update-april-4-2025/&ved=2ahUKEwjS7Z7zzcqMAxWd5ckDHcTsCR44HhDF9AF6BAgDEAI&usg=AOvVaw1kjkT_sxH3ZibDcm5RXqvH
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45	https://www.pwmnet.com/trumps-tariffs-add-to-challenges-facing-uk-economy&ved=2ahUKEwjS7Z7zzcqMAxWd5ckDHcTsCR44HhDF9AF6BAgBEAI&usg=AOvVaw25q5lZWaGTjhN3g6P_x4v1

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51	https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/health/3333474-market-shock-trumps-reciprocal-tariffs-ignite-global-economic-concerns&ved=2ahUKEwi17_rzzcqMAxXRMdAFHWEgMro4KBDF9AF6BAgBEAI&usg=AOvVaw1wLSVmaFrLHeXc_QUqXf2z
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3. Military news for reciprocal tariffs

Table 3. Sources of Military news for reciprocal tariffs (Source: Author analysis)

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4. PEM Comparison with Other Methods

Table 4. PEM comparison with other Methods

Method	Key Features	Strengths	Limitations	Gap Addressed by PEM
VADER (Lexicon-based)	Rule-based polarity detection (positive/negative/neutral)	Simple, interpretable, and works well on short texts	Limited domain sensitivity, cannot capture complex geopolitical narratives.	PEM provides **domain-specific clustering** (Political, Economic, Military)
LIWC (Dictionary-based)	Predefined word categories (psychological, affective)	Good for psychological/social media studies	Not adaptable to evolving policy/economic terms	PEM adapts to **contextual keywords** like tariffs, deterrence
SVM / Naïve Bayes (ML-based)	Supervised classifiers trained on labeled sentiment data	Effective for binary/multiclass sentiment	Requires large labeled data, limited interpretability	PEM works **unsupervised**, interprets **latent discourse clusters**
BERT (Transformer-based)	Contextual embeddings for text classification	High accuracy, captures nuanced sentiment	Computationally heavy, often "black box"	PEM adds **transparent interpretability** via coherence/diversity
LDA (Topic Modeling)	Unsupervised clustering of topics	Good for thematic extraction	Lacks sentiment layering; topics are not domain-specific	PEM aligns **topics with sentiment dimensions** across Political, Economic, and Military
PEM (Proposed)	Domain-specific sentiment clustering (Political, Economic, Military)	Integrates coherence, diversity, and perplexity for robust validation; interpretable clusters	Requires domain knowledge for labeling	Provides **multidimensional, structured insights** into geopolitical discourse

A Comprehensive Bibliometric, Informetric, and Science Mapping Study of AI and Sustainability

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence has emerged as a transformative force across various sectors. It drives efficiency and innovation while making a major contribution to sustainability initiatives. This study presents a comprehensive bibliometric, informetric, and science mapping investigation of sustainability and artificial intelligence. Using data from the Scopus database (1997–2024) and analysed through Biblioshiny supported by R programming, the study identifies key publications, influential authors, and emerging themes. Findings reveal how AI technologies contribute to achieving environmental, economic, and social sustainability goals through data-driven and intelligent practices. By mapping the intellectual structure and evolution of this interdisciplinary field, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and manufacturing organizations to advance sustainable innovation and strategic decision-making.

Keywords: *Sustainability, Artificial Intelligence, Digital transformation, Bibliometrix analysis, Biblioshiny*

1. Introduction

The current wave of technological transformation indicates that innovation is advancing at an accelerating pace; as technologies grow more capable, the rate of their future development increases correspondingly. (Klarin, 2023). The key drivers of this rapid transformation include artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and robotics. As a result of this technological evolution, AI's capabilities have grown significantly, leading to the emergence of new applications across sectors. Although AI is already embedded in nearly every aspect of society, many people remain unclear about its true nature and scope. Consistent with this rapidly changing landscape, leading institutions and enterprises are developing technologies that advance the concept of AI as a catalyst for the evolution of Industry 5.0 (El Namaki, 2018). Also, sustainability has become a crucial phenomenon in the economy, targeting carbon footprint reduction and enhancing resource efficiency (Greif, 2023). Continuous climate change and environmental degradation have made it a top priority (Kimmig, 2023). Luo (2022) conducted a bibliometric study on the use of AI in smart building technologies, underscoring its role in enhancing environmental sustainability and resource efficiency. The study concluded that AI-based systems significantly improve energy management and operational performance, making them valuable for future sustainable building practices. Also, Saeidnia et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review on AI-enhanced scientometrics and bibliometrics, illustrating how AI itself is transforming methods for scholarly evaluation and trend analysis. AI's potential to monitor and lessen deceptive sustainability claims in corporate reporting is also highlighted by research by Moodaley and Telukdarie (2023). Even if research in this field has expanded quickly since 2018, there are still plenty of chances to incorporate interdisciplinary cooperation, policy development, and ethical issues into AI-driven sustainability studies.

This study includes a bibliometric analysis to identify the main research trends and direct future scholars in response to ongoing changes in the economic environment. Authors discovered few papers that used Biblioshiny to perform a thorough bibliometric analysis. As a result, the author chose this work for a bibliometric analysis. Here in this study, the outline of the paper decides as follows: First part consist of the objectives and methodology of the research. Following by the theoretical background and then the year wise analysis on the topics, then to author collaboration, network collaboration along with the co-coupling also has been discussed in the paper. The objectives of this paper are to map the research in scientific way to determine the role of artificial intelligence

(AI) in accomplishing environmental, economic, and social sustainability goals by utilizing AI technologies and sustainable practices
identify the most influential author and papers.

By taking into consideration above objectives, authors referred to use Bibliometric analysis. This study included 1355 papers extracted on 31 July 2024 in total, which are extracted from the Scopus database by putting he word "Artificial Intelligence" and "Sustainability" in the search box. The papers extracted has been limited to English language and only journals. The Scopus database was deemed under investigation since it contained the greatest level of authenticity. The time span considered here was from 1997 till 31st July 2024. Biblioshiny software has been used to analysis the data.

1.1 Scientific Collaboration Analysis

A scientific collaboration analysis was carried out to determine the most important relationships between the actors (i.e., authors and countries). In many research areas, scientific collaboration analysis is employed extensively to determine the social structure of the field.

1.2 Science Mapping

"Science mapping is a spatial representation of the relationships between individual papers or authors, as well as between disciplines, fields, and specializations"(Fusco et al., 2020) . Science mapping is carried out with the help of co- word and co-coupling.

2. Theoretical Background

A review of recent literature highlights the growing significance of Industry 4.0, artificial intelligence (AI), sustainability, and digital transformation in modern industrial and business environments. Grief et al. (2024) employed a SWOT framework to evaluate AI's role in promoting environmental sustainability, offering a strategic perspective distinct from traditional review studies. Ipkovich et al. (2024) proposed a model integrating network science and AI-based life cycle management for sustainability planning. Their study utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) to address challenges of adaptability and effective decision-making in sustainability strategies. Bajic Bojana et al. (2024) emphasized that although Industry 4.0 focuses on smart manufacturing, it lacks human-centric considerations. To bridge this gap, they introduced the concept of human–cyber–physical systems (HCPS) to enhance collaboration between humans and technology. Similarly, Klarin et al. (2024) underlined the need to

embed professionalism and ethical conduct in AI systems and developers to ensure responsible implementation. The reviewed studies applied theories such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Resource-Based View (RBV), Dynamic Capability Theory, and Sustainable Development Theory. Overall, the theoretical insights underscore how technological advancements can align with sustainable and ethical business models, shaping the foundation for responsible digital transformation.

3. Results:

3.1 Scientific Collaborative Analysis

3.1.1 The Main Description of the Study

Table1 describes the main information of this study. The study included 1355 documents with the time span 1997-2024 and annual growth rate of the above topic is 25.53.

Table 1: Main Information about Data

Description	**Results**
Timespan	1997:2024
Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	722
Documents	1355
Annual Growth Rate %	25.53
Document Average Age	1.72
Average citations per doc	14.5
References	0
Document Contents	
Keywords Plus (ID)	6732
Author's Keywords (DE)	4649
AUTHORS	
Authors	5023
Authors of single-authored docs	158
Authors Collaboration	
Single-authored docs	164
Co-Authors per Doc	4.18
International co-authorships %	36.9
Document Types	
Article	1355

(*Source: Author's own contribution***)**

3.1.2 Annual Scientific Production

The trend on the relevant issue is displayed by Annual Scientific Production (see fig.1). It illustrates the genesis of the idea of artificial intelligence. According to it, sustainability and artificial intelligence were both introduced to the market in 1997, but at that time, people did not give them much thought. However, starting in 2017, awareness of the concepts has grown, and after COVID-19, they will be given top priority as more people realize the value of sustainability for society. The government has also taken several steps to achieve sustainability and reduce carbon emissions as much as possible.

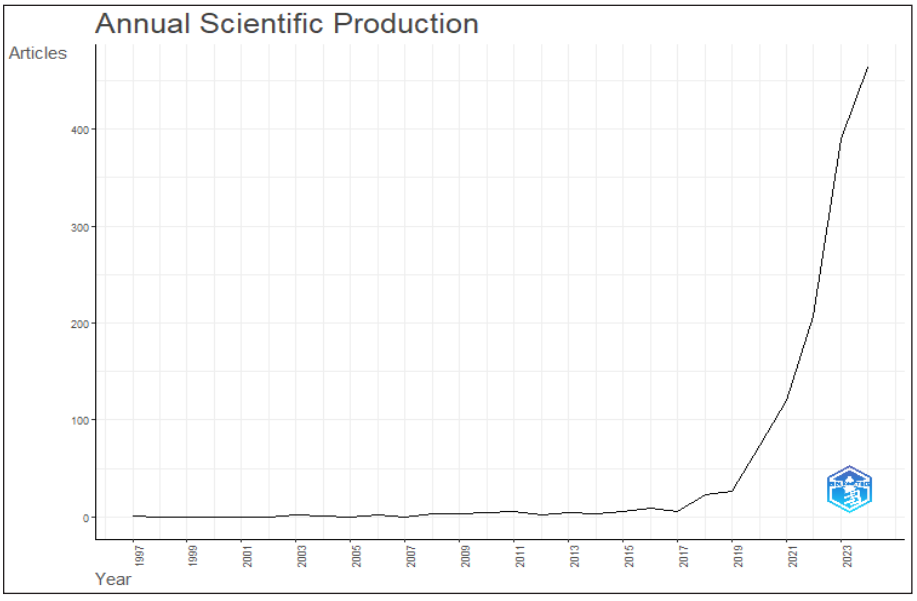


Fig.1: Annual Scientific Production year by year analysis

(Source: Author's own contribution)

3.1.3 Average Citations per year:

Figure 2 shows the average number of citations for the publications each year. It is evident that the year 2020 had the most citations, indicating that artificial intelligence and sustainability were the main topics of research at that time. Both concepts' trends saw a dramatic rise in 2020, but they also saw severe declines in the years that followed, with the current trends continuing the downward trajectory.

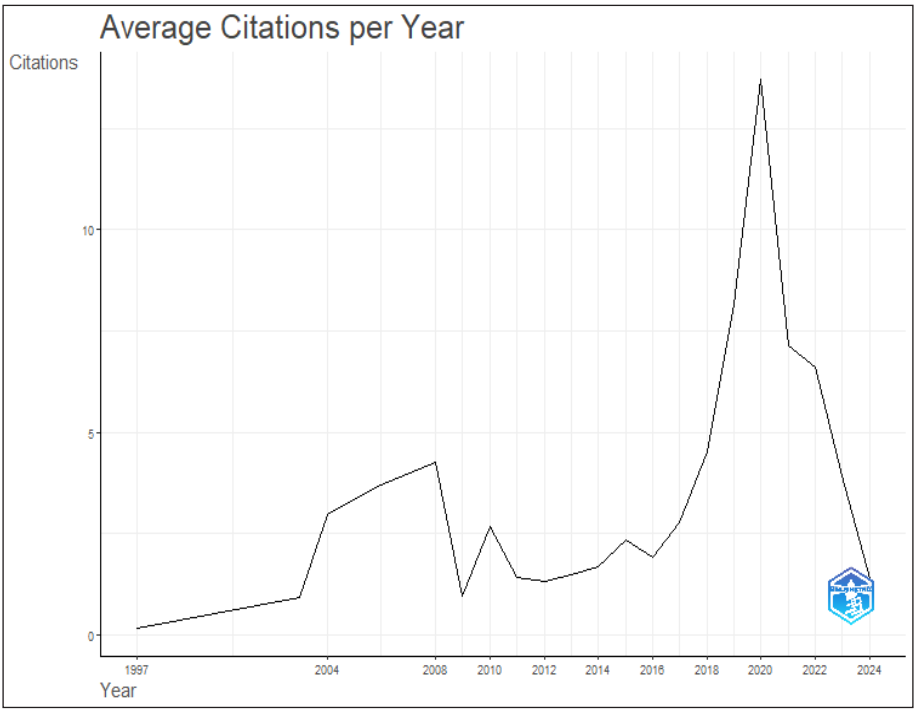


Fig.2: Average Citations per year

(Source: Author's own contribution)

3.1.4 Three Field Plot

The three-tier strategy, or three field plot (see fig.3) is based on the authors' keywords, nations, and subjects of their individual studies. It showed how these three has been connected. The graph has indicated that Chinese and Indian authors has been produced most of the publications on these subjects. China has played the role of main actor. The terms artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data, sustainable development, digitalization, industry 4.0, Internet of Things, innovation, digital transformation, Chat GPT, and block chain has been most frequently used by the writers.

A significant number of Chinese authors has discussed AI, machine learning, and sustainable development. Indians has less concerned with in blockchain and more interested in the ideas of sustainable development and digital transformation. Most of the studies has been talked about sustainability, artificial intelligence and digital transformation.

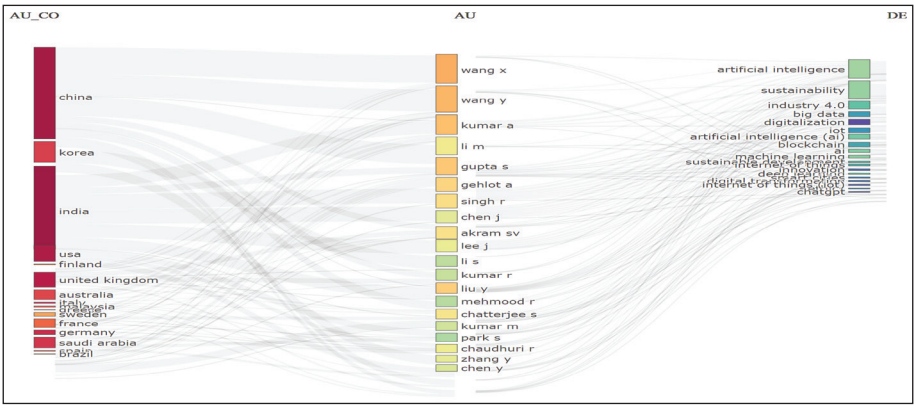


Fig. 3: Three Field Plot

(Source: Author's own contribution)

3.1.5 Most Cited Sources

Figure 4 shows the sources that are most relevant out of the 723 total sources. The most pertinent publications for the reference papers have been depicted in the figure. The study's theme, "Sustainability," is what the most papers published in the Journal of Switzerland were about. IEE access is followed by the Journal of Cleaner Production (impact factor 9.7), Heliyon, and AI and Society. The focus of the journals is the study's central theme.

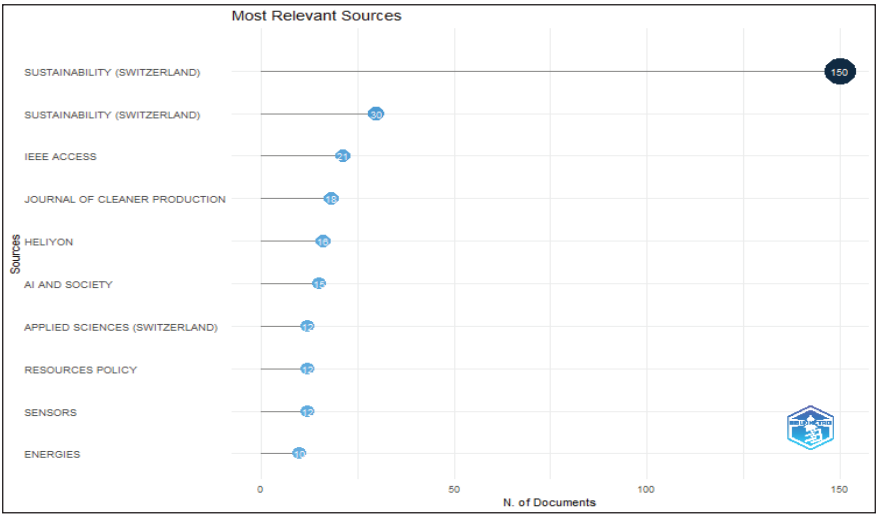


Fig. 4: Most Relevant Sources

(Source: Author's own contribution)

3.1.6 Most Relevant Author

Figure 5 shows the names of the authors who contributed maximum towards this filed. Out of 5024 authors the figure contains the list of only 10 authors. Wang X contributed 11 articles with Articles Fractionalized as 2.28809523809524. The fractionalized frequency implies equal shares among all co-authors of the associated publications, thereby quantifying each author's individual contribution (Wei & Jiang, 2023). This author is followed by Wang Y with the same number of articles with articles fractionalised as 2.43134920634921. The subsequent authors are Kumar A with 10 article, Gupta S. with 9 articles, Liu Y., Gehlot A., Singh R. etc.

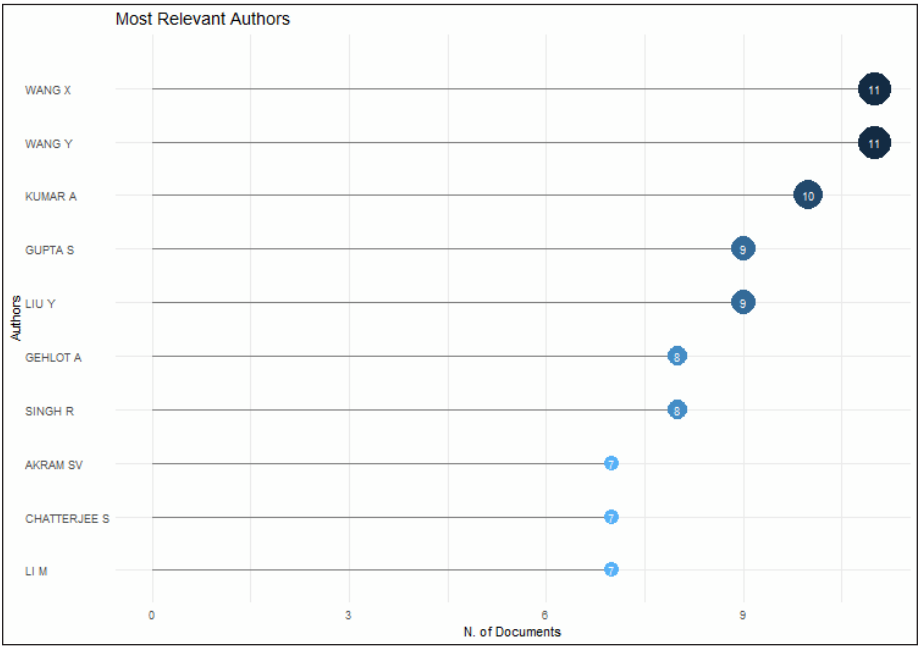


Fig. 5: Most Relevant Authors

(Source: Author's own contribution)

3.1.7 Corresponding Author's Countries

Figure 6 represents corresponding author's countries. Here, SCP means Single Country publication and MCP means multiple countries publications. Figure describes which country contributes maximum towards this topic and their national and international collaboration also. It is clear from the figure that China contributed maximum towards this topic where the single country publication

is 98 and multiple country publication is 48. India in the same line has the data 85 and 40 followed by USA with 92 and 11. The other countries line up here are UK, Korea, Italy, Australia, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Malaysia, Canada, France, Netherlands, Poland, Finland etc.

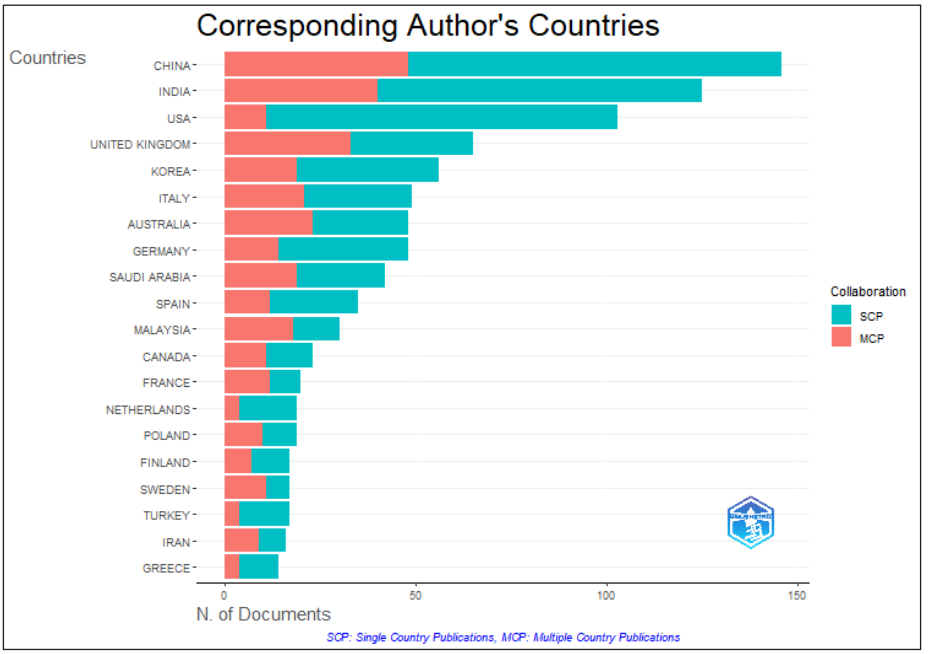


Fig. 6: Corresponding Author's Countries

(Source: Author's own contribution)

3.1.8 Country Scientific Production

Figure 7 shows the county scientific production on the topic of artificial intelligence, sustainability and allied related topics. Here, India is at top position with the frequency of 594 followed by China 572, then USA 570 and UK 315 and so on. In this study, countries and authors were considered as units of analysis (Fusco et al., 2020).

3.1.9 Country Production Over Time

Table 2 displays the total amount of each country's contribution to the writing of articles on the same topics. The largest contributors are the United States, China, and India. The table shows that, following COVID, India has embraced these themes at the quickest pace of adoption.

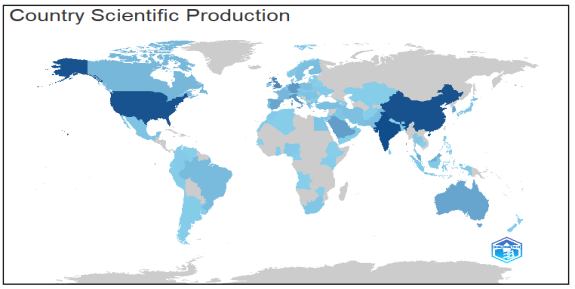


Fig. 7: Country Scientific Production

(Source: Author's own contribution, Different shades of blue indicate different productivity rate: dark blue = high productivity; grey = no articles)

Table 2: Sum of Country Production from the time-period 1997-2024

	China	India	Italy	UK	USA
1997-2024	1324	1272	801	884	2724
Growth rate after COVID	1117.021	2021.429	461.3636	826.4706	277.4834

(Source: Author's own Contribution)

The production by country over time is clearly shows that China's interest in these topics began to increase in 2010 only (see fig.8). Other countries began to show interest later in 2014, and the number of publications on these topics peaked in 2020.

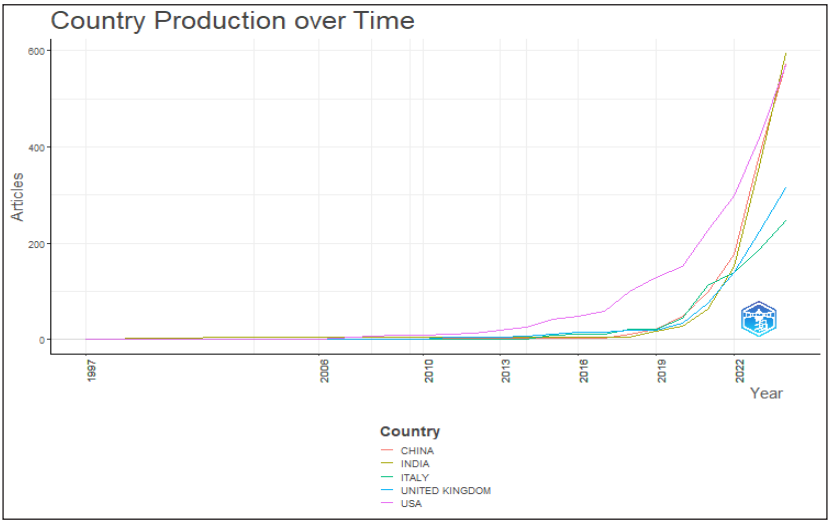


Fig. 8: Country Production over time

(Source: Author's own contribution)

3.2 Informetric Analysis

3.2.1 Frequently Used Word

Table 3, Figure 9 and Figure 10 illustrate the word frequency analysis of the publications reviewed for the literature study. The analysis reveals that *artificial intelligence* (frequency = 436) emerged as the most dominant term, indicating its centrality in the research discourse. This was followed by other prominent terms such as *Industry 4.0*, *machine learning*, and *sustainability* (frequency = 330). The word cloud generated using **Biblioshiny** visually supports these results, emphasizing the prevalence of *artificial intelligence* and *sustainability* as recurring themes across the reviewed literature. The graphical representation aids in identifying the thematic concentration areas and reflects the growing research interest in the integration of artificial intelligence with sustainable industrial practices.

Table 3: Frequently Used Word

Words	Occurrences
artificial intelligence	436
sustainability	330
machine learning	112
ai	93
artificial intelligence (ai)	82
deep learning	58
industry 4 0	46
sustainable development	43
internet of things	38
blockchain	34

(Source: Author's own contribution)

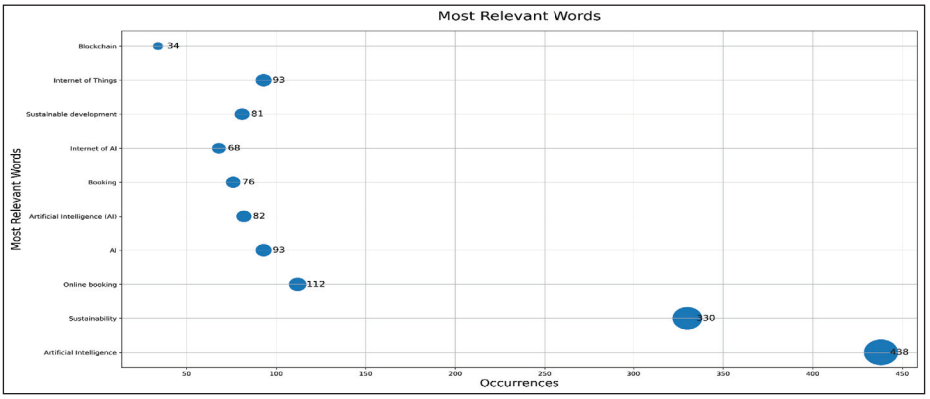


Fig. 9: Frequently Used Word
(Source: Author's own contribution)



Fig. 10: Frequently Used Word- Word Cloud

(Source: Author's own contribution)

3.2.2 Co-Word Networking

Co- Word Networking is the enhancement by mining the semantic information from co-word networks (Fusco et al., 2020). Results also show there is much connection between the words artificial intelligence and sustainable development (see table 4 and fig.11) There are three groups; 1st in pink circle, second one in purple and third one is in black. Group 1 represents the high connectedness among the words.

Table 4: Co-Word Networking

Node	Cluster	Betweenness	Closeness
artificial intelligence	1	208.549971	0.02040816
sustainable development	1	253.76038	0.02040816
sustainability	1	62.8212452	0.01960784
machine learning	1	24.4972045	0.01923077
decision making	1	21.4229527	0.01886792
climate change	1	2.33804283	0.01449275
innovation	1	0.71688392	0.01234568
algorithm	1	1.69463702	0.01408451
environmental impact	1	1.63517859	0.01369863
smart city	1	0.87500815	0.01333333
sustainable development goal	1	0.144157	0.01176471
environmental sustainability	1	1.52756539	0.01408451
optimization	1	0.32082363	0.01282051
risk assessment	1	0.73857722	0.01282051
water management	1	0.45706551	0.01265823
internet	1	0.70501694	0.01265823
artificial neural network	1	0.09749416	0.01190476
carbon footprint	1	0.22946158	0.01234568
economic and social effects	1	0.82136492	0.01315789
economics	1	0.63381643	0.01333333

(Source: Author's own contribution)

Table 4 displays important terms from research on sustainability and artificial intelligence, emphasizing their roles and impact in the co-word network. A strong thematic group is formed by the fact that all terms are part of a single cluster. Measures like betweenness and closeness centrality show how important each phrase is in relation to others. Artificial intelligence and sustainable development have *high betweenness values*, indicating that these ideas serve as key links that connect many issues within the area. In a similar vein, their high closeness centrality suggests that they are strongly connected to other terms, indicating that they have a significant impact on the direction of study. Even if they are less central, other words like environmental sustainability, climate change, machine learning, and decision making are important sub-themes that add to the larger conversation. Figure 11 shows strong thematic group in in AI and sustainability research.

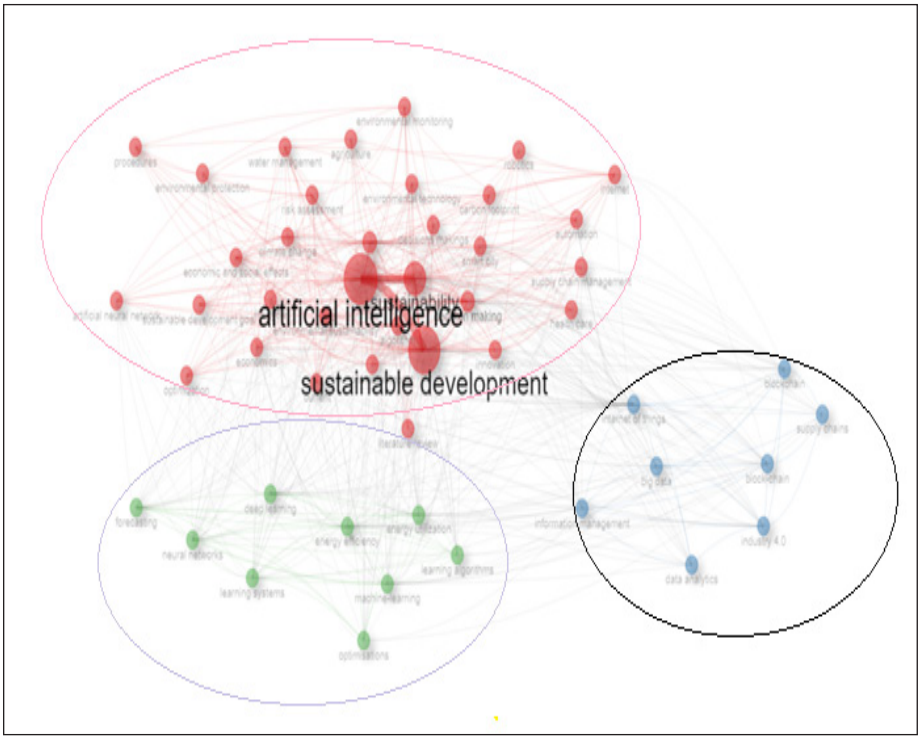


Fig. 11: Co-Word Networking

(Source: Author's own contribution, here, different colours shows different groups, and these circles made with the help of MS- paint)

3.3 Science Mapping

3.3.1 Author Collaboration Network

Co-authorships, which are among the most well-established types of scientific collaboration, are linked together in a social network called the "scientific collaboration network."(Durugbo, 2016). Table 5 shows the author collaboration network.

Table 5: Author Collaboration network

Node	Cluster	Betweenness	Closeness
wang x	1	267.833333	0.00970874
wang y	1	147.633333	0.00862069
liu y	1	0	0.00813008
li m	1	8.9	0.00793651
zhang y	1	0	0.00641026
chen y	1	34.9166667	0.00740741
wang f-y	1	37.4	0.00833333
ali m	1	84	0.00714286
chen l	1	3.58333333	0.00675676
huang s	1	0	0.00684932
liu j	1	1.5	0.00613497
wang j	1	0	0.00769231
wang p	1	36.2333333	0.00793651
kumar a	2	267.858571	0.00869565
gehlot a	2	0.64	0.00714286
singh r	2	0.64	0.00714286
akram sv	2	0.64	0.00714286
kumar r	2	0	0.00704225
agrawal r	2	0	0.00699301

(Source: Author's own contribution)

Table 5 illustrates the author collaboration network in AI and sustainability research, showing how closely researchers are connected. High betweenness values, such as those for Wang X and Kumar A, indicate these authors act as key connectors within the network. Closeness values reflect how efficiently authors can interact with others, highlighting central figures who influence collaboration and knowledge sharing in the field.

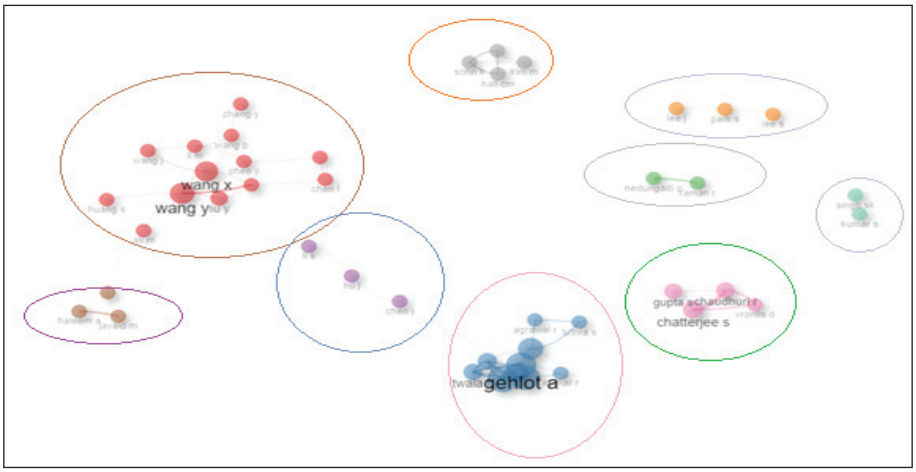


Fig 12: Author Collaboration network

(Source: Author's own contribution, Bibliometric software attributes different colour to each cluster)

The co-citation network's visual depiction reveals the existence of several linkages and bridges—nodes—that link the two clusters (Durugbo, 2016) (see fig.12). Figure 12 shows nine clusters, each of which represents a group of authors with similar interests. They talked about similar ideas.

3.3.2 Keywords Occurrences

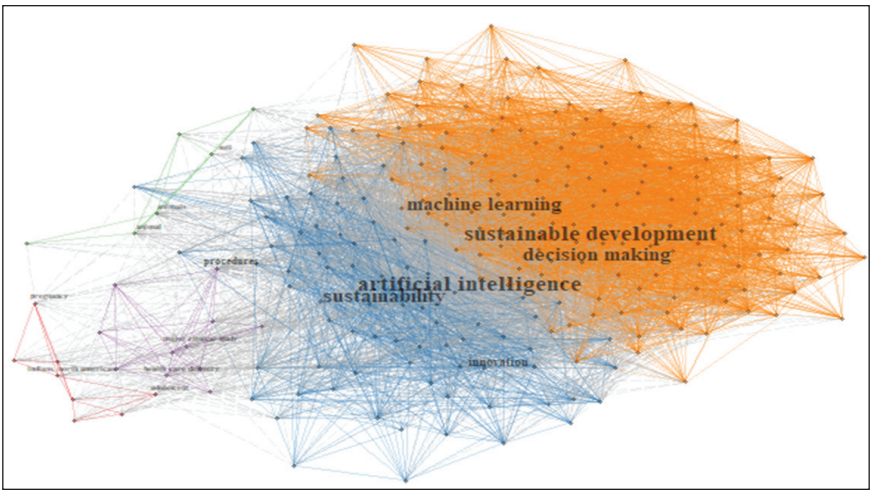


Fig 13: Keyword Occurrences
(Source: Author's own contribution)

The analysis of keyword occurrences identifies the most frequently used terms within the selected body of literature. Each keyword represents a significant concept or topic discussed in the publications. By calculating the number of times a keyword appears, it becomes possible to determine the dominant themes and focal areas of research in the field which is shown by fig.13

3.3.3 Collaboration Analysis

Considering several levels of aggregation, this analysis offers a summary of scientific collaboration and research communities. Nations and writers were considered as units of analysis in this research (Yan E, Ding Y, 2012) (see fig.14)

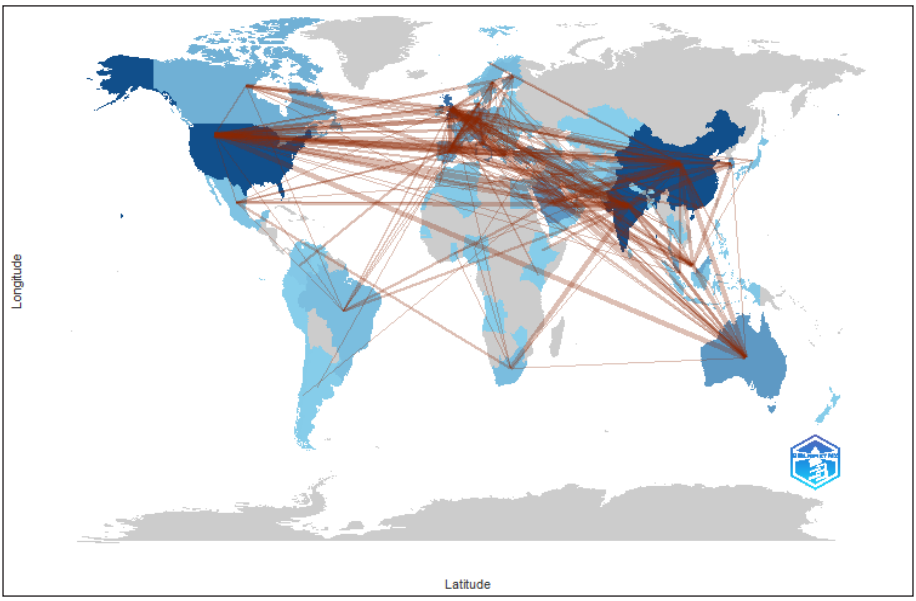


Fig.14: Collaboration Analysis
(Source: Author's own contribution)

4. Discussions

This bibliometric analysis represents a comprehensive picture, information of the structure and the development of the AI and sustainability both together in the world. Although there have been numerous numbers of papers available on this topic but from best of our knowledge this one is the one and unique contribution in the field of AI and Sustainability. The paper highlights the change in the trend of usage of artificial intelligence, and one can enthusiastically use AI to achieve sustainability. The different collaboration of different authors is also illustrated

through different graphics. The article fragmentation and network coupling are used to discuss the scenario in detail.

Overall, this field is progressing, but not yet saturated. AI has already demonstrated its capability to reduce environmental footprints, optimize systems, and support data-driven sustainability planning. Yet, challenges remain — especially regarding ethical deployment, transparency, and policy alignment. If upcoming research focuses on bridging technical innovation with social responsibility, the impact of AI on sustainability can move beyond conceptual discussions and translate into measurable real-world benefits.

5. Conclusion

This review and mapping of research from 1947 to 2024 shows how far the world has come in connecting artificial intelligence with sustainability—and how much potential still lies ahead. Over the years, what began as scattered technological experiments has gradually shaped into a focused research area where AI is viewed not just as a digital tool, but as a partner in solving environmental challenges. The study's bibliometric approach proved to be quite helpful in examining and presenting a thorough picture and detailed information sustainability and artificial intelligence, particularly about Industry 4.0 and digital transformation.

There are certain limits to the paper, primarily related to the methodological choices made. Due to the paucity of time, author considered the concept of sustainability and AI in general not in the specific reference. Compared to qualitative methods, bibliometric methods are objective and repeatable, but they also imply a less thorough knowledge. The most cited references, for instance, are displayed by the citation and co-citation analyses, but the purpose of the citation is not disclosed.

Keeping limitations aside this study contributes much in the field of sustainability. The majority of the theoretical and even fewer empirical research on this subject employs a mono-dimensional approach. Overall, this study contributes towards a valuable resource for the policy makers, scholars, manufacturing units etc

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Overview of Index Mutual Funds: A Bibliometric Review with Special Focus on India

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Abstract

This study attempts a bibliometric review of the available literature on index mutual funds extracted from the Scopus database. Biblioshiny R's software is employed in bibliometric analysis to envision patterns of relevant keywords. Keywords such as "index fund" OR "index mutual fund" are used to cover the relevant literature. The study covers the period between 1978 and 2024. The study reveals that index fund research is still growing with significant scope for further exploration. The USA leads in all elements of the bibliometric report, while India lags behind. Indian journals and authors should enhance quality and quantity to gain global recognition and indexing.

Keywords: index funds, mutual funds, passive funds, benchmark funds

1. Introduction

For investors looking for long term investment option, a less risky form of investment, Index Funds today are a source of investment. The index funds' success is subject to their low volatility and the selection of the index (NSE of India). An index mutual fund value should change with the benchmark index that it replicates, as far as possible. So, in the Indian context, investors who invest in an index mutual fund that copies a broad index such as the Sensex or Nifty can hope that their portfolio in the market will take part in a bull rally. So, a significant correction in the stock market will generate an advantage for investors who invest in an index mutual fund (Sarkar et al 2013). The first Index

fund was launched in India in June 1999, but they had a relatively small AUM due to limited awareness and investor interest. The total AUM of Index Funds on Nifty 50 stands at Rs. 16,105 Cr as of November 30, 2021, as against Rs. 4,515 Cr as of September 30, 2019, which has grown at ~80% CAGR (NSE India). This growth highlights the increasing investor interest in passive investment strategies in general and index funds in particular.

But the literature on index mutual funds is scarce when a narrowed-down search on Scopus to articles with titles containing keywords "index fund" OR "index mutual fund" only 148 articles were found, with the most significant contributions from the United States with 68 contributions and India with just 8 contributions. This highlights my first motivation to take up this study. The second motivation is the utility of the bibliometric study for the academic and research community in shaping the future course. The third is to fill the gap between the first and second motivation. The trend in the index fund growth story in India highlights the need to take up this study.

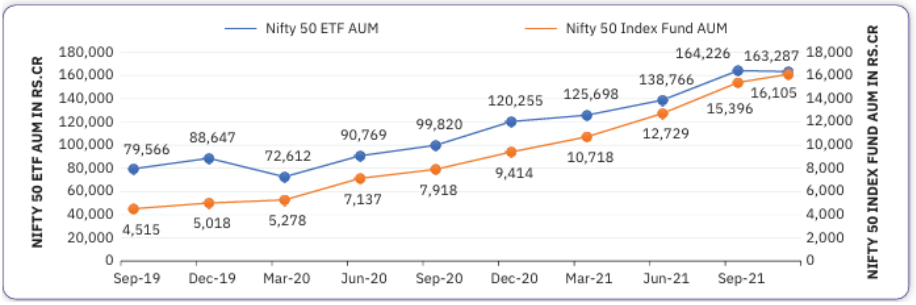


Figure 1. Growth Trends of Nifty ETF and Nifty Index Fund

Source: 25_Years_Journey_of_Nifty50_2022-01 (nsearchives.nseindia.com)

2. Objectives

a) To study the current research trend in index mutual funds?

b) To identify the most influential sources, authors and documents in this research domain?

c) To identify the dominating countries in this domain of mutual fund study?

d) To study the conceptual structure and intellectual structure in the domain of index mutual fund research?

e) To study the scope of future research on the basis of the bibliometric report generated by Biblioshiny?

3. Research Methodology

Bibliometric analysis is a prevalent, rigorous and acceptable method to explore and analyse a huge quantity of scientific data. It helps us to take out the evolutionary gradations of an explicit field, while bringing into light the evolving areas in that field (Donthu et al, 2022). Bibliometric methods or "analysis" are now validated as a scientific specialisation of library sciences. These are integral to the methodology of research appraisal within the scientific and applied fields (Ellegaard and Wallin, 2015). In the market for multidisciplinary scientific literatures Scopus is the largest database (Kuchi, 2004), and this is the reason why the Scopus database is being used. R is employed for the bibliometric analysis to show patterns of relevant keywords related to index funds using various visualisation effects and an analysis table, graphs and diagrams.

Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

To take into consideration all the relevant scientific publications and reduce the chances of omission of documents from the index mutual funds, keywords that are inclusive and general to cover the overall documents are used.

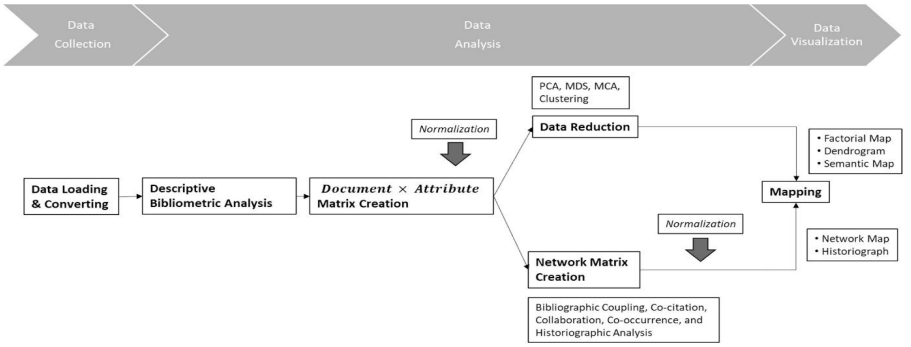


Fig. 2. *bibliometrix* **and the recommended science mapping workflow.**

Source: As outlined by Aria and Cuccurullo (2017)

Keywords which are used to cover the relevant available literature are "index fund" OR "index mutual fund". After entering these keywords into the search field, 583 documents were retrieved from the database of Scopus till Feb 9, 2025. The study covers the period between 1978 and 2024, and documents retrieved till 2024 were 583. Further, the first inclusion criterion used in the study is

"Research documents of the domain Business, Management, and Accounting and Economics, Econometrics, and Finance and decision sciences in order to limit the database search to relevant disciplines. Next criteria used to limit our search to publications in the English language only. Other filters available in these two categories were excluded to keep our study relevant. 475 documents covering scientific publications from 1978 to 2024 were used for this study after following the inclusion criteria. Biblioshiny provided by R is used to conduct this bibliometric study.

Table 1. Summary of bibliometric analysis based on Scopus

Source	Scopus	No. of Items
Timespan		1978-2024
Keywords	"index fund" OR "index mutual fund"	
Document Type	Total Contribution	475
	Article	390
	Book	8
	book chapter	34
	conference paper	17
	conference review and note	1+2
	Review	23
Language	English	475
Source type	Journals, Books, etc	241 (journal, books, conference proceedings and book series)

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

4. Results, Analysis, and Discussion

Trend in research and scientific productivity

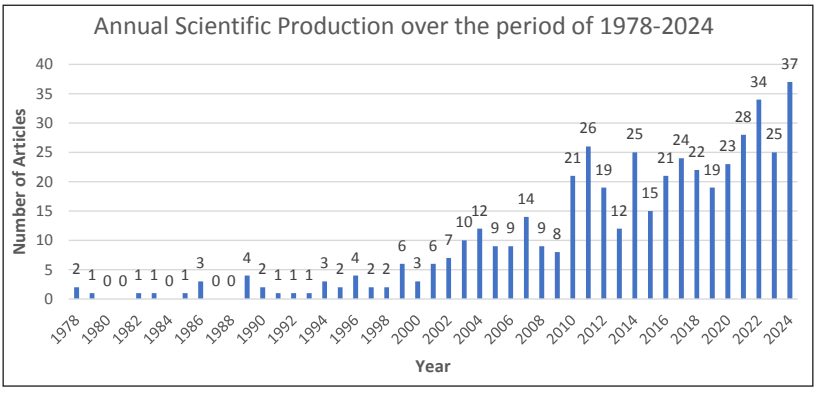


Figure 3. Annual scientific production.

Source: Author's Own Work on the Basis of Biblioshiny Report using Scopus database

Examining the first research question regarding index mutual fund trends, Figure 3, which is drawn in Excel on the basis of the report provided by Biblioshiny, the volume of annual production increased significantly from 2010. Almost approx. 74% articles were produced after 2010, implying that most of the intellectual discussion in the field of index mutual funds happened after 2010. Fundamentally, it can be said that index mutual funds got their attention after the 2008 financial crisis.

Most Influential Sources, Authors and Documents

Table 2. Most Influential Sources

Source	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC	NP
Journal of portfolio management	11	19	0.393	399	22
Journal of banking and finance	10	12	0.294	342	12
Review of financial studies	8	9	0.5	531	9
Financial analysts journal	6	11	0.2	235	11
Managerial finance	6	9	0.2	97	16
Financial management	5	5	0.217	189	5
Journal of finance	5	5	0.167	1661	5
Journal of financial markets	5	6	0.238	270	6
Journal of financial research	5	6	0.125	97	6
Applied economic perspectives and policy	4	4	0.25	436	4

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

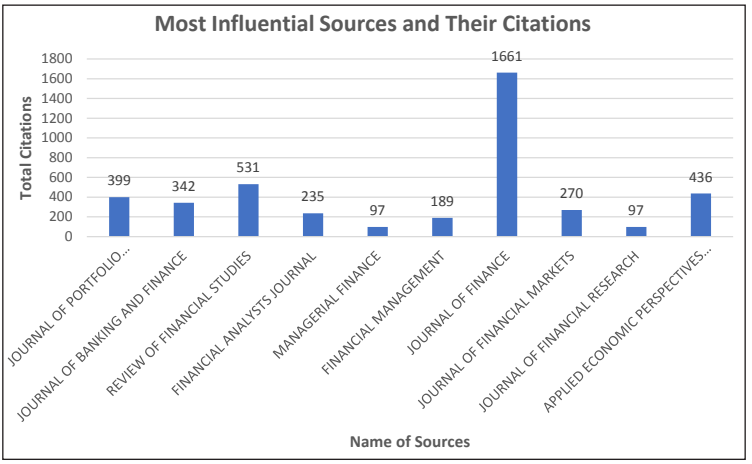


Figure 4. Most Influential Sources

Source: Author's Own Work on the Basis of Biblioshiny Report using Scopus database

This part of the article addresses the second research question about the most influential sources, most influential authors and the most influential documents in this domain of research. Table 2 and Figure 4 summarise the 10 most influential sources relating to index mutual funds scientific production. The most influential sources are ordered in sequence of their h_index starting from top, along with their g_index, m_index, TC (total citations) and NP(Number of Publications). H_index and g_index tell us about the overall impact of the journal, and m_index is calculated taking into account the age of the journal. TC shows the citation impact, and NP tells us about the overall productivity of a journal. Journal of Portfolio Management, Journal of Banking and Finance and Review of Financial Studies are the top 3 journals in this domain, having h_index 11, 10 and 8, respectively. Journal of Finance got the highest number of citations of 1661, which is significantly higher than all journals in the list. Figure 3 shows the most influential journals sequenced according to h_index and the total citations they received. As per the g_index of respective journals Journal of Portfolio Management, the Journal of Banking and Finance, and the Financial Analysts Journal are the three most influential sources with 19, 12 and 11 g_index, respectively. According to NP (i.e. number of publications), Journal of Portfolio Management, Managerial Finance and Journal of Banking and Finance are the most influential sources in this domain, with 22, 16 and 12 publications, respectively.

Journal of Portfolio Management is published by Portfolio Management Research and is a United States based Journal. Journal of Banking and Finance is published by Elsevier B.V. and is based in the Netherlands. Review of Financial Studies is published by Oxford University Press and is based in the United Kingdom. Financial Analysts Journal is published by Taylor and Francis Ltd. and is based in the United Kingdom. Managerial Finance is published by Emerald Group Publishing Ltd. and is based in the United Kingdom. Financial Management is published by Wiley-Blackwell and is based in the United States. Journal of Finance is published by Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd and is based in the United Kingdom. Journal of Financial Markets is published by Elsevier B.V. and is based in the Netherlands. Journal of Financial Research is published by Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd and is based in the United Kingdom. Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy is published by John Wiley and Sons, Inc. and is based in the United States. This information about countries and publishers is collected from www.scimagojr.com. It can be said based on the above information that India is nowhere in the top 10 sources of index mutual fund research publications. None of the publishing houses which

are publishing these journals are from India. In Scimago in 2023, for which data was available, there were 1645 journals for the Business, Management and Accounting domain, out of which only 24 belong to India, and among them, only 1 journal is Q1, and 7 journals are Q2. The USA has 380 journals, and the UK has 679 Journals of which most are Q1 and Q2. This position of India indicates that India has a long way to go both in terms of quantity and quality of scientific production and its sources.

Table 3. Most Influential Authors

Author	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC	NP
IRWIN SH	12	13	0.75	987	13
GRUBER MJ	9	17	0.243	1760	17
SANDERS DR	9	10	0.563	822	10
ELTON EJ	8	14	0.216	775	14
FRINO A	5	5	0.2	182	5
GALLAGHER DR	5	6	0.2	182	6
BLAKE CR	4	5	0.133	462	5
BOGLE JC	4	7	0.167	81	7
BUSSE JA	4	5	0.182	183	5
ADAMS JC	3	3	0.188	90	3

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

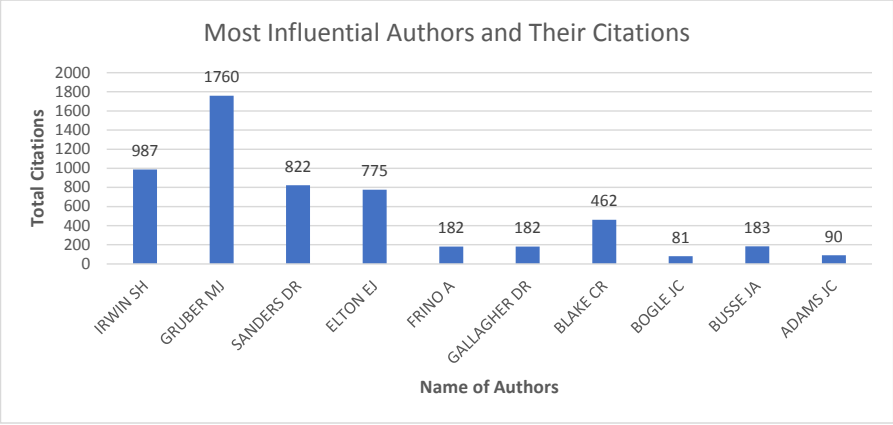


Figure 5. Most Influential Authors

Source: Author's Own Work on the Basis of Biblioshiny Report using Scopus database

Table 3 and Figure 5 summarise the 10 most influential authors relating to the scientific production of index mutual funds. The most influential authors are ordered in sequence of their h_index starting from top, along with their g_index, m_index, TC (total citations) and NP (Number of Publications). H_index and g_index tell us about the overall impact of an author, and m_index is calculated taking into account the active years of an author. TC shows the citation impact, and NP tells us about the overall productivity of an author. Irwin, Gruber and Sanders are the top 3 authors in this domain, having h_index 12, 9 and 9, respectively. Gruber got the highest number of citations of 1760, which is significantly higher than all other authors in the list. Figure 4 shows the most influential authors sequenced according to h_index and the total citations they received. As per the g_index of respective authors, Gruber, Elton and Irwin are the three most influential authors with 17, 14 and 13 g_index, respectively. According to m_index, Irwin is the most influential author, followed by Sanders and Gruber. According to NP (i.e. number of publications), Gruber, Elton and Irwin are the most influential authors in this domain with 17, 14 and 13 publications, respectively.

On the basis of the top 10 documents identified by Biblioshiny, identification of affiliated countries of the top 10 most influential authors is carried out to identify the academic strength of the country in terms of their h_index, g_index, m_index, TC and NP. Below is the list.

1. Irwin, S.H.-United States of America
2. Gruber, M.J.- United States of America
3. Sanders, D.R.-United States of America
4. Elton E.J.-United States of America
5. Frino, A.-Australia
6. Gallagher, D.R.-Australia
7. Blake, C.R.-United States of America
8. Bogle, J.C.-United States of America

9. Busse, J.A.-United States of America

10. Adams, J.C.-United States of America

In the list of the top 10 most influential authors, it can be seen that 8 out of 10 authors are from the United States of America, and two are from Australia. Bogle, J.C., from the United States of America, was an American businessman who was the founder and CEO of The Vanguard Group and contributed to popularising index mutual funds. He was a giant in the mutual fund field. On the basis of this information, India lags behind in this aspect too. This can be seen as an opportunity by Indian scholars to look into the unexplored aspects of index mutual funds in the Indian context with a higher degree of precision and contribute towards the development of a more robust mutual fund market.

Table 4. Research documents with the highest number of citations

No.	Journal/ Publisher	Author	Article/book	Citations
1	The Journal of Finance	Gruber(1996)	"Another Puzzle: The Growth in Actively Managed Mutual Funds"	978
2	The Journal of Finance	Shleifer(1986)	"Do Demand Curves for Stocks Slope Down?"	679
3	Journal of Applied Econometrics	Hansen et al (2011)	"Realized GARCH: a joint model for returns and realized measures of volatility"	420
4	The Journal of Business	Elton et al (1996)	"The Persistence of Risk-Adjusted Mutual Fund Performance"	370
5	Journal of International Money And Finance	Buyuksahin and Robe (2014)	"Speculators, commodities and cross-market linkages"	348
6	Handbook of the Economics of Finance	Barber and Odean (2013)	"Chapter 22 - The Behavior of Individual Investors"	327
7	The Quarterly Journal of Economics	Ippolito (1989)	"Efficiency with Costly Information: A Study of Mutual Fund Performance, 1965–1984"	288
8	The Quarterly Journal of Economics	Hortacsu and Syverson (2004)	"Product Differentiation, Search Costs, and Competition in the Mutual Fund Industry: A Case Study of S and P 500 Index Funds"	277
9	The Journal of Business	Lynch and Mendenhall (1997)	"New Evidence on Stock Price Effects Associated with Changes in the S and P 500 Index"	267
10	Applied Economics Perspectives and Policy	Irwin and Sanders (2011)	"Index Funds, Financialization, and Commodity Futures Markets"	263

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

Table 4 shows the most influential top 10 documents in the field of index mutual funds. This table mentions the most influential documents along with their respective authors, sources (journal in which they appeared) and their citation impact. "Another Puzzle: The Growth in Actively Managed Mutual Funds" is the most influential document with the highest number of citations, 978, followed by "Do Demand Curves for Stocks Slope Down?" with 679 citations, and "Realised GARCH: a joint model for returns and realised measures of volatility" at number 3 with 420 citations. On the basis of the top 10 documents identified by Biblioshiny, identification of affiliated countries of contributing authors is carried out to identify the academic strength of the country in terms of the top documents produced by their authors. Below is the list.

1. Gruber (1996) - United States of America
2. Shleifer (1986) - United States of America
3. Hansen et al. (2011) - United States of America, Denmark, China
4. Elton et al. (1996) - United States of America
5. Buyuksahin and Robe (2014) - United States of America
6. Barber and Odean (2013) - United States of America
7. Ippolito (1989) - United States of America
8. Hortacsu and Syverson (2004) - United States of America
9. Lynch and Mendenhall (1997) - United States of America
10. Irwin and Sanders (2011) - United States of America

On the basis of the above information, it can be said that the United States of America is leading in this aspect, too, as all the documents in the list of the top 10 most influential documents are produced by authors who are affiliated with the United States of America. The most developed financial system in the United States of America can be attributed to the focus of its authors on research and development of finance domain. This can be a lesson to India to focus on research and development in this discipline, too, on the part of both the academic community and government.

The most Dominating Countries in Research on Index Mutual Funds

This part of the article addresses this research question. This article tried to identify the most dominant countries in research on three bases. These three bases are Countries' Scientific Production, Countries' Annual Production over Time and Number of Citations they received. The reports on these three bases are generated through Biblioshiny, whose appearances are modified in Excel to give better visual effects to the table and pictures.

Table. 5 Counties' Scientific Production

Country	Freq	Country	Freq	Country	Freq	Country	Freq	Country	Freq
Usa	488	Netherlands	16	South africa	7	New_zealand	3	Qatar	2
China	78	Chile	12	Israel	6	Norway	3	Saudi arabia	2
Australia	48	Sweden	12	Czech_republic	5	Slovakia	3	Serbia	2
India	41	Italy	11	Portugal	5	South korea	3	Bangladesh	1
Uk	41	Japan	10	Belgium	4	Thailand	3	Ireland	1
Canada	30	Singapore	10	Finland	4	Tunisia	3	Lithuania	1
Spain	25	Turkey	9	Pakistan	4	Austria	2	Nigeria	1
France	22	Colombia	8	Denmark	3	Cyprus	2	Philippines	1
Germany	21	Brazil	7	Greece	3	Mexico	2	Poland	1
Switzerland	17	Indonesia	7	Malaysia	3	Morocco	2	Uae	1

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with help of Scopus database

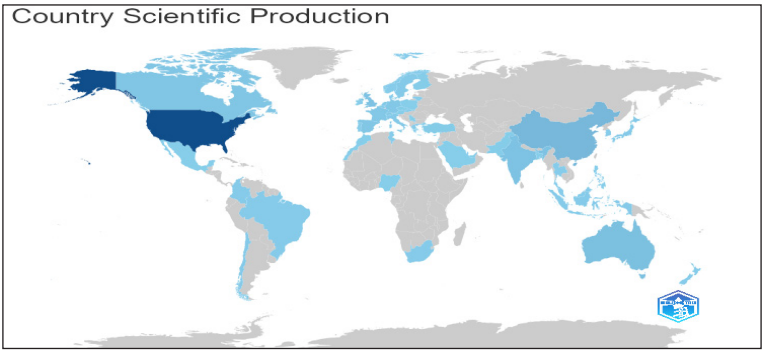


Figure. 6 Countries' Scientific Production

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

Table 5 and Figure 6 show the countries' scientific production over time on the basis of the Scopus database. The top 5 countries have most of the scientific contributions in this domain. The next 10 countries shown little interest in this research area, which is evident from their scientific production. Figure 6 counties with dark blue colour show significantly higher production, light blue colour shows less scientific production and countries with grey colour show very little or no production. Figure 6 and Table 5 is USA leads the research in the area of index mutual fund, much higher than all countries in the list, which is also depicted by its dark blue colour in the map. Counties like India, the UK, Australia and China are major contributing nations, with India least among these five countries.

Table. 6 Countries Annual Production over Time till 2010

YEAR	USA	INDIA	UNITED KINGDOM	AUSTRALIA	CHINA
1978	3	0	0	0	0
1991	17	2	0	0	0
1992	19	2	0	0	0
1993	19	2	2	0	0
1994	22	2	2	0	0
1995	24	2	2	0	0
1996	25	2	2	0	0
1997	26	2	2	0	0
1998	29	2	2	0	0
1999	39	2	2	1	0
2000	43	2	2	1	0
2001	51	2	2	3	0
2002	63	2	2	6	0
2003	72	2	3	6	0
2004	85	2	5	9	1
2005	94	2	7	12	1
2006	106	2	7	15	2
2007	131	2	7	19	3
2008	139	2	7	19	3
2009	142	2	7	22	3
2010	172	2	14	22	3

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

Table. 7 Countries Annual Production over Time

YEAR	USA	INDIA	UNITED KINGDOM	AUSTRALIA	CHINA
1978-2010	172	2	14	22	3
2011	196	2	16	23	11
2012	219	2	16	23	14
2013	229	5	18	25	17
2014	247	6	20	27	23
2015	263	9	20	29	23
2016	286	9	24	31	28
2017	301	9	25	33	38
2018	322	9	27	33	39
2019	338	11	28	34	45
2020	352	12	31	37	51
2021	374	17	32	39	65
2022	433	25	37	40	67
2023	461	33	39	41	73
2024	488	41	41	48	78

Source: Author's Own Work on Basis of Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

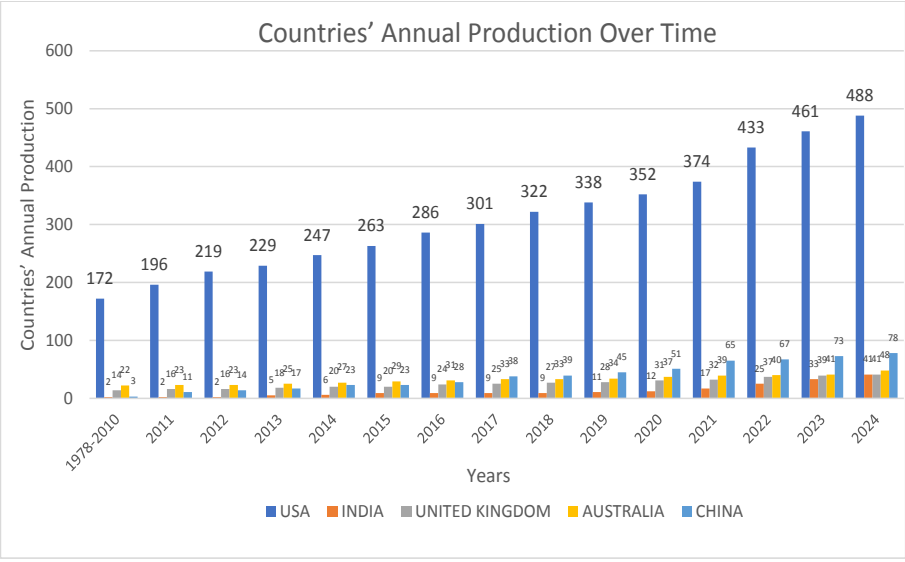


Figure 7. Countries' Annual Production Over Time

Source: Author's Own Work on the Basis of Biblioshiny Report using Scopus database

Table 7 and Figure 7 shows five most dominating countries in research on index mutual funds on the basis of the country's annual production over time.

The USA is the most dominating country in index mutual fund research. From the above table and figure, we can see that for around 15 years, there was no contribution from the UK, Australia and China in the Scopus database. India, too, contributed very little. Globally, annual scientific production from all countries increased significantly after 2000, and after that, we see a sharp increase from all these countries. The USA is the most dominating followed by Australia, China, the UK and India. The USA is much higher in scientific production in comparison to all the following countries. India has the lowest recent annual production, even though India started producing academic research in this field much earlier than the UK, Australia and China. This trend is evidence of the highly developed and focused financial interest of researcher of USA leading towards its developed and efficient financial market.

Table 8. Most Cited Countries

Country	Total Citations	Average Article Citations
USA	4585	36.1
UNITED KINGDOM	361	25.8
CHINA	208	9.9
CANADA	152	21.7
NETHERLANDS	133	33.2
SWITZERLAND	123	17.6
SINGAPORE	120	40
INDIA	111	7.9
GERMANY	92	13.1
PORTUGAL	76	76

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with help of Scopus database

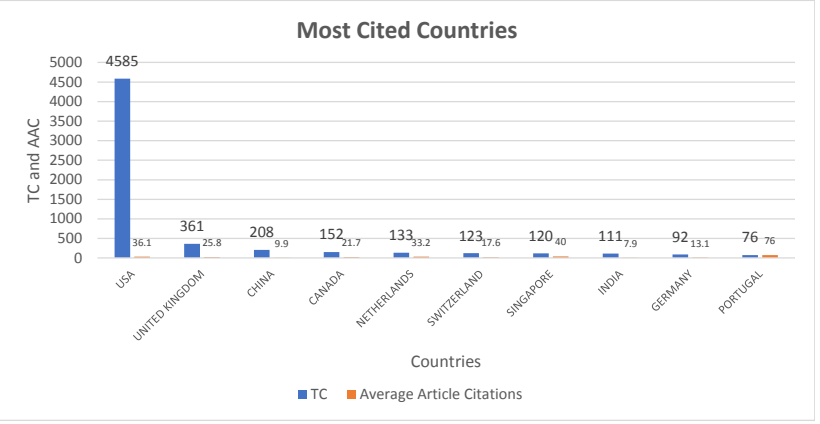


Figure 8. Most Cited Counties and their Total Citations and Average Article Citations

Source: Author's Own Work on Basis of Biblioshiny Report using Scopus database

Table 8 and Figure 8 show the most cited counties in the domain of index mutual fund research. The table and graph show the Total Citations and Average Article Citations received by the top 10 most cited countries in this research domain. The USA too is leading here, followed by the UK and China. India is in 8th position. This also sheds light on the quality of work done by these countries and their relevance in the current research trends, so that they are being frequently cited. The gap between the USA and the rest of the countries is significantly higher, which implies that the USA is a leader in this field of research.

The Conceptual Structure over Time

The conceptual structure of a field identifies the main themes, subthemes, and patterns of the area (Khare and Jain2022). Conceptual structure helps to identify trending topics, main research themes and emerging areas using two methods, namely the network approach and the factorial approach. In the network approach which is used in this study, the Co-occurrence Network and Thematic Map are used in this study.

Co-Word Network

Relationships between keywords on the basis of their co-occurrence in the research papers are explained through Co-Word Network analysis. Larger nodes imply higher frequency and importance of keywords, whereas a thicker connection between nodes tells how strong the relationship is between concepts.

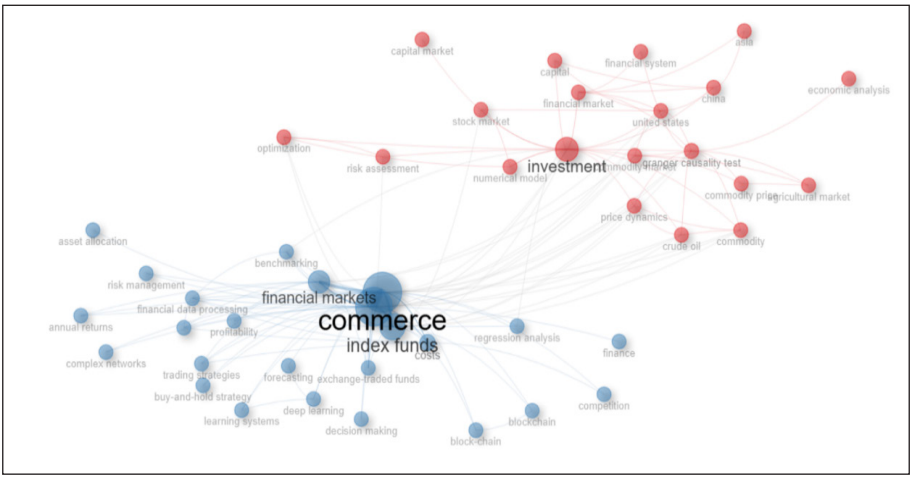


Figure 9. Co-Word Network between Keywords

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

Co-Word Network is divided into two major clusters of blue and red colours, which can be seen in Figure 9. The focus of the blue cluster is on topics like financial market, commerce index funds, benchmarking, block-chain and costs. Topics like commerce, financial market and index have larger nodes which indicate that these are central research themes. Red cluster delves into the themes like investments, commodities, commodity pricing and economic analysis. Investment is the most prominent theme in this cluster, highlighted by a thicker cluster. Remaining themes like price dynamics, stock market, crude oil, etc., appear to be of similar significance.

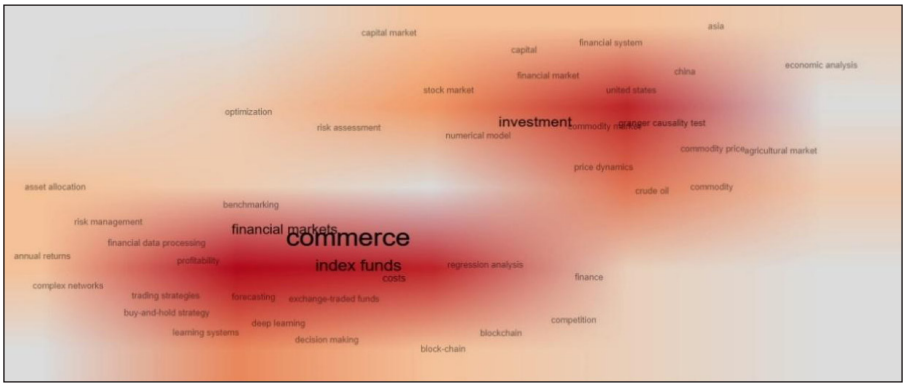


Figure 10. Co-Word Network Density

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

Figure 10 shows the Co-Word Co-occurrence Density Visualisation, which helps to identify central themes in this domain of this research and the themes that are not so frequent in this literature. Darker region shows the central theme of the domain, as keywords falling into the darker region are highly co-occurring keywords, while the lighter region shows less frequent co-occurring keywords, which are less discussed in the literature. Commerce, index fund, financial market and investment are the core focus of the literature. ETFs, forecasting, profitability, cost, and Granger causality tests are the trending topics. The presence of the USA, China and Asia shows the geographical focus in the index mutual fund research area.

Thematic Map

Biblioshiny generates a thematic map on basis of database provided to it and categorises research themes based on their centrality (importance) and density (development level) into four quadrant which are Motor Themes (well-developed

and important), Niche Themes (specialized but isolated topics), Basic Themes (important but underdeveloped topics) and Emerging or declining themes (weakly developed and marginal topics).

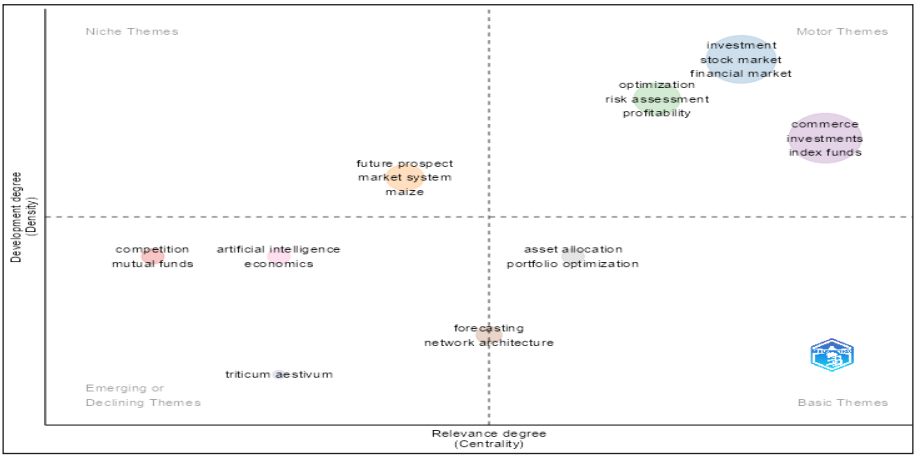


Figure 11. Thematic Map of Index Mutual Funds Scientific Literature

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

Figure 11 indicates that investment, stock market, financial market, commerce, investments, index funds, optimisation, risk assessment and profitability are the motor themes on which the research fraternity is actively working and are significant for future studies. Topics like asset allocation, portfolio optimisation, and forecasting are the basic themes which highly relevant but less dense. So, these topics need to be explored further to increase their depth. Prospects, market system and maize are the niche theme which are well developed but not connected to the broad theme. Competition, mutual funds, and artificial intelligence are the niche themes.

The Intellectual Structure over Time

Intellectual structure analyses which authors, documents, or sources have had a major influence on the academic field (Khare and Jain, 2022).

Co-citation Network

An author co-citation network helps researchers to identify the most prominent authors in a specific research domain (Lin and Himelboim, 2019). Nodes are individual authors, and connections between them are formed when two authors

are frequently cited together in other publications, indicating a shared intellectual space or research focus within that field.

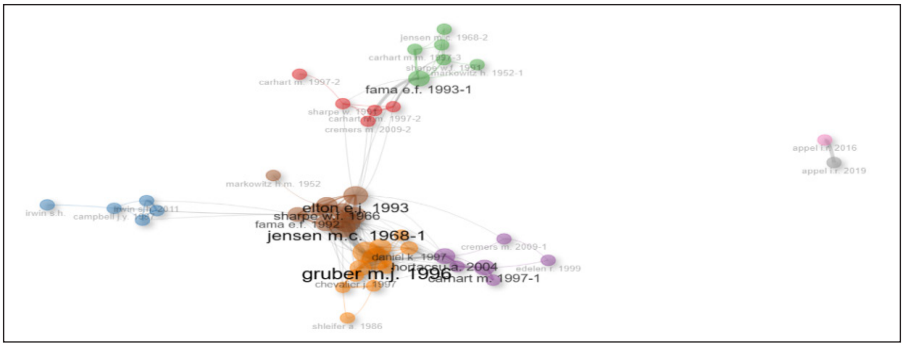


Figure 12. Co-citation Network

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

Central nodes show the most influential scientific production. Jensen and Gruber are highly co-cited and form foundational themes as their nodes are larger and central. Other important nodes are Cahart, Fama and Elton. It can be observed from Figure 12 that the whole co-citation network is divided into various colourful clusters, which represent how the clusters of authors are being cited together in common research topics. The thickness of nodes represents the influence of authors in the research space in various clusters. Jensen, Elton and Sharpe are in the brown cluster, focused on fundamental research in this area. Hortacsu and Cremers are in the purple cluster. Gruber, Shleifer, and Daniel are in the orange cluster focussing on asset pricing and behavioural finance. Jensen, Fama and Cahart are in green nodes, and Cahart, Sharpe and Cremers are in red nodes. Many authors appeared in multiple nodes. Appel is in the peripheral node, which is isolated, which suggests that his work is not integrated into the core area of the research domain.

Table 9. Co-citation Network Table

Node	Cluster	Node	Cluster
carhart m.m. 1997-2	1	gruber m.j. 1996	5
carhart m. 1997-2	1	carhart m.m. 1997-1	5
fama e.f. 2010	1	fama e.f. 1993-2	5
sharpe w. 1991	1	shleifer a. 1986	5
cremers m. 2009-2	1	sirri e.r. 1998	5
irwin s.h.	2	daniel k. 1997	5

irwin s.h. 2011	2	chevalier j. 1997	5
campbell j.y. 1997	2	berk j.b. 2004	5
irwin s.h. 2012	2	warther v.a. 1995	5
aulerich n.m. 2013	2	zheng l. 1999	5
fama e.f. 1993-1	3	elton e.j. 2004	5
markowitz h. 1952-1	3	jensen m.c. 1968-1	6
sharpe w.f. 1991	3	elton e.j. 1993	6
carhart m.m. 1997-3	3	elton e.j. 1996	6
jensen m.c. 1968-2	3	sharpe w.f. 1966	6
berk j.b. 2015	3	grinblatt m. 1989	6
carhart m. 1997-1	4	brown s.j. 1992	6
hortacsu a. 2004	4	fama e.f. 1992	6
sirri e. 1998	4	treynor j.l. 1965	6
cremers m. 2009-1	4	ferson w.e. 1996	6
gruber m. 1996	4	markowitz h.m. 1952	6
edelen r. 1999	4	appel i.r. 2016	7
gruber m.j. 1996	5	appel i.r. 2019	8

Source: Biblioshiny Report generated with the help of Scopus database

Table 9 represents the co-citation network in tabular form. Authors in each cluster are mentioned cluster-wise. Fama, Sharpe, Cremers and Carhart are in cluster 1. Their focus is on mutual fund performance and asset pricing models. Irwin, Campbell and Aulerich are in Cluster 2. They are related to the commodity market and financialization. Fama, Markowitz, Sharpe, Carhart, Jensen and Berk are in cluster 3. Their research is related to portfolio theory and capital markets. Carhart, Hortacsu, Sirri, Cremers, Gruber and Edelen are in cluster 4. Their research is related to fund flow and investment behaviour. Gruber, Carhart, Fama, Shleifer, Sirri, Daniel, Chevalier, Berk, Warther, Zheng and Elton are in cluster 5. Their research is related to mutual fund growth and index funds. Jensen, Elton, Sharpe, Grinblatt, Brown, Fama, Treynor, Ferson, and Markowitz are in cluster 6, related to asset pricing and portfolio performance. Appel I is in clusters 7 and 8 focussing on ownership and governance of passive mutual funds and investment activism.

Limitations

Though the study contributes significantly to the body of knowledge, it has several limitations. This study primarily focused on the Scopus database. There

are other databases of Web of Science, Google Scholar, and PubMed, which are not included in this study. Additionally, the keyword-based approach of the author to article selection may introduce subjectivity bias into the process. The Biblioshiny conduct bibliometric analysis based on the title, keyword and abstract of research papers or articles. It does not look into the whole content of the paper, which has its own underlying disadvantage.

Conclusion and Future Scope

It can be concluded from the study that the discussion on index mutual fund has not reached its saturation yet, which is evident from the growth of literature, which can be seen in the recent decade. This means that index mutual funds need more research in the mutual fund research domain. Journal of Portfolio Management, Journal of Banking and Finance and Review of Financial Studies are the top 3 sources. Even among the 10 most influential sources in the list, we hardly find any Indian sources, which means Indian Journals can promote scientific work in this through a special issue and should focus on their quality improvement to become eligible for top indexes like Scopus and Web of Science. Irwin, Gruber and Sanders are the top 3 authors in this domain, having h_index 12, 9 and 9, respectively. India is also not in the 10 most influential authors and not even in the 10 most influential documents. The USA is the leading country in index mutual fund research, followed by the USA, China, Australia, India, the UK, Canada, Spain, France, Germany and Switzerland. But scientific production by India is ten times lower than USA, which hints that there is a huge scope for Indian scholars to look into mutual fund research from an Indian perspective and explore the unexplored. The USA receiving almost 40 times higher citations indicates that Indian scholars need to work on improving the quality of their research work. The conceptual and Intellectual Structure highlighted in this bibliometric study identified motor, basic, niche and emerging or declining theme which may give insight to the readers about their future research interests in this domain of research. Investment, stock market, financial market, commerce, investments, index funds, optimisation, risk assessment and profitability are the motor themes on which the research fraternity is actively working and are significant for future studies.

Policy Implication

The key takeaways of this bibliometric review carry important lessons for policymakers, regulators, academic institutions, and practitioners, particularly in the Indian context. The edge of the USA in index mutual fund research

and the comparatively low scientific production and citation impact of Indian studies indicate the need for strategic interventions to improve India's research ecosystem in passive investing.

Regulatory bodies such as the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) and the Ministry of Finance may encourage research on index mutual funds through sponsored research programs, data-sharing initiatives, and collaborations between academia and asset management companies. The role of index funds in promoting low-cost, transparent, and diversified investment avenues is very important, and hence, evidence-based policymaking supported by indigenous research can help strengthen investor protection, product innovation, and market development in India.

Indian journals and universities should work on enhancing research quality and international visibility. None of the Indian journals are among the most influential sources, which suggests the need for taking initiatives for quality improvement, editorial strengthening, and special issues dedicated to passive investing and mutual fund research. Efforts by the Indian journals to align publication standards with international indexing requirements, such as Scopus and Web of Science, can improve the global standing of Indian research output.

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The EU-India Energy Efficiency Cooperation: Partnership to Implement Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC) in India

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Abstract

Energy Efficiency (EE) is slowly gaining ground in policy making around the world. It is being seen as one of the most viable alternatives to reduce the chief culprits of Climate Change. Concerted EE measures can achieve almost half of Greenhouse gases (GHGs) targets as agreed in Paris agreement. According to World Energy Outlook Report 2017, EE has the potential to mitigate 44% of Carbon Dioxide (CO2) where renewables can deliver only 36%. EE was entitled as the "First fuel" by International Energy Agency in 2013 owning to its multiple benefits. UN has called to double the global rate of energy efficiency improvements under Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 7.3).

The European Union (EU) is one of the early movers to take concrete EE measures. For the EU, Energy Efficiency serves many purposes: "Energy Efficiency- Saving energy, saving money, protecting the climate". EU has implemented Energy Performance Building Directive since 2002 in its building sector. Buildings are the largest energy consumer and CO2 emitter in Europe. On the other hand, India is projected to demand one fourth of the world total energy by 2040. It is going to be one of the largest GHGs emitter due to its growing economy, fast urbanization, improvement in standard of living and climate vagaries. Extending its climate efforts to external sphere EU with India have solidified their cooperation on Energy Efficiency especially in the building sector.

In this regard, the paper briefly discusses the concept and benefits of energy efficiency, along with its meaning and scope in the European Union (EU) and India. Given that buildings are the second-largest final energy consumers in India as well, an attempt has been made to examine the EU's experience with its building-related directives and to analyze current developments in India's building codes. The study undertakes a comparative assessment

of regulatory frameworks, policy instruments, and implementation mechanisms adopted in both jurisdictions. The research further elaborates on the EU–India partnership in this field, highlighting areas of cooperation, knowledge transfer, and capacity building. It also dwells on the key challenges in achieving energy-efficient buildings, such as regulatory enforcement, technological barriers, and financial constraints, while exploring probable policy and institutional solutions.

Keywords: Energy efficiency, climate change, Sustainable Development Goal, energy conservation building code

The European Union is one of the early actors to recognize Energy Efficiency as the 'inhouse energy resource'. It is cost effective, sustainable and bring in various co benefits. The EU has taken a holistic approach towards energy efficiency by including it in headline targets in Climate and energy packages of 2020 and 2030. It has also implemented sector specific legislations and measures such as "Energy Performance building directive", Ecodesign and energy labelling, heating and cooling strategy, smart grid and metres etc. Being a normative actor, the EU commits itself to extend climate efforts through its external policy. Hence it collaborates with other states to move towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030.

By 2040, India will account for one-fourth of the Global energy demand, making it one of the biggest contributors. Paradoxically, though, its per capita energy usage is still 40% below the global average (IEA 2021). The increase in energy demand in India would be driven by urbanization. Around 315 million people (about present US population) are projected to be living in India's cities by 2040. Further energy consumption will rise due to growing economy, improvement in standard of living and intensified heat waves due to climate change. This would lead to unbearable energy costs and very high carbon emissions in India. However, under the Scenario of an Efficient World, this energy demand growth may be capped at just 82% between present and year 2040. Hence, in this context the EU-India Energy Efficiency Cooperation becomes of utmost significance to ensure energy security and improve energy efficiency keeping climate protection in view. The cooperation is emphasized in EU- India Joint statement on clean energy and climate change[1] 2017 that 'The EU and India agree to cooperate on increased energy efficiency of products and industrial processes, as well as on further develop their existing cooperation on energy efficiency in buildings.'

In this regard, the paper broadly discusses about the concept and benefits of energy efficiency, its meaning and scope in EU and India. Since in India also,

buildings are the second largest final energy consumers, attempt has been made to study the EU's experience with regard to its Building directives and current developments in Building code in India. The research elaborates upon the EU-India partnership in the field; dwells upon challenges and probable solutions.

Concept of Energy Efficiency (EE)

In simple terms, Energy Efficiency caters to performing the same task while using less amount of energy or increasing productivity with same amount of energy. The origin of the concept of EE is traced to 1973 oil crisis, when western economies were majorly hit due to Arab oil embargo. The crisis exposed the risk of fuel dependency on outside sources and presented the energy saving or less energy consumption as the immediate solution. At this time, Lovins (1976) was one of the first to give meaning to Energy efficiency as 'using less energy to produce greater economic output'.

In academic literature several references have been made to Energy efficiency like "one of the largest resources" (Laitner J.A, 2013), "low hanging fruit". The International Energy Agency (IEA) market report changed the status of energy efficiency from a 'hidden fuel' to the 'first fuel' on account of its of multiple benefits (IEA 2013). It highlighted that conservation of energy by plugging in the energy wastage, is the cheapest, cleanest and immediate source of energy. Multiple benefits accrue to EE primarily due to reduction in fossil fuels consumption. These effects spillover to reduction in emission of greenhouse gases; lower demand of energy imports; energy supply sufficiency and lower energy price so lesser cost for households and industries. The benefits are further interlinked to opportunities like new jobs and investment avenues along with public health, environmental and economic positives in the long run (e.g., less air pollution and related health improvements) (Jollands et al.2010, IEA 2014, Fawkes S. 2013, Bernstein M. A, 2002). Hence EE is very important solution to ensure Energy Security, environment sustainability, industrial competitiveness, financial stability and well-being of people. Energy Efficiency improvements are subject to required technologies and judicious management of energy systems and information database at different levels. Therefore, every sector of the economy provides enormous scope of energy efficiency whether industry, buildings, transport or energy generation.

It must be emphasized that energy efficiency is a broad concept that encompasses more than merely adopting energy-efficient items; rather, it is based on the flow

of energy. It concerns with tackling energy losses, less energy usage, behavioral changes, innovative reusing of energy in process of energy production, transformation, transmission, distributions along with final consumption of energy. This requires not just techno-economic measures but also policies to make energy efficiency- way of life (Morvaj, Z. and Bukarica, V. 2010, Palm. J (eds.), 2010).

Energy Efficiency (EE) is gradually gaining traction in global policymaking due to its potential to enhance energy security and reduce fossil fuel consumption. Hence, UN has called for double the rate of improvements in energy efficiency at global level under SDG- "Affordable and Clean energy". As per estimates in World Energy Outlook, in contrast to renewable energy sources, which can only reduce CO2 by 36%, EE has the potential to reduce it by 44%. Hence, Energy efficiency measures further contributes to strengthen the fight against Climate Change (SDG 13); help improving the air quality in cities (SDG 11.6); and bring good health and wellbeing to people (SDG 3).

Meaning and scope of Energy Efficiency for EU and India

European Union and India are different type of political entities located in different geographical locations and level of economic development. The EU is constituent of many mature economies, attempting to accelerate its economic growth, on the other hand India is one of the fastest emerging economies. However, both are major energy consumers and among the largest Greenhouse gas emitters. Both the entities are endowed with lower presence of conventional energy resources. Both fulfill large share of their growing energy demands with imported energy and spend huge sum of their public budgets on it. Both the EU and India are ardently committed to Paris Climate agreement to reduce their emission intensity and achieve other climate goals. Hence it becomes imperative for both to take policy measures to improve Energy Efficiency.

European Union

There has been rising trend of energy import dependency in the European Union over the decades and its domestic energy production is on the fall (Eurostats, 2019). So, at present EU imports more than half of its energy from external sources, making it one of the largest energy importers globally. Such dependency charges a huge import bill on the union and poses threat to its energy security. Further energy sector contributes largest in Green house gases emission (80.70% in 2017) in Europe (European Parliament, 2019).

Hence, there is increased emphasis on reducing energy consumption in the union, where Energy Efficiency comes into play. EU believes that promoting Energy Efficiency can reduce energy bills for Europeans and help mitigating the climate challenges that is clearly visible through their tagline "Energy Efficiency- Saving energy, saving money, protecting the climate". It also means to lower their vulnerability to external energy suppliers and create new economic activities. The targets for energy efficiency have been revised upwards from 20% by 2020 to 32.5 % by 2030 in Energy and Climate Packages.

EU recognizes the fact that Every step of the energy cycle, from production to final consumption, needs to be more energy efficient. Various EE measures have been taken like Energy Efficiency Directive, Energy performance building directive, Heating and cooling Strategy, Ecodesign and energy labelling directive etc. Moreover, EU emphasizes that cost of EE measures must not outweigh the benefits. Therefore, EU strategies primarily focus upon sectors where the energy saving potential is greatest, like buildings. Since buildings in the EU are responsible for over 40% of energy consumption and 36% of CO2 emissions, they are the single biggest energy consumer in Europe (Eurostat, 2019).

In 2016, over half of the EU's overall final energy consumption came from the residential and industrial sectors, 25.7% and 25% respectively (EU energy in figures, 2018). Where in EU's residential sector, heating and hot water requirements solely constituted for 79% of total final energy use and cooling has fairly small share. In industrial sector also, 70.6% of energy was used for space and industrial process heating alone, 26.7% for lighting and electrical processes such as machine motors, and only 2.7% for cooling (CIEP, 2017). From these figures it is clear that, most of the energy in EU is consumed for heating purpose. Therefore, energy efficient mechanism for heating is vital for EU to achieve its energy efficiency targets.

EU set a goal in 2007 to attain 20% EE by 2020 compared to its anticipated energy use by that period. That is estimated roughly equivalent to closing of 400 power stations. In 2015, the Energy Union was established with Energy efficiency as its one of the strategic priorities and the EU is also promoting the principle of 'Energy Efficiency First' (Gouardères F., 2018).

India- India's energy consumption has more than doubled over the period of 2000- 2018 due to high economic growth, improvement in standard of living and increase in demand for energy services (IEA 2020). The India energy outlook

2021 projected that India's energy needs would drive the global energy demands mainly accounting for 25% of the share by 2040. It will move up from its fourth position to be the third biggest energy consumer over taking the European Union by next decade (IEA 2021).

With country's commitment to the Paris Summit 2015, India has to balance between its economic and environmental objectives in the context of its progressively increasing energy demand (Bhaumik S., 2018). Hence with huge government debts and high fiscal deficits, measures to improve energy efficiency becomes a strategic policy priority to India. As average cost of EE measures (USD 0.03) to save per kilowatt hour (kWh) of electricity is lesser than cost of generating same amount from a thermal power plant (USD 0.068) in India (IEA, 2017a). The Energy Efficiency outlook for India report estimates that India would be able to reduce its fossil fuel imports by 18% worth $440 billion in 2018 in the Efficient scenario (IEA 2016). Energy efficiency can make Indian industries competitive. It can help India achieve its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) objectives and control air pollution. An analysis by TERI showed that Energy Efficiency Scenario has the potential to reduce emission intensity by 41% by 2030 having a positive impact on overall energy sector (Mathur R. et al., 2018). Therefore, to make the current energy transformation cost-effective and sustainable. India implemented the "National Mission for Enhanced Energy Efficiency (NMEEE)" since 2011 as part of National Action Plan for Climate Change. NAPCC acknowledges energy efficiency as a key tool to address the challenges of climate change. In fact, according to report by Bureau of Energy efficiency (BEE), India has reduced its energy intensity by twenty percent in 2018-19 compared to 2005 level and saved Rs 89,122 crore (BEE 2020).

The scope of Energy Savings in India can be primarily realized from industry (45%) and buildings (30%), followed by the transport sector. Its space cooling demand are projected to quadruple by 2040 in building sector and use of electric appliances would also rise exponentially with improving living standards (IEA, 2019). Emerging economies would constitute majority share of the expected energy growth for space cooling by 2050. Just three countries India, China and Indonesia would contribute to half of global cooling energy demand growth (Thambi S., et.al, 2019). Energy demand for the purpose of cooling in India is projected to double by 2027 under the business as usual scenario.

However, with EE measures, it is possible to reduce emissions by 20% and the overall increase in energy demand by seventeen percentage. Again Buildings are the second in demanding final energy in India (BP, 2019) and Space cooling in

building sector continues to dominate with nearly 57% of total energy demand for cooling (Kumar, S., et. al 2018). Though at present and in short term much of the energy is used for lighting in India but in long term as clear from above, cooling energy demand will rise multifold. Hence in short term India's efforts can focus on LED lights and energy efficient fans but in long run viable energy efficient cooling solution are necessary. Hence, it is important to effectively implement and strengthen its efficiency standards through building energy codes.

EU Experience in Implementing its Energy Performance Building Directives (EPBD)

The importance of energy saving was first time realized by Europe and the world after the 1970s oil crisis that resulted into major economic and social upheavals. But the Energy Efficiency became the priority in EU energy policy in recent time only as EU was cautious and reluctant to impose strict regulatory measures taking into account the possible negative impact on the competitiveness of its domestic manufacturing and construction industry as well as the cost burden of expensive Energy Efficiency (EE) solutions of that time. With the time the cost of energy efficient products and technology has come down. Hence EU began imposing obligatory EE regulations with EU Energy Performance Building Directives (EPBD) in 2002.

Because EPBD was a directive issued by the "European Commission" and authorized by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. It is mandatory in terms of the set goals to be achieved by all the Member States. But MS are free to devise their own state laws in line with broad framework of the directive. Hence EPBD (2002) set some key requirements to be achieved by all MS with in specified time period-

1. Adoption of an Energy Performance (EP) calculation methodology that complies with EU guideline.

2. Establish Minimum standards for Energy Performance for new buildings and 'major renovations' for existing ones. These standards were to be reviewed after every 5 years.

3. All new structures and/or buildings that are for sale or rental must meet the requirements for "Energy Performance Certification (energy label)". For which energy audit to be conducted independently (EUR-Lex, 2007).

EU EPBD has been further added the target to achieve the 'Nearly Zero Energy Buildings (NZEB)' by the period 2019-2021. Some other reform measures have also been added with new directives like 'cost optimal' methodology (A form of life cycle analysis), mandatory EPC visibility on property sale or rent adverts, independent monitoring and control systems for EPCs. Further efforts are being made in the direction smart buildings including comfort criteria and smart financing.

Though the structural process of implementation of EPBD is similar, but there are many differences in measures taken by respective MS in terms of technical standards, types of software and format of databases, variation in design of EP certificates, kind of skill training, financing mechanisms as well as stringency of laws and punishment for non-compliance. To encourage communication and the sharing of best practices among its member states, the EU Commission established a collaborative forum (Kevin O'Rourke, 2018).

Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC) in India

The assertion that "*India's building spree will shape its energy use for years to come*" in the India Energy outlook report 2021 shows the importance of construction of energy efficient building stock for India to determine its energy demands in the coming times. As the building space in India is projected to double in coming two decades, where most of the construction would happen in urban areas (IEA, 2021). The government's policy agency Niti Aayog, estimates that energy demand from India's buildings will increase by more than 800 percent in 2047 compared to 2012. Under the current standards, the country will face higher energy costs and skyrocketing consumption for decades. At the same time, air pollution will worsen, adding to the impact of climate change. That's why India needs better building efficiency policies and programs now.

The building sector in India is growing unprecedently accompanied by progressively increasing energy demands. Presently it constitutes for 38% of India's total annual primary energy consumption and 31% of the total annual electricity consumption. (NITI Aayog & Prayas, 2017). Moreover, there are prediction of addition of around 40 % of building stock in coming 30-40 years.

Hence, it becomes the priority to take measures for energy efficiency in Buildings. The Energy Conservation Building Code was launched by Government of India (GOI) to implement EE measures in new commercial buildings on 27th May 2007.For the development of ECBC, an Expert Committee was set up by India's

BEE that was supported and guided by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and significant inputs were provided by various other stakeholders such as practicing architects, consultants, educational institutions and other government organizations. At present ECBC is a voluntary code which is applicable only to commercial buildings. Minimum energy standards for new commercial buildings are set under ECBC which have a connected load more than 100kW or contract demand of 120 KVA and above. (UNDP)

Since Power distribution and urban development both subjects come under concurrent list. The EC Act 2001 gives powers to the Central Government to develop and update ECBC and the state governments are provided with the flexibility to modify the code with respect to their local or regional needs and notify ECBC in the State Gazette and revise building Byelaws, whereas urban local bodies enforce ECBC and revises building modelling bylaws and approval process. Therefore, enforcement basically lies with the state governments. (AEEE, 2019)

The ECBC prescribes design norms and standards and mandatory requirement for building envelope, lightening and HVAC system (Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning). The second version of ECBC was updated and released in 2017. This was done to expedite code installation and adequately meet ongoing advancements in energy efficiency. Although code compliance is voluntary, a few states began the process of making it mandatory for commercial building stock covered by the modified EC Act, 2001, by notifying ECBC in their gazettes (AEEE, 2017b). ECBC 2017 provides unique three tiered structure which paves the way towards the future of Near Zero Energy Building (NZEB). A Building's minimum energy savings should be 25% in order to be ECBC compliant. Additional energy efficiency performing new buildings would be graded higher as "ECBC Plus or Super ECBC" status with energy savings of 35% and 50%, respectively. The revised code 2017 sets provisions to integrate renewable energy sources in building designs with the inclusion of passive design strategies like daylight requirements and shading provisions. The code seeks cost effectiveness and the best possible energy reductions while maintaining comfort levels. By 2030, it is predicted that 50% less energy will be used if the code is successfully implemented for the construction of new commercial buildings nationwide. With a projected reduction in peak demand of over 15 GW annually and savings of energy almost 300 billion units by 2030, this would result in cost savings of Rs 35,000 crore and a reduction of 250 million tons of Carbon dioxide (PIB, 2017). Application of building codes

has the potential to reduce electricity consumption by 25%- 30% (Saurabh Diddi, 2017).

EU- India Energy Efficiency Partnership

An India-EU Clean Energy and Climate Partnership was established during the 2016 EU-India Summit. The partnership aims support and strengthen dialogue and cooperation on clean energy, energy efficiency and the implementation of the Paris Agreement. It fosters collaborative projects and research in the area and offers general guidelines for the EU-India energy and climate policy debate. Currently, the partnership's operations center on offshore wind energy, rooftop solar and solar Parks, smart grids, biofuels, energy efficiency in buildings, and the integration of renewable Energy and storage (EEAS,2019).

The goal of the EU's "Clean Energy Cooperation with India (CECI)" initiative is to increase India's ability to implement low-carbon energy generation and boost energy efficiency, which will help to slow down global warming. One of the three CECI implementation is "ACE:E2 (Adoption, Compliance, Enforcement for Energy Efficiency)". It focuses upon improving energy efficiency in building sector. Its main goal is to assist India in adopting, enforcing, and complying with the "Energy Conservation Building Code (ECB)" by disseminating practical knowledge from the EU's experience with industry best practices and enabling its adaptation to the Indian context. Additionally, it encourages European companies to collaborate with their Indian counterparts in the field of energy innovations. In essence, the project offers legal and policy support as well as technical aid for the creation and execution of energy efficiency laws for the building industry.

The EU through the ACE:E2 project mainly supports the four states (Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Bihar) in cooperation with India's Bureau of Energy Efficiency to Implement ECBC in commercial buildings. The project's scope has been further expanded to whole India through organizing regional and national workshops, publishing reports to help other states for implementing of ECBC. EU has funded this project with € 1.500.000 and its implementation is carried by "EXERGIA S.A." in collaboration with PwC India.

Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC) is being implemented with EU collaboration under the project in the four Indian states in following steps -

1. Adoption- Institutional and legal framework is established through discussing and finalizing governance issue, action plan of a particular

state. Under the project the activities related to adoption of ECBC – amendment, notification, rules and integrating bye-laws have been undertaken in the four states after conducting various stakeholders meetings.

2. Compliance- It is also involved in developing a certification mechanism, monitoring and verification framework in these states. The project also developed and conducts training from a 2 hour to full day sessions, awareness programs and ECBC communication strategy involving various stakeholder.

3. Enforcement- Efforts are made to integrate ECBC in the bye laws and further in building approval process by respective PWD and Urban development departments. The project also supports the states in developing a certification mechanism and collection of energy performance database to improve monitoring.

4. Tools- the project is involved in developing various tools like notification user guide and demonstration project in consultation with BEE to ensure compliance. Under the Demo projects, prospective new building and other existing building are identified and their energy efficient design is developed, to be used as template like MEDA in Maharashtra and Intelligent City Operations and Management Centre, Bhubaneshwar (ACE:E2).

Conclusion

Though it has been more than a decade since the ECBC was first launched in 2007 but its effective implementation is still far from the scene. There are several challenges faced in India in this regard-

- Since ECBC is voluntary in nature, few states have notified it in their gazette to start the process of making compliance of code mandatory for commercial buildings under EC Act, 2001. It has to be first adopted by states and then implemented by local bodies after being integrated in bye laws. This process is immensely slow and complicated. More over states are at different stages of implementation of ECBC which is modified according to their local need. Though it is best based on "subsidiary principle", that creates better scope of decentralized planning, implementation and updation with respect to niche feedback.

Nevertheless, it also creates inconsistency and incongruence to measure the implementation of the code. This it becomes difficult to analyse, compare and monitor the implementation process over all. Hence in line with fire safety and other structural criteria, the revised code must also be made necessary by mainstreaming it into building design and construction.

- The implementation of ECBC is not just about the adoption of required legislation rather it requires the deployment of crucial energy efficient technologies and products. It becomes a very costly affair for India already facing financial crunch in the absence of effective transfer of clean technology at affordable prices. In this regard EU's efforts under ACE:E2 in the form of just the dissemination of knowledge rather than active participation and exchanges between various stakeholder and technology cooperation, do not seem sufficient. Therefore, there is need for increased business to business collaboration along with structured clean technology transfer protocols to increase dissemination of energy efficient products at affordable prices.

- There are still certain hurdles like cultural differences, slow administrative processes and lack of stringent IPR enforcement etc.. these issues often discourage European businesses to invest in India's Energy Efficiency market. In 2018, this market in India was estimated at $23 billion (around Rs1.5 trillion) with vast scope to further expand (Bhaskar U.,2018). To increase ease of doing business, the government of India has taken several proactive measures like "Invest India" unified platform. These efforts could further take a boost with signing of long awaited EU- India Free trade agreement (FTA).

- There is lack of awareness and access to information regarding the energy performance measures and standard mechanisms among builders, investors and buyers in India. According to "Natural Resources Defense Council" report, developers are generally unaware that buildings with energy performance certification have greater property values and are leased more quickly. At the same page, buyers don't get to know about advantages including reduced energy expenses, easier maintenance, and better insulation and ventilation based on climate zone. This leads to lack of momentum towards ECBC compliance in absence of popular demand. There is need for collaboration between

EU-India for research on cost and benefit analysis of energy efficiency measures, mobilization of resources and create awareness about the importance of energy efficiency improvements . In this regard, India could take a leaf out of EU's practice of mandatory disclosure of "energy performance certificates" on advertisement of building for sale or rental purpose.

- The efforts under ACE:E2 are still at a nascent stage, which could be further optimized through its collaboration with already active actors and projects in the field like AEEE(Alliance for an Energy Efficient Economy) a non-profit partnership by Indian businesses in Energy Efficiency, Shakti sustainable energy foundation, USAID ECOIII project, UNDP GEF etc. this could minimize any duplicacy of efforts and boost the level of activities with widened opportunities of joint collaborations in cost effective manner.

- There is going to be exponential growth in residential building stock due to rapid urbanization. hence the electricity consumption by residential sector also estimated to leap by more than eight times by 2050. Hence any possible EU-India collaboration under Skill India Program to provide training in Energy Efficient building designs to youth as local masons, Civil engineers and architects could make significant improvement in improving EE in the sector.

India's energy demands are growing exponentially in the backdrop of growing population, rising standard of living, progressing economy and expanding urbanization. In such juncture, it is need of the hour to mandate energy efficiency measures in a cross sectoral manner. It is not about just using energy efficient appliances but requires an overhaul in how we produce, transmit and use energy. It's short term strategy may cater to tackling the current demand like energy efficient lightening. However, for the long term it needs to increasingly invest in research and development as well as market mechanisms to derive the solution for efficient cooling demands. The cooling demands are going to form major chunk of its overall energy demand growth due to its tropical and subtropical climate and rising global temperature effects due to Climate Change. While the government of Inida has devised the "cooling action plan", EU- India partnership would need to deepen to fasten up the ECBC implementation across the country. It is suggested that the partnership should further entail possible

clean technology transfer at affordable prices as well as pave the way for joint production partnership in innovations like smart grids and smart meters. Moreover, the EU's own experience of EPBD implementation itself provide many useful lessons for smooth Building code implementation in India which is estimated to save 20-25% of energy. Hence this paper argues for 'Energy Efficiency first policy' in India with the motto of "Energy Saved is Energy Supplied". Such a policy aims to mainstream energy efficiency measures in to the overall energy policy making in India.

Endnotes

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Cultural Hybridity and Identity Politics in the Writings of Indian Diaspora in the Middle East

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Abstract

This paper examines how Indian diaspora writers in the Middle East negotiate cultural hybridity and identity politics through their literary works. Drawing on postcolonial and diaspora studies, it explores how these writers articulate belonging, displacement, and adaptation in a region that itself is a historical crossroads of migration. The analysis will focus on themes such as the tension between cultural preservation and assimilation, the role of language in identity construction, and the negotiation of socio-political realities unique to Gulf States. Authors like Benyamin (Goat Days), Anees Salim, and Deepak Unnikrishnan (Temporary People) offer subtle portrayals of migrant life that reflect both the challenges and creative resilience of diasporic existence. Through situating these works within the larger framework of decolonization, the study will highlight how Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East contributes to the reimagining of cultural memory beyond national borders.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora Literature, Cultural Hybridity, Identity Politics, Gulf Migration, Decolonization

Introduction

The discourse on decolonization has expanded beyond the political realm to encompass questions of language, literature, and cultural memory, particularly in contexts shaped by migration and transnational exchanges. Postcolonial studies have emphasized how the legacies of colonialism continue to inform cultural identities, practices of belonging, and literary expression in diverse global settings (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). Within this broader field,

diaspora literature occupies a significant place as it reflects the lived experiences of displacement, cultural negotiation, and identity construction. Diasporic texts not only engage with the politics of memory but also create new spaces of hybridity where identities are continuously reimagined.

The Middle East, more precisely the Gulf region of West Asia, represents a unique arena for examining Indian diaspora literature. While the term "Middle East" is used in this study due to its prevalence in migration and literary scholarship, it is acknowledged that "West Asia" offers a more geographically grounded alternative; both terms here refer to the Gulf-centered migration context. Unlike the well-documented Indian Diasporas in the West, Gulf migration is characterized by temporary labour contracts, restrictive citizenship policies, and deeply stratified social hierarchies (Khalaf, 2015; Gardner, 2010). This transitory nature of settlement produces a distinctive set of challenges and opportunities for cultural expression, making the writings of Indian migrants in this region a crucial site for scholarly attention. The intersection of multiple languages, such as Malayalam, Hindi, English, and Arabic, further enriches the literary landscape, highlighting the complex dynamics of cultural hybridity. Indian writers such as Benyamin, Anees Salim, and Deepak Unnikrishnan have foregrounded these concerns through their literary works. Benyamin's *Goat Days* explores the alienation and exploitation of migrant workers in the Gulf, while Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* employs linguistic experimentation and fragmented narratives to capture the precariousness of diasporic life. These texts, along with others emerging from the region, provide subtle yet powerful portrayals of displacement, belonging, and resilience. In doing so, they contribute to broader conversations on how cultural memory is reconfigured in postcolonial and transnational contexts.

The selection of Benyamin, Deepak Unnikrishnan, and Anees Salim is deliberate and theoretically grounded. These writers represent three distinct yet complementary strands within Indian diaspora writing connected to the Gulf region: Benyamin foregrounds the lived realities of working-class migrant labourers and the structures of exploitation underpinning Gulf economies; Unnikrishnan offers an experimental, formally innovative engagement with migrant precarity and linguistic hybridity; and Salim's fiction, though not always geographically located in the Gulf, articulates psychic displacement, memory, and marginal subjectivities that resonate strongly with diasporic conditions. Together, these authors allow for a multi-layered exploration of diaspora literature that encompasses labour, language, memory, and identity

politics, thereby enabling a more comprehensive analysis of cultural hybridity and decolonial consciousness in the Middle Eastern context.

This paper situates the writings of Indian diaspora authors in the Middle East within the framework of cultural hybridity and identity politics. Drawing on theoretical insights from Homi Bhabha (1994), who conceptualizes hybridity as a "third space" of cultural negotiation, and Stuart Hall (1990), who views identity as both "being" and "becoming," the study argues that these literary works extend the discourse of decolonization beyond national boundaries. By examining how Indian diaspora literature in the Gulf navigates the tension between preservation and assimilation, as well as the politics of visibility in host societies, the study underscores the role of literature in reimagining decolonization as a transnational, ongoing process. Their narratives challenge readers to rethink concepts of home and nation, acknowledging the ache of nostalgia without erasing the inventive joys of cultural blending. In reclaiming cultural memory and contesting simplistic notions of assimilation, these writers show how diasporic literature can reimagine exile not just as loss, but as a fertile ground for new forms of community, artistry, and hope.

Historical and Socio-political Context

The migration of Indians to the Middle East has a long historical route, predating the colonial and postcolonial eras. For centuries, the Indian Ocean functioned as a corridor of exchange linking South Asia with the Arabian Peninsula, enabling trade, cultural interaction, and the movement of people (Chaudhuri, 1985). Coastal communities from Kerala, Gujarat, and other regions maintained sustained maritime ties with ports in Oman, Yemen, and the wider Gulf. These early exchanges laid the groundwork for the large-scale labour migration that would follow in the twentieth century.

The discovery of oil in the Gulf in the early twentieth century, followed by the post-World War II modernization drive, created unprecedented demand for foreign labour. The oil boom of the 1970s accelerated this process, attracting millions of South Asian workers, particularly from India, to build infrastructure and sustain service economies (Khalaf, AlShehabi, & Hanieh, 2015). Kerala emerged as a major source region, with migration becoming a defining feature of its economy, society, and cultural imagination. The Gulf became so central to Kerala's social fabric that scholars often describe migration as an essential "social contract" binding Kerala and the Middle East (Osella & Osella, 2000).

What distinguishes the Gulf migration model from diasporic experiences in the West is its temporality, embedded in the sponsorship or *kafala* system. This legal framework ties the residency status of migrants to their employers, thereby curtailing their autonomy and rendering them vulnerable to exploitation (Gardner, 2010; Longva, 1997). Migrants remain economically indispensable yet politically marginalized, as Gulf States restrict pathways to naturalization, long-term settlement, or political participation. As Vora (2013) argues, Indian migrants in Dubai and other Gulf cities embody a paradox: they contribute to the nation-building projects of their host societies but are denied the possibility of becoming "citizens."

This precarious existence shapes the socio-political realities of Indian diaspora life in the Gulf. Migrants navigate stratified labour markets marked by sharp hierarchies of class, nationality, and ethnicity. Western expatriates and Arab elites often occupy privileged positions, while South Asians, particularly unskilled and semi-skilled workers, remain confined to low-paying jobs under exploitative conditions (Khalaf et al., 2015). Such stratification is not merely economic but also cultural, influencing the visibility, representation, and recognition of Indian migrants in public life. The experience of "temporary settlement" means that migrants live in a state of perpetual liminality; neither fully integrated into the host society nor fully detached from the homeland (Gardner, 2011).

At the same time, migration has profoundly transformed sending communities in India. Remittances from the Gulf have become a critical pillar of Kerala's economy, driving improvements in housing, education, healthcare, and social mobility (Zachariah & Rajan, 2012). The "Gulf dream" has reshaped aspirations and consumption patterns, while also creating new forms of inequality within Kerala between migrant and non-migrant households. These socio-economic transformations are deeply intertwined with cultural change, influencing practices of religion, kinship, and modernity (Osella & Osella, 2000).

For the diaspora itself, cultural life in the Gulf is simultaneously constrained and vibrant. Restrictions on citizenship and cultural expression produce a sense of invisibility, yet Indian migrants sustain rich cultural worlds through literature, cinema, language, and community organizations. Migrant writers articulate these contradictions, capturing both the alienation of exclusion and the resilience of diasporic creativity. The literature of Benyamin, Deepak Unnikrishnan, and others must therefore be read within this broader historical and socio-political matrix where temporary migration, economic

dependency, and cultural negotiation converge to shape a distinct diasporic condition.

Themes in Indian Diaspora Literature from the Middle East

Belonging

The question of belonging is a recurring concern in Indian diaspora literature situated in the Middle East, particularly because the Gulf region embodies a paradoxical space for migrants; one of opportunity yet simultaneous exclusion. Belonging in this context is rarely straightforward, as migrant lives are shaped by legal, cultural, and social structures that prevent complete assimilation into the host society. Indian diaspora writers often portray characters whose experiences oscillate between inclusion through labour and exclusion through socio-political barriers.

Benyamin's *Goat Days* (2012) captures this tension with stark realism. The protagonist Najeeb, like many migrant workers in the Gulf, embodies the migrant's search for dignity and recognition while trapped in an environment that systematically denies him social rootedness. His yearning for connection is not only personal but emblematic of a larger collective desire among Indian migrants for acknowledgment within the host society. Yet, belonging remains fragile, tethered to the temporality of labour contracts, the absence of citizenship rights, and the lack of cultural integration in Gulf States (Gardner, 2010).

This duality reinforces Avtar Brah's (1996) concept of the "homing desire," which emphasizes that belonging is not necessarily tied to an actual return to the homeland but rather to the creation of "home" within dislocation. For Indian migrants in the Middle East, home becomes simultaneously plural and fractured: it resides in memories of Kerala or Hyderabad, in the solidarity of migrant communities, and in the spaces they carve out within alien landscapes. At the same time, the impossibility of permanent settlement in the Gulf produces what Steven Vertovec (1999) calls "transnational belonging," where identity is constructed across borders rather than firmly rooted in one place.

Thus, in diaspora literature, belonging emerges not as a static state but as a process; an ongoing negotiation between memory, displacement, and lived reality. The writings of Indian diaspora authors capture this fluidity, portraying belonging less as possession of space and more as a fragile, deeply felt yearning for stability and recognition within transient conditions.

Displacement

If belonging reflects the search for rootedness, displacement in Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East highlights the inevitable ruptures caused by migration. Unlike voluntary cosmopolitan mobility, the displacement experienced by many Indian migrants in the Gulf is marked by compulsion; economic necessity, poverty, and lack of opportunities in their homeland. Migration to the Middle East, especially since the oil boom of the 1970s, was rarely imagined as a seamless relocation; rather, it was undertaken with the burden of sacrifice and the awareness of a precarious future.

Literary works often underscore the psychic and social costs of this uprooting. In Benyamin's *Goat Days*, displacement is dramatized through Najeeb's entrapment in the desert, where he is stripped of his humanity and alienated both from the host society and from his own cultural roots. The physical dislocation is compounded by emotional estrangement: the migrant is caught in a liminal zone, belonging neither fully to the homeland nor to the new environment. This echoes Salman Rushdie's (1991) assertion that migration is always shadowed by "the loss of roots," where the migrant becomes a figure of in-betweenness, haunted by the absence of stability. Displacement also extends beyond the migrant individual to encompass families and communities back home. Letters, phone calls, and remittances create a fractured form of presence, but also accentuate absence. Writers such as Unni R. and Benyamin depict how the family unit itself undergoes dislocation, as relationships are restructured around the absence of the migrant breadwinner. Displacement thus emerges as both spatial and relational; an uprooting from the homeland and a disruption of familial intimacy.

Moreover, the displacement in the Gulf context is intensified by the lack of pathways to permanence. Migrants are positioned as temporary "guests" regardless of decades of residence, which makes the sense of settlement perpetually deferred. Edward Said's reflections on exile (2000) resonate here: the Gulf migrant embodies the paradox of being necessary yet unwelcome, present yet denied permanence. Diaspora literature from this context exposes how displacement is not only the migrant's entry point into the Gulf but also the condition that defines their entire existence there.

Hybridity

Hybridity in Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East emerges as a central analytical category, reflecting the everyday cultural negotiations undertaken by

migrants in structurally unequal host societies. While postcolonial theory often approaches hybridity through Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space," where new identities emerge through cultural interaction, the Gulf context complicates this formulation. Here, hybridity is not simply a creative fusion of cultures but a constrained and uneven process shaped by legal exclusion, labour hierarchies, and social marginalization. Migrants absorb elements of host cultures while remaining institutionally barred from full participation within them.

Literary narratives often depict how migrants embody dual cultural registers. They carry the linguistic, culinary, and religious practices of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, or Andhra Pradesh, while simultaneously adapting to the rhythms of Gulf life, whether through language acquisition, workplace discipline, or the codes of surveillance in host societies. For instance, Benyamin's works describe how migrant workers navigate the paradox of praying in mosques side by side with Arabs, while still being treated as outsiders within the same religious community. This fractured hybridity reflects Stuart Hall's (1990) idea that identity is not fixed but "a matter of becoming," continually reshaped in relation to new socio-political conditions.

Hybridity also manifests in the lives of second-generation diaspora, who, though fewer in number in the Gulf compared to Western diasporas, embody a complex duality. They are born into societies that legally and politically refuse them citizenship, yet their cultural sensibilities, language, clothing, and social etiquette bear the imprint of the Gulf. This tension is poignantly captured in short stories by Indian writers in Malayalam magazines published from the Gulf, where children struggle to situate themselves between a homeland they scarcely know and a host land that will never accept them as its own.

At the same time, hybridity in the Gulf is not only cultural but also linguistic. Migrant speech often becomes a creolized mix of Malayalam, Hindi, English, and Arabic, reflecting both adaptation and resistance. This everyday hybridity signifies what Ananya Jahanara Kabir (2010) terms the "lived palimpsest," where multiple layers of identity co-exist without necessarily resolving into a singular whole. Thus, in Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East, hybridity does not connote celebratory cosmopolitanism but rather a fraught negotiation; an unfinished blending shaped by inequality, exclusion, and survival. It marks both the resilience and the vulnerability of migrant existence in the Gulf.

Alienation

Alienation is a recurring and powerful theme in Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East, reflecting the existential disconnection that migrants experience in the host society. Unlike displacement, which foregrounds the physical rupture of migration, alienation highlights the psychological and emotional estrangement that follows sustained encounters with exclusion, marginalization, and cultural dissonance.

For Gulf migrants, alienation often begins with the structural inequalities embedded in the region's labour regimes. The *kafala* (sponsorship) system places workers in a state of dependency on employers, where even basic freedoms such as movement, association, or protest are restricted. This precarious existence fosters a profound sense of being "present yet absent," indispensable for the economy yet socially invisible. Benyamin's *Goat Days* is perhaps the most striking literary representation of this alienation, where the protagonist's dehumanizing life among goats becomes a metaphor for the isolation and disempowerment of countless migrant labourers.

Alienation also operates in the domain of identity and belonging. Migrants live in spaces that blur the line between home and exile: company accommodations, labour camps, and gated apartments. These are not sites of integration but rather enclaves of segregation, where cultural life is reproduced in miniature yet remains disconnected from the mainstream of Gulf society. Diaspora literature frequently depicts characters who oscillate between nostalgia for their homeland and the emotional void of their hostland, caught in what Salman Rushdie (1991) describes as the "imaginary homelands" spaces of memory and longing that can never be fully recaptured.

Furthermore, alienation extends across generations. Children of migrants, though exposed to the culture of the Gulf from birth, face legal exclusion and an uncertain future. Literature captures their "in-between" existence: alienated from the homeland through distance and alienated from the host land through denial of rights. In short stories and memoirs, second-generation migrants articulate feelings of rootlessness, highlighting the paradox of being socially integrated yet politically invisible. Language further deepens alienation. Many migrants in the Gulf operate with limited Arabic proficiency, restricting them to occupational spaces where communication is utilitarian rather than enriching. In literary texts, dialogues often shift between Malayalam, Hindi, and English,

with Arabic as an alienating presence; a language of authority and distance, rarely of intimacy. This linguistic estrangement reinforces the boundaries of exclusion that migrants navigate daily.

Thus, alienation in Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East is not merely a personal condition but a structural and collective experience. It reveals the psychological cost of economic survival and foregrounds the human toll of systems that sustain migration. In doing so, the literature functions as both a testimony and a critique, illuminating the hidden fractures beneath the narrative of Gulf prosperity.

Language

Language occupies a central role in Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East, functioning both as a bridge of connection and a marker of alienation. Migrant experiences in the Gulf are mediated through multilingual encounters; Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil, Urdu, and English coexist alongside Arabic, yet these languages operate within unequal hierarchies of power, access, and intimacy. Literature from the diaspora often explores this linguistic complexity, capturing the tensions between communication, identity, and exclusion.

For first-generation migrants, language is primarily tied to survival. Limited proficiency in Arabic confines them to low-paying jobs and reinforces their outsider status. Literature reflects this struggle, portraying characters who navigate daily life through fragments of Arabic words functional for labour but insufficient for cultural integration. The absence of linguistic fluency often parallels a broader social exclusion, where migrants remain trapped within their own linguistic enclaves.

At the same time, Indian languages, especially Malayalam in the Gulf context, serve as powerful tools of cultural continuity. Migrants recreate their homeland through linguistic practices, whether in literature, theatre, or everyday conversation. Gulf-Malayalam literature thrives on this retention of the mother tongue, transforming it into a repository of memory and belonging. Writers like Benyamin deliberately employ Malayalam idioms and dialects to preserve the rhythms of migrant life, ensuring that the diaspora's stories remain rooted in their linguistic heritage.

English occupies an ambivalent space in diaspora literature. On one hand, it functions as a language of aspiration and mobility, opening doors to better

employment and education. On the other hand, its dominance in literary production often marginalizes vernacular narratives, creating a gap between migrant experiences and their literary representation. English writings about the diaspora sometimes reflect the perspectives of more privileged migrants, whereas vernacular texts more directly voice the struggles of working-class communities. For the second generation, language becomes even more complicated. Children of migrants often grow up fluent in English and Arabic but disconnected from their parents' mother tongues. Literature captures this linguistic dissonance, portraying hybrid identities that emerge when young migrants negotiate multiple languages but belong fully to none. The inability to master their parents' native tongue intensifies the generational gap, while their lack of legal and cultural recognition in the Gulf prevents full ownership of Arabic. This liminality often results in a fractured linguistic identity.

Ultimately, language in Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East is never neutral; it embodies power relations, generational tensions, and cultural negotiations. It is a site where migrants struggle for dignity, assert cultural continuity, and articulate the unspoken fractures of diasporic life. By foregrounding language as both a unifier and divider, diaspora writers reveal the complex ways in which words, idioms, and silences construct the migrant condition.

Resilience

Resilience emerges as one of the most profound themes in Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East, highlighting the ability of migrants to endure hardship, adapt to hostile environments, and construct meaningful lives in conditions of precarity. Despite legal restrictions, social exclusion, and the transitory nature of their existence in Gulf societies, migrants carve out spaces of survival and hope. Literature becomes a witness to this resilience, capturing not just suffering but also strength, creativity, and endurance.

For many first-generation workers, resilience is expressed through their capacity to withstand exploitative labour conditions while maintaining familial responsibilities across borders. Poems and short stories often portray migrants who suppress their pain and loneliness to fulfil the economic dreams of their families back home. Their sacrifices are narrated not only as individual struggles but also as collective acts of perseverance that sustain entire communities in India. Cultural resilience is another recurring motif. Migrants preserve their

traditions, rituals, and communal practices in foreign lands, transforming the Gulf into a cultural extension of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, or Hyderabad. Literary works depict festive gatherings, religious practices, and cultural associations as acts of resistance against erasure, ensuring that migrant communities retain a sense of continuity and dignity amidst alienation.

Women's narratives add further dimensions to resilience. Literature portrays women migrants, whether domestic workers or nurses, negotiating multiple vulnerabilities: patriarchal control, economic exploitation, and social isolation. Yet, through networks of solidarity, faith, and inner strength, women demonstrate remarkable resilience in reconfiguring their identities and asserting agency within constrained circumstances. For the second generation, resilience takes on different shades. Denied citizenship rights and often marginalized in Gulf societies, they nonetheless cultivate hybrid identities that draw from both India and the Middle East. Literature depicts their resilience in negotiating belonging through education, cultural creativity, and transnational networks, even when their futures remain uncertain.

Resilience in diaspora literature is not romanticized as mere endurance; rather, it is portrayed as a complex negotiation with power, loss, and aspiration. By foregrounding resilience, writers challenge stereotypes of migrants as passive victims, instead presenting them as active agents who continuously reconstruct life in hostile terrains. In this sense, resilience becomes not just a survival strategy but also a literary metaphor for hope, continuity, and transformation within the diasporic condition.

Textual Analysis of Selected Authors

Benyamin's *Goat Days* (2012) has emerged as one of the most searing accounts of the Gulf migrant experience, particularly in its portrayal of alienation and dehumanization in labour camps. The protagonist, Najeeb, undergoes profound psychological and physical trauma while being forced to herd goats in extreme isolation, stripped of human dignity and social connection. The novel exemplifies what Ghosh (2018) describes as the "literature of captivity" within migration studies, where the migrant's body becomes both a site of exploitation and resistance. The text not only foregrounds the exploitative labour regimes of the Gulf but also highlights migrant resilience through Najeeb's capacity to endure and ultimately survive. Scenes such as Najeeb's forced identification with the goats, his gradual loss of language, and his bodily degradation in the desert

intensify the novel's critique of migrant dehumanization. The erosion of speech and memory in the text symbolically represents how migrant subjectivity itself is dismantled under conditions of extreme isolation.

In *Temporary People* (2017), Deepak Unnikrishnan presents a radically different aesthetic approach, using linguistic experimentation and fragmented narrative structures to mirror the fractured identities of Gulf migrants. His stories blur the boundaries between the real and surreal, capturing the precariousness of belonging for communities perpetually labelled as "temporary." The hybrid linguistic style, mixing English, Malayalam, Arabic, and even invented words, embodies Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity, where language itself becomes a site of negotiation and subversion. This experimental narrative underscores the impossibility of fixed belonging, reflecting what Nair (2020) identifies as the "liminality of Gulf existence." Stories such as "Gulf Return" and "Temporary People" foreground absurdity, bureaucratic violence, and linguistic distortion to depict migrants as spectral figures; socially present yet politically absent; thereby formalizing precarity through narrative technique.

Although Anees Salim's works, such as *Vanity Bagh* (2013) and *The Blind Lady's Descendants* (2014), are not set explicitly in the Gulf, they resonate with themes of displacement and fragmented memory that align with diasporic conditions. His characters often grapple with histories of marginalization, silenced voices, and estrangement, evoking a diasporic consciousness rooted in absence and longing. As Varughese (2016) notes, Salim's narratives articulate "subterranean geographies of loss," making them valuable for understanding how diasporic subjectivities emerge even outside the immediate migrant milieu. In this way, Salim broadens the spectrum of Indian diaspora literature by connecting everyday alienation to larger cultural dislocations.

Together, these authors illuminate the complex experiences of the Indian diaspora in the Middle East. While Benyamin foregrounds physical suffering and survival within exploitative labour systems, Unnikrishnan exposes the structural precariousness of migrant identities through experimental storytelling, and Salim offers subtle, memory-infused reflections on displacement. Despite differences in style and context, a common thread emerges: the resilience of migrants who, even in conditions of profound dislocation, construct identities, memories, and cultural continuities. These narratives underscore what Clifford (1997) terms the "routes" of diaspora, where movement and adaptation define community more than roots.

Literature as Resistance: Reclaiming Visibility, Voice, and Cultural Memory

Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East often functions as a site of cultural resistance, challenging dominant narratives that render migrant labourers invisible within host societies. Migrant workers in the Gulf are frequently positioned as an anonymous labour force, reduced to economic units sustaining national development projects without recognition of their personal histories, cultural identities, or struggles (Gardner, 2010). Within such a framework, literature emerges as a powerful medium of resistance, reclaiming both visibility and voice for these marginalized communities.

Benyamin's *Goat Days* (2012), for instance, exposes the dehumanizing conditions of migrant labourers through the traumatic experiences of Najeeb, a Malayali worker trapped in servitude. Through narrating the untold suffering of Gulf migrants, the text functions as an act of cultural witnessing, contesting the silence imposed by both sending and receiving states. Similarly, Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* (2017) employs experimental narrative forms to represent the precarious lives of expatriates in the UAE, whose identities are suspended between belonging and exclusion. The linguistic fragmentation in his work reflects the fractured subjectivity of migrants, simultaneously asserting their presence in a space that attempts to erase them. The act of writing itself becomes a strategy of resistance by recording migrant experiences that are systematically denied institutional recognition. Scholars argue that diasporic narratives not only document lived realities but also provide counter-discourses that subvert hegemonic representations of migration as purely economic success stories (Clifford, 1994; Brah, 1996). In the Gulf context, where strict labour hierarchies and restrictive citizenship regimes prevent migrants from articulating dissent publicly, literature performs the political work of giving voice to silenced communities.

Furthermore, these works contribute to the preservation of cultural memory, ensuring that the sacrifices and resilience of migrants are not forgotten. Literature allows migrant stories to enter the collective imagination, challenging the amnesia of both host societies and homeland audiences. By doing so, it asserts the humanity of migrants, affirming their agency and resilience in the face of systemic marginalization (Hall, 1990; Brah, 1996). In this sense, Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East transcends its role as artistic expression, functioning as a form of cultural resistance and political intervention.

Reimagining Decolonization through Diaspora Literature

The discourse of decolonization has traditionally been centered on political independence, territorial sovereignty, and the reclamation of indigenous cultures. However, diaspora literature complicates and extends this conversation by situating decolonial struggles within the lived realities of transnational migration and displacement. Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East, in particular, offers powerful reimaginings of decolonization that are not confined to nation-state frameworks but engage with the fluidity of belonging, the persistence of colonial hierarchies, and the production of cultural memory across borders.

Diasporic writings foreground the continuities of colonial legacies in contemporary global labour regimes, where migrant workers from South Asia often face conditions akin to indenture, servitude, and systemic exclusion (Gardner, 2011). Through narrating these experiences, authors such as Benyamin and Deepak Unnikrishnan expose the persistence of exploitative structures that replicate colonial hierarchies within Gulf economies. Literature thus becomes a medium through which migrants not only record their struggles but also challenge dominant narratives that render them invisible. In doing so, these works reposition decolonization as an ongoing, unfinished project that extends beyond political independence to encompass cultural representation, dignity, and justice (Mishra, 2007). Diaspora literature also reimagines cultural memory by moving beyond the constraints of national borders. Writers articulate hybrid forms of identity that draw simultaneously from homeland, host land, and transnational circuits of migration. For instance, the "homing desire" articulated in such literature (Brah, 1996) resists essentialist notions of return by emphasizing the creation of belonging in in-between spaces. This construction of cultural memory across geographies destabilizes the Eurocentric and nation-centered models of decolonization, foregrounding instead a pluriversal approach rooted in lived migrant experiences. The act of remembering, whether through narratives of Gulf labour camps, fragmented family histories, or linguistic hybridity, becomes itself a decolonial practice, reclaiming agency from structures that seek to erase or silence migrant lives (Hall, 1990).

In reimagining decolonization, diaspora literature functions as a mode of resistance that critiques power relations sustaining both colonial and neo-colonial orders. The depiction of migrant precarity in texts such as *Goat Days* and *Temporary People* highlights the systemic displacement produced by global capitalism, authoritarian state structures, and restrictive citizenship laws

(Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). Yet, these works also resist cultural erasure by giving voice to silenced communities, preserving vernacular expressions, and foregrounding subaltern subjectivities. As such, literature not only critiques structures of domination but also reconstructs alternative imaginaries of community, belonging, and justice. It asserts that decolonization is not simply about rejecting colonial authority but about reconstituting cultural and political spaces where marginalized voices can thrive (Spivak, 1988). Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East reimagines decolonization by weaving together narratives of displacement, resilience, and cultural memory that transcend national boundaries. Through their textual interventions, these writers contribute to decolonial thought by exposing persistent inequalities, reclaiming erased histories, and envisioning futures beyond colonial and neo-colonial constraints.

Conclusion

Indian diaspora literature from the Middle East emerges as a vital site for examining the entanglements of migration, memory, and identity in transnational spaces. These writings not only document the lived experiences of precarious migrant lives but also move beyond narrative testimony to function as acts of cultural resistance. Authors such as Benyamin, Deepak Unnikrishnan, and Anees Salim highlight alienation, hybridity, and resilience, foregrounding the social and psychological realities of communities whose lives remain shaped by both aspiration and marginality. In doing so, they complicate the binaries of "home" and "abroad," instead presenting a diasporic condition that is fluid, fragmented, and yet constantly seeking meaning. Moreover, the thematic engagements with belonging, displacement, and identity underscore how diaspora literature contributes to reimagining postcolonial subjectivity in global contexts. Through reclaiming visibility and voice for otherwise silenced migrant populations, these texts not only critique structures of power and exclusion but also expand the boundaries of cultural memory beyond the nation-state. As such, they resonate with broader decolonial discourses, challenging hegemonic narratives and offering alternative modes of seeing and remembering. Ultimately, Indian diaspora literature from the Gulf is more than a reflection of labour migration; it is an archive of survival, resistance, and creativity. It testifies to the ability of marginalized communities to transform dislocation into cultural production, thereby contributing to both regional and global literary landscapes. This body of work thus compels readers and scholars alike to reconsider the intersections of migration, literature, and decolonization in ways that remain deeply relevant to the twenty-first century.

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Maharanis in a Democracy & the Royal Dynastic Route for Women's Representation: Vijayaraje Scindia and Gayatri Devi

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Abstract

Women's representation in the Indian Parliament has been abysmally low, more so in the Lok Sabha with only about 5 percent women Members of Parliament till the 1970s. The same applied to the state legislatures too. However, amongst the few female MPs in the legislature, a good number came from erstwhile princely families. While the 106th Constitution Amendment Act, 2023 provides for one-third reservation for women in the Union and State legislatures, earlier the royal dynastic roots also provided opportunities to women in these institutions. Two such female leaders emerged in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, with contrasting personalities namely Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia and Maharani Gayatri Devi, respectively. The article traces their political trajectory and the ways in which they navigated their journey being in opposition party (to the dominant party, Congress). Theoretical reasons for the continuation of dynasties in electoral democracies has also been briefly analyzed.

Keywords: Political Dynasties, Politics of presence, royal patron-clientelism, political capital, representation, emergency

From Palace to Parliament-Vijayaraje Scindia and Gayatri Devi

Women's representation in the Indian Parliament has been abysmally low, more so in the Lok Sabha with only about 5 percent women Members of Parliament till the 1970s. The same applied to the state legislatures too. However, amongst the few female MPs in the legislature, a good number came from erstwhile princely families. While the 106th Constitution Amendment Act, 2023 provides

for one-third reservation for women in the Union and State legislatures, so far, the political inheritance from dynastic families also provided opportunities to women in these institutions. Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, two of the largest states in India present an interesting political trajectory in this context. Rajasthan was created out of the 22 princely states that formed *Rajputana*, while, Madhya Pradesh underwent several integration, re-integration and divisions to be in its present form. Prior to independence, these states comprised both, British Indian provinces and princely states. The transition from princely rule to electoral democracy brought with itself many changes in the polity. The traditional aristocracy had to negotiate to maintain their position of prominence in their respective fiefdoms. In the early decades of independence, members from royal families had to compete in elections with veteran leaders of the freedom struggle. While some of them joined the Congress party, others found an alternative platform in the Swatantra party and Bharatiya Jana Sangh. Gwalior and Jaipur were two such prominent princely states in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan whose members eventually founded political dynasties to compete in electoral democracy. My paper will trace the political journey of Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur and Vijayaraje Scindia of Gwalior to understand the idiosyncrasies of democratic polity in India in a complex web of caste, class, gender hierarchies and regional dynamics. I have largely relied on the biographical and autobiographical account of the two princesses to address the given questions, apart from a few secondary readings and my field trip to these two states. The paper proposes to address the following questions-

- What were the circumstances that impelled them to join active politics and the challenges they faced in establishing their distinct political identity?
- Did their social background and gender pay political dividends?
- What advantages did their royal lineage bring to the political parties they joined?

Table 3: Percent dynastic MPs by gender (2004.14)

Parliament	Total no. of female MPs	Percent female MPs who are dynastic	Total no. of male MPs	Percent male MPs who are dynastic
2004	45	57.88	498	16.67
2009	58	68.96	485	25.36
2014	63	42.86	480	19.17

Source: Chandra, Bohlken and Chauchard 2014

The Theoretical Aspect: Dynasties and Women's Representation

British feminist scholar Anne Phillips in her seminar work underlines the significance of the politics of presence over the politics of ideas.[1] Social identity of the representatives is not just a matter of symbolic representation but also ensures fairness and equality. Given the power hierarchy in our society, marginalized groups, especially women have dismal presence in political parties as well as in the legislature. Very few women in India have made it to positions of authority, as ministers, chief ministers or governors, as compared to their male counterpart. Women's representation in Indian Parliament has been abysmally low. While the percentage has been less than 15 for Lok Sabha, upper house had a better share of 17-18 percent women representatives so far. Almost similar figure holds true for state assemblies in India in the last 75 years. A substantial number of women have been able to enter the legislature through the dynastic route. Erstwhile royal political dynasties too have contributed in enabling women to be the political decision-makers by encouraging their participation in democratic politics. This paper will engage with two such prominent women leaders from royal families who eventually shaped democratic political dynasties within their family and made a lasting impact on politics in their region.

Political Capital and Patrimonial Relations

As far as the politically predominant class of Rajasthan was concerned, the feudal nobility and the princes from the Rajput/Kshatriya clan dominated it. Susanne Rudolph and Lloyd Rudolph suggest that Rajasthan was not prepared for political modernization and democratic rule. In the 'Essays on Rajputana', they write, "Caste, clan, land and chivalric reputation had legitimized rulership in the old princely states ruled by Rajputs, members of the warrior-ruler caste (Kshatriyas). After conclusion of the subsidiary alliances in 1818, British recognition and support were required as well. The addition did little, however, to change explicitly the way most Rajasthanis understood the legitimacy of their maharajas or nobles; ascriptive factors justified the exercise of power in 1947 as they had done in 1818." [2]

Though the perception of the ruled did not undergo much transformation even after British paramountcy was established, it did create some pressure on the rulers to justify their rule by greater public service. Susanne Rudolph and Lloyd Rudolph suggest that the princes were pressurized to orient their rule towards public service and convert their courts into public institutions. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, princely states began to issue annual reports on public

administration that included statements on fiscal situation and programmes/ policies of the rulers. [3]

Patrimonialism is another concept that may help understand the preponderance of dynasties. Patron-clientelism is marked by mutual obligations and a relationship marked by mutual transaction. Placing it in the South Asian context, Anastasia Piliavsky writes, "Political patronage is an expression of the broad moral sense that shapes the ways in which people relate across social levels and contexts".[4] Perhaps this very relationship grounded in patron-clientelism enables these members of political dynasties to sustain and enjoy uninterrupted power.

Political Background: Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan

Madhya Pradesh as it existed in 1956 also comprised three princely States that were joined to the Hindi-speaking region of the erstwhile Central Provinces. The integration of large princely states, such as Gwalior, Indore and Bhopal into the Indian Union was a tough task. Another challenge was to bring together the traditionally hostile princely states of Gwalior and Indore together. After several rounds of discussions and meetings, the Maharaja of Gwalior softened his stand. V.P. Menon, the erstwhile States Secretary noted the crucial role of the Maharani of Gwalior in this regard, 'I also had an opportunity of discussing the matter with the Maharani whose progressive outlook enabled her to appreciate my arguments'[5]. Moreover, to pacify the warring sides, the erstwhile Maharajas of Gwalior and Indore were made the Rajpramukh and Uparajpramukh respectively of the new union and they were supposed to hold this office for life.

Apart from the tussle between these two princely states, the region also witnessed rift in the Congress leadership. The conflict that arose between Marathi speaking faction led by Dr. Khare and the Hindi region leaders D.P. Mishra and Ravi Shankar Shukla in the newly formed ministry of 1937 is well known. This crisis resulted in the resignation of Dr. Khare and Ravi Shankar Shukla became the new Premiere of Central Provinces and Berar. Thus, rifts were visible even before independence and what initially emerged were loose political units bound together by compulsions of administration. Mayne Wilcox suggested that there was a lack of coherent political community in the newly formed state.

"MP was formed because there seemed to be nothing else to do with its constituent parts...the state was not created on the basis of an indigenous demand and its constituent units in fact possessed almost no political affinity...the parts of the state are greater than the sum."[6]

In Madhya Pradesh, one could witness factions along regional lines and often a power struggle between the upper caste/class leaders within the party. The power tussle along caste line continues until date and one can witness a shift from upper caste dominance until the 1980s, to the rise of the Other Backward Classes since late 1990's. The Chief Ministers till 1990s were either Brahmins or Rajput by caste but post Mandal[7], as many as three Chief Ministers belonged to the OBC Community. Moreover, the state is also home to several tribal communities, which constitute 20% of its population.

In case of Rajasthan of the 22 princely states, 19 were *salute* and the rest 3 were *non-salute* states. While some like Udaipur and Jaipur were large enough, a few such as Karauli were tiny principalities. These princely states of Rajputana varied not only in terms of their size, history and culture but in their ancestry and historical lineages as well. Most were ruled by Rajput rulers from various sub-clans differing in ranks, except a few such as Dholpur, whose ruler belonged to Deswali tribe of Jats. Udaipur, Jaipur and Jodhpur were principal states of Rajputana. The Udaipur dynasty founded by Kanaka Sen ranked first among the Rajput princes, owing to its history of heroic resistance against the Muslim rulers/ invaders In his work,[8] V.P. Menon, the Secretary of the erstwhile States ministry[9] documents the complexities that were involved in bringing all the native states of Rajputana to table to decide over the position of Rajpramukh and Uprajpramukh.

The States ministry considered it important to consult all the stakeholders that included the concerned 'Maharajas' and the popular leaders, such as Hiralal Shastri, Jai Narayan Vyas, Manikalal Varma and Gokulbhai Bhat. Popular leaders like Gokulbhai Bhat of the Congress were active in Praja Mandals. Apart from being the President of Rajasthan Provincial Congress Committee, Bhat was also an adviser to the Dowager Maharani of Sirohi.[10] These leaders proved as important link between the Indian Government (Central leadership) and native princes. They were consulted on all the important matters regarding the integration of states and perhaps this provided some space to the leaders from non-royal dynasties to enter the regional political space in the democratic polity of independent India. Some of them, like Hiralal Shastri and Jai Narayan Vyas went on to become the Chief Minister of Rajasthan.

The Maharaja of Jaipur was made the Rajpramukh for life whereas two more posts of Senior and Junior Uprajpramukh were created to accommodate the aspirations of other significant native states of Rajputana. It is also interesting

to note that the States Department thought that bigger states like Jaipur, Jodhpur and Bikaner, who were joining the Union, should be given some weightage in the Council of Rulers and hence the number of votes that each ruler had in the Council was in proportion to the population in their states. Moreover, the remnants of the feudal structure were retained when it was proposed that special interests such as 'Jagirdars' should have representation in the constituent assembly of the new Union. The States ministry accorded this power to the Rajpramukh, to nominate four persons to represent such interest. Thus, the democratic state itself created space for feudal elements.

The first democratic elections in the country witnessed some princely rulers of erstwhile Rajputana in the electoral fray. Rajasthan witnessed some of the major princely families jump into the electoral fray post-independence. Some of the major ones include the princely families of Jodhpur, Bikaner, Jaipur, Bharatpur in Rajasthan while from Madhya Pradesh; these included the princely states of Gwalior, Rewa and Rajogarh. However, it is interesting to note that none of these Princes had ever joined the Indian National Congress or any other political party prior to independence. On the contrary, the Congress leaders from these states such as Jai Narayan Vyas, Hiralal Shastri and D.P. Mishra had prior experience of being part of the democratic process during the freedom struggle as well as in the popular movement in the princely states. Despite this, some of them could not defeat the princes in the electoral battle in new democratic India. Case in point being the electoral contest between the prince of Jodhpur, Maharaja Hanwant Singh and Jai Narayan Vyas.

The Jodhpur Maharaja defeated J.N. Vyas in the first assembly election held in Rajasthan in 1952. Jai Narayan Vyas had been the founder of Jodhpur Praja Mandal and later, the Prime Minister of Jodhpur State for a year beginning 1948 as well as the Chief Minister of the state when he contested for the aforementioned election. Hanwant Singh ran election as an independent candidate while Vyas fought on a Congress ticket. Similarly in Guna, Maharani Vijayaraje Scindia of Gwalior with no prior experience of holding any political/administrative post, contested on a Congress ticket against incumbent V.G. Deshpande of Hindu Mahasabha. Deshpande was a popular leader of Hindu Mahasabha and had been in active politics prior to independence. His popularity can be assessed from the fact that he was elected not from one but two constituencies, namely Gwalior and Guna in the 1952 elections to the Lok Sabha. However, the Gwalior Maharani defeated him by a margin of around 60 thousand votes despite being a novice in democratic politics.



Rajmata Vijayaraje during a campaign. Source: Getty Images

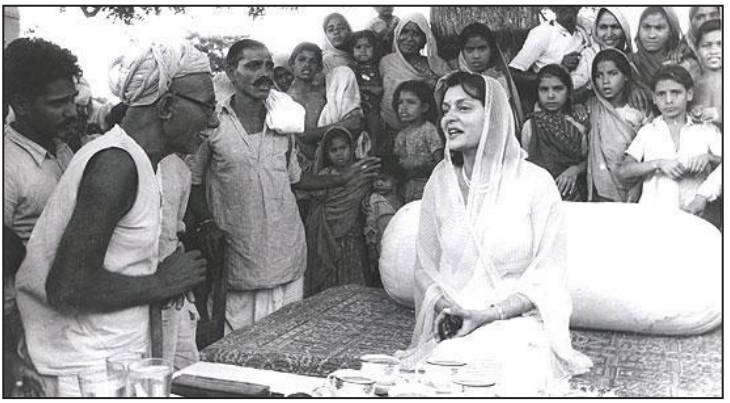
The Dowager Maharani; an aborted call and the 'calling'- Vijayaraje Scindia

The aforementioned paragraph sets the tone for the political journey of a Maharani into the democratic polity. The circumstances that led to Gwalior maharani Vijayaraje's electoral debut is as interesting as her political career. Initially, it was tough for the royals to come to terms to the transition from princely rule to democracy which they believed was imposed on them. Maharani Vijayaraje Scindia in her autobiographical work notes, "They wanted to bring in democracy in the place of feudal rule, but that democracy did not extend to the people of princely states, who were to be transferred to the new regime without giving an opportunity to decide their fate." [11] Given this kind of resentment among the princes in general, any activity by members of the royalty that appeared as a move against the ruling Congress party was perceived with suspicion. Jawaharlal Nehru became concerned about the fact that Sardar Angre, an aide of Gwalior Maharaja Jivaji Scindia, was supporting the Jana Sangh candidate in Madhya Pradesh and thus scuttling the chances of Congress party in the region. Maharani Vijayaraje's entry into politics was initiated under such

circumstances when she met Nehru to allay such fears about Maharaja's active support to Jana Sangh candidate in election, but was herself offered to contest to prove Gwalior's loyalty to the Congress. Vijayaraje Scindia recalls in her autobiography, "Improbable as they must seem, these were the circumstances that combined to push me into politics-a tissue of rumors, a wife's anxiety to save her husband from the consequence of such rumors (that he was lending support to the Hindu Mahasabha) and an abortive telephone call".[12] She recalls that Nehru was skeptical of the growth of Hindu right-wing party in Gwalior-Guna region and suspected that the Maharaja was extending his support to the Jana Sangh candidate. Hence, he thought it prudent to capitalize on the influence of the Gwalior princely family by fielding the Maharani herself on the Congress ticket. Vijayaraje Scindia who began her political career at the behest of Congress leadership, later became its fiercest critic and also the founder of one of the most powerful political dynasties (hailing from erstwhile royalty) spanning over six decades over three generations in two states. Thus, the foundation of the Scindia dynasty in Madhya Pradesh appears to be mediated by the Congress itself.

In 1957, Vijayaraje Scindia won from the Congress ticket by a great margin from Guna parliamentary constituency, with 76% of votes polled in her favour. However, due to differences with the State Congress leader D.P. Mishra, 'Rajmata' parted ways with the party. Moreover, the tough stance of Congress towards the erstwhile princes and attempts at pruning their privileges disillusioned the royal families and many of whom including Vijayaraje joined the Swatantra party. Later, she joined the Bhartiya Jana Sangha, a right wing Hindu nationalist party from which the Bhartiya Janata Party was to emerge in 1980. Thus, she continued to be the member of BJP and contested her consequent elections under it, winning from Guna parliamentary constituency, four times in a row since 1989.

She was also the Member of Parliament in the Third Lok Sabha elections (1962-1967) from Gwalior constituency. Her only son Madhavrao Scindia joined the Bhartiya Jana Sangh at her behest and won from her erstwhile constituency, Guna by a huge margin in 1971 Lok Sabha election. However, subsequently, he joined the Indian National Congress. Christophe Jafferlot suggests that the success of Scindias' stems from this faculty of combining innovation and rootedness in a territory. He adds that they were predestined to govern according to the criteria of the past but they pursued their vocation by adjusting their know- how.[13]



Maharani Gayatri Devi interacting with locals in Rajasthan.
Source: A Princess remembers (1985)

Maharani Gayatri Devi: Rebel for a cause

Gayatri Devi was born in 1919 as the princess of Cooch Behar in West Bengal. She was more realistic than Rajmata Scindia in her approach towards the fate of princely states in an Independent India. She writes, "However, all along it was obvious that the princely states could not remain as they were once India became independent."[14] Gayatri Devi recalls that though her husband Man Singh, the Maharaja of Jaipur considered merger as a politically wise and historically inevitable move, she was unhappy about losing their identity as rulers.

In her words, "Although Jai had tried to convince me of the necessity of his actions, I really disliked the idea of his no longer being the ruler of Jaipur."[15] Both, Vijayaraje Scindia and Gayatri Devi had similar reactions to the changing dynamics in independent India. Their displeasure captures the general reluctance of the princes to relinquish their hereditary power to rule over the 'subjects'. In the early decades of India's Independence, people at large still revered the princes as their real rulers. Recalling the occasion of birth of her son, Gayatri Devi writes, "Even though Jaipur no longer had an independent identity as a state, the people still thought of us as their ruling family."[16]

In 1956, the post of 'Rajpramukh' that pacified the loss of their royal powers too could be abolished. A sense of betrayal prevailed amongst the Princes who considered it a breach of faith on part of the government. In Maharani Gayatri Devi's own words, "not only had the ruling party failed to respect the argument that made Jai Rajpramukh, it now seemed determined to isolate him." [17] This was

a final blow to the Jaipur royals already disillusioned with the change of guards in the region, after independence. Meanwhile, due to strong disagreement with Nehruvian policy, erstwhile Congress leader C. Rajagopalchari in 1959 formed the Swatantra Party, favoring a market-based economy and the end of 'license raaj'. The policies and the liberal views of the party appealed to the disgruntled Princes, some of whom including the Jaipur Maharani, Gayatri Devi joined it.

As she documents in her memoir, she never thought of making politics a career but was unhappy with the ruling Congress which she thought had become arrogant. Describing the conditions that led to her joining the Swatantra Party, she explains,

"I had no personal ambitions and, in spite of my disappointment with the Government, felt no animosity to any individual. I thought that the Princes should find capable candidates, back them, and help in their election campaigns to Parliament in New Delhi and to the State legislative assemblies. In this way, I imagined, there would be a sensible, non-extremist opposition to the Congress Party. With these ideas in mind, and a rather inchoate wish to do something for the country, I finally took the step of joining the Swatantra." [18]

To her surprise, she was offered to contest elections and ran for Lok Sabha seat for the first time in 1962 from Jaipur and won by a majority of 175,000 votes over the runner-up Congress candidate and had her name registered in the Guinness book for the largest majority won by any candidate in any democratic elections in the world. To use her words, "Whatever the situation might be in the rest of India, in former princely territories people voted, when they had the opportunity, from a sense of the age-old bond between an Indian ruler and his subjects. The actual platform was a secondary consideration."[19] Her landmark victory testified the reverence of people for their erstwhile rulers remained intact long after the end of princely states. Three members of the Jaipur family became parliamentarians in 1962. While Gayatri Devi and her stepson Pat joined the Lok Sabha, Maharaja Jai Singh became a Rajya Sabha MP.

Gayatri Devi became a prominent face of the Swatantra party in the Lok Sabha and took the ruling Government to task by raising pressing issues. In reply to the President's address to the Parliament, she emphasized the problems faced by the people due to rising prices and shortage of basic commodities.[20] On another occasion, she schooled Prime Minister Nehru (whom she otherwise admired) for failure of his Government to speculate and check Chinese invasion of India.

She retorted, "If you had known anything about anything, we wouldn't be in this mess today." [21]

The Charitable trust fund started by her husband Maharaja Jai Singh often came in handy when Gayatri Devi needed to invest in a few pressing needs of her constituency, such as grants for schools and hospitals. Before the emergency ordeal, she had been actively engaged in juggling between Jaipur and New Delhi to resolve local issues of the people and fulfilling her deliberative duties in the Parliament.

Emergency: The point of Departure

A very important aspect that reaffirmed the legitimacy of the princes (including the Scindias) in the democratic polity was their standing during the national emergency imposed in 1975. Being in the opposition party and opposed to Indira Gandhi's autocratic leadership, Vijayaraje Scindia of Gwalior and Gayatri Devi of Jaipur were jailed. Angama Jhala Dey in her work writes about the vulnerability of the Princely legacy during the traumas of emergency, in the following:

"Both Gayatri Devi and Vijaya Raje Scindia were earlier motivated to enter politics in response to Congress-led governments in their own states…It was a traumatic time for courtly families whose private properties were falling into disrepair and were sometimes seized by the government and their private collection unduly taxed." [22]

The national emergency imposed by the then prime minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975 was a serious blow to the erstwhile aristocratic class in India, especially for those who made their opposition to the Congress party public. Consequently, even the blue-blooded female political leaders opposed to Mrs. Gandhi were not spared and were humiliated by putting them behind bars in an inhumane condition. Writing about the condition of the jails during the national emergency imposed in June 1975, Coomi Kapoor, in her work titled, 'The Emergency: A personal history' recalls,

"The conditions in most jails were appalling…The former Maharani of Jaipur Gayatri Devi was housed in Tihar jail, in a small room with a veranda which was meant for visiting doctors. It had open sewers running along its side." [23]

It is interesting to note how Vijayaraje Scindia, speaks about another female politician, Indira Gandhi, the forerunner of another dynasty, in the aftermath of

her authoritarian rule during the national Emergency. In her autobiographical work, Scindia writes, "No one could have been more conscious of her fantastic personal appeal, or fitted herself more easily into the image of queen, than Mrs. Gandhi herself".[24] She recounts that all the dissenters were put behind bars during the 1975 emergency, following which she herself was planning to take refuge in her ancestral home of Nepal. However, at the last hour, she changed her mind to stay in India and face the consequences, about which she writes,

"I could not bring myself to run away, seeking safety and leaving others to face the music- I, who called myself a leader and who had been accepted as such by a large number of people. Leaders did not run away". [25]

This speaks volume about her perception of true leadership and eventually legitimized her as a leader with strong credentials. Both the erstwhile Maharanis were imprisoned in Tihar jail and have documented their ordeals in their respective autobiographies. They even once shared room in the Tihar jail. In July 1975, Gayatri Devi was arrested under the COFEPOSA [26] on allegations of 'large scale evasion of taxes'. In an interview, Gayatri Devi shares the trauma of being in jail for five and a half months.[27] She narrates about the terrible noise in the jail premises, poor quality of food served. In her own words, this experience was akin to living in a bazaar surrounded by squabbling women criminals and prostitutes. Similarly, Vijayaraje recalls her stay as prisoner no.2265 in Tihar jail and her interaction with fellow inmate Maharani Gayatri Devi, "It was depressing beyond words. Gayatri Devi, who was ill and in need of major surgery, had convinced herself that she was going to die in Tihar."[28]

While Vijaya Raje Scindia was released on parole on health grounds, Gayatri Devi was released on parole only after she wrote to Indira Gandhi expressing her approval for government's 20-point programme and assuring that she was no longer interested in politics. Though Gayatri Devi did not participate in active politics afterwards, she expressed her support for the newly elected Janata party government in 1978.

Given her stand during the emergency, the Janata party thought Vijayaraje Scindia as an apt candidate to take on Indira Gandhi in the upcoming election to the Lok Sabha from Rae Bareily in 1980. The constituency of Rae Bareli had earlier elected Feroze Gandhi as its representative who won consecutively in 1951 and 1957 elections. In subsequent Lok Sabha elections, his wife Indira, won from the same constituency in 1967 and 1971. Vijayaraje knew that it was

going to be a tough battle for her to plunge into the traditional Gandhi bastion and she was reluctant in the beginning as she recalls in the following manner,

"I tried to reason with my party colleagues that they had made a blunder in taking me away from the place where I could have been useful and putting me against Mrs Gandhi in her own stronghold." However, the leadership in Janata Party was euphoric about the contest and in Vijayaraje's own words, "…the Janata leaders saw me as the one person who just might be able to defeat Mrs. Gandhi. Almost certainly I could have done so in Gwalior, but not in Rae Bareilly, which was her home ground, as it had been her husband's before her, a constituency that between them they had nursed assiduously for more than twenty years." [29]

Her fears were not ill founded as she lost to Indira Gandhi in this election, the only election she lost. The same year in 1980, she became the Vice-President of the newly formed Bhartiya Janata Party. From 1989 to 1998, consecutively she was elected as the MP from Guna constituency as the BJP candidate. Her rift with her son Madhav Rao, who Joined the Congress and left to Nepal while she was imprisoned in Tihar, made her share her political legacy with her daughters Vasundhara Raje and Yashodhara Raje. Thus the rift in the Scindia dynasty further consolidated their position in electoral politics, with one end attached to the Congress party, while the other with the BJP. With Jyotiraditya Scindia joining the BJP in March 2020, this was seen as 'ghar-wapasi' as now the entire Scindia clan was in the BJP of which, Vijayaraje Scindia was a founding member.

The Legacy

The political legacy of Maharani Gayatri Devi was carried forward not by her children but by her step-granddaughter, the Deputy CM of Rajasthan, Diya Kumari who became BJP MLA consecutively since 2013, the same year she joined active politics.

The two women from erstwhile royalty proved their mark in Indian politics. With contrasting personalities, they shared the commonality of challenging the mighty Congress party, in a polity marked by patriarchal values. While 'Rajmata' Vijayaraje Scindia was an enigma[30], known for her austere lifestyle and religiosity, 'Maharani' Gayatri Devi was a socialite known for Ostentatious living. The former supported traditional beliefs, like the worship of Sati, while the latter defied convention such as Purdah (in Jaipur royalty). Both paved the way for blue-blooded political dynasties that thrive largely on old ties of patron-client relationship and the capital generated from it.

Endnotes

1 Anne Phillips, Dealing with difference: Politics of Ideas or a Politics of Presence? Constellations, Vol 1, No 1, 1994, Blackwell publishers, UK. 74-91

2 Essays on Rajputana: Reflections on History, Culture and Administration, (India, Rajasthani Granthgar, 1984) pp 7.

3 For a detailed account of the annual reports of states like Bikaner, Jaipur and Kotah, see Essays on Rajputana: Reflections on History, Culture and Administration, pp 14.

4 Anastasia Piliavsky, *Patronage as Politics in South Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 29-30.

5 V.P. Menon, *The Story of the integration of the Indian states* (Madras, Orient-Longmans, 1956), 158.

6 Wayne Wilcox, "Madhya Pradesh", in *State Politics in India*, ed. Myron Weiner (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968), 128, 132.

7 In 1990, V.P. Singh government accepted the second Mandal Commission report that provided 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes in all services. Prior to this, there was provision for caste-based reservation for members of the Scheduled castes only.

8 V.P.Menon, *The story of the Integration of Indian states* (Orient Longmans, 1961).

9 The ministry was given the task of integration of the princely states into the Indian Union and was headed by Sardar Patel.

10 *Ibid*, 185.

11 Vijayaraje Scindia, Manohar Malgaonkar*, Princess: The autobiography of Dowager Maharani of Gwalior* (London: Century, 1985), 161.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Christophe Jaffrelot, "What princely democracy? The case of the Scindias", 622, *Seminar*, 2011.

14 Gayatri Devi, S.R.Rau, *A Princess Remembers: Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*, (Anchor Press, New York, 1985) pp 206

15 *Ibid*, 216.

16 *Ibid*, 221.

17 Gayatri Devi, S.R.Rau, *A Princess Remembers: Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*, (Anchor Press, New York, 1985), 253.

18 *Ibid*, 255.

19 Gayatri Devi, S.R.Rau, *A Princess Remembers: Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*, (Anchor Press, New York, 1985), 230.

20 *Ibid*, 277.

21 *Ibid*, 288

22 Angma Dey Jhala, *Royal Patronage, Power and aesthetics in Princely India* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), 87.

23 For details, refer to the chapter, The Midnight Knock in Coomi Kapoor, *The Emergency: A personal history* (Penguin, 2015).

24 Vijayaraje Scindia, Manohar Malgaonkar*, Princess: The autobiography of Dowager Maharani of Gwalior* (London: Century, 1985), 225.

25 *Ibid*, 227.

26 The Conservation of Foreign Exchange and Prevention of Smuggling Activities Act, 1974 is a preventive detention law in India.

27 https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/interview/story/19770430-i-would-like-to-help-the-janata-party-as-far-as-possible-rajmata-gayatri-devi-823674-2014-08-07.

28 Gayatri Devi, S.R.Rau, *A Princess Remembers: Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*, (Anchor Press, New York, 1985), 244.

29 Vijayaraje Scindia, Manohar Malgaonkar*, Princess: The autobiography of Dowager Maharani of Gwalior* (London: Century, 1985), 261.

30 The Age of Kali, William Darympyle, 1998, pp 62. Like Lady Thatcher - whose unshakeable convictions and sense of destiny she shares - the Rajmata provokes the strongest of responses. In her time the Rajmata (Queen Mother) has been called a madwoman and a saint; a dangerous reactionary and a national saviour; a stubborn and self-righteous old lunatic and a brave and resilient visionary. At the age of seventy-nine she is still an enigma.

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Divine Feasts: Food Offerings as Expression of Devotion and Cultural Heritage in the Folk Traditions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

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Abstract

The paper explores the intersectionality of food, cultural identity and religion in post-colonial Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, centering on how sacred offerings in folk deity traditions serve both cultural and devotional aspects of everyday lives. Drawing from ethnographic study, oral traditions, and print-media sources, the study looks into how food functions as a potent instrument for religious belonging. In parts of rural and sub-urban communities, the act of offering food to deities shows a religious gesture that affirms the shared histories of locality, identity, and agrarian ties. This framework investigates the worship of local deities, more precisely Gorakhnath Baba, Tarkulha Devi, Chhathi Maai, Deeh Baba, Kaali Mai, Niksha Baba, Teej and Jitiya. The traditional observances followed by the Khichdi Mela at Gorakhnath Temple, the annual fairs of Tarkulha Devi and Kaali Mai, and the village-specific ritual practices of Deeh Baba illustrate how sacred offerings are deeply embedded in seasonal cycles, agricultural produce, and collective memory. In order to explore how sacred offerings maintain devotional practices, support cultural identity and serve as a medium of intangible cultural heritage in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The interviews with devotees, priests and local historians based on participant observation create the complex perception of the ritual meaning and the evolving patterns of change in time. The study shows that divine offerings are a means of showcasing as a cultural memory, which encompasses levels of ecological knowledge, farming schedules, and socio-religious levels of the order.

Keywords: food offerings, cultural identity, folk deity traditions, cultural memory, intangible heritage

Introduction

Food holds a sacred status in Indian society and it connects the worldly and the spiritual worlds. It has an outstanding role in the folk religious tradition of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where the offerings to the local deities have been part of cultural memory since ages. Food offerings in rural and suburban communities are not only a symbolic representation of piety, but are also the manifestation of community identities, the surrounding environment, and the agricultural cycle. Daily rituals and practices, festivals, temple services, and family traditions reveal the centrality of food in Indian religion and society. As noted by various scholars, festival foods, such as *khichdi, puri-sabji, lapsi,* and *thekua,* can be used as mediums to share stories at a communal level, ritually connect, and pass heritage down generations. Diana L. Eck (2013, 361-362) points out that the variety of Indian festivals, in terms of food serving, highlights not only the religious tendencies of the area but also the complex spiritual and social background of the nation. The anthropological theory of food offers strong support to the theory of Claude Levi-Strauss (1983, 64-65, 89, 94), who believes that cultural meanings are imprinted in the act of cooking and eating, and the theory is well supported by evidence of folk worship in North India, which uses cooking as a language to communicate aspects of kinship and hierarchy. Although the central role of food in Hindu ritual has been acknowledged and academic scholarship has tended to concentrate on pan-Indian rather than on folk-level traditions in less urbanized traditions, including Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. When exploring these contexts, those who do it usually do not capture the integration of oral histories, local media, and participant observation in understanding how food rituals are evolving in reaction to social change. The changes in the economic structures, rapid modernization, and migration of the people to the cities have transformed the communal eating practices. Nevertheless, according to field research, the concept of ritual meal and offering of food still exists in rural regions.

The paper studies the special food offerings made to deities in the villages of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, highlighting the devotional customs that often go unnoticed. It is constructed on a multi-dimensional research based on ethnographic work, interviews with villagers, media studies, and oral traditions. The emphasis is given to major local deities like, Gorakhnath Baba, Tarkulha Devi, Chhathi Maai, Deeh Baba, and Kaali Mai, which are the main subjects of collective worship in villages and small towns. Ritual occasions such as Khichdi Mela at Gorakhnath Temple, the animal sacrifice at Tarkulha Devi Temple and the Chhath festival provide some insight on the relation of food to

the seasonal cycles of the new agricultural harvest and the place of memory. The paper shows the lived meanings of food as a media of ritual, social belonging, and cultural adaptation, through revealing personal accounts. The theoretical framework of the study is based on cultural anthropology, religious studies, and historiography. It interacts with the existing literature on Indian rituals, but broadens its perspective using fieldwork and the contemporary media. The paper uses ethnographic study, oral narratives, interviews, and analysis of print media to get insights into the ways that ritual foodways maintain and transform community identities in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Foods such as *khichdi* are used during rituals, which symbolizes the fertility of the fields. Men and women have distinct roles in the preparation and distribution of food. This paper shows how folk traditions adapt to changing religious environments.

The Symbolic Role of Food in Folk Traditions

Food as Ritual Medium

In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, food offerings have always held great significance during religious gatherings. It is just not the food, but a means of spiritual connection and community bonding. Food serves as a unifier between individuals and communities (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 183). The special food prepared, decorated, and eaten during the festival is a ritual that serves as a way to express gratitude, establish identity, and reinforce distinctions based on caste, gender, and kinship (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 185). The Yadav community members practice the *biradari bhoj* (family feast) which is a ritual that shows the membership and social status in the community. Caste associations are maintained and sustained through food selection and communal eating (Prasad, 2019, 113). However, these communal feasts are also sites of exclusion and hierarchy. Food, as Arjun Appadurai (1981, 494-495) suggests in his theory of "gastro-politics", is a semiotic indicator of social status and relations of power. Food distribution has a tendency to strengthen the caste lines, a reality critically observed by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who noted that food and water were primary tools of social exclusion in the caste system. Although the *mela* (fair) area seems to be a democratic space, there are rigid rules of purity and pollution that govern who prepares the food and who consumes it. Mary Douglas (1966, 126-127) explains this as the defense of social boundaries by ritual purity. Sidney Mintz (1985, 151-154) has observed that consumption patterns are inseparably related to the power structures, including in religious contexts. The offering of ghee or goats reflects such power structures, as only those with economic privilege are able to make these offerings. According

to the village life accounts and folklore, it is also evident that food traditions represent social stratification and economics as it is only those who are able to partake in the offerings and consume sacred food.

However, these rituals can also foster social unity across occupational boundaries. Folk songs often refer to individuals who belong to various occupational groups bringing together materials of Chhath puja, indicating social affiliation as well as unity. The interdependence of various groups in carrying out rituals is illustrated in a popular Chhath song which explicitly names marginalized and pastoral communities, such as the *Ḍom* and the *Ahīr*, as the essential providers of the *supa* (winnower) and milk respectively. The ritual cannot be completed without their contributions, as sung in the following verses:

Kaha paebo supava?

Kaha ho paibo doodh?

Kaha ho paebo deva ho suraj baba araghiya ke jor?

Domva ghare baans ke supava, ahirwa ghare doodh.

Ganga ghate paibo suruj baba araghiya ke din.

(Where shall I find a winnower?

Where shall I find milk?

Where shall I see the Sun God so whom I can offer *arghya*?

In the Ḍom's house, you shall find the winnowers.

In the house of ahīr (milkman), you shall find milk.

On the riverside of Gaṅgā, you can see the Sun god and offer *arghya*.) (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 187).

The Concept of Prasada

Prasada in the Hindu religion is a complex and central concept that goes beyond the simplistic explanations of ritual food offerings. According to the explanation of Andrea Marion Pinkney, *prasada*, which is a Sanskrit word commonly translated as either the "gracious gift" or the "blessed offering," is the focus of the contemporary and classical religious life in South Asia, and it can be material, emotional, or conceptual (Pinkney 2013, 734-735). *Prasada* does not simply

represent the food offered to the deity. It is the sacred grace that flows reciprocally between devotee and divine. Hindu devotional rite starts with the *darshan*, a mutual look between deity and devotee, and is followed by offerings made by the devotee. Such offerings are called *naivedaya* and can include offerings as simple as flowers or vegetarian food. Once tasted or received by the deity, this offering is transvalued into *bhoga*, the divine enjoyment, and then given back to the worshippers as *prasada*, the divine gift with divine blessing (Pinkney 2013, 736-737). Priests frequently mediate this cycle of exchange in the offerings at temple sanctuaries which highlights the complexity and stratification of modern rituals (Pinkney 2013, 737-739).

The ethnographic study conducted by Pinkney in various sectarian environments Vaishnava, Shaiva, and Shakta, indicates that there are common values and practices pertaining to *prasada*. As an instance, Vaishnava traditions, which are vegetarian in nature, focus on ritual purity and limits to access to the sanctum, whereas Shakta traditions may be non-vegetarian and include a wider range of offerings to the goddesses, including non-food items (Pinkney 2013, 738-742). Such diversity in *prasada* practice embraces larger theological and cultural differences as well as addresses the role of *prasada* as a symbolic channel between human and divine worlds where generosity, reciprocity, and respect are essential elements (Pinkney 2013, 743). The material and non-material sense of *prasada* is amalgamated in the classical Sanskrit *prasada* conception. The modern material *prasada*, the blessed food or items offered after worship, is entrenched in the traditions of Sanskrit texts as *prasada* refers to happiness, divine favour, clarity and grace (Pinkney 2013, 745-747). The *Skandapurana* and the *Visnupurana* describe cases of *prasada* as a material item and spiritual exultation, connecting the physical gift to great affective and cosmological energies (Pinkney 2013, 746-749).

Foodways and Cultural Memory

Traditional foods offered to local deities are repositories of cultural memory and identity. Foods such as *khichdi, puri-sabji, lapsi* and *thekua* are perceived not only as delicious types of food of the season but also as indigenous beliefs about place, farming cycles and ecological wisdom. Ritual meals are used to celebrate transitions, such as harvest, childbirth, or recovery, and carried out carefully to symbolize, on new utensils, clean spaces, and seasonal ingredients, which indicate, and strengthen, environmental sensitivity (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 192). The fact that these foodways have resisted the forces

of modernization and global cuisine is testimony to their contribution in the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage. An example is the making of special foods which are put up for Kaali Mai and Deeh Baba prepared in Kushinagar village, where devotee Sheela Devi explains how things have always been done, food being the last aspect of ethnicity to be altered.

Case Studies: Food Offerings to Specific Deities

Gorakhnath Baba and Khichdi Mela

In Gorakhpur city of Uttar Pradesh, the cult of the ascetic deity Gorakhnath Baba, who is admired throughout North India, is based on a most symbolic sacred offerings, *khichdi*. According to mythology and oral narratives, Guru Gorakhnath visited the Jwala Devi shrine (Himachal Pradesh) in the *Treta Yuga*. He declined a feast there, stating that as a *yogi* he subsisted only on alms. He travelled till Gorakhpur begging for alms and began meditating by the Rapti river. Meanwhile Jwala Devi kept water boiling for his return, for him to cook the rice he was given as alms. Awed by his divinity, devotees filled his *khappar* (begging bowl) with rice and lentils. While this mythology frames the ritual of offering *khichdi*, Briggs (1938, 86) confirms the historical significance of the site, noting that Gorakhnath came from Punjab to this location and established it as the central seat of the Kanphata Yogis. This blend of ancient legend and ascetic history has evolved into the massive Khichdi Mela observed today. *Khichdi* is a simple but nutritious blend of rice and lentils. It is served in the Gorakhnath Temple each year during the auspicious occasion of *Makar Sankranti* in the month of January. This is a ritual called the Khichdi Mela, which attracts thousands of its followers in the surrounding regions. And they come to offer *khichdi* to the deity as a show of devotion and appreciation. *Khichdi* is not just a dish but a meal that is more than just some ingredients. Being a dish traditionally linked to the plain subsistence, they represent purity, newness, and hope of the rich harvest in the next agricultural year. It symbolizes planting and harvesting, which is strongly associated with rural life. The Makar Sankranti festival, which celebrates the northward movement of the sun, is itself a festival of fresh beginnings that is entrenched in agrarian cosmology. The offerings reflect the villages' dependance on their land and the weather. During this festival the task of preparing *khichdi* is shared in the villages. This task is mostly performed by women. The process entails rigid ritual practices. Women are the main custodians of the kitchen practice *choka purna* (purity of kitchen space). They wear unstitched clothes, and do not taste food in the kitchen because of

the belief that the food will be contaminated by *jutha* (saliva pollution). This sacred tradition also serves to preserve family age-old recipes. The shared task of preparing *khichdi* fosters unity among villagers and facilitates the passing down of customs and cultural knowledge from older to younger generations. During interviews with villagers they told us that this offering is a promise to God and a social bond that binds the villagers.

Khichdi Mela defines the town's identity as a religious center. Attracting both pilgrims and traders, it represents the convergence of spiritual and economic life. Ritual food offerings, in addition to their sacred role, also serve the needs of the secular world and local markets, and are essential to the sustenance of village economies. The Mela has been institutionalized by the temple authorities and there are grand preparations which emphasize the purity of the food and the socio-religious significance of the festival. The Khichdi Mela is in these ways an example of the rich layers of meaning within the folk food offerings. Food offerings are symbolic scripts which define collective memory and identity in rural India especially when in line with ecological cycles. The Khichdi Mela of Gorakhnath Baba preserves these values in a material state, and since the ritual is an important part of the cultural life of the community.

Tarkulha Devi and Ritual Sacrifice

The Tarkulha Devi Temple, which is located in the Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh is a significant place of folk worship. It focuses on the goddess Tarkulha Devi, an incarnation of Durga that is worshipped in the area. The history of the shrine is firmly connected with the anti-colonial struggle. Local oral sources suggest that the freedom fighter Bandhu Singh had the dense *tarkul* (palm) forest as his hideout and that he used the place to venerate the goddess and as his *ishta devi* (presiding goddess). This deep connection between the goddess and her abode in the palm forest is immortalized in popular Bhojpuri folk songs sung by devotees:

Ye tarkulwe me maai tohar vaas bate

Ehise naam tohar

Duniya me khaas bate

Tohara ke kaise manai

Ye tarkulahi maai...

(O Mother, you reside within this *tarkul* tree (Palm tree),

Hence your name holds a special place in the world.

How shall I worship you, O Mother Tarkulha…)

It is believed that Bandhu Singh sacrificed the heads of British enemies as a form of tribute before commencing guerrilla warfare against British rule. Ritual practice of the temple is characterised by a strong tradition of animal sacrifice, and specifically the sacrifice of goats offered by pilgrims during thanks-giving for wishes that have been fulfilled or as a means of protection against evil spirits. There is an increase in sacrificial offerings during the annual Navaratri festival. Thousands of goats are reportedly sacrificed on the auspicious days of *Navami* and *Dashami*. It is a highly symbolic sacrifice that connects the devotion of the community to the martyrdom of the Bandhu Singh whose sacrifice and struggle continues to serve as a local mytho-historical point of reference. The sharing of goat meat in the form of *prasada* enhances the collective identity because of a tangible ritual connection which implies the unity of the devotee with the collective consumption of the blessings offered by the deity. Although it has a violent nature, the goat sacrifice is ritualized, with practical ethics of sacrificial offering being instilled in it to make it more of an offering than a slaughter. The sacrifice is viewed by the devotees as an inevitable stage towards spiritual favor and protection, something with which the fierce and protective character of the goddess is directly linked. Munari Devi of Chakdeiya village in Kushinagar district (Uttar Pradesh) informs that local devotees continue to participate in these rituals, reflecting how the worship of Tarkulha Devi extends beyond Gorakhpur and binds together surrounding rural communities.

Along with animal sacrifices, many temples also offer non-violent substitutes like the coconut offering ritual, which gives an alternative option to people who do not sacrifice due to religious or other ethical reasons. It is an inclusivity that indicates a wider malleability of folk traditions that strike a balance between the purity of rituals, social morality, and the evolving religious views. The sacrificial act is not only a sustaining force to the spiritual power of the temple, but also an economic driver of the region. The number of pilgrims that come to festivals help the local economy, whether it be in livestock trade, food production or the market of religious paraphernalia. At the same time, the ritual solidifies shared memories associated with anti-colonial struggle and martyrdom, a phenomenon of how food and sacrifice play an overlapping role of devotion, history and preserving identity.

Kaali Mai and Deeh Baba: Village Foodways and Ritual Offerings

The worship of Kali Mai and Deeh Baba as regional deities continues throughout the rural parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The celebration of their worship is usually characterized by the consumption of the locally produced delicacies. The people provide the same kind of food items to the deities in the neighborhood. Kaali Mai is the local mother goddess and Deeh Baba is the local protective spirit. The mythical origins of the Kaali Mai in this area are quite different as compared to the classical Puranic tradition. She is not only the destroyer of evil but in the rural folklore of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar she is the *gram devi* (village guardian), the female energy that protects village frontiers. Anthropological accounts, such as those by William Crooke (1896, 129), identify her within the tradition of the "Seven Sisters", local goddesses associated with nature, fertility, and protection against disease. The village Kaali Mai is believed to reside in the Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*). Etymologically, the term "Deeh" or "Diha" refers to a mound of earth, a ruined site, or the land of a village, characterizing Deeh Baba as the "Guardian of the Soil" or "Boundary Master". They receive offerings such as *kadhai*, a ritual meal composed primarily of *puri, sabji* and *lapsi* (a halwa made of flour and jaggery) that highlights the connection of culinary practice with devotion. This tradition shows how food offerings bridge the gap between spiritual and material needs. At the same time, this practice remains with us as a cultural legacy, sometimes tangible (like actual food) and sometimes intangible (like tradition or belief). These offerings are not just rituals, they are a way of carrying forward our values and traditions. This practice also emphasizes how these ordinary dishes acquire sacred meaning. Just as *lapsi* represents divine purity, the *sabji* symbolizes the abundant yield of the earth. These ancestral recipes are shared among people, which increases community unity and strengthens relationships. Sheela Devi of Kushinagar says that this is not just a ritual, but a way to assert individual identity and the identity of society. This sentiment is vividly captured in local folk songs where devotees call upon the protector deity for prosperity and blessings while holding sacred offerings:

Rahiyan me thaad tiriya dhar leike

Aava deeh baba ghudsavar hoike

Deeh baba tahake ek kanya pukare

Kanya ke var de da mukh bhar ke

Aava deeh baba ghudsavar hoike

Deeh baba sthan ek nirdhan pukare

Kaali maai sthan ek nirdhan pukare

Nirdhan ke dhan dei da hik bhar ke

Aava deeh baba ghudsavar hoike...

(A woman stands on the path holding the *dhaar* (sacred offering),

Come, O Deeh Baba, riding on your horse.

O Deeh Baba, a maiden calls out to you,

Grant her blessings in abundance...

At Deeh Baba's shrine, a poor soul calls out,

At Kaali Mai's shrine, a poor soul calls out,

Grant the poor wealth to their heart's content,

Come, O Deeh Baba, riding on your horse…)

The traditions here demonstrate that food is a core part of our culture, preserving ancient customs, even as modern pressures or changing people's ways of living. And importantly, women often prepare and decorate food, maintaining the sanctity of the ritual and carrying forward the traditions of society. It is their responsibility to preserve folk religion and village culture. Religious offerings are linked to seasons and natural cycles, as their festivals and food rituals are determined by the harvests. (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 192). From one perspective, the practice of offering *kadhai* makes people's religious faith more democratic, as everyone uses everyday food instead of luxurious food.

Chhathi Maai and the Festival of Chhath

Chhath is a major festival in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is one of the most nature-centric and culturally rich festivals. It is devoted to the worship of the Surya (Sun God) and Chhathi Maai, a localized emerging goddess image (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 183). The traditions are deeply embedded in the Epics and Puranas, and the legends indicate that such rituals as Sita and Draupadi performed them to ensure the well-being of their families, and the warrior Karna was the founder of the tradition of sun worship (Badikilaya 2019, 74). It is celebrated over four days during the autumn season, and involves rituals that offer a form of

gratitude to nature, solar cycles, and agricultural abundance. Chhath celebrations epitomize the close connection between food, nature, and spirituality. The food customs on each of the days of Chhath are multidimensional in terms of their symbolism, they reflect the ideals of cleanliness, religiosity and unity between the community. The four-day celebration is a gradual increase in ritual purity and ecological awareness embodied in the well-considered meals.

Day 1: Nahae-Khae – Ritual Purification and Simple Nourishment

On the first day, devotees have *nahae-khae*, which is a simple vegetarian meal, usually focused on *lauki-bhat*, a dish of bottle gourd and rice (Badikilaya 2019, 73). This also involves self-cleaning as a preparation of the body and mind for the fasts and offerings to come. The fact that locally sourced freshly cooked food is used in clay pots highlights the focus of the festival on the purity of nature and environmental harmony.

Day 2: Kharna – Sacred Sweetness and Energy

The second day, *kharna*, has an elaborate meal after sunset, which includes sweetened rice (*rasiya*), *puri*, fruits, and a unique *dosti roti,* a wheat chapati cooked in ghee (Badikilaya 2019, 73). These food items highlight the hospitality and sweetness of the festival, the blessing of prosperity and embracing of community. The *dosti roti* is also an exceptional culinary symbol of hospitality and piety, which is eaten at the evening meal to break the fast.

Days 3 and 4: Arghya – Divine Offerings and Communal Unity

The final days involve the offering of *arghya* (water and food offerings) at sunset and dawn. As well as, the preparation and serving of traditional sweets such as *thekua* and the *kasar*, sugarcane and fresh fruits (Badikilaya 2019, 74). These represent the seasonal harvest and the cycle of renewal. The ritual invitations that are spread among the relatives and the communities create an atmosphere of collective worship and social solidarity. The food procedures of the whole festival are focused on ecological consideration. Earthen vessels, mango wood fire for cooking, and natural ingredients highlight a sustainable approach embedded in the ritual framework (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 192). This festival celebrates personal religious beliefs as well as the local environment and its heritage. Chhath festival contributes to the preservation of our culture and traditions. They foster a living legacy of folklore, food systems, and rituals that resist the pressures of globalization (Badikilaya 2019, 75-76). Devotees themselves conceive of Chhath food offerings as a continuation of the

ancestral knowledge, and environmental and social sense of family. Thus, Chhath presents an excellent example of food as a repository of unseen cultural legacy.

Niksha Baba: Rituals and Food Offerings

Niksha Baba is a local deity in the district of Ambedkarnagar of the state of Uttar Pradesh, whose shrine is Pandal Tola close to Shivala Ghat in the twin town of Shahjadpur. The *baraat* (wedding) procession of Niksha Baba, according to centuries-old oral tradition, used to pass this area on their way to Jharkhandi in Tanda (a local town in Ambedkar Nagar district). On the third day, while returning, he received the tragic news of his bride's sudden death at a place called Ariya. It is said that he lost his worldly senses, and became an ascetic. Every year, on the first Tuesday of Sawan, there is the traditional *mela* (fair) in honor of Niksha Baba, which attracts hundreds of thousands of devotees of the whole district as well as others. This is a festival dipped in centuries-old religious belief as the faithful believe that honest prayers in the court of Niksha Baba are never in vain. The ritual worship of Niksha Baba has its own and necessary food offerings known as *kadhai*, a sacred *prasada* of *puri* (deep-fried wheat bread) and *lassi* (buttermilk) in front of the deity. During a visit to Niksha Baba temple, a local devotee named Laxmina Devi said, "Offerings are cooked and arranged with meticulous care by the devotees and form an essential component of worship at the temple."

The Niksha Baba Fair is not just a religious gathering, but also a social and cultural event. During the fair, the entire area is filled with devotion and celebration, with feasts, group *kirtan* and *bhajan*, and collective chanting. Devotees arrive on foot or in two and four-wheeled vehicles, offerings, and praying for the health, prosperity, and well-being of their families. However, the most popular sweet offering of Niksha Baba is a special mithai (sweet) named *damdan*, which is prepared in a different way with sugar and black pepper and only offered this time of the year during this mela. This sweet is not only offered to the deity by the devotees, but they also carry it home as *prasada* and this represents the holy continuity between the temple and household devotion.

The mela serves a religious, social and economic purpose at the same time. It develops the sense of community, revives regional cultural memory and encourages local business by preparing and selling the devotional food stuffs and paraphernalia in large quantities. The occasion is well coordinated by both the local officials and a mela committee so that the huge number of people who

visit can be facilitated and the sanctity and smooth running of the fair maintained. The ritual food offerings by Niksha Baba and the attendant celebrations unravel the deep aspect of food as a medium of folk religiosity, devotions and social identity in the Uttar Pradesh's rural spiritual world. The *mela* continues to serve as a vibrant example of the blend of ancient faith with contemporary cultural expressions.

Teej and Jitiya: Gender, Austerity, and Ritual Foods:

The cycle of folk fasting in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar would not be complete without the referencing of Teej and Jitiya (*Jivitputrika*) which are two festivals that emphasise the role of women as the spiritual custodians of family well-being. In contrast to the community act of feasting in the Mela, these religious practices are marked by severe fasting (*nirjala* or without water) and ritual foods, which are indicative of strong cultural conviction.

Teej, Devotion and Phalahar: In the folk traditions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Teej is not a singular event but is observed as a triad of festivals known as Haryali Teej, Kajari Teej and Hartalika Teej that are celebrated during the months of *Sawan* and *Bhado* in the rainy season. Whereas Haryali Teej embraces the rains during the month of *Sawan*, the other festivals that have strong ritual importance to married women include Kajri Teej and Hartalika Teej. The festivals are celebrated in the lunar month of *Bhado* and are dedicated to marital happiness and idolising of Shiva and Parvati. Although Kajri Teej is on the *Krishna Paksha* (dark fortnight) and Hartalika on the *Shukla Paksha* (bright fortnight), these two have one thing in common that they respect the divine couple.

According to *Uttar Pradesh District Gazetteers: Kanpur* (1989, 61), this is mainly a women's festival where women dress in colourful attires, sing folk songs known as *kajri* and pray to Mahadeva (Lord Shiva). The worship of Mahadeva is believed to be especially rewarding to married women. Hartalika Teej has elaborate ritual preparation. Conventionally, the followers make idols of Shiva and Parvati by hand with clay of a local pond/sand. The worship is characterized by the offering of *solah shringar* (sixteen adornments), i.e. *mehndi* (henna), *sindoor* (vermilion), bangles, and *bindi*, which symbolize the wish to see a long day of life of the husband. The ritual depends on sacred vegetal components like *belpatra, dhatura, shami* leaves and *suhag pitari* (bridal box). It is usually accompanied with *kheer*, *halwa*, *gujiya*, *malpua*, and fruits available at the time of year such as bananas and apples.

Jitiya: Jitiya or Jivitputrika is observed on the eighth day of the *Krishna Paksha* in the month of *Ashwin*. It is also devoted to a mythical character of Gandharva prince Jimutvahan who is worshiped for his ultimate self-sacrifice. The mythology states that Jimutvahan had volunteered to become the food of Garuda (the eagle deity) to spare the life of one snake. Moved by his sacrifice, the gods granted him the boon that the children of any mother who worships him would live a long life. This festival therefore is strictly followed by mothers to pray for long life and well-being of their children. According to Amravati Devi of Jungle Chauri (a village in Gorakhpur district) the customary offering is *dahi-chura* (curd and flattened rice), *gur* (jaggery), *puri* and a special vegetable curry prepared of *sarputiya* (sponge gourd). Contrary to the vegetarianism of most Hindu fasts, there are local variations which refer to older folk traditions which are non-Brahmanical. Bijuli Prasad, who remembers his family custom in Kushinagar, informs that his mother would offer the small fish to the deity. The addition of fish symbolises fertility and life that challenges the conventional discourse of vegetarian purity in ritual fasting. The women fast the whole day without water and it is only broken after the sun rises the next morning.

Continuity and Change in Food Practices

The continuity and the change are two aspects of a dynamic trading in food offering to deities in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. As everyday practices are transformed by modernization, urbanization and migration, the significant symbolic and spiritual meanings are maintained. The community life continues to be rooted in traditional rituals like Khichdi Mela at Gorakhnath Temple, animal sacrifice at Tarkulha Devi and seasonal celebrations like the Chhath. Simultaneously, we can observe changes such as urban migrants tend to cook simplified or symbolic dishes, and the adoption of ready-made or commercially obtained food implies changing economic conditions (Mishra 2024, 26). This process is called symbolic psychological continuity, in which rituals change over time, but their cultural and psychological impact persists. It is through these changing rituals that the cultural identity of a community is maintained. The continuation of offerings represents a compromise it takes up the outside force without compromising genuineness. There is also an overlap with heritage and development, e.g., Chhath festival is now a tourist destination due to its religious heritage, which supports the local economies and also spreads agro-ecological expertise (Badikilaya 2019, 76). The contemporary media expands such traditions to more distant and younger populations and enhances oral practices by guaranteeing a continuity outside geographical locations (Yadav, Srivastava

and Chandra, 2025, 201). However, there is also the issue of commodification in this expansion since rituals may lose touch with grassroot authenticity. This change corresponds to the theory of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998, 149) of heritage as a new form of cultural production. With festivals such as Khichdi Mela growing into huge tourist attractions, the food itself transforms into a commercial aspect of the experience that visitors are offered, and in some cases of the festival, the novelty of ritual diminishes. Such a ritual economy supports the local market. Sellers of *damdan* sweets, jaggery, ritual paraphernalia all depend on this particular religious consumption to earn an annual income. This creates a complicated conflict between true piety and profit. Preservation and adaptation are, therefore, always negotiated in communities. Sacred food rituals in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh represent an example of living traditions which are both adaptive and persistent. They act as cultural memory, spiritual belonging and social cohesion ensuring that people, agriculture and the divine are connected even during modern changes.

Conclusion

Food, culture and beliefs are intertwined in the religious traditions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Through a multidisciplinary lens combining ethnographic observation, oral histories, and textual analysis, this paper has shown that food offerings to local deities such as Gorakhnath Baba, Tarkulha Devi, Kaali Mai, Deeh Baba, Chhathi Maai, Niksha Baba, Teej and Jitiya are far more than mere ritual acts. These figures represent specific folk manifestations rooted in the broader Hindu religious tradition, a shared lineage that explains their deep interconnectedness. They are powerful expressions of cultural identity and collective memory. They are also essential in shaping social cohesion in communities. Sacred food offerings operate within a unique symbolic system. Common items like *khichdi, puri-sabji, lapsi,* and *thekua* are a way to show devotion and connect with the community. These rituals integrate environmental and agricultural knowledge into daily life. They also reflect the villages' social and religious structures. These rituals not only strengthen shared history and relationships, but also ensure the preservation of this precious culture through time, even under pressures of modernization and urbanization. These different case studies show different manifestations of ritual food offerings. The Khichdi Mela festival is marked by the gathering of people and offerings of new harvest dishes. The sacrifice of an animal at Tarkulha Devi is prominently reflected in the martyr's folklore and his devotion. Kaali Mai and Deeh Baba's food offerings show the intimate, everyday nature of village ritual life. The Chhath

festival exemplifies the ecological and spiritual nexus of sun worship through detailed food observances; and the vibrant mela at Niksha Baba highlights folk religiosity's ability to foster large-scale community identity and ritual economy. These food offerings serve important economic and social functions. They support local markets and artisanal crafts. And also, religious tourism based on these traditions has the potential to foster sustainable community development. All these rituals represent a symbolic psychological process, where traditions continue to evolve without losing their original emotional and cultural meaning. Future research should focus on how the younger, migrating generation continues or discontinues these food-based traditions. This study concludes that to understand the social soul of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar's folk culture, one must first look at what is being cooked, offered, and collectively shared.

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The Evolution of Cosmetics from Ancient India to Modern Times: From Sacred Organic Traditions to Environmental Crisis

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Abstract

The use of cosmetics is timeless and a worldwide manifestation of culture, individuality, and social relevance. In India cosmetics were a ritual practice for the gods and the goddesses, and they were deeply rooted in Ayurvedic medicine, spiritual practices, and mythological fables. The discovery of cosmetics and their various applications in the ancient city of Harappa is also evident from the uncovered cosmetic instruments and the use of natural products that meet the standards of environmental friendliness and therapeutic integration. Indian traditional cosmetics were very efficient since they largely consisted of naturally available products, for instance, turmeric, sandalwood, neem, and rose water, which not only facilitated the skin's purification process but were also beneficial to the general health of the body as they contain vitamins and microorganisms that are beneficial to the body through seasonal adaption as well as the use of biodegradable compositions. However, industrialization has been the reason behind the change of cosmetics from being a symbol of purity and gentleness to being a source of pollution and disease. The change from using natural cosmetics to synthetic versions has had a great impact on the environment including but not limited to water pollution, microplastics contamination, and packaging waste, which are completely contrary to ancient sustainable practices. As this comparative study argues, Indian traditional cosmetic wisdom grants us the required instruments to create environmentally responsible and culturally sensitive beauty practices which, at the same time, can resolve the sustainability issues of the modern era. The comparison between presently used synthetic formulations and ancient organic cosmetics reveals that the shift towards the development of sustainable beauty techniques that reflect environmental responsibility as well as cultural legacy is an urgent requirement.

Keywords: traditional Indian cosmetics, environmental sustainability, Ayurveda, natural ingredients, microplastic pollution

Introduction

Since the very beginning of time, cosmetics in India have always been considered as the most important part of one's social identity, a means of self-expression, and a way to beautify oneself. Villages were using materials directly from the environment to take care of and nurture their skin, whereas royal palaces were preparing made-up formulas that followed not only seasonal cycles but also the special ritual requirements. The consumption of cosmetics in general has soared in today's India, where it is not only the old rituals that matter but also the new-age promo strategies, technology, and global fashion all play an equal part. The first hygienic practice in the Indus Valley Civilization is the starting point of a very long way of beauty through the holy and devotional myths of the Vedic people, to the scientific medical integration of the Ayurvedic treatises with the last four and a half millennia of the history of Indian cosmetics. The progression of cosmetic habits is a major manifestation of the growth of human civilization, albeit an aspect that is rarely acknowledged, especially when it comes to environmental sustainability and cultural heritage. Whereas the focus of modern scholarship on the dynamics of the modern beauty industry is extensive, the systematic appraisal of ancient cosmetic traditions and their environmental implications receives very little attention. It has nevertheless shifted so much over the past few decades, from a fantastic journey of human invention and cultural continuity to one that has turned away from nature and human well-being and to one that is causing ecological harm at a large scale. Contrary to the medicinal, seasonal, recycler safe, and plant-based formulations that were the lifeline of communities for thousands of years, Indian middle-class beauty habit consumers who are of the magnitude of millions daily are switching to synthetic chemical-laden cosmetics that not only kill aquatic life but also pollute marine ecosystems with microplastics, which further contaminate the land, and cruelty due to animal testing, and toxic substances are released into our body tissue.

The Sacred Origins: Cosmetics in Ancient India

- **Archaeological Foundations of the Indus Valley Civilisation (2500-1550 BCE)**

One of the most incredible archaeological discoveries is from the sites of Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Chanhudaro and Kalibangan which largely represents the first proof of a highly developed use of cosmetics in India, thus showing a

culture which recognized personal grooming and beauty as the basic features of daily life. The Harappans not only manufactured various cosmetic tools but also made the use of these tools and substances to reflect their technical sophistication and eco-friendliness. Archaeological digs have discovered elaborate kohl containers made of copper, bronze, ivory, and bone, with evidence of antimony and lead carbonate that were painstakingly manufactured using environmentally friendly extraction processes (Chandra, 1973). These ancient cosmetic preparations were known for their natural composition and medicinal properties. Cinnabar residues show the sophisticated use of mercury-based face paints and early lipstick formulations, whilst rouge preserved in cockleshells indicates trade linkages with other civilisations and demonstrates the global aspect of early beauty practices. Bronze and copper mirrors with carefully polished surfaces, ivory combs in various artistic designs, and specialised bathing facilities, including the famous Great Bath at Mohenjodaro, reveal a culture that understood beauty as inseparable from cleanliness, health, and spiritual well-being (Chandra, 1973). Excavations have discovered detailed kohl containers which artisans constructed using copper, bronze, ivory, and bone materials to store kohl which contained antimony and lead carbonate that experts had extracted through biodegradable or non-synthetic methods. The cosmetic practices, its use, materials and production processes demonstrates their commitment to environmental sustainability. While hot-air bath facilities mimicked contemporary spa treatments but used renewable energy sources and natural ventilation systems, barrel-shaped terracotta scrubbers produced from clay mixed with natural sand grains performed an efficient exfoliation without harming the environment. Patterns that will impact Indian cosmetic practices for millennia were developed by this fusion of environmental management and beauty care.

- **The Vedic Era (1500-500 BCE) and its classical literature**

The transition from the evidence of excavations to the recorded literary traditions reveals how the use of beauty treatments had deeply connected with the spiritual concepts and the knowledge of the seasons. Numerous accounts of beauty practices that went beyond simple cosmetic embellishment to include religious meaning, social identity, and therapeutic purposes can be found in the Vedic writings. The first appearance of (kohl) in written form occurs in the *Atharvaveda* which explains its mythical origin from Mount Trikakuda and shows how its use as a cosmetic product evolved to serve as a protective measure against evil spirits and to enhance spiritual defence (Patkar, 1996). The *Satapatha Brahmana*

states that *Anjana* was thought to be the changed eye of *Vrtra*, a formidable demon whose vanquishment was celebrated in Vedic mythology. The material was believed to emit a heavenly shine while protecting against evil forces and death. This mythical framework illustrates how ancient Indians viewed cosmetics as instruments for protection and spiritual growth rather than only surface-level beautification. When religious observance and beauty practices were combined, cosmetics were recognised as necessary elements of ceremonial purity and heavenly contact. The Vedic era also produced advanced knowledge of natural substances and seasonal adaptation. Ancient Indian beauty practices were holistic, and sacred aromatics like *Kushtha* (*Saussurea lappa*) fulfilled two purposes: they were scented cosmetic drugs and therapeutic agents with a variety of medicinal uses. Madhugha flowers from *Jonesia Asoka* or Bassia Latifolia were used for natural scent and ornamentation, and nalada made from the roots of ginger grass and nard produced lingering fragrances that were thought to have both magical and artistic qualities (Patkar, 1996).

- **Ayurvedic Cosmetology: A Classical Integration (600 BCE-600 CE)**

The classical period, with its systematic medical integration and universal therapeutic methods, represents the zenith of the cosmetic capabilities of ancient India. In order to classify preparations into different therapeutic categories, such as *Varnya Gana* for improving complexion, *Kustagna Gana* for curing skin diseases, *Kandugna Gana* for anti-pruritic effects, and *Vayasthapak Gana* for anti-aging applications, the *Charaka Samhita* created innovative classification systems for cosmetic drugs (Mahishapura et al., 2018). Cosmetics were elevated from folklore to recognised medical specialities that required a great deal of education and experience according to this scientific foundation. By detailing twenty-two distinct cosmetic procedures, known as *Upkramas*, comprising different applications, irrigations, and specialised therapies that were included into all-encompassing medical practice, the *Sushruta Samhita* expanded the field (Sushruta, ca. 600 B.C.E./2015). These methods showed a profound grasp of how environmental elements influenced both health and beauty, as they were tailored to each patient's constitution, seasonal needs, and special therapeutic goals (Ajanalkar et al., 2016). It would take many generations for other medical traditions to match the groundbreaking advancement that was the methodical approach to beauty medicine. According to Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*, cosmetics was one of the sixty-four essential arts (*Chatusshashti Kala*) that all educated people were expected to learn. Of these, eight arts were specifically related to beauty practices, such as making ornaments, preparing perfume, decorating

the face, and decorating the teeth and clothes. Beauty practices have become deeply ingrained in Indian intellectual and social life, necessitating a level of study and proficiency equivalent to that of music, poetry, or mathematics, as seen by their inclusion into broader cultural education.

- **Early Mediaeval and Mediaeval Era**

The period between 700 CE and 1700 CE demonstrated a rise in complex cosmetic application methods that became specific to different regions while still requiring natural ingredient components. The literary sources contain multiple Sanskrit texts which explain how different regions practiced beauty rituals and applied cosmetics throughout different times of the year.

- **Modern time period of India**

The time period from 1700 until 1960 saw ongoing development of existing practices through just a small amount of industrial growth. The Ayurvedic formulations together with the natural components of the products remained the primary focus of the products.

- **Present time period of India**

The period from 1960 to 2000 experienced major industrial growth which introduced new technologies into the world. The major developments of this time period include the 1952 introduction of Lakme by JRD Tata and Simone Tata together with the 1960 introduction of Vicco Turmeric which combined Ayurvedic practices with commercial products. The period from 1970 to 1980 saw the development of Shahnaz Husain and Biotique which became popular among consumers. The 1990s saw the introduction of foreign brands into the market during the time of economic liberalization. The period between 2000 and the present day marks the transition from using natural cosmetics to synthetic chemical cosmetics which create major health and environmental issues. After 2000 many new cosmetic brands have emerged in India and gained popularity.

Customs of the Past: The Knowledge of Organic Beauty and Natural Substances and Their Health Benefits

Using only natural substances that offered both therapeutic and aesthetic benefits, ancient Indian cosmetics created a concept of beauty care that promoted rather than jeopardised environmental and health well-being. Detailed knowledge of plant characteristics, seasonal fluctuations, and synergistic combinations that maximised safety and effectiveness were all part of the advanced botanical

knowledge that was created during this time (Patkar & Bole, 1997). Sandalwood was categorized into 11 distinct varieties based on the area of origin, color, and aromatic characteristics. Each variety was chosen not only for its healing virtues but also for decorative purposes. Neem was extremely rich in nature having potent antiseptic qualities, thus skin being free from infections and the healing process becoming faster, whereas turmeric was the main ingredient in beauty products because of its anti-inflammatory, antibacterial and skin-brightening abilities. Plant oils were used for the purpose of protection and nourishment, which were also found to be compatible with different seasons and skin types besides that rose water was considered to be a gentle cleanser and a fragrant hydrator. Actually, it was through the traditional knowledge systems that the combining of these ingredients was performed which acknowledged the complex relations between plant substances, human physiology, and environmental factors. The cosmetic use of rituals that made a difference was not simply going for the perfect ingredients. The therapeutic application of beauty methods went beyond merely selecting the right ingredients. It involved the integration of beauty through lifestyles that were holistic and recognized that wellness from within was the source of outer beauty. The basis for effective beauty care, as per the Ayurvedic cosmetic traditions, is a healthy diet, sufficient sleep, stress alleviation, and emotional balance (Ajanalkar et al., 2016). This comprehensive model saw beauty as a manifestation of total health, thereby setting standards that contemporary science is only now starting to confirm.

Sophistication, Fragility, and Inequality in Ancient Practices: Material Restrictions and Preservation Limits

The archaeological sets collected from Harappa and Mohenjo-daro with kohl sticks along with signs and traces of pigments stand as proof of a lineage of sophisticated aesthetic craftsmanship. They demonstrate that people have been looking good and taking care of themselves for a very long time. Plant oils, clay-based skin treatments, and mineral-based Kohl were the primary self-care products. They made Kohl from things like antimony or galena. There was a problem with these things. They did not last long. For example herbal infusions would sometimes start to ferment. The oils would quickly get old and not work anymore. There were no preservatives like formaldehyde or parabens. The *Charaka Samhita* and other Ayurvedic texts said that these products do not last long and need to be made often. Cosmetics that people like to call "seasonal artisanal" are actually very fragile. These cosmetics have problems because they use ingredients from farms and they can be damaged by humid

air and changes in temperature and they do not last long. Cosmetics, like these, which are called "seasonal artisanal" cosmetics are not very strong. Without contemporary preservation and packaging technology, such systems would fail in today's mass markets and extensive distribution chains.

Toxic Minerals and Early Toxicology

Ancient practices were not always safe. People used lead carbonate to make their skin look whiter and antimony compounds for eye makeup. We now know that these things are injurious to our health. Neurological damage and problems can happen from lead. Not that only, but lead and antimony can also cause problems with having babies and hormone issues. These things can make the whole body sick because it stays inside of the body for a long time. Scientists have looked at the bones of people from times who used lead-based makeup. They found these problems on their body which they did not know at the ancient time. Ancient toxicology did recognize certain "poisons" and adverse reactions, but without modern analytic chemistry, chronic low-dose harm remained largely invisible.

Caste, Gender, and Unequal Access

The way people looked at beauty and cosmetics was not the same for everyone. A time ago people who were considered high up in society, only they had access to nice things like saffron, special sandalwood, musk and good quality perfumes. When you look at pictures and writings they often show women getting ready as something they do to please their husbands and look good for men not as something they do for themselves. Beauty routines were seen as a process to make the wife look attractive to men rather than as a way for women to express themselves and feel good about themselves. Some researchers like Baudrillard, Sassatelli and Slater have said that we are always being told to buy things to make ourselves feel good. Not only women, in some places men are also being told that they have to take care of their appearance and make themselves look good like a job. This is referred to as "postfeminist sensibility" by Rosalind Gill. She informed us that people are manipulated in this way that they have the freedom to select how they want to look (Gill, 2007). We are under a lot of pressure to look a specific way. Social media and consumer culture are involved in this. They give us the impression that we must constantly look and feel flawless. Social media platforms make this problem worse by showing us what they think are bodies and faces. They also make us take a lot of selfies and follow people who are trying to sell us things like Van Dijck said. This creates a cycle: we feel insecure about ourselves so we have started to change ourselves and buy

stuff and then we throw away more things which are not needed anymore (Van Dijck, 2013) . The Caste system and Gender roles played an important role in how people accessed beauty products and how they were seen. This aligns with what Bray and later feminist historians of technology show: technologies of the body encode gendered power, allocating skilled aesthetic labor to women while subordinating them within patriarchal frameworks. Thus, even when ancient cosmetics were more biodegradable and locally embedded, they were not egalitarian or risk-free. Their "virtues" were tightly intertwined with inequality and constraint.

From Organic Traditions to Petrochemical Beauty

The process of creating beauty products has developed extensively since its current state. The current production process needs multiple materials which include petroleum and mineral oils and synthetic perfumes and polymeric film-formers. The businesses are now able to obtain these ingredients at any time because the new system allows them to do so without depending on weather conditions or crop harvesting schedules. The modern world provides ingredients which businesses can store for extended periods and distribute internationally. The businesses can manufacture the product in large volumes and sell it to customers throughout the world. Habib says that the petrochemical industry had a lot of materials so they tried to find ways to use them and make people want to buy them (Habib, 2021). This is what Habib calls "capitalism". The petrochemical industry wanted to make money from the hydrocarbons they had, so they created new markets for plastics and other petrochemical products. Cosmetics and personal care became ideal vehicles with small unit size, high margin, repeat purchase, and branding potential. Yet these gains in stability and scalability relied on externalizing ecological and health costs, actually air and water pollution at refineries, plastic waste in oceans, and chemical exposure to consumers and workers. None of these costs are fully internalized into product pricing.

Liquid Modernity and Planned Obsolescence

Bauman's idea of modernity is really helpful in understanding why cosmetic products change so quickly these days (Bauman, 2000). Beauty products are made to go out of style. There are always improved versions coming out which replace the old ones. This happens because of the media, where famous people and special effects make it seem normal to always be changing your look. The way we think about who we're is changing too. Now it is like a project to always

make ourselves better by buying things. The cosmetics industry utilizes product expiration dates to create a system which forces consumers to continue buying their products while generating profits through this advanced profit-making technique. The design of cosmetics products exists to create short-lived items which consumers must keep buying because of their limited durability. The established local traditions together with seasonal patterns and the restricted availability of resources maintained stable norms which existed despite the existence of caste-based and patriarchal systems.

Chemical Shift, Industrialisation and the Development of Artificial Cosmetics

The transition from traditional organic cosmetics to modern synthetic ones was basically influenced by three major factors conceiving industrialisation, the global market and consumer tastes and preferences. Such a change radically altered daily life with the use of chemicals as the main way products dominated the market instead of petroleum-derived chemicals, synthetic preservatives, artificial perfumes, and chemical colorants. The diffusion of methods, custom-made formulae, and a new marketing concept that focused more on the product's facileness and instant results rather than on the sustaining of environmental and human source over time accompanied this change. Owing to the use of petrochemical derivatives, traditional oils of vegetable origin were substituted with chemically derived emollients like petrolatum, while natural processes for the preservation of the products that had been used for centuries and were completely safe gave way to preservatives such as parabens and formaldehyde-releasing agents. Besides the fact that they provided more intense and more reliable sensory features, artificial fragrances and colorants also contained a host of potentially dangerous substances that could trigger allergies and which were not present in the conventional formulations (CAS Science Team, 2024). Contrariwise to natural ones which required seasonal procurement and precise preparation methods, synthetics offered longer-lasting, consistent and affordable products because of the economic effect of industrial production. This economic mode of thinking altered the relationship between environmental care and beauty habits by making cosmetics no longer therapeutic customized but mass-produced consumer goods.

Development of the Contemporary Cosmetics Sector in India

India's metropolis cosmetics sector gained development never seen before, due to various factors like urbanisation, increased disposable incomes, social

media influence, and changing consumer preferences. With the industry clocking a 25 percent growth rate, it is anticipated that by 2025 the sector will reach ₹1,50,35,50,000, thereby not only making India the cosmetic market with the quickest growth but also placing it among the top global cosmetic markets (Metcalf, 2006). Environmental concerns have developed side by side with this exponential growth, as traditional manufacturing and packaging have not been able to keep up with the quantity and pace of modern-day production. The contradiction between economic growth and environmental protection materially finds expression in regulatory architecture governing India's cosmetics sector. Explicitly mentioning seven from the 169 parts of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act are the only ones that deal with cosmetics control; most of the chapters in the Act deal with medicinal uses although they also monitor safety and efficacy. While such tolerance in the regulatory oversight of safety and efficacy has facilitated the proliferation of cosmetic products containing potentially harmful substances, the latter has been largely unaccounted for in terms of their environmental impact. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has identified the environmental impact of industrial beauty manufacturing and has developed schemes for cosmetic industries such as Consent to Establish and Consent to Operate (Patel, Patel, & Zaveri, 2025). Nevertheless, the difficulties of modern supply chains and enforcement make it hard to have a complete, from the getting of materials to the final goods, and therefore the total environmental impact of cosmetics manufacture.

Environmental Crisis: Negative Aspects of Contemporary Beauty Practices and Pollution of Water and Ecosystem Damage

Modern beauty routines are the main culprits in water pollution, and this has been happening in diverse forms, such as product disposal, consumer usage, and factory waste. The frequent utilization of various substances in beauty products that include sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS), parabens, sulfates, and synthetic scents has resulted in the introduction of these substances into water systems, and thus, pollution of rivers, lakes, and seas has happened. SLS is a substance that has the characteristic of foaming and is most frequently found in shampoos and shower gels. However, even at very low concentrations, it is still harmful to aquatic life and causes the death of fish gills and blocks the process of water breathing. Moreover, in case SLS interacts with other chemicals in water systems, it leads to the formation of nitrosamines, which are one of the carcinogens that can affect both aquatic life and human health. Being endocrine disruptors, paraben chemicals that are added as preservatives in most of the cosmetic products

interfere with the hormonal system of fish and other aquatic animals, thus they get reproductive problems and their population decreases (Das et al., 2024). Whole ecosystems are impacted by the bio magnification effects of hazardous substances that bio accumulate in aquatic food chains, while chemical reactions in water bodies can produce new toxic molecules that are far more dangerous than their constituents.

The Crisis of Microplastics: From Cosmetics to Marine Environments

The current beauty industry practices which use micro plastics in their cosmetic products present the most serious environmental threat. Microbeads which researchers define as plastic particles smaller than 5mm demonstrate environmental risks which have become more recognized by people yet still exist in personal care products throughout India. According to research by Toxics Link, micro plastics are present in 28% of all tested cosmetic items in India, with these persistent pollutants present in 50% of face wash products and 67% of face scrubs (Toxic Link, 2019). These microplastics inflict terrible environmental harm and penetrate marine habitats through wastewater discharge. The species of zooplankton and fish and seabirds and marine mammals all suffer from intestinal blockages and nutritional deficiencies and death because they consume plastic waste which they mistake for food. Microplastics develop into carriers that absorb hazardous materials including heavy metals and persistent organic pollutants (POPs) which they distribute through food webs to create greater environmental damage.

Chemical Substances and Microplastics Impact

The products which we apply to our skin contain frightening ingredients. Modern cosmetics have a lot of things in them like surfactants, preservatives, UV filters, plasticizers and fragrances. These include things like Parabens. You know, methyl propyl, butyl paraben and so on. They are used to keep cosmetics from damage. In reality these disrupting chemicals can act like estrogen in our bodies even if we use a small amount of them. Sodium lauryl sulfate, which is also known as SLS and other similar substances are really bad for organisms. Even small amounts of Sodium lauryl sulfate can damage the tissues of the body and change the way their cells work. Nonylphenol and similar substances are also a problem. They can act like estrogen in the body. They do not break down easily. They can stay in the sediment and in the bodies of living things. Sodium lauryl sulfate and other substances like it can really disrupt our body systems. Nonylphenol and similar substances can cause problems even at very low doses.

Facial scrubs and toothpastes and cleansers have been using plastic particles like polyethylene for a long time. People looked at the markets in India and all around the world. Found out that around half of the face washes they tested and most of the scrubs have these plastic microbeads, even in the products that say they are "natural" or "herbal". The natural and synthetic categories are not always helpful. We need to look at toxicology and environmental fate one situation at a time. The work of Peiss on American cosmetics shows that when people say something is "natural" it is often just a way to sell things and does not really mean it is safe or good quality (Peiss, 1998). These tiny particles go through the water treatment plants and end up in rivers and estuaries and oceans. Then they are eaten by plants and animals in the water like plankton and also by fish and shellfish which damages them. Microplastics are really bad for these living things and for the environment, in general. Andrady and others have found that microplastics cause problems in two ways (Andrady, 2018). Sometimes, they can block and sometimes they can also carry bad things like PCBs and PAHs. These microplastics pick up the things and then move them up the food chain. This kind of slow violence hurts the environment a bit at a time (Nixon, 2011). Liboiron says that pollution is basically the same as colonialism (Liboiron, 2021). The people who buy these products and the companies that make them are usually rich and they get all the benefits. On the other hand the bad effects of these products like polluted water and dirty air hurt poor people and communities with many different races especially in the Global South.

Animal Testing: The Beauty Industry's Ethical Crisis

While numerous countries have banned the use of animals for testing, the practice remains a major ethical and environmental issue, the global cosmetics industry is still engaged in this. In 2014, India was the first South Asian country to ban animal testing for cosmetic products and thus laid the foundation for the rest of the region. However, because of the global cosmetics supply chain, there are still many products in the Indian market that might have been woefully backstreets for animals. Animal testing is still used to test beauty products even though it is against the law, in places. This kind of testing is not really needed for science anymore. It still happens in some parts of the world where beauty products are made. For example rabbits and rodents and other animals go through a lot of pain when they are used for eye and skin tests. The other problem is that these tests do not really tell us how humans will react to things. The industry's persistence in performing experiments on animals is an indication of the industry's preference for geography over ethics, especially

when it comes to the Chinese market, which is the area that sets the condition of mandatory animal testing for the import of cosmetics (Yadav, 2020). Cruelty Free International reports that more than 500,000 animals are severely abused in cosmetic tests every year all over the world. They are exposed to operations including force-feeding harsh chemicals, applying harmful compounds to their eyes and bare skin, and documenting the harm done to their bodies. From a scientific standpoint, animal testing is becoming less and less required due to the availability of substitute testing techniques such as cell cultures, artificial skin models, and computer modelling.

Ancient Ayurveda : Romanticisation and Reality

Ayurvedic literature such as Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita have numerous sophisticated recipes for herbs and minerals that are thought to be beneficial to our skin and hair. Even some of the recipes have claimed to make the human skin look better, can stop any skin problem like itching even it can make humans look younger than their age. Many plants that were used in the past really had some capabilities like helping to fight against germs, even reducing swelling or protecting against sunlight.

But we should also remember one thing that all these old ways of healing are not good. Chakrabarty's insistence on "provincializing Europe" invites a parallel move: provincializing both Ayurveda and western biomedicine, treating them as situated knowledge systems rather than absolute yardsticks (Chakrabarty, 2000). The task requires us to establish a critical synthesis between the two extreme approaches which involve historical examination and the acceptance of modernity without evaluation. The present-day existence of consumer culture shows itself through our everyday routines. It's like a machine that constantly makes us want to buy goods.

Towards Non-Materially Grounded Alternatives : Circular Design and Its Limits

Some companies are trying to make cosmetics in a better way. They are doing things like:

- Making products that you can refill, like bars or sticks so we do not need much packaging.
- Using materials that can break down naturally or can be recycled completely.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation and McDonough & Braungart say that things should be made in a way that they can safely break down or be used again as nutrients, even though they said it is needed to change the way businesses work. But still we should know that a lot of things that are said to be "green" or "zero waste" are not really that great. For example, though the packaging might be better, the actual product might still have the same formula of using petrochemicals or microplastics in it.

Sometimes some of them can be labelled as "organic", but still they are made with labor that is not fair or has a supply chain that is very long and bad for the environment. We need to make some changes to the rules and laws by the government to control damage to both the human body and the environment.

Doughnut Economics and Cosmetic Provisioning

The idea of the "doughnut" by Raworth is a way of thinking about the economy. It says that the economy should be between two things: making sure people have what they need to live and taking care of the planet (Raworth, 2017). For things like cosmetics this means:

- Our organization needs to establish its basic requirements because these needs serve as the foundation for our organizational dignity and our physical well-being and our ability to communicate.

- The system needs to be designed in a way that allows local production at lower intensity to operate together with industrial activities which undergo strict environmental control throughout their operational limits.

Moore's "web of life" perspective reinforces that beauty economies sit inside ecological systems, not outside them. An enduring cosmetic culture will have to take into consideration that humans, other non-human species, and environments are interactively linked, as opposed to existing as separate or isolated entities (Moore, 2015).

Comparative Analysis of the Differences between Traditional Know-How and Modern Methods, the Items, and Their Impact on Health

The chemical discrepancy between traditional and modern cosmetic products is a major difference in how people understand environmental sustainability and human health. The skin and hair beauty of old India was completely natural

and with the use of minerals, plants, and other earth materials, which were used without any harmful effects for a long period of time and not only gave the beauty but also the health of the skin (Chandrasekhar, 2023). Modern cosmetics that contain hundreds of thousands of synthetic chemicals have been reported to be the cause of various health problems such as cancer, endocrine disruption, toxic to reproduction, and nervous system damage, etc. Simultaneously, the anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial, and skin-renewing properties of some common ingredients like turmeric, sandalwood, neem, and rose water not only were the skin youth but also they, in a certain way, were cosmetics. Indeed, these natural compounds, when properly produced and used, were in harmony with the body's natural repair functions and thus caused very few instances of side effects. In contrast, these modern synthetic compounds, such as formaldehyde releasers, parabens, phthalates, and artificial perfumes, which are allergens, endocrine disruptors, and potential carcinogens that cause diseases rather than offer health, are always there. Through many centuries of detailed observation and research, they took the human body and its physiology into consideration, advanced knowledge of botanical chemistry, thus the co-existence of traditional products with the human body. Contemporary synthetic chemicals, created mainly for cost and industrial ease, frequently lack thorough safety testing and may have cumulative or delayed health consequences that are not immediately noticeable (Alnuqaydan, 2024). Regulations that let potentially hazardous materials to continue to be used until clear harm is established have supplanted the precautionary principle that once guided the selection of ingredients.

Sustainable Solutions: Ancient Natural Substitutes and Green Chemistry

The increasing consciousness of the unfavourable effect of synthetic cosmetics has on nature and human health keeps on drawing attention to the natural components and green chemistry strategies that are a mix of old and new scientific knowledge. Among other environmental measures to lessen the toxic effects of their activities on nature, biotech companies within the beauty industry have decided to use the fermentation process in order to produce hyaluronic acid, a completely natural moisture agent obtained from vegetal oil, which can easily replace the one of fossil origin, and therefore contribute to the brand having the greenest possible figure, while the ingredients part of the industry is engaging with each other to provide the ideal solution for the sustainable brands to have a circular business model and still not harm the environment. Jojoba beads and oatmeal are the raw materials for the production of biodegradable

exfoliants being the alternatives to plastic microbeads and natural antioxidants such as vitamin E and grapefruit seed extract are the sources used for the replacement of formaldehyde-releasing chemicals and synthetic parabens. These innovations are in line with the classic pharmaceutical model that is centred around the use of natural ingredients and health benefits as they indicate that safe cosmetic formulations can be achieved without any compromise of human and environmental health. Sustainable ingredient substitution is a challenge that requires not only a thorough understanding of how changes affect product performance and safety, but also the extent to which customer usability is affected by the change. The manufacture of natural products using currently accepted performance criteria, along with the preservation of environmental compatibility, is achieved by the green chemistry principles employing renewable feedstock, catalyst processes, and solvent-free extraction methods. There are absolutely ways to accomplish sustainable personal care product formulations through the blending of ancient wisdom and contemporary science.

Zero-Waste Innovations and the Circular Economy

The transition to sustainable cosmetic practices needs complete distribution and packaging and consumer behaviour transformation. The transition requires more than ingredient substitutions and circular economy concepts. Reusable packaging solutions, solid formulas that do away with plastic containers, and return policies that ensure packaging materials are continuously used are all being implemented by zero-waste cosmetic firms. Such changes maintain customer ease of use and the quality of products with less waste production. Packaging made from biodegradable natural materials such as bamboo, recycled paper, and plant-based plastics, for example, is a showcase of environmentally friendly packaging that can decompose without damaging the Earth.

These products are made for high concentrate versions which give the same effectiveness as conventional products but they need less packaging and the transportation of these products has a lower carbon footprint. Besides that, local production and distribution networks not only lower the carbon footprint but also support the local economies and decrease the supply chain vulnerabilities. Cosmetic producers must assume responsibility for the full lifecycle of their goods, including disposal and environmental remediation, in order to undertake extended producer responsibility programs. While guaranteeing that environmental costs are internalised in product pricing rather than externalised to people and ecosystems, these initiatives provide financial incentives for sustainable design.

Conclusion

Development of cosmetics from ancient India to the present day shows a significant shift from revered organic customs that valued environmental harmony and human well-being to commercial methods that put financial gain ahead of the welfare of the world. Through extensive research, it has been revealed that ancient Indian beauty products that can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization and the classical Ayurvedic traditions have developed intricate beauty care systems that not only catered to the needs of the skin but also involved environmental sustainability, seasonal adaptation, and therapeutic benefits, numerous of which modern science is just now beginning to understand and value. The mentioned illustrations display the ways through which customers can get the same quality of goods and at the same time coexist with nature and produce less waste. Biodegradable materials-based products like bamboo, recycled paper, and polylactic acid derived from plants are only a few of the eco-innovations in the packaging industry that aim to eventually decompose in nature without polluting. Concentrates are designed to perform functions that are very close to those executed by regular products but have less packaging and thus leave a smaller carbon footprint. Moreover, the use of local production and distribution networks not only reduces emissions but also promotes the local economies and lowers the risk of disruptions in the supply chain.

The knowledge of ancient Indian cosmetic customs offers both motivation and useful advice for building a more sustainable and just future as consumers, legislators, and business executives struggle with the environmental catastrophe brought on by contemporary beauty practices. India's cosmetic industry's transition to sustainability is not only an essential environmental requirement but also a way to revive the country's traditional heritage that has been lost due to globalization. Through the adoption of clean and green beauty regimen, India is enabled to lead the entire world to follow a pattern of beauty that respects human diversity, encourages social welfare, and protects the ecosystems which are the source of life on Earth, by implementing sustainable innovation while also drawing from the ancient practices of nature.

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Indigenous Voices: A Case Study of Jharkhand

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Abstract

The article primarily reiterates resistance as assertion of identity, exploring it through the rubric of aesthetic creation. An attempt has been made to comprehend resistance as existential condition of human life, as a constant struggle to loosen the grips of domination and subjectification. This further treads the path to recreate the self through alternative ways, which exemplify resistance. This essay is divided into five sections. The first section is an introduction to the subject, leading to the second section which endeavours to take into account the web of state power relations that serve as modes of domination. The third section tries to locate the site of resistance, i.e. the Potka block in Jharkhand from a spatial and temporal perspective. The fourth section attempts to see the exemplification of resistance against those practices of domination as discussed in the second section. Here resistance manifests through social and cultural enactments under aesthetic creation which has been used as a resource to practice/exercise resistance. Subsequent to these arguments, the conclusion, which is the last section, argues that in this exploration of alternative ways of resistance and its politics, what also needs to be taken into account is dissenting voices within the alternatives. Hence the crux therefore is that such acts of resistance try to recuperate those imaginations, which have been subsumed/conquered by the dominating perspective, however this process of resistance is a continuous one, as alternatives contain seeds of further alternatives.

Keywords: resistance, land, identity, state power relations, aesthetic creation.

1. Introduction

'Gaon chodab nahi,

Jangal chodab nahi,

Mai matti chodab nahi,

Ladai chodab nahi.

Bandh banae,

Gaon duboe,

Karkhana banae,

Jangal kate,

Khadan kode,

Sanctuary banae.

Jal,jangal, zameen chodab hum kaha-kaha jae?

Vikas ke bhagwan bata, hum kaise jaan bachae?'

(We will not leave our village,

nor our forests,

nor our mother-earth,

we will not give up our fight.

They built dams, drowned villages, built factories,

they cut down forests, dug out mines, sanctuaries.

Without land, forest and water where do we go?

Oh god of development, tell us, how to save our lives?).[1]

These lines connote both making and unmaking of subjectivities. Making here implies subjectification according to the controlling/ruling power network (implied in the second half of the lyrics, where development has been imposed in terms of dams, factories, mines), while unmaking implies deconstruction of that subjectification, subsequently re-making our selves by other means of assertion (implied in the first half of the lyrics, where they assert that they will not part with their village, soil and continue the fight). With this understanding, the article tries to understand resistance as assertion of identity through land which would be dealt under the rubric of aesthetic creation. This resistance is not against state or development, instead these acts of resistance create punctures in

the state led development model. Resistance then becomes existential element of the human condition.

The article travels through the terrains of Potka block in Jharkhand, where resistance has become an art of asserting identity in non-statist framework. This draws thread from the conception of resistance as aesthetic creation (existence), in the Foucauldian sense of the term. Foucault in his later works took up the idea of aesthetics of existence i.e. the self to be created as an art, instead of being shaped by universal rules. Here universal rules are those factors which shaped the dominant development paradigm as imposed upon the people by the state after independence i.e. the development primarily via industrialization based upon the process of land acquisition.

Here, aesthetic creation has been taken at the level of community, where the self relates to the others. The sense of community involves the lived intersubjective connections which include linguistic, symbolic and dialogic set of relations through which we identify with the conditions in which we live. These intersubjective connections could be figured from the culture, memories, ability to forget, practices, myths, performing art traditions which enable us to identify the codes of everyday life.

Therefore, there are two primary aims of the article: first to lay out the nexus of power relations against which people are resisting i.e. to figure out resistance against what; and second to bring on the surface various acts of resistance against the former, which are alternative imaginations of association and ties probed under aesthetic creation. These have been illustrated through the study of Potka block in Jharkhand. Before moving further, an attempt would be made to draw the discourse of resistance, in other words the next section makes an effort to locate the web of state-power relations against which acts of resistance are being carried out.

2. The discourse of resistance: web of state-power relations

The web of power relations in the given work could be identified through the strings which connect neo liberalism, development and the state. There are three primary features of neo liberalism which we need to take into account. First we can see the change in the nature of the state. It shifts from being an entity apparently above the society and intervening in its economic functioning in the interests of society as a whole, even at the expense of the unbridled interests

of finance capital, to an entity acting exclusively to promote the interests of finance capital.

Thus, a shift could be discerned in the nature of the state. It assumes the new role of carrying out privatization and disinvestment, earlier the state worked , an investor and a producer. Another shift could be seen in the 'texture' of the state, that is, in the nature of the state personnel, bureaucracy, including the organic intellectuals at large, in the era of neo liberalism.[2]

It is within this kind of understanding we can see how the neo liberal state led defnition of development, has achieved dominance over a period of time under the garb of serving national interest. After independence the task of nation building was contained in the essence of development which was enshrined in the socialist planning and the planning commission. In fact the new state acquired legitimacy because it provided the condition for national development. Development was meant to follow a linear path which in turn was made to be based on general interests, and thus subsuming particular interests.

This planning induced development had a populist side in terms of ending poverty, exploitation, and simultaneously modernist side which was invocation of modern science and technology. This national economy was made tantamount to the nation itself, as seemingly it stood for all. The imagination of the nation was linked through the five year plans and the nation was penetrated in our consciousness through big dams, power plants which were conceived in the post independent period. Hence, patriotism was meant to be working for the nation building tasks. Thus, all these practices were meant to produce a particular kind of subject for whom development meant progress in the name of national interest.

The citizens of independent India were made to see each other as fellow travellers on the journey of development. And those who did not participate in this were rendered outsiders (Deshpande 2003: 64-72). This growth was strengthened since the times of Nehru, explains Partha Chatterjee using the phrase, 'moment of arrival'.[3] The nationalist thought as 'scientific and rational' was instituted as state ideology. Any kind of issue be it political, economic, social, justice was related to the economic structure of the society. National project became synonymous with industrialization with emphasis upon heavy engineering machine-making sector, scientific research institutes and electric

power. Thus, the national project became industrialization under the national state (Chatterjee 1986: 131-160).

One very explicit form of this domination was exercised by creating a 'development regime'. David Ludden explains this phrase as ' an institutional complex created by colonial capitalism and by bourgeois nationalism as a vital force in the cultural and material life of India'. This kind of construction has colonial legacies where the colonial state's imagination was considered rational and based on this imagination attempts were made to bring order into the space of disorder or the colony. The trajectory of the development discourse was based on the assumption that the best could be achieved through mature capitalism. It was assumed that the state had the knowledge to realize this potential for the progress of the people. Independence was in a way, the replacement of the colonial state carrying this attitude by the national state sharing the same orientation.

A set of measures was conceived to be scientific and rational which were to serve as models of development. David Ludden explained the continuity between imperial developmentalism and the accumulation of state power in independent times specifically in the field of agriculture. For instance, he held that in the imperial regime economy and society was separated, agriculture became an object of development by being abstracted from society and culture. Similarly, the essence has been carried forward where today there is dominance of state led irrigation systems, hybrid seeds and so on. (Ludden 1992: 247-273) This conception leads to marginalization of local sense of development where they want to develop by their indigenous means not only in agriculture but also in other fields like electricity production, mining and other ways of resource utilization.

In the similar context of continuity, Amit Prakash explains that few colonial concepts were accepted . This included according to him, primarily the arenas of politics and economics where the nationalists had accepted the desirability of the colonial rationalist discourse. He said, "Therefore, the Constituent Assembly sought to implement the ideals that the nationalist leaders had learned to cherish, such as industry-led development and political democracy, and a complete break from the colonial approach could not be expected." (Prakash 1999: 461) He explains further that when the constitution came into the public domain in 1950, the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission was appointed. This was formed in 1959 under the chairmanship of U.N. Dhebar. At this stage it, a discourse was created that awakening of tribals would take place by means of massive developmental activities carried out by the state machinery.

Eventually, the umbrella of state defined development in terms of high modernism to achieve 'national' self-reliance and to uphold the newly achieved sovereignty excluded diverse perspectives as well as alternative paths to development. In the process, what happened was that dissenting voices were rendered as inimical to the interests of the country and thereby started the official national practice of silencing these different subjectivities. The occupation with a singular definition of development with industries deepened to such an extent that industrialization as development became a universal law where the end to be achieved was industrialization/modernization/development.[4] As a result, perspectives offering other notions of development apart from the industrial progress were rendered as anti-development, anti-national, uneducated, primitive and so on.

The euphoria of independence initially led to the belief that the national state would unlike the colonial state, work for the development of all. However, this ecstasy was soon over for most of the people when they realized that the state works within its own structure, which was projected as 'national interest'. This sense of national interest gradually subsumed within it all kinds of diversions in terms of culture, identity, association, belonging and so on. Only the identity of being an 'Indian' devoid of other dimensions working for the development of national interest was deemed as 'modern' and 'progressive'. The faces of caste, class, region and so on were treated as 'aberrations' of Indian democracy which had to be treated properly.

It seems sacrifice for the nation was invented as a noble task, where land were to be forfeited for the national development. It should be noted that the umbrella of Nehruvian state was quite wide to amalgamate few voices of protest against land acquisition. People were convinced that they will be a part of the development process. Therefore, various projects turned out to be successful in acquiring land as well. But then gradually fissures came on the surface, which ultimately led to the questioning of the development policy. Nevertheless, the erection of Nehruvian hegemony on the board of development is quite noteworthy.[5]

This was followed by the period in post 1990s where people were placed in the lap of liberalization, privatization and globalization. Development assumed new dimensions and capital became more porous and fluid. There was an integration of financial, labour and capital markets on a global scale. Attempts were made to restructure our economy in terms of Structural Adjustment Programmes and wooing multinational companies. In addition, efforts were made to avail funds for development from World Bank, International Monetary Fund, including attempts to increase Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs).

In this backdrop, the role of the state was more restructured as neo liberal state to protect the market and so in response to take its step back from other spheres of welfare. Now we had entered the discourse of corporate-government nexus for special economic zones, industrial corridors, urban extensions, mining projects, power plants. These constituted the vocabulary of development in the neo liberal period.

Precisely, neo liberalism and development paradigm of the state became the strings of the web of domination and power relation. The discourse of neo-liberal state emerged as a meta-narrative, henceforth creating exclusionary practices and constraints, thus carving a path on which all the subjects had to move in one direction. Gathering from the above account we could say that a process of exploitation along with subjectification has been going on. Henceforth, resistance have been against the normalcy/naturalness of the present development model in India. We need to take into consideration that many times multiple articulations of history are cemented to produce a singular history. The pores, fissures, disjuncture in history and politics are plastered so that the unity of history to produce a singular articulation appears to be complete. Therefore, in order to explore the diversity, we need to understand that all the claims of knowledge and politics are embedded. In other words, we might say they are contextual. Thus, there is no univocal conception. Here we would narrow down on the case study of Potka bock.

3. Case Study

3.1 Locating the Resistance Spatially

Potka block is located in Dhalbhum sub-division of East Singhbhum district in Jharkhand. The block headquarter could be seen beside the Hata - Musabani road at a distance of seven kilometers from Hata (a place on Jamshedpur-Chaibasa Road). **The block constitutes of 25 panchayats and two hundred 93 villages.**

The total geographical area is 1,44,208.7 acres, out of which 17,115 acres form the forest area. Out of the total population of 1,70,657, 4.1% is the Scheduled Caste population and 51.2% is the ST population.[6] Non-Adivasi communities include the Mandals (Sundi), Monalahas (Bania) and Madina. The occupation of Mandal population is to sell liquor and the indulgence of Bhumij Adivasis in liquor has led to the loss of the land to non-adivasi Mandals and Banias. So today non Adivasis own the Adivasi land and the latter are compelled to work as labourers on their own land. (Tudu 2010: 11)

The economy of the area is agriculture based, this along with the production of paddy sustains the population along with the production of few vegetables for eight months and rest of the year their livelihood is dependent on the collection of forest products as mushroom*, sal* and other non-timber products along with poultry. But on the other hand, many of the government functionaries like Manoj Kumar, the *Prakhand Pramukh*, Deepak Kumar who was the ward member (*Panchayat Sadsya Samiti*) of the Judi panchayat opined that the land is quite rocky and not favorable for agriculture. However, local people wanted better irrigation facilities so that the production could increase.[7]

Conversations with the villagers showed that only 5% of the people are in government jobs and a meager 1% into small business. But then in the wake of making the area 'modernized and industrialized' large scale violations of traditional and constitutional rights are taking place, and thereby ignoring the fact that their economy is primarily agro based.[8] Hitherto, we tried to place our case study spatially. In the subsequent section, a temporal sense of resistance would be dealt, which will further ensue an understanding of the forces against which resistance was being led.

3.2 Locating Resistance on Temporal Grounds

Before moving on with the discussion of acts of resistance, I would try to lay down the sense of resistance as used in the article. Broadly speaking, resistance should not be understood as a space to be created outside power relations. And here goes the statement, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." (Foucault 1990: 95).

The term exterior is important, because it also implies that power does not always mean being trapped, Foucault says its productive as well, in the sense it produces consciousness, subjectivity and hence the capacity to act. Thus, resistance is not to power as such, instead it is against social practices/arrangements arising out of a specific product of power relations or we could also say against truth effects. (Muckelbauer 2000: 89-90).

Hence, in the case of Potka block the resistance is not against state or development per se. Instead people have been protesting against the particular power arrangement where the state has been acting in nexus with corporate companies to acquire land. The inhabitants feel that such state moves are

completely wiping off the basis of identity which they share in that region, i.e. the land. They also very strongly hold that the state should not impose the national development upon them rather try to see the local sense of development i.e. the trajectory which people want for their region.

The entire narrative of the resistance against the corporate acquisition of land goes back to 2004. Though the entry to this area i.e. the Potka block was first made by the Jindal company, but the areas of our concern are particularly the areas covered by Bhushan Steel and Power Limited (henceforth BSPL). The project of development according to the company was to establish an integrated steel plant of three million tonnes and a nine hundred megawatt power plant with the estimated investment of rupees 10, 500 millions. Following this, Memorandum of Understanding (henceforth MoU) with the Jharkhand government was signed on 7th September 2006. This plant if implemented required 3,450 acres of land in Potka and Jamshedpur. This threatened thirty villages of dispossession, which were by and large Adivasi dominant.

Vijay Kishore, the vice-president of BSPL, held that as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility, ponds have been dug up to provide water to the villages around the proposed plant. Also he added, industrial training programmes have been initiated so that people could be placed in the company. Furthermore, he held that the company would provide direct employment to approximately three hundred people immediately and to ten thousand people in the next phase of work.[9]

Elaborating on the project, Chandra Bhushan Sharma, Deputy General Manager and Spokesperson of the company said that it would be a modern steel plant which would adhere to all the pollution control norms. He also held that industrial training to approximately one hundred fifty villagers between 18 to 45 years of age has already been initiated. The company declared that it would achieve full production target of three million tonnes per annum by 2012. It was also claimed that 2,792 acres out of the total land required would be provided by the state government. The company would source water from Domuhani (meeting point of river Subarnarekha and Kharkai) and power from NTPC's Ramchandrapur-grid at Gamharia in adjoining Seraikela-Kharsawan district. He added that the company has elaborate plans to develop Potka, situated twenty five kilometres away from the steel city into a satellite town by building necessary infrastructure including roads, water and power lines. He said, "We will soon enter into a land purchase agreement with the state government. There is no controversy about

forest or tribal land. Moreover, there is no question of any displacement, as the land acquired by us is vacant and not inhabited by villagers. We have the blueprint ready for Potka. Development of the area will become necessary as our project would provide numerous employment opportunities." [10]

The 14 villages demarcated by the company in this block were Roladih, Sarmanda, Judi, Samarsai, Bada Bhumri, Rangamatia, Poda Bhumri, Bingburu, Pichili, Chandpur, Rajabasa, Atnabeda, Khadiasai, Hisagoda, Potka, Tangarsai, Bada Sigdi, Chota Sigdi, Hesbel, Jahatu, Kalikapur, Matkomdih, Savnadih, Khanchibil, Dhirol, Dawanki and Sohda. Bhushan company has been trying to acquire land since 2005. Apart from this in Jamshedpur division villages like Marchagoda, Bhuridih and Kudada were demarcated for acquisition. (Tudu 2010: 4) These villages were chosen as they were located on the main road, which made survey of the land easy said Sombari Murmu of Roladih village associated with *Bhoomi Raksha Bahini Kisan Morcha*.

However, it should be noted that the resistance against land grab was not uniform all over Potka block. In Judi village, people easily gave up their land in lieu for compensation and employment in the two industries named Saha and Swati in 2007-08. Though, presently they are resisting against these companies as the promises were not fulfilled and the issue of pollution is creating problems for the villagers.[11]

At this juncture, it would also be apt to point out the limitation of the work. The fieldwork was biased in the sense that the narratives primarily show the resistance against land acquisition. Again to reiterate, the resistances had varying degrees. Nevertheless, laying down the narratives on a larger canvas showed that largely people were not willing to part away with their land. There were few villages which were composed of basically the non-Adivasi families who were willing to give away their land for a good compensation in terms of money and job in the companies. The fieldwork, however, largely revolved around conversations with those families which comprised basically the Adivasi families, who were unwilling to part with their land.

One another way of understanding resistance here could be acts to affirm the difference in terms of identity linked to the land. For instance, the explanation by Dayamani Barla, the Convenor of *Adivasi Moolvasi Astitva Raksha Manch* which played a major role in organizing the resistance against Arcellor-Mittal in Torpa-Kamdara is helpful. She says that the adivasis have 'created' their

land. Though, she holds that there is no legal proof for this, but in an asserting tone she adds, "History gives the proof which show how our ancestors created the land of this state by clearing the forests and fighting with wild animals like bears, lions, snakes." Therefore she puts, "We do not have to look up to any authority for our rights because we have traditional rights over this land."[12] The transgressive acts are meant to bring into light the exclusions created as a result of dichotomies or how norms which are portrayed as natural/universal are actually creating marginalization.[13]

Another aspect which comes up through the acts of resistance is that, they are meant to show that there are no neat compartments of development and anti-development. When people are not willing to part away with their land, it implies that there is a necessity to look into alternate ways of politics. It is not that people are being recalcitrant by not following the path of development treaded by the state. More precisely what need to be accounted for are the specificities of 'India' in the postcolonial era in terms of its political system, understanding modernity, development and so on. Similarly, we need not forget that there are particularities within the meta-narrative of Indian nation state. A point which needs to be reiterated is that there is no 'homogenous time and space', instead the heterogeneities need to be celebrated.

The article tries to probe one such basis, i.e. the land and how it serves as a basis of identity, henceforth the resistance against any such acts which try to question that premise. Therefore, their sense of development has a different understanding of land and hence the politics is also different from the one which has been imposed by the state.

I would also like to draw here that the freedom is nothing absolute here, instead it is 'recognition of one's entanglement in the webs of power/knowledge ' (Thiele 1990, 908). Adding valour to resistance, we might say that we as subjects, tend to transform our existing conditions. In this process of genealogical understanding, we have popular/local/discontinuous knowledge which help to resurrect the subjugated knowledge system from the metanarratives.

Therefore, delving into alternative vocabularies of imagination of spaces, by unsettling the 'normal' spaces form an important part of emancipatory politics.[14] They serve as spaces for resistance in 'other' lived spaces that is apart from the dominant ones.[15] It is within this realm of ideas we are trying to explore the

basis of land for various imaginings apart from the normalized understanding given by the state[16].

4. Resistance as Acts of Aesthetic Creation

The entire formulation that Foucault does not provide normative parameters on what form will the resistance take has been taken as a criticism against him. One significant implication of this is that it creates imaginations which are not dictated by the present discourse of power and here lies the space of aesthetic self-creation. Precisely, it implies 'refusal to what we are' (Pickett 1996: 464). The underlying sense of this statement is that first we understand that we have been constituted as subjects with the interplay of truth, knowledge and power. Thus, this also means that there is a scope of re-fashioning ourselves as subjects or to resurrect the ways of subjectivity which we think is ours.

From this understanding we draw the aim of self-creation or aesthetics of existence/creation as a weapon of resistance. The ethics within this comprise various practices of thinking, in fact our being. This process of self-fashioning (stylization of the self) is a means of self-empowerment, which means exercise of agency and autonomy.[17]

In our case, aesthetic self-creation as a weapon of resistance could be primarily understood through narratives which bring on the surface the fact that land is a basis of identity and not something which could be traded off in return for a compensation. A further manifestation of this was also seen in the assertion of the indigenous ways of life.

This process requires the analysis of meanings of culture which entail feelings and experiences of everyday realities. This also engages a study of perceptions, responses, reactions which shape along with producing changes in consciousness, which in return profile the social order. So, the culture of oppression and the culture of protest need to be dealt simultaneously. Within the former a theatre of terror is devised which is not just to create fear through authority but also inculcates a sense of self-derogation. This is done by relegating the subordinates as dangerous, inferior and violent.

Nonetheless, this is countered by a relentless culture of protest which is not only physical survival but a collective will to live. This is done by nurturing their own inculcated values of justice, equality and preservation of zones of

resistance through symbols like drums, arrows, oral history, songs, literature and so on (Devalle 1992: 200-227).

In order to attack these constructs of domination, we need to indulge into local struggles against power and thereby de-subjectify the subject. This deconstructive exercise would unmask those imaginations which do not fit the discourse of normalcy. They are not inferior or less subordinate or utopias of illiterate people, steeped in backwardness, unliberated by modernity, rather it reveals that there are myriad imaginations of the term development.

The method to achieve this is to problematize the given arrangement of social order, based upon the premise that there is no universal knowledge system which can speak from anywhere for everybody.

The narratives gathered during the land struggle in Potka block came up in various forms. Placing under the rubric of aesthetic creation , the narratives show that people are not against the state per se, rather they are uncomfortable with the statist framework of land acquisition . Their acts of resistance they display reassertion of their existence by reiterating their ties with the land by treating it as non-saleable asset. It was held by the villagers that the state is not able to understand the importance of land in the life of Adivasis. So people have been protesting against the state, trying to tell the state, that land is not merely an economic commodity which could be 'compensated'. They held that the identity and existence of their community till date is based on land. This could be perceived in the proclamation of Shailendra Mahto, an activist of *Bhoomi Raksha Sangharsh Samiti*, which has been protesting against the land acquisition led by Jindal company in Potka block. He said, "If the government would not stop capitalist exploitation, then *sendra* will be declared against them."[18]

Sendra is a term in Adivasi vocabulary. This is a traditional custom in which once in a year Adivasis go to the forests with all their traditional *auzaar* like *teer* (arrow) and *dhanush* (bow). It should be noted that they do not use the term *hathiyar,* rather *auzaar* because they associate the former with violence. Along with arrows, bows and drum beating they go to hunt down the wild animals in the forests who damage their crops and cattle. Thus, declaration of *sendra* serves as a means of protection for the people against the wild animals who try to damage their land and crops. So he held that nobody, including the animals could alienate them from their rights endowed by their ancestors in terms of

land and other resources. He added that even if the state attempts to do so then *sendra* will be deployed against the state as well.

Simultaneously, the villagers also emphasized that they have been wrongly branded as 'anti-development' and also as 'anti-national'. Rather, they say that they want development, but not through industries nor by imposition of state led industrialization. They have been asking the state that aren't they the 'citizens' of this country, so why is the state not catering to their needs instead imposing things on them. Broadly, it could be said that they are trying to create a space in non-statist sphere, which could also be treated as arts of not being governed. The next section delves into the narratives which were collected during the fieldwork conducted in three phases, the first in April 2010, the second in May-June 2011 and the third in February-March 2012. These narratives will attempt to explain the acts of resistance.

Narratives are used in the sense that they are anchored in some understanding of the self, as they originate from someone's point of view. Narratives give shape to various kinds of habitable spaces existing, as the self understands in relation to other selves, collectives and the environment. Placing the narratives within this paradigm in no way intends to produce narratives 'versus' the nation state/ dominant political community.

Narratives

If the company is giving compensation and even jobs, then why not give up the land and lead a better life? Here lies the answer 'land is everything, without land education has no meaning', says the family of Sombari Murmu of Roladih village. Land is the only asset and agriculture is the only means of earning as people are not educated, says Sakhan Majhi, Sombari's brother. Does this mean that if they will be educated then they will give away their land and move to other occupation? The answer is an emphatic no. A collective voice speaks aloud 'land is our existence'. They say that their ancestors ate from that land and also their generations will eat from the same land. Wheat production is enough from which they could eat and sell. They are able to produce some vegetables for survival.

There has been a strong negation for compensation also because villagers feel that no corporate or the state can give the space where their cattle, bulls, goats can go with them. Their concern is also about trees, rivers, mountains, *zahera*

(place of worship), *akhada* (common ground), *sasandiri (*ancestor burial ground*)* water, things which can never be replaced. Most importantly, they raised, 'what about our memories? For instance, they strongly feel about the place where their ancestors are buried. For some communities, ancestors are their custodians and they are also worshipped during festivals. Therefore, the concern of the Adivasis is that with the coming of the company their existence and their community will vanish. Neither the state nor the company could compensate for their customs and traditional systems. As Saraswati Sardar says, "We will become refugees without land." Adding to this, Sameer Sardar of Roladih village said, "We are happy the way we are." With an expression of agreement Saraswati Sardar exclaimed, "Yes we are satisfied with our lives and we do not want to eat smoke." People agreed that in no case, neither for employment nor for money will they give their productive land.

Furthermore, the villagers were of the view that even if they give unused land then due to pollution and industrial wastes the production of *dhan* in cultivable land will also stop and eventually the villagers will have to move out.

Simultaneously, they have clearly asserted that they are not 'begging from the state'. Land is their existence and the state's rule would not be accepted on that. This has been a clear declaration.[19] The slogans till now demonstrated that Adivasis would sacrifice their lives but not their land. This was given a new dimension by Siddheshwar Bhagat. He affirmed that the state does not give us birth so it has no right to take it, rather right to life is a fundamental right which the state should protect. So he says, "Neither will we give our lives, nor our land."

Adding to this, the major festivals and worship to their god called *marang buru* are linked to the agriculture cycle and hence land. Hiramani Murmu, Butti Soren, Shakuntala Murmu in Kalikapur , explained their festivals with great enthusiasm. In March they have *baha* to celebrate spring, praying for the new flowers and fruits, and for a good monsoon. Then they celebrate *erok* in June-July after the first showers which commemorate the beginning of ploughing and crop cycle. This is followed by the festival *janthar* in November which is a ritual offering that signifies the beginning of harvest and threshing operations. And the most important is *sohrai* which is thanksgiving after harvest (Das 1991: 277).[20] So that particular space (as there are no images of god) has emotional meanings, for them which can never be replaced by any means. Thereupon, the attachment to land works as the basis for overall reproduction of their collectiveness and identity.

The narratives show that sense of belonging through the land are varied as land has multiple dimensions, in the sense starting from identity flowing into tributaries of livelihood, security, memories, social status, ownership, ancestral asset, balanced ecology and so on.[21] So they are completely against the state sponsored development in terms of industrialization which they feel are dispossessing people from their everyday life system. These narratives clearly reveal resistance to the web of state power relations. This has been analysed by mapping numerous ways as material, social, political, cultural, spiritual in which land shapes the identity of the Adivasis in this region through the narratives.

5. Conclusion

An important outcome of the above study is an analysis of resistance in its myriad forms and how it has become the existential element of human condition. Nevertheless, in this exploration of alternative ways of resistance and its politics, we should not forget to delineate dissenting voices within the alternatives.

Do these alternative spaces give further space to dissenting voices? Generally, we see that a certain kind of imagination becomes dominant in movements or protests. Therefore, 'whose imagination' becomes an important question. Various voices especially based on gender, are subsumed in a movement of a generic type as land issue. What we need to understand is that in any community there is a selective tradition which becomes overriding and thus we have some tones encompassed within the overarching voice. This explains the enduring nature of agonistic politics which is constant struggle, without closure.

Henceforth we could say that the article tried to comprehend practices of resistance by dwelling upon the conception of land to comprehend unconventional fashioning of grouping and ties. The identity through land has been explored by placing it as a geographical place, means of livelihood, value system, personal and collective security, as a means of maintaining ancestral links and so on. All these coming together form a sense of association which do not sit comfortably with state imaginations and thus form alternative modes of identity. A major emphasis has been placed on the resistances arising from the present land acquisition process. This strong wave of resistances which sweep across Jharkhand reveal explicitly that people are not ready to place themselves within the given state or corporate definition of development.

Nonetheless, this argument by no means implies that there is complete opposition to the present development discourse. Travelling through the narratives of the fields give a clear picture where Adivasis have articulated in a lucid way that they are not anti-development. The problem for them is in the present trajectory of development being pursued. In a few instances, people have rated the present policies of development as 'terror of development' which they in their discourse term it as *vikas ka aatank*. This they say has been working against their *pehchan, astitva aur asmita* which can be translated as identity, existence and dignity. Development it seems in this mineral rich area of Jharkhand has been defined as land grab, exploitation of natural and mineral resources and massive dispossession leading to dislocation of various kinds of communities.

Endnotes

1 These are the lines inspired by a song of Bhagwan Maaji, leader of the adivasi struggle against bauxite mining in Kashipur. (Sasi 2009) *Gaon Chodab Nahi*. http://kafila.org/2009/06/25/gaon-chodab-nahin/. Accessed on 21 January 2010.

2 Prabhat Patnaik, 'The State under Neo-Liberalism', 10 August 2010, http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/patnaik100810.html. Accessed on 15 May 2012.

3 One of the endeavours has been to question the characterization of 'development' mainly in terms of 'industrialization'. This growth was strengthened since the times of Nehru, explains Partha Chatterjee using the phrase, 'moment of arrival'. The nationalist thought as 'scientific and rational' was instituted as state ideology. Any kind of issue be it political, economic, social, justice was related to the economic structure of the society. There were three requirements 'a heavy engineering and machine-making sector, scientific research institutes and electric power'. Thus, the national project became industrialization under the national state. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought And The Colonial World, A Derivative Discourse*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986, pp.131-160.

4 We can say that all the three terms industrialization, modernization and development have become synonymous. Routledge Paul, "Modernity as a Vision of Conquest: Development and Culture in India," *Cultural Survival*, 19 February 2010, http://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csq/article/modernity-a-vision-conquest-development-and-culture-india . Accessed on 10 July 2010.

5 One area of interrogation which spills up here is that of docile bodies. Is it that the state had made the subjects docile in the name of development that the resisting agency was missing in most instances, and people had given their land?

6 Potka block has been functioning since 1958 vide the letter number 3852 dated 23.03.1958 of the Department of Community Development, Government of Bihar. See "Potka Block, East Singhbhum", http://jamshedpur.nic.in/potblk.htm. Accessed on 6 January 2012. Here the data are according to 2001 census. While talking about specific villages later, the data has been given on the basis of interaction with the villagers during the fieldworks. As far as East Singhbhum district is concerned, the population has been recorded 2,291,032, the sex ratio is 949 per 1000 males and the literacy rate is 77.13. *Census of India 2011, Provisional*

Population Totals, Paper-I of 2011 Jharkhand Series-21 (Ranchi: Directorate of Census Operations, 2011), p.21, 40, 53 respectively.

7 The information about occupation was given by the people during the fieldworks. I met the government functionaries mentioned here on 14 February 2012 in Hata, the market place in Jamshedpur-Chaibasa road. Judi village is around twenty kilometers from Jamshedpur. The functionaries even said that the local villagers also feel that their soil is not suitable for production and that they want industries to be set up. But the picture that came up about agriculture during interactions with the villagers was in contrast to what the government officials held. In opposition people held that agriculture sustains them primarily.

8 'After Mittal…..Bhushan, the Struggle Continues*',* http://www.cnisbss.org/infocus/Potka.pdf. Accessed on 7 January 2012.

9 See Pinaki Majumdar, 'Bhushan Steel Offers Villagers Price sop For 300 Acres', *The Telegraph* , 19 May 2010. http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100519/jsp/jharkhand/story_12464251.jsp Accessed on 10 January 2011.

10 'Rs 10500cr Fillip for Potka', *The Telegraph*, 7 May 2010. http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100507/jsp/jharkhand/story_12421650.jsp. Accessed on 10 February 2011.

11 This information was given by R .N. Banerjee who was a retired school teacher in Judi village whom I met on 15 March 2012 at his residence.

12 This was part of an interview with Dayamani Barla when I met her during my fieldwork in Nagdi village. This was on 3 October 2012 in Ranchi.

13 A genealogical study of the trajectory of deveopment in independent Inda could explain this. We need to understand how land acquisition has been made a 'normal' mode in order to attain development, by very naively subsuming the various dimensions of land which are components of identity.

14 The term emancipation is another contested term, there are different meanings attached to it at different levels. Here, the term is used as Nivedita Menon understands emancipation as a process without closure, it is not a goal we can reach. Each victory becomes the site of a fresh cooptation, but conversely too each defeat releases new potential to resist oppression. So political practice is the perpetual attempt to eliminate oppression rather than the achievement of this elimination. Emancipation is thus a horizon which drives our political practice. See Nivedita Menon, *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law* (USA: Permanent Black, 2004), p.20.

15 The term 'other' has been used in the sense of various and not as connoting 'we' versus 'they'.

16 Normalized as used here implies that land has been treated as saleable commodity by the state, as something which could be compensated through monetary or other means. If we look through the land acqusition acts we see that there is no scope to see people might not be wiing to part away with their land in any circustances. It should be noted that in the

present laws, state assumes that a 'fair' compensation and rehabilitation can replace the dispossession of land.

17 The realm of art is taken 'as a sort of refuge for all those aspects of human life and culture that have been forgotten, excluded or repressed by Wester modernity', which are also seen as ' pre-rational embodied otherness'. See Jon Simons, *Foucault & the political*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp.78-79.

18 I met Shailendra Mahto in Dorkasai village, Potka block at his residence on 20 February 2012.

19 This can be seen in the slogans raised during the protests, *khan, khanij hamara hai, raj tumhara nahi chalega* (minerals are ours, your rule will not be accepted). They also claim, *hum apna adhikar mangte, nahi kisi se bheekh mangte* (we are asking for our rights and not begging).

20 Victor Das in his study also holds that all the major festivals are based on an appreciation of natural resource, environment and thus the land.

21 We need to see also how land is treated as an ancestral gift, which needs to be preserved for generations to come. So people feel that if they give away their land then it will be a betrayal to their ancestors.

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Caste(-less) Community and the Savarnas: Understanding Ambedkar

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Abstract

This paper aims to read Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* and a few of his other works in relevance with the idea which discusses the responsibility of the *savarnas* (upper caste people) in dismantling caste hierarchies. When we investigate Dalit history, their struggles have carved the road for movements towards establishing and fighting for the social justice. Ambedkar strongly states that the persistence of caste is at core as *savarna* problem which is sustained by their will. Dalits on the other hand have struggled historically and have driven the social movement to establish equality. *Savarnas* lack the willingness to enact sincere reform in building a society equal for all. Ambedkar has pointed out that the notion of caste is a "sickness" within the Hindu society. He countered it and provided a solution to it, which was his demand for "notional change" among the *savarnas*. This paper investigates the inadequacy of tokenistic reforms such as policy formation for the upliftment of the Dalits which forget to analyse its ground application, reducing the Dalits to mere votes, instead of inculcating the need for a deeper transformation of social consciousness. This paper will draw comparative insights from global struggles such as against racial oppression and contemporary debates on structural violence while establishing across borders solidarity. This paper also situates Ambedkar's critique within both a historical and the contemporary context. In doing so it aims to explore how caste annihilation is not simply a struggle limited to Dalit's lives rather it is a collective action, requiring the active participation and accountability of the privileged section of the society. Lastly this paper argues that the future of an equitable and caste-less India depends on the complete and radical reorientation of the *savarna* consciousness, without which Ambedkar's vision of justice, liberty and fraternity remains a distant dream.

Keywords: Ambedkar, caste, caste-less society, Dalit Studies, notional change, structural violence

1. Introduction: Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This paper reads B.R. Ambedkar's prose and the metaphors he chose, like caste as "sickness" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 26), as "gutter" (Ambedkar, 1938) as mental slavery to understand why notional change remains the unrealised importance of anti-caste praxis. Rather than treating Ambedkar's texts as historical artifacts, this paper approaches them as living theory. By engaging in close readings of *Annihilation of Caste* and *Caste in India* the paper will trace how he located the root problems not in Dalit bodies but in the consciousness of the *savarnas* in the country. The method is important to show how the movement of caste takes from Ambedkar's language to its institutional afterlives by reading the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal controversy and Gandhi's *Harijan* discourse as case studies that reveal the limits of liberal reform. To build a bridge between the past and the present, this work brings Ambedkar into conversation with contemporary critical voices like Anupama Rao's framing of caste as structural violence, Isabel Wilkerson's account of unconscious bias, Nico Slate's excavation of how Indian elites defend caste through racial comparison. This shows how each of them extends Ambedkar's insight that caste operates beneath awareness, as a program running in the background of even liberal minds. This paper also draws on Dalit movement scholarship, from Dalit Panthers to T.M.Yesudasan and B. Krishnappa, to ground this analysis in the lived experience of those who have theorised caste through survival. The approach is not to apply theory onto Dalit lives but to let Dalit thoughts lead the critique.

The framework that emerges centers on Ambedkar's proposition that caste is a "notion, a state of mind." (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 68) This becomes the anchoring concept through which this paper reads three entrenched logics. They are firstly, "structural violence" (Rao, 2009, p. 94), following Rao this work will map caste not as prejudice but as a system woven into law and bureaucracy where we can see how even protective measures like reservations produce what she calls, "legal exceptionalism" (Rao, 2009, p. 242) and recognises that Dalits are trapped in perpetual marginality. Secondly, using Wilkerson's "Unconscious Bias" (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 178) work on implicit bias the paper theorises *savarna* consciousness as sedimented with automatic encodings of superiority that precede deliberate thought making it hard to feel neutral existence. And lastly, internal colonization, not the exact term which Ambedkar used, but which reflects his challenges to the Congress party. He questioned them regarding their approach to reform which intended to oppose British rule while practicing caste

rule within themselves. This helps to frame an understanding of *savarna* refusal as a postcolonial continuity where political freedom was achieved while social domination persists till the present. These strands point to a central claim that annihilating caste demands institutional transformation led by *savarna* moral awakening as consciousness change alone cannot dismantle caste logic which is embedded within them.

As the idea to engage with a historical role of the *savarnas* in building a caste-less society revolves around the mind, a quote a Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* flashes in front of the sight, where he quotes Mathew Arnold and towards the end poetically questions the consciousness of the Hindus and seeking a poetic justice it seems, as he states,

> The Hindus in the words of Mathew Arnold are "wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born". What are they to do? The Mahatma to whom they appeal for guidance does not believe in thinking and can therefore give no guidance which can be said to stand the test of experience. The intellectual classes to whom the masses look for guidance are either too dishonest or too indifferent to educate them in the right direction. We are indeed witness to a great tragedy. In the face of this tragedy all one can do is to lament and say— such be thy Leaders, O! Hindus. (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 96)

The quote reflects how Dr. B.R. Ambedkar depicts the existential predicament which the Hindus suffer from within the complex fabric of Indian civilisation by referring to Mathew Arnold's radical statement that they are "wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born." By analysing this we can explore how the imagery captures the struggle between the caste system as an oppressive structure and the aspiration for a future grounded in equality and justice. Here we analyse how the "world dead" represents the deeply entrenched caste hierarchies which continues to dictate social interactions and opportunities. This showcases how caste traps countless individuals in a vicious cycle of discrimination and dehumanisation. We can see how in contrast, the "world powerless to be born" signifies the urge for a society where caste is abolished, a vision that remains elusive yet vital.

Ambedkar's observations reveal a critical gap in the leadership within the Hindu community. He describes a deep divide between the general public and the intellectual elite, also showing how the very public representatives, our leaders that the community turns to for delivery and direction frequently fall short of

offering the wisdom required for significant change. In addition to sustaining of the caste-based oppression, this lack of strategic and mindful leadership leaves barren the possibility of reforms and collective actions. Nico Slate can be traced in alliance with the argument as he criticises leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose and Rabindranath Tagore who frequently defended caste in international forums by drawing a positive comparison to racial injustice in the west. Slate describes how Gandhi downplayed the violence of untouchability by comparing it to Jim Crow laws and lynchings in the US, Bose saw it as an ancient attempt to harmonise difference and Tagore defended caste as a "frictionless alternative" to American racism.

These representative figures used race and caste comparison to protect the nation's image. Voices from the margins have decoded this myth and call for more significant social change, insisting that rather than encourage self-criticism and internal decolonisation of Dalits within a caste society, building solidarity across oppressive lines is required. Ambedkar and Slate's arguments demonstrate the strategic use of racial-caste parallels and the failure of visionary leadership. Slate depicts how leaders represent the entire India but fuel caste structures. Ambedkar states that the *savarnas* have an active participation in the struggle against caste discrimination. His emphasis was on the real ground actions and not mere hollow words of acknowledgment of the problem, which is insufficient. It is time for transformative change which requires concerted efforts and accountability by the *savarnas*.

When we observe closely, we can map that at the heart of Ambedkar's critique lies his vision of a birth a caste-less society, one where dignity and equality are not just aspirational ideals documented for showcasing but a practical reality. He clearly states that the responsibility for dismantling caste hierarchies does not solely rest on marginalised communities but must be shared by all the societal members. Even if the margin gains the consciousness to assert its rights but if the center doesn't let go of their oppressive order and privileges, the establishment of an equal society cannot meet its goal. For the *savarnas*, this marks for a moral rejuvenation when they confront and let go of their complicity in sustaining oppressive structures and commit to genuine reform that address the root causes of inequality.

This paper explores how Ambedkar's expectations of *savarnas* in leading a social reform which would foster a caste-less society. This emphasizes the necessity of their collective responsibility and active engagement. By critically

evaluating his crucial work *Annihilation of Caste*, this paper seeks to show how *savarnas* can contribute to this transformative vision. In doing so, this work will explore how inspiration arises from a deeper understanding of Ambedkar's call for action and to highlight the roadmap towards a more just and equitable future for all the sections of the society.

Speaking in a general everyday phenomenon, if one needs to resolve any problem the first step in solving it, is to acknowledge its existence. Similar dynamics can be traced from this text. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar diagnoses the symptoms of illness within the *savarna* community. We can see how he mentions in the preface of the text, "I shall be satisfied if I make the Hindus realize that they are the sick men of India and that their sickness is causing danger to the health and happiness of other Indians" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 26). Ambedkar viewed caste as a social malaise which is continuously poisoning the lives of human civilisation. The *savarnas*, who are the beneficiaries and upholders of this system, are central to its perpetuation. As Ambedkar termed *savarnas* as "sick men of India", he challenged the upper castes to step forward and confront their complicity in this existing system of inequality. For Ambedkar, this "sickness" stemmed from a moral blindness which reflects *savarnas's* failure to recognise the inhumanity and injustice caste inflicted on millions of people. This blindness, in turn weakened India's collective moral strength, preventing true sense of nation's unity and progress.

The role of *savarnas* therefore becomes crucial in Ambedkar's vision of a casteless society. He believed that the real change could not simply emerge from the oppressed. Let's draw a simple example of a free-flowing water body, a river, to reflect this. If we compare human society to a free-flowing river, which nurtures and enriches lives and nature, any resistance to the flow or its stagnation in a particular location, will take away its potential to nurture and rejuvenate lives within nature. Worst, it will stay decaying and stinky. This very act of restricting the flow of water is unnatural; it hinders the basic nature of rivers, which is meant to flow. Similar can be seen in the case of human society, we are born social animals. It's against our natural characteristics to be resisted and divided into airtight compartments of caste. It kills the basic nature of humans who are by nature supposed to be in interaction with each other. This barricading of humans in the caste order kills humanity within human society. It challenges the very idea of fraternity, one of the crucial elements to establish a space equal for all. Hence, it requires those in the positions of privilege to relinquish their selfish interests and challenge the foundations of caste-based

hierarchy. Ambedkar often questioned their superficial approaches to reform, which rather than uprooting the caste system, reinforce it. As he states, "The Social Conference was a body which mainly concerned itself with the reform of the high caste Hindu Family…They did not stand up for the reform of the Hindu society" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 41- 42). A real transformation, as he argued, requires the upper- caste Hindus to undergo a deep moral reawakening, while recognising that the caste system is not only a Dalit problem but a national crisis which barrens the ethical core of the county. This text reflects upon how Ambedkar persistently calls for liberal *savarnas* to take meaningful actions towards dismantling the caste system. Here we can draw a comparative lens to global struggles for equality such as Civil Right movements in the United States, where the participation of white allies was seen as important for breaking the structures of racial segregation. In the above context the privileged groups are not just a passive looker but an active participant in the system of oppression. For Ambedkar, as for figures like Martin Luther King Jr. the moral responsibility of the privileged communities is to dismantle the very systems that benefits them. In this comparative frame, the "sickness" of racism, like the "sickness" of caste, fester within those who uphold and benefit from these systems and the cure for this sickness lies in their own hands by challenging their own privileges.

Ambedkar's vision of a true nation, united in true sense with equity to all, can be established through a caste-less society only, therefore it places responsibility on the *savarnas*. Their moral awakening is not a matter of choice but a necessity for the health of the entire nation. The "danger to the health and happiness of other Indians" arises from the fact that the caste system, which by implication and functionality fragments society into rigid hierarchies restricts the establishment of an equitable society. As Ambedkar states, without this moral awakening of the *savarnas*, India cannot even hope to achieve true democracy, justice or unity in the first place.

We can further trace how Ambedkar's critique goes beyond social reform. It demands a transformation of consciousness among the *savarnas*. He challenges them to transcend their historically ingrained privileges and participate actively in undoing the caste hierarchies. It is the moral responsibility of the upper castes and therefore they cannot be a passive marker of privilege but have to participate in the transformative act of undoing caste. The *savarnas* must work towards creating an equitable social order where caste-based discrimination and privilege no longer exist in practice. Ambedkar's plea for the realisation

of this "sickness", at its core can be seen as a call for moral and social healing. By mapping the ways in which caste harms and impacts not just the oppressed but the entire nation, Ambedkar urges the *savarnas* to see and realise that the struggle for a casteless society is not merely a fight for Dalit rights but a fight for a collective moral and social welfare of India.

In this alignment of thought, one can see Ambedkar accepted the invitation to preside the conference of Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal against his will. The only hope he had behind his mind is that the *savarnas* are at least ready to address the issues within themselves and are making an initiation regarding a social reform as he said, "Yours is a cause of social reform. That causes has always made an appeal to me and it is because of this that I felt I ought not refuse an opportunity of helping the cause especially when you think that I can help it" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 37).

Initially, the disease of caste was diagnosed by many anti-caste leaders and scholars like Iyothee Thass, Periyar, Phule over the different timeframes. Ambedkar named it as a disease, leading to the realisation of its deep-rooted presence within the affected community. This very diagnosis led to the call for its cure which could initially be seen in the efforts within the community itself as the initiation lead by Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal, framed in the language of social reform. However, we can see how over the time this social reform movement becomes overshadowed and lost by the rise of political reform, the thought which superseded this was the belief of the *savarnas* that political reform held greater significance. Hence, we can see how social reform became the discarded Indian *Kapas* fabric which none of the Gandhaian and Nehruvian followers intended to cover themselves with. It can no longer be seen as a primary battle to be worth fighting for.

This shift then raised a critical need for revisiting the nature of this "sickness". Can we see caste as a physical barrier that prevented Hindus from intermingling? As Ambedkar confronts this very question by illustrating that caste is not like bricks or barbed wire that physically restricts interaction. Instead, he explains, "Caste is not a physical object…Caste is a notion, it is a state of mind. The destruction of Caste does not therefore mean the destruction of physical barriers. It means a notional change" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 68). We can trace how his emphasis on the notional change offers a profound insight into the nature of caste and provides the reason why it continues to persist in Indian society. Hence, we can say that unlike tangible structures such as walls or fences, caste should be

analysed as an abstract construct which exists in the collective consciousness and influences social relations, behaviour and one's own identity is constructed in relevance of it. This non-physical nature of caste makes it more challenging to dismantle and uproot as it resides in the deep ingrained consciousness and beliefs of the individuals. It produces an attitude of oppression which is invisible from open naked eyes unlike physical objects which are easy to detect. We can surely see the effect of caste reflected in everyday activity, that is the establishment of hierarchy and stigmatisation promoting the caste order.

In understanding Ambedkar, the *savarnas* play a vital role in establishing a caste-less society. The Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal was named for the cause to establish an anti-caste society which uplifts the act of breaking caste system. Its decision to invite Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit (*Antyaja*) leader to preside over their conference shows a mark of progressive shift in the *savarna* community's approach to social reform. It showcased a willingness to engage with Ambedkar's radical critique of caste and to acknowledge the voices of the marginalised communities. It also seemed as questioning the unquestionable, the divine religious scanty of the Shastric law hood of selecting a *Guru* (a teacher). In the same light of argument Ambedkar states, "According to the *Shastras* the *Brahmin* is appointed to be the Guru for the three Varnas, … is a direction of the Shastras. The Mandal therefore knows from whom a Hindu should take his lessons and from whom he should not. The *Shastras* do not permit a Hindu to accept any one as his *Guru* merely because he is well-versed." (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 37)

However, when Ambedkar refused to dilute his critique of Hindu scriptures, the event was cancelled exposing the superficial gesture of the *savarna* driven Mandal. It unfolds the tokenistic approach of the reform which was not sufficient for confronting the society drenched with caste oppressions. This proved that the *savarnas* are incapable of questioning the religiously sanctioned inhuman laws of oppression and proving again that neither can an *Antyaja* be a *Guru* just because he is well versed and learned (*Pandit*) nor can he show a contention to it. Thus, we can explore how the cancellation of the event raises the question of how the *savarnas* self-diagnosed approach to social reform leads to "*Sunyata*" in Buddhist philosopher's Nagarjuna's term. As caste is deeply embedded in the mind minds of the *savarnas*, and they are not willing to let go their privileges as Ambedkar states, "The *brahmins* do not have the patriotism of the samurai of Japan." (Ambedkar, 2013, p. 27) How did this class let go their privileges for the greater good of their nation and to establish equality and unity. Hence the *savarnas* need to rejuvenate their consciousness with the seeds

of equality and produce an equal space for all which will lead in formation of a united nation in true sense. He calls for a fundamental reorientation of their perceptions and position in the caste society, as he states, "…Caste System is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into water-tight compartments" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 47). The eradication of caste cannot be just achieved by changing the laws, rules on paper or tearing down physical symbols of division. It requires the *savarnas* to actively and radically dismantle their mental framework which perpetuate caste-based hierarchies and privileges. Thus, the idea of "notional change" which Ambedkar proposes injects the need for transformation internally rather than externally making the adjustments. It won't be enough for the *savarnas* to simply alter their outward behaviour. They must unlearn their embedded assumptions of caste superiority and consciously work towards establishing equality and humanity for all.

This analogy can be extended further to mirror the realities of caste which is not only shown through oppression of Dalits but also should be analysed through the actions and privileges of the *savarnas*. Here the shift of locus is needed. The frosting of the Ambedkarite consciousness has now led the margins to turn itself as the locus and cross examine the defaulted center as faulted and with the unnatural oppressive epithet for humanity. The *savarnas* should metaphorically and literally shatter this mirror and while doing so, one needs to have consciousness and recognition that the image it presents is false, constraining both the oppressed and the privileged; rather than breaking it in mere denial. This could be one of the interpretations when Ambedkar states for an active participation of the *savarnas* and not just act as passive participants. It established through the Hindu religious texts and other sanctioned texts by the Hindu social order such as *Manu Smriti* and it all depicts how the *savarnas* are the architects and beneficiaries of the Caste System. Their complicity in maintaining caste structures prism out that they bear a moral responsibility to lead in dismantling this very system. He argues how for this moral responsibility to be fulfilled they need to confront uncomfortable truths about their historical and social privileges. The change Ambedkar is advocating for is not a simple relinquishing of privileges; it demands an active reigning of one's identity which is grounded in the recognition of shared humanity and social justice.

The analysis of this text clearly states one of the core ideas: a caste-less society can be achieved through a mental revolution. In this mental revolution the

savarnas will have to move from being passive inheritors of caste privileges and become active dismantlers of the ideological structure which sustain it. It cannot be denied that political and legal changes are important but it fails to serve the purpose of building a equitable society as nothing concrete can be done without the internal shift of consciousness. To genuinely contribute to the creation of a just and equitable society, the *savarnas* will have to sink in their infected consciousness and hunt for the humanity buried under the pile of caste superiority within their mental framework. Further, by locating the suppressed humanity and entrenched notions of superiority one needs to replace it with values of equality, solidarity, fraternity and mutual respect. This is what we can draw as an essence of what Ambedkar's call for "notional change" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 68) maps. It seeks to transform which starts within the mind of the individual, but its impact would extend outwards in action and will reshape the social structure.

In the text 'Caste in India: Their Genesis, Mechanism and Development' Dr. B.R. Ambedkar strongly asserts that the caste system is fundamentally a *savaran's* problem. He traces it politics, how this system is engineered and perpetuated by upper caste through oppressive customs like Sati, child marriage and forced widowhood to women. While the lower caste bear the weight of this hierarchy, it is the upper caste men who benefit by this structure in particular, and in general the entire *savarna* community exercise these privileges. But the Brahmins are who created and maintain it for their personal benefits.

Ambedkar has defined caste as "an enclosed class," (Ambedkar, 1917, p. 15) emphasising that the mechanism for endogamy and social isolation is central in the sustenance of caste. He provocatively asks the question, "What is the class that raised this 'enclosure' around itself?" (Ambedkar, 1917, p. 15) and his reply is also very clear, locating the position of the *Brahmins* that is the highest within the Hindu social order and exercises the optimum power and privileges. While the other non-Brahmin caste may observe some of these customs, their adherence is neither strict nor complete, as they can be analysed as the derivative of Brahmin practices. This critical distinction underscores that the *Brahmins* are the architects of caste system. Ambedkar states that *Brahmins* are, "…father of the institution of caste" (Ambedkar, 1917, p. 15). This strengthens their social dominance while limiting the mobility and opportunities of the others.

Ambedkar's argues that caste is not just a social ill affecting the marginalised but a system that benefits a selected few within the social frame. When we

look within this framework, upper caste men gain significant advantages as their personal benefits are prioritised in a society that sees them as superior to women. For this Ambedkar notes, how "man as a maker of injections is most often above them all," (Ambedkar, 1917, p. 11) highlighting how men navigate the caste system with all the power and privileges designed as per their benefits while women remained subjugated. He argues that the responsibility of dismantling caste rests squarely on those who have historically benefited from it. Drawing upon this, we can trace how this exposure of hypocrisy among upper caste reformers, who seem to advocate for change but at the same time resist to cease their privileges which calls for a profound transformation within these communities. One can witness how Ambedkar urges an unlearning of the caste and patriarchal consciousness which has been deeply ingrained over generations upon everyone in the name of moral grounds for the upliftment of the society. Ambedkar's speech at the Karma in 1937 provides a sharp critique of caste divisions within untouchable communities, but we need to investigate it also as a presenter of a broader reflection on the responsibility of *savarnas* in perpetuating and dismantling these divisions. By using vivid metaphors and direct appeals, we can see how Ambedkar not only addresses the untouchables but also holds the *savarnas* accountable for the continuation of caste order. He begins by lamenting the lack of unity among the untouchables. As he states, "First, it is a misfortune of all of us that there is no unity among the various castes such as *Mahar, Chambhar, Bhangi*, etc. prevailing among the untouchables." He directly links this disunity to the broader system of caste discrimination in Hindu society and emphasises that it is not the untouchables themselves but the Hindu social order which needs to be questioned and blamed. He states, "The real reason for absence of this unity is the existence of caste distinction (*jatibhed*) in the Hindu society. *Mahars, Mangs, Chambhars*, or *Bhangis* are not responsible for this caste discrimination," This critique of Hindu caste system is further strengthened through Ambedkar's use of a graphic metaphor, where he compares caste discrimination to a stream of filth flowing downwards: "Caste discrimination is the gutter of dirty water (*gataar gangaa*) coming flowing to us from the above. This is the shit (*narak*) flowing towards us." This image of caste as a filthy, toxic force highlights the dehumanising effect of the caste system.

Ambedkar does not stop at merely pointing fingers at the *savarnas*, he systematically decodes how upper caste manipulates and exploit divisions among untouchables. He explains, "Hindus, not only do not remove the caste discrimination among themselves, but on the contrary, they strive for strengthening the differences among the untouchables, taking undue advantage

of their ignorance," By putting different groups against each other, upper caste Hindus ensure that untouchables remain divided and weak, this politics of the *savarnas* which is in alliance with the caste order prevents the untouchables from collectively challenging this system. The ladder of hierarchy continues, and the caste conspiracy wheels with this division making its extinction harder. He points out the *savarnas* politics of dividing the nation into rigid ranks of communities and sustain their hierarchy, "They support *Mangs* and raise then against *Mahars*; They support *Chanbhars* and raise them against *Mahars* and *Mangs*."

Here we can see how Ambedkar's message is very clear and should not be understood as a message of victimhood alone. Reading his text reflects how he stresses the need for untouchables to take responsibility for their own liberation. He states, "But though the original responsibility of the caste distinction is on Hindu society, for us, to forget our responsibility would be suicidal." By this Ambedkar produces a sense of agency which is very crucial. He urges untouchables to actively reject internal divisions, calling for the abolition of caste distinctions and bans on inter-dining and inter-marriage within their own communities. As he puts, "It is our foremost duty to remove the caste distinctions among ourselves and prevent the entry of policy of discrimination among us."

For Ambedkar, holding onto caste pride within untouchables communities is futile given the gaze with which these caste names are viewed by society. He asks, "What is there so great about the names *Mahar* and *Mang*, that you should feel proud of it? What bright history comes in front of your eyes by uttering these names, so that you should strive for preserving old traditions?" He always fought for the dismantling of any notion of pride in these labels. He stressed pointing that *savarnas* and their caste order can only offer degradation. This text be seen as the heart of his call for unity, as he argues the untouchables to recognise their shared oppression and unite against the common enemy: "Both our societies are getting crushed under one common grinding stone, and work unitedly." Ambedkar goes beyond rhetorical appeals, offering a guarantee that he will ensure the unity. He proudly declares, "Talking about *Mahars*, about this, they are not willing to follow any caste distinction. They are ready to have inter-dining and inter-marrying with *Mangs*, *Chanbhars* or *Bhangis*. And if they are hesitant, I undertake that I will compel them for it," Ambedkar's commitment to achieving this unity reflects his larger vision he had to form a society that transcends the caste system, one where untouchables unite in their struggle and refuse to allow caste names or traditions to divide them.

In the speech referred above Ambedkar's critique of the *savarnas* is expressed with clarity. He narrates how they are not only perpetuators of caste distinction but they also actively work to deepen them within the oppressed groups. However, he equally emphasises the responsibility which the untouchables hold to break free from these divisions and work towards solidarity. He foregrounds clearly that both oppressed and oppressor will have to take their share of responsibility for dismantling the caste system. The call to unity and the rejection of caste-based pride are the first steps towards achieving a caste-less society, where one can break the barriers imposed by Hindu society to remove the social divide and dehumanisation by othering the people. The vision of living in a caste-less society seems farfetched. Over a long anti-caste struggle and fostering of the anti-caste consciousness within the Dalits, they have mobilised and worked against the grain to eradicate caste, but one community alone cannot turn this dream into reality. As the reality feeds upon the collective consciousness and evolving humanity of each one of us living in this society, where *savarnas* have a major role to play. We can explore how Ambedkar framed caste as a social construct rather than a divine mandate. He always stressed that if caste is a product of human design, then dismantling it is within our human capacity. However, as it can be observed the upper caste who are both, the beneficiaries and protectors of this system have often resisted the structural changes necessary for a true reform.

Ultimately, Ambedkar's message is loud and clear, where he asks the upper caste to recognise that caste and accompanying gender inequalities is their problem. They need to engage with it consciously and address the roots of caste and gender oppression. If they truly aspire to establish a casteless society, they must confront their privileges and actively work in destroying the system which help the caste and gender hierarchies sustain. As we are pointing at these intertwined problems of caste and gender inequalities, Ambedkar draws our attention to how these injustices permeated within the caste structure but the *savarna* community becomes the locus of it. Gender inequalities, particularly practices like forced widowhood and child marriage, became focal points for those *savarnas* who identified as social reformers. This group of leaders is distinct from those who advocated political reform only. Ambedkar poses a critical question in this context: Are we fit for political reform when our masses are suffering? His answer in this context is a clear resounding "No". He challenges the Congress Party, particularly its leadership, by questioning their opposition to colonial rule while ignoring internal oppression within India. It reflects how the *savarnas* were very eager to decolonize from the rule of the Britishers but simultaneously

failed to address the colonisation governed and imposed by them within the Indian society through the practice of caste system. Thus, we got independence from the external colonisation of the Britishers but till present time we have failed to gain freedom from the caste system. As the Congress Party declared that one country should not rule over another, Ambedkar asks how they could justify the rule of one class (the upper castes) over another (the lower caste).

As we read the text, we can see how Ambedkar portrays the discourses of social and political reform in relevance of *savarnas* party consciousness. We trace how he reflects on the withering away of the social reform consciousness and how the political reform overshadowed it. This decaying of the social reform reflects not only on the demise of the movement rather the concern is deep, it speaks loudly of the *savarnas* indifference towards genuine social change. Looking at the social reforms which the *savarnas* initiated Ambedkar decodes their limited and restive approach. Mostly the so-called social reforms were concerned primarily in improving the conditions of the upper-caste Hindu families. They centered around practices like widow remarriage and opposing child marriage. They never genuinely questioned or intended to challenge the caste system itself. Ambedkar also notes the hostility of Congress, the party portrayed itself as leading the political reform movement and towards social reform efforts. He cites the speech of Mr. Bonnerji, a prominent Congress leader, who dismissed the necessity of social reform as a prerequisite for political reform. Bonnerji's rhetorical questions, whether political reform was contingent on ending widowhood or allowing women to attend universities demonstrate the superficial understanding of social issues which can be held by many in the political reform camp. We see how Ambedkar was clear that Dalits must agitate for their rights, but we can also see how he equally recognised that the upper castes must actively engage in the reform too. In *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables,* Ambedkar writes:

Mr. Gandhi does not merely claim for himself the championship of the Untouchable. He claims similar championship for the Congress. The Congress, he says, is fully pledged to redress the wrongs done to the Untouchables and argues that any attempt to give political safeguards to the Untouchables is unnecessary and harmful. (Ambedkar, 1945, p. 7)

We can see the politics of Gandhi who advocated for the upliftment of the Untouchables, referring to them as *"Harijans"* by which he meant children of God. But one needs to question this choice of address made to the Untouchables

by Gandhi. Did it change the situation of Untouchables? Can he, being so influential, take the issue of caste and the oppression of the Untouchables within this system with a more concert approach? Renaming of the Untouchables to *Harijan*, whom does it serve the purpose to? Can it be seen as a superficial approach or could it make sense in Gandhi's approach towards the anti-caste establishment? To answer these questions, Gandhi defended caste as stated by Nico Slate earlier, and as has been recorded by Dr K. Jamanadas who states, "…Narsi Mehta, who "invented" the name *harijan* for fatherless children of Devadasis. But Gandhi applied this name to SC's. If it was somebody else not knowing the language, life and literature of Narsi Mehta, there might have been some excuse. But Gandhi was well conversant." This shows a conscious choice by Gandhi and makes the people of the margins to question and doubt his approach which he showcased to be in the path of social and moral reform reflecting a shallow initiation for the sake of uniting the nation for his bigger agenda to get freedom from the Britishers. however the thorns of caste never affected him as speaking for the margin and having the rationality to listen the margin varies. He often emphasised moral reform within the existing social order but never initiated the movement to radically restructure it. Many including Ambedkar viewed this approach as inadequate as it did not challenge the entrenched caste system but rather sought to improve the conditions of the marginalised within it.

As this work intends to examine and map out why the tokenistic reforms failed and why even the presence of well-intentioned *savarna* leadership often reproduces caste oppression? Ambedkar's analysis can be seen in parallel with the contemporary validation which Wilkerson's has to state while analysing the hierarchies. In her work *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* she documents how embedded prejudices are. What she calls these prejudices is the "unconscious bias" (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 178) She explains how it automatically operates within the minds of dominant-caste people and can be seen even in those who consciously claim egalitarian ideals. Drawing on Harvard sociologist David William's research, Wilkerson notes how "approximately 80 percent white Americans" (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 178) carry implicit biases so automatic that they precede conscious thought. She further argues how these are not crude stereotypes openly defended but it should be understood as ingrained associations deeply lodged in the subconscious of these people. We can draw a parallel similarity with the kind of "sickness" notion Ambedkar diagnosed within the *savarna* consciousness. We can see a thread of alliance within Wilkerson's analysis of hierarchy with what Ambedkar talked about while expressing how

savarnas could not truly engage in reform because they lacked the willingness to undergo genuine introspection. He further points this phenomenon as how caste has become embedded not as an explicit ideology to be debated but as an invisible program running beneath the surface of consciousness. Wilkerson's analysis thus can be understood as the reinforcement of the urgency of Ambedkar's call for a "notional change" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 68). Thus, without addressing the deep-rooted automatic encodings of superiority that have been like a rock sedimented into their consciousness which is infected by their "unnatural" privileged over centuries, the dismantling of hierarchy becomes hard, even if we introduce policies and draft rules for the same.

While on the one side Ambedkar's diagnosis of consciousness as the problem remains valid, we can trace contemporary Dalit scholarship, like the works of Anand Teltumbde's analysis, to reveal how *savarna* consciousness has transformed into institutional forms making moral appeals insufficient. Teltumbde argues that, "the social consciousness of the average Indian is his or her caste consciousness" (as cited in Natrajan, 2006, p. 31) This consciousness operates through what Teltumbde identifies as a concealed architecture of privilege, that is, "The fact that the accident of birth in a social structure of differential privileges is more important than individual 'merit' is so well concealed that it may go unnoticed even by the victims." (Teltumbde, 2018, p. 89) Here, Teltumbde exposes how caste naturalises itself in birth-based hierarchy. It appears as a natural outcome while meritocracy functions in its mystifying veil. This suggests that the problem is not individual belief, but the issue lies in the fundamental framework in organising society itself. In modern India, this consciousness manifests through electoral systems and bureaucratic procedures distributing resources along the caste lines with mathematical precision yet appearing merit based. Ambedkar's "notional change" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 68) thus faces a contemporary obstacle, that is in the institutional structures which have become so embedded with caste logic that *savarna* individuals experience their complicity as participation in neutral procedures. This institutional invisibility explains why consciousness transformation though remaining necessary has proven very difficult to turn into reality. Thus, within contemporary Dalit scholarship this recognition that consciousness operates through institutions refocuses the problem not on individual morality but on the very systemic transformation.

Hence, when we outline the failure of the social reform movements and the neglect of caste annihilation; they symbolise the unwillingness of the *savarnas*

to confront the deep-rooted injustices that sustained their own privileges. Ambedkar's argument that *savarnas* must bear a significant portion of the responsibility for dismantling caste comes from his understanding of caste as a system of privilege and oppression. In *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946) Ambedkar asserts,

> *Chaturvarnya* would have been a very innocent principle if it meant no more than mere division of society into four classes. Unfortunately, more than this is involved in the theory of *Chaturvarnya*. Besides dividing society into four orders, the theory goes further and makes the principle of graded inequality the basis for determining the terms of associated life as between the four *Varnas*. (Ambedkar, 1946, p. 3)

This helps us bind our thoughts how *savarnas* have till present continued the internalised institution of inequality through the very practice of caste division. Contemporary scholars such as Anupama Rao, in *The Caste Questions* (2009), have extended Ambedkar's critique by examining how modern political and cultural institutions continue to preserve caste hierarchies. Rao emphasised into the complex ways in which caste manifests as a form of "structural violence" (Rao, 2009, p. 94), can be seen to be intricately woven into social hierarchies and institutional practices. She sheds light on a troubling paradox by referring how laws and policies which are designed to protect Dalit rights, end up reinforcing the very separateness and vulnerability they aim to address. We observe how this phenomenon of legal exceptionalism recognises Dalit identity but also traps individuals within a framework that continues to marginalise them. Rao explores and asks us to reflect on the lived experiences. She states that these legal structures can inadvertently create a loop of dependence and exclusion. By emphasising the need for genuine inclusion rather than mere acknowledgment she calls for a re-evaluation of the systems in existence. Further she urges us to imagine a society where Dalit identities are not just recognised but fully integrated and empowered within this social structure. Through her insights one would be encouraged to consider the broader implications of caste discrimination and the urgency to transformative changes that would truly lead towards the empowerment of the Dalit communities.

The historical movement when Ambedkar initiated the Chavadar Lake *Satyagraha*, was not because drinking the water from there would make the Dalits immortal, rather he stated, "We are going to the lake to assert that we too are human beings like others. It must be made clear that this meeting has

been called to set up the norm of equality…" (Ambedkar, 2013, p. 24) T.H.P. Chentharassery also states in the same light that, "Untouchables were yet to be accorded the status of human beings." (Chentharassery, 2013, p. 37) Thus, we can say, this caste system has made the soil barren so that the seeds of equality, liberty and fraternity can. The Dalit Panthers Manifesto, also mentions that "The present legal system and state have turned all our dreams to dust." (Dalit Panther Manifesto, 2013, p. 64) We still can see the *savarnaa's* failing to dismantle the caste hierarchy and create a society where everyone is equal and not dehumanised in name of being born in an Untouchable caste.

Ambedkar in *Annihilation of Caste* states giving up caste is giving up fundamental religious notions and therefore one needs to "destroy the authority of the *Shastras* and the *Vedas*" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 69). Further he states that it seems impossible to annihilate caste and one of the reasons is, "…the attitude, which the *Brahmins* have shown towards this question…" (Ambedkar, 1936, p.70). Chandra Khan Prasad, in his writing, "Untouchability and it's 'Hidden' Agenda," reflects, "But society, by and large, has been refusing to internalize that verdict to the hilt, and therefore Dalits remain excluded from institutions outside the command of the state" (Prasad, 2013, p. 161) reflecting how it is crucial for the *savarnas* to have a notional change for creating a caste-less society. This recognition is crucial for fostering genuine allyship with the marginalised communities, centering Dalits and Adivasis, who have borne the burden of caste-based discrimination. As the news headlines on the 28th May, 2024 states, "The willful ignorance of caste in *Savarna* India" (*The News Minute*, 2020) powerfully illustrated the deep rooted presence of caste in Indian society and exposed its systematic oppression, often masked by convenient ignorance among privileged groups, especially the *savarna* elite. We can explore how from incidents of caste-based violence and exclusion to the manipulation of public discourse surrounding reservations, the text serves as a comprehensive commentary on the state of caste in modern India.

It emphasises how caste continues to dictate everyday interactions be it policy making and power structures. Its extension of presence is visible in every space, such as media representation, education or corporate spaces. Even in the 21st century, discriminatory practices persist such as violence against Dalits, to the denial of basic dignity in spaces like temples or public services. Aunupama Rao's sates in this relevance , "…whether it be the mysteries of the body, as with Gandhi, or of the authentic India, 'Bharat', which for Nehru was peopled by the simple peasantry rooted to the soil, lacking consciousness of the nation

as a whole." (Rao, 2014) This aligns with Ambedkar's point that there is a need for *savarna's* to have notional change, and which can be done once the new consciousness of establishing a equal society for all is implanted in their mind. She also expresses how the representation of Dalits selfhood strengthens the minority's claim of suffering, their pain of being othered within the nation they are part of. In this lack of consciousness of nation by the *savarna's* made Ambedkar to state, "we are part apart" (Ambedkar, 1939, p. 280) in the context of the Dalit situation in India.

It's not even surprising, as caste has been normalised within our lives, and Ambedkar sharply critiques how caste remains an unproblematized issue in mainstream spaces. Even the progressive movements often fail to address caste-based issues adequately. The economic argument against caste-based reservations is debunked. It demonstrates how it cannot transcend economic status and affirmative actions until systematic barriers are dismantled. The change can only be visible when the *savarnas* educate themselves and push for policy change that focus on caste based representations. The call for a caste censes, more data-oriented policy making and active participation in political processes that challenge caste structures highlights the need for collective social reform.

This paper advocates for commitment to confronting caste and emphasising that until the caste system is thoroughly dismantled India cannot claim to be an equal society. The role of the *savarnas* is crucial as it's their notional sickness which perpetuates caste. Hence the cure through change in notion for a society where equality prevails needs to be initiated from their mental doors. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* is not only a scathing critique of caste oppression but also a call for upper-caste Hindus to take responsibility for the system they uphold. This paper aims to add in the prevailing scholarship where there is change in the subject of experience and the theorisation can be gazed into. As its high time the gaze needs to be shifted, as the margin speaks from the lived experience and their writings reflects the perspective that they perceive of the world surrounding them. The Dalit Panther Manifesto states, "…the atrocities on the Dalits have grown endemic" (Dalit Panther Manifesto, 2013, p. 61). This issue was also highlighted by Ambedkar when he states, "…as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem" (Ambedkar, 1917, p. 6). This has now turned into a reality, caste is no longer problem limited in India. It has spread globally

as international nations are also forming anti-caste rules to prevent caste-based discriminations in their nations. As in the present time, caste still breathes, even stronger than ever. As B. Krishnappa states, "Caste plays an important role even to this day. Be it elections or political office, caste is a living force, eating its way into human lives like termites." (Krishnappa, 2013, p. 111) The void of lack of responsibility by the *savarnas* results into the hyacinth-tic growth of the caste which has conquered the world. As T.M. Yesudasan states in his work, *Towards a Prologue to Dalit Studies*, "Dalit studies evolved under the following limiting conditions emerging at global and national levels, which have a bearing on the everyday practices of Dalit life-world" (Yesudasan, 2013, p. 151). As a result, in building upon the argument that caste sickness has now turned pandemic, it raises the urgency to create a dialogue between the *savarnas* and their ability of social consciousness.

Ambedkar's vision of a caste-less society underscores the need for those who benefit from hierarchies will have to lead change by dismantling it, be it through abandoning endogamy, renouncing caste-based privileges, or critiquing the religious texts that justify caste. As Ambedkar himself states, "Make every man and woman free from the thraldom of the *Shastras*, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the *Shastras*, and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry, without your telling him or her to do so" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 68). Even Gandhi towards the ending phase of his life built some alignment to Ambedkar's: his argument in *Caste Must Go and the Sin of Untouchability* is in similar light as Ambedkar. In it he writes that "The present caste system is the very anti-thesis of *Varnashrama*. The sooner public opinion abolishes it the better...The existing practice is therefore doubly wrong in that it has set up cruel restrictions about interdining and intermarriage and tolerates anarchy about choice of occupation" (Gandhi, 1946, pp. 3–4). The Mahatma's understanding took a tour of evolution to some extent, but his followers still got shackled with the notional slavery of the caste system. Hence, even the Mahatma failed to bring notional change within the *savarna's* showcase the tragic rigidness of holding unto an unnatural superiority complex.

In summing up we can say that Ambedkar's vision of annihilating caste is therefore not merely a battle for the oppressed but also a profound responsibility that rests with the oppressors. The upper castes *savarnas* must change their mentalities, abandon their privileges and actively work towards building an equal society and rejuvenation their moral consciousness with the act of contribution in building one.

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Negotiating Caste, Identity Crisis and Resistance: A Feminist Study of *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla

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Abstract

Dalit literature has emerged as a powerful medium of resistance and self-expression, giving voice to communities that have long been silenced by dominant socio-cultural structures. In contemporary times, narratives within Indian Dalit literature unveil the harsh realities faced by the Dalit community while celebrating their resistance, resilience and quest for social justice. This research paper focuses on Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants,* which offers a thorough analysis of the systemic oppression and resilience found in the Indian social landscape, particularly within the caste system. In her memoir, Sujatha Gidla discusses her life, her family, and the predicament facing the entire Dalit community. This paper analyses the complex entanglements of caste, selfhood, gender and political existence that emerge through the narrative. Gidla's academic perspective explores the significant impact of education in promoting empowerment and upward social mobility among marginalised communities. Using theoretical and critical perspective of Dalit aesthetics and Dalit feminism, the study aims to investigate caste, gender, socio-economic issues, and resistance against discriminations of Dalit people in Indian society. Dalit women life writing help to understand the inhuman practice of discrimination, violence, humiliation and untouchability, against Dalit women based on caste, identity crisis, labour exploitation, and sexual harassment.

Keywords: caste, Dalit Literature, Dalit feminism, gender, identity crisis, resistance

1. Introduction

Dalits, formerly known as Untouchables, have been subjected to the worst kind of ill-treatment and oppression at the hands of upper-caste people. The Sanskrit root word "*dal*," which means "to crack, split, be broken or torn,

asunder, trodden down, scattered, crushed, and destroyed," is where the word "Dalit" came from (Kumar, 2010, p. 45). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar used the word in his work *The Untouchables*, referring to them as "Broken Men," which refers to the original ancestors of Untouchables in the English translation of Dalit (Bharathi, 2012, p. 11). The history of the country is marked by movements and struggles against caste-based discrimination and untouchability. Various reformers, movements, and historical events have contributed to shaping the narrative of caste struggles and societal reforms. As Sharankumar Limbale (2014) argues, "Dalit literature is a genre of writing that creatively depicts the hardships, enslavement, dehumanization, mockery, and poverty that Dalits face. This literature is merely an idealized portrayal of sorrow" (Limbale, 2004, p. 30). Its main focus is to oppose caste hypocrisy, following B.R. Ambedkar's ideology of equality, liberty, and justice. It aims to spread brotherhood among humans.

Dalit life writing has emerged as a powerful literary and political form that challenges the silence of mainstream Indian literature. While autobiographies foreground collective histories of caste oppression and social exclusion. From the critical study of Sujatha Gidla's *Ants among Elephants*, this research paper closely studies the profound struggles and resilient resistance of Satyamurthy and Manjula, who belong to the *Mala* caste. By examining the lived experiences of Manjula, it is found that caste-based discrimination, gender inequalities and violence, and the enduring constraints and oppressions were imposed by the upper castes from the British colonial era to contemporary times. In the context of Dalit women, this research also helped to clarify the complex intersections of caste, identity, and resistance.

In this paper, a feminist interpretation of a Dalit autobiographical literature goes beyond just highlighting female characters or gender-based suffering. Rather, it looks at how caste affects women's access to political voice, education, sexuality and labour. Such a reading foregrounds Dalit women's lived experiences as sites of knowledge production, challenging universalist feminist frameworks that ignore caste and Dalit political traditions that marginalize women's narratives.

Sujatha Gidla comes from a Christian Dalit family of the *Mala* community in Andhra Pradesh, shaped by caste oppression and radical politics. Her family had a strong revolutionary background. As a student activist, Gidla actively participated in the strike against academic injustices based on students' sociocultural, caste, class, and economic backgrounds. She was the only woman participant of her time; as a result, she was detained from her academics for three

months. Gidla subsequently relocated to the United States of America. She quit her job during the recession in 2019 at the age of 26 and started working as a conductor on the New York City Subway. Read through a Dalit feminist lens, her life narrative highlights the close link between marginalisation and resistance.

Ankita Das, writing for *Feminism in India*, highlights that Gidla fills a crucial gap in post-independence historiography by distinguishing between Dalit men and Dalit women, which is often ignored in both mainstream feminism and male-centred Dalit politics. Through the feminist lens, *Ants Among Elephants* gives a compelling account of the voices that have been silenced in these historical initiatives and have been restored. The ants are not merely silent victims of caste and gender abuse; they are also the counter-narrators. History will remember and be reminded of such resistance since the ants, despite being continuously tramped on, have never failed to sting the elephants (Das, 2020).

Similarly, Pankaj Mishra, in *The New York Review of Books*, situates that Gidla's book is a significant contribution to Dalit literature in English, praising its ethical and nuanced representation of historical suffering. As he remarks, "The book blends memoir, history, ethnography, and literature" (Mishra, 2017), Gidla expands the scope of Dalit life writing and shows how personal narratives function as powerful political interventions central to Dalit feminist critique.

2. Research Methodology and Research Question

This paper offers a Dalit feminist reading of Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, situating the text with in the theoretical interventions of Dalit aesthetics and Dalit life writing. Scholars such as Anupama Rao, Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Sharankumar Limbale, argue that Dalit life writing is not just personal stories, but a form of social and political protest. It focuses on how caste, gender and political consciousness intersect in Gidla's narrative, and how Dalit women's experiences remain marginal within both mainstream feminism and male-centred Dalit politics. The study is guided by the following research question:

1. How does *Ants Among Elephants* challenges dominant feminist and Dalit political narratives?

2. In what ways does Gidla's narrative reveal the specific burdens faced by Dalit women due to the intersection of caste and gender?

3. How does Dalit autobiographical writing function as a form of resistance and self-assertion?

Through this lens, the paper sheds new light on Dalit feminist debates by demonstrating that Dalit women's life writing is a crucial site of theory, not merely testimony. The paper contributes to ongoing discussions on how Dalit feminist perspectives reshape the understanding of caste, identity, and life writing in contemporary Indian literature.

3. Burden of Caste and Gender

In *Ants Among Elephants***,** Sujatha Gidla strategically shifts narrative voice to foreground the structural burden of caste and gender. Gidla uses first-person perspective narration when she starts describing her uncle's life journey; she switches to third-person perspective narration to describe the hardships of the family and community. This narrative shift signals that Dalit oppression exceeds individual experience and must be understood as historically produced social condition. Gidla depicts in her book the resilience and revolution against caste oppression, gender discrimination, and the fight for equality. As she clarifies in the introduction of the book, "My stories, my family's stories, were not stories in India. They were just life" (Gidla, 2017, p. 1). It is revealed that the book narrates the real-life incidents that took place in the life journey of the author, her mother Manjula, and maternal uncle Satyamurthy.

Ants Among Elephants opens with Gidla speaking directly to her American readers, who have only experienced racism on the basis of skin color. The Untouchables, who are given menial jobs, are not allowed to live in the village. They must live outside the village boundaries, "are not allowed to go to temples or share water sources, and cannot eat with or use the same utensils as caste Hindus" (Gidla, 2017, p. 2). Such practices shows that caste controls space, labour, and dignity. Dalit women experience this burden more because they face both caste exclusion and gendered responsibilities.

Gidla's uncle K.G. Satyamurthy represents political resistance in the text. His turn to communist ideology reflects the failure of post-independence democracy to address caste injustice. She also traces caste oppression across generations through the story of her great-grandparents, Venkataswami and Atchamma, were born in the Khammam district in the 1800s and belonged to a nomadic clan. They pursue their livelihood by wandering various forests for fruits, honey, and

roots. The village land was fertile and yielded good profits from farming. Seeing this, the local zamindar decided to seize control. He imposed taxes on land use and offered loans for essentials like seeds, salt, and clothes. When the villagers couldn't repay the loans, he took their land as compensation and turned people into daily wage earners in their own lands.

In Hindu society, the caste system assigns occupations based on birth and marks certain communities as impure. In Polukonda village, people without caste were later labelled as Untouchables because their living conditions were considered polluting. As a result, Sankarapadu was marked as an Untouchable colony within Polukonda. Hinduism is the dominant religion in India, based on caste and relegates Untouchables to manual labor and menial tasks. Justified through religious doctrine, this system marginalizes Untouchables, forcing them to live outside village boundaries and denying them basic human dignity. Gidla's shows that this system controls everyday life.

Her mother Manjula's life clearly shows that caste oppression intersects with gender discrimination. She experienced double discrimination as an Untouchable and, within the Untouchable caste, faced gender discrimination as a woman, as described by the writer with examples. Manjula earned gold and silver medals in her studies. Her proud father, Prasanna Rao, joyfully attended the award ceremony to accept her medals. Manjula grew up as the most mischievous person in the family right from her childhood. After her mother's death, she is loved by her father Prasanna Rao, but later controlled by male family members. Her younger brother Carey beats her every day, instructing her to behave like a proper lady and discouraging her interactions with other girls. In college, her family strictly controls her behaviour and appearance. She is deliberately made to look "as unattractive as possible" (Gidla, 2017, p. 113), and is not allowed to wear half-saris. During one visit, her father gives her plain white clothes, stricter than what even Brahmin widows wear. Because of this, people mock her by calling her "Musali Papa," meaning "old lady." Notably, these decisions were made without consulting Manjula herself, exposing the lack of agency afforded to women, even within a Christian household. This highlights the parallels between Hindu and Christian traditions in marginalizing women's voices.

Sujatha Gidla's work powerfully illustrates the Dalit Feminist argument that Dalit women experience oppression at the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Gidla's narrative also shows how Dalit women like Manjula are excluded both from mainstream feminism and male-centred Dalit politics. Questions of

caste discrimination, poverty, hunger, public violence, and sexual exploitation reminded outside its feminist agenda. As Sharmila Rege claims that Dalit women remain "outsiders within" dominant social and political movements. The masculinization of Dalit movement and the savarnization of womanhood subjected Dalit women to interlocking oppressions of caste, class, and gender (Rege, 2003, p. 91). Dalit women were also marginalized within patriarchal Dalit political movements, where gender concerns were subordinates to caste struggles.

In his 1995 essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently," Gopal Guru also talks about how Dalit women have to deal with double silencing because they are left out of both "male-dominated Dalit politics and mainstream Indian feminism." He argues that it's crucial to acknowledge their unique perspective as "valid and authentic" (p. 2549). This idea helps us understand that women's dignity in Indian society is often shaped not by their individuality but by caste, class, and social power. Gidla's portrayal of Manjula's life reflects this double marginalization. Manjula's experiences of domestic violence, social control, and economic hardships are never recognized as a feminist issue. Through Manjula's everyday struggles, Gidla challenges the masculinization of Dalit politics and savarnization of womanhood that Rege critiques.

Historically, Indian women have endured systemic discrimination through practices like child marriage and *sati*. Women are often protected, exploited, or avenged not to safeguard their dignity as individuals but because of caste, class, and personal jealousy. In *Ants Among Elephants*, women repeatedly become sites of caste conflict rather than subjects with agency. Gidla shows this clearly through two incidents. First, the Kapus sought help from Dalits such as Satyam to protect Kapu women. Second, the Surya Samajists, a high-caste group, supported Aseervadam, a lower-caste boy, in his conflict with Manjula. This reveals that caste authority protects male ego while ignoring women's consent.

The text also exposes caste-based ideas of respectability. Brahmin girls are valued for appearing old-fashioned, which is read as a sign of purity while lower-caste Christian Women are stereotyped as sexually immoral and described as "cheap and easy" (p. 138). Such differential treatment reveals that caste, more than gender, determines how women are judged. As Sharmila Rege (1998) explains, in the Brahmanical social order, caste divisions and sexual divisions work together. Higher caste status often depends on controlling women to the private sphere, while the visible participation of lower-caste women in social

labor reinforces assumptions about their sexual availability. Brahminism uses this to mark lower-caste men as impure because they can't control "their" women (Rege, 1998, p. WS-44). Gidla's narrative shows that women are not treated equally but they are judged according to caste.

This critique also extends to mainstream feminism. As Anupama Rao points out, Indian feminism largely emerged from upper-caste women's struggles and rested on "the responsibility of denying caste as a problem for gender" (Rajan, 2009, p. 209). *Ants Among Elephants* directly challenges this position by centring a Dalit woman's life where gender oppression cannot be separated from caste humiliation. Dalit women experience double patriarchal oppression due to their lower social and economic position. They are oppressed inside their own community by Dalit men and outside by dominant-caste men. As Uma Chakravarti notes that "upper-caste men have long exercised sexual and social power over Dalit women, which reflects their control over lower caste" (Chakravarti, 2018, p. 81). Manjula's married life exposes that caste and patriarchy work together to oppress Dalit women. Married to a man much older than her, she endures domestic violence and humiliation but continues to work, raise her children, and protect her self-respect. Her struggle reflects the intersections of caste and gender, where Dalit women face exploitation both at home and in public life.

Caste also controls love and personal relationships. In another revealing incident of caste-based discrimination, Flora, who is in love with Satyamurthy, acknowledges that their relationship is impossible due to caste differences. Her statement "Your caste and mine are not one. You are a Christian, meaning a *Mala* Christian, an untouchable. We are Brahmins" (Gidla, 2017, p. 70), reveals that caste endogamy blocks emotional choices and preserves upper-caste purity. Gidla further reveals that caste shapes the body and self-image. Dalits are often portrayed as physically inferior by caste Hindus, a dynamic evident in Satyam's description of Flora as "high-caste features—fair skin and a distinct caste nose" (p. 65), exposing that Dalits' internalize caste hierarchies. As Limbale argues, Dalit consciousness emerges from recognizing this internalized oppression and turning it into awareness and resistance.

By recalling the *Vetti* system, where Dalit families were forced into lifelong bonded labour, Gidla connects present injustice to historical oppression. The Dora's *gadi* (house) symbolized tyranny, slavery, and cruelty and served as a place of torture, rape, and murder (Gidla, 2017, p. 40). As Rege (1998) argues,

"The diversity among Dalit women highlights the need to centre Dalit feminist liberatory knowledge in all liberation efforts. This requires examining how gender, race, class, caste, and sexuality intersect and recognizing that the Dalit feminist perspective itself can be questioned and revised" (Rege, 1995, p. 45). Gidla's narrative does this by showing that Dalit women's suffering and resistance cannot be understood without confronting caste as lived, structural reality.

Mainstream literature often portrays women in these customary roles, depicting issues like a husband's dominant attitude, mistreatment of in-laws, sexual harassment within the family, and domestic violence. These themes are frequently explored by feminist writers, shedding light on age-old violence prevalent in orthodox families. Mainstream literature has, so far, ignored and suppressed the voices of the marginalized, confining them within the existing social structure. *Sarvajanik Satyadharma*, written by Jothiba Phule, called attention to the issue of gender equality and urged people to treat women with greater respect and to educate them (Singh, 2014, p. 37).

4. Education, Resistance and Identity

Gidla shows how institutions such as education, religion and marriage reproduce caste patriarchy. Manjula's experiences in universities reveal that higher education does not dissolve caste prejudice but often reshapes it through moral policing, regional discrimination, and social exclusion. At Andhra University, Manjula faced criticism from fellow Christian women for interacting freely with peers and going to cinema. Despite being postgraduate students, their narrow-minded views reflected internalized caste and gender bias. As M. N. Srinivas (2012) found that even though the Christian missionaries worked hard to convert people in India, they only changed the faith but not the cultural practices. Christian's social status in their community still largely relies on the caste they belonged to before their conversion.

Despite facing many challenges, she persevered and continued her journey alone. She builds supportive network with assertive women, and encounters the belief that "marriage is a compulsory norm, particularly for women" (Lamb, 2011, p. 49). As a motherless child, it was assumed that marriage would offer her protection. Gidla exposes the patriarchal exploitation through the dowry demand in Manjula's proposed marriage showing that education alone cannot dismantle caste patriarchy.

The intersections of caste, gender, and societal norms intertwine to punish women for circumstances beyond their control. Manjula's broken engagement sparked rumours that severely damaged her reputation, turning her into a social outcast. Manjula's self-awareness deepened after completing her post-graduation. Education opens doors to rationalism and logic. Education offers access to political awareness and intellectual autonomy. At home and finally at peace, she began to reflect a growing individual consciousness. She came to understand that existence gains meaning through action and hard work. While gender consciousness relates to women as a group, self-consciousness is rooted in individual awareness. As Socrates said, "The aim of life is the perfection of the soul, achieved by knowledge, particularly knowledge of oneself" (Velmans, 2000, p. 11).

Manjula's life illustrates how education produces political consciousness without securing social equality. Her brother Satyamurth's engagement with communist ideology plays a crucial role in shaping Manjula's political awareness. Her sharp response during a job interview, where she openly questions the meaning of democracy, reveals a critical awareness and exceeds institutional expectations. This moment exemplifies what Anupama Rao (2009) discusses in *The Caste Question* that the Dalit political subjectivity demands both material equality and cultural recognition. Rao writes that Ambedkar envisioned justice not merely as legal inclusion but as "Political adequacy (equalization) and acknowledgment of cultural exclusion are two specific forms of redress that Ambedkar believed were necessary for the Dalit to become a fully humane society" (Rao, 2009, p. 23). Manjula's critique exposes the failure of democratic institutions to address caste-based exclusions, even while claiming formal equality.

Gidla extends this critique of political and social norms through her own refusal to conceal caste identity in the United States. When she declares herself an untouchable and is met with the response, "Oh! But you are so touchable" (Gidla, 2017, p. 3), the moment destabilizes caste as naturalized identity. This moment allows Gidla to reclaim her identity without shame, transforming what was historically a marker of exclusion into a site of political assertion. She is unapologetic and unconventional and challenges caste norms through her honesty. Read through Sharankumar Limbale's notion of Dalit consciousness as a "revolutionary mentality connected with struggle" (Limbale, 2004, p. 32), emerging from lived experiences of humiliation and exclusion.

The internal conflicts and emotional suppression experienced by Dalit women raise serious concerns about mental health. Sujatha Gidla briefly touches on

this issue through Manjula's story. Ajita Chakraborty (1990), in her essay *"Mental Health of Indian Women,"* observes, "One can say that neurosis is a way of expressing emotional difficulties when the usual ways of resolving them fail" (p. 43), provides a useful framework to interpret Manjula's temporary breakdown. Her distress reflects the cumulative burden of caste humiliation, domestic violence, professional struggles, and her suppressed anxiety. Sujatha's suffering reflects the collective pain of Dalit women denied the privileges of caste, wealth, and male power.

Gidla discovered her own identity in the free land of America, regardless of her caste and creed. She spent her entire life attempting to determine what a good human being needs. According to her, the identity problem is built on untouchability levels and occupational forces. In current India, Dalits are viewed as the ghettos of traditions and practices. Limbale's formulation of Dalit literature provides a critical framework for reading Gidla's self-representation. Limbale defines Dalit literature as "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (Limbale, 2004, p. 19), emphasizing that authenticity emerges from lived experience rather than aesthetic refinement.

The socio-economic situation of the Dalit community is revealed in Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (1986), in which he describes the community's painful struggle. In this book, Limbale describes his family's battle to find a position in society. Similar to Limbale, Sujatha Gidla was severely oppressed by the society's divided mind. Identity crisis is the process of discovering one's position in a world of intense rivalry and fragmentation. Gidla was struck with the notion of self-awareness at a very young age in her life. Talking about identity formation, Maya Vinai (2013), in her article, says,

Caste, class, and gender are complete choppers along which identity formation occurs in India. Social changes, urbanization, and reservation have unquestionably decreased the thickness of caste oppression; however, they have lamentably neglected to eradicate it by and large. Consistently, newspapers and media journalists report instances of honor killings, caste-based rape, and oppression (Vinai, 2013, p. 56).

5. Conclusion

Dalit women have historically faced oppression, marginalization, and silencing within deeply entrenched casteist and patriarchal social structures, yet they

have also persistently resisted these forms of domination. Dalit life writing has emerged as a powerful medium through which Dalit women articulate their lived experiences, reclaim voice, and challenge dominant narratives that have traditionally excluded them. Rooted in lived reality, struggle, and resistance, Dalit aesthetics foregrounds pain, protest, and assertion as central elements of creative and political expression.

This paper has shown that Gidla's narrative functions as a Dalit Feminist life narrative that exposes cased and gender-based discrimination. Gidla stands out because of her radical political history. *Ants Among Elephants* gives a compelling account of the voices that had been muted in these historical endeavours and reintroduces those silenced voices by examining them through the prism of feminism. This paper closely studied the profound struggles and resilient resistance of Satyamurthy and Manjula, who belong to the Mala caste. By examining the lived experiences of Satyamurthy and Manjula, it is found that caste-based discrimination, gender inequalities and violence, and the enduring constraints and oppressions were imposed by the upper castes from the British colonial era to contemporary times.

In an interview with *The New Indian Express*, Gidla argues that caste oppression cannot be addressed in isolation from other structures of inequality. Her insistence that caste is not merely a "Dalit problem" but a structural problem affecting the entire society (Gunasekaran, 2018). Gidla links the women's question directly to caste oppression by underlining the urgency of an intersectional Dalit feminist politics.

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From Silence to Defiance: The Voice of a Bengali Dalit Author

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Abstract

The history of literature has long mirrored the social hierarchies within which it is produced. Women, across cultures, have often been relegated to the margins of the literary canon, their creative voices silenced or dismissed under the weight of patriarchal norms. While men were celebrated as the arbiters of culture and intellect, women were tethered to the domestic sphere, their narratives cast as minor or secondary to the dominant tradition. Yet within this silencing lies a persistent undercurrent of resistance. Women's writing has historically sought not only to document their exclusion but also to reclaim language as a tool of self-assertion and critique. In the Indian context, the suppression of women's literary voices has been further compounded by the layered structures of caste. Upper-caste women, though marginalized by gender, still occupied positions of relative privilege, while Dalit women, at the intersection of caste, class and gender oppression, were triply silenced. Their entry into literature thus represents not an aesthetic contribution of beauty but an urgent voice of struggle against the irrational constructions and power structures of the society, one that destabilizes both Brahmanical patriarchy and the elitist assumptions of mainstream feminist discourse. This paper examines how Bengali Dalit woman writer Kalyani Thakur Charal transforms this historical silence into literary defiance through her poetry collection *Poems of Chandalini* and her novella *Andhar Bil.* The paper argues that Charal's writing functions as testimonial resistance, where personal narratives become political interventions. Her work challenges both Brahmanical patriarchy and the exclusions of mainstream feminism by foregrounding Dalit women's embodied experiences as sites of knowledge. The findings demonstrate that Charal reclaims language as a tool of assertion, turning suppressed pain, internalised silence, and marginalised lives into acts of literary and political defiance. In doing so, the paper establishes Bengali Dalit women's writing not as peripheral literature, but as a critical epistemology that demands recognition, dignity, and humanity.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Dalit Women Writers in Literature, Caste and Gender, Resistance, Intersectionality, Bengali Dalit Literature, Feminist Discourse.

Introduction

The voices of Bengali Dalit women acquire a distinctive resonance within a literary culture that has long celebrated itself as progressive and humanist. Despite Bengal's rich literary tradition canonised by figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and later feminist writers like Mahasweta Devi, Dalit women's narratives were systematically pushed to the margins. Experiences shaped by poverty, caste-based discrimination, gendered violence, and social exclusion rarely found articulation within mainstream Bengali literature. Writers like Kalyani Thakur Charal have broken through this silence by placing Dalit women at the centre of literary expression. Charal's writings, in both poetry and prose, insist that the personal is inseparable from the political, and that narrating one's own life is itself an act of resistance.

This emergence must be understood within the larger corpus of Bengali Dalit writing, where testimony, memory, and lived experience form the core of literary expression. Writers such as Manju Bala, through short stories like *Conflict* and *Discrimination*, foreground the everyday humiliations and gendered vulnerabilities faced by Dalit women within domestic and public spaces. Similarly, Lily Haldar's *Bhenga Berar Pachil* explores caste exclusion and the fragile boundaries that separate Dalit lives from social recognition. These narratives function not merely as fiction but as testimonies that expose the persistent workings of caste in ordinary life.

The tradition of Bengali Dalit writing is also shaped by autobiographical and testimonial forms. Manoranjan Byapari's short stories such as *The Fortress*, *The Undead Men* and his autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life* narrate caste oppression, hunger, imprisonment, and political awakening with stark honesty, establishing life-writing as a crucial mode of Dalit expression. Likewise, Jatin Bala's *Shikharh Chhenrha Jiban* (*A Life Uprooted)* documents displacement, refugeehood, and caste marginalisation, linking personal memory to collective Dalit history.

Dalit poetry from Bengal further strengthens this testimonial tradition. Manohar Mouli Biswas's poetry collection *The Wheel Will Turn* articulates resistance, dignity, and political assertion, while critical engagements with his work such as *Bangla Dalit Writer Writes Back* edited by Jaydeep Sarangi highlight the intellectual and aesthetic interventions of Bengali Dalit literature. Anthologies like *Under My Dark Skin Flows a Red River*, translated by Debi Chatterjee, and

Dalit Poems, Songs and Dialogues from Bengal in English Translation edited by Asit Biswas and Shubh Brat Sarkar, have played a crucial role in making these voices accessible beyond the Bengali-reading public.

Within this broader tradition of Bengali Dalit writing, the present research paper focuses exclusively on the works of Kalyani Thakur Charal, particularly her semi-autobiographical narrative *Andhar Bil* and her poetry collection Poems of Chandalini. This focus is deliberate. Charal's writings are among the most widely translated Bengali Dalit texts available in English, making them accessible for critical engagement beyond the Bengali literary sphere. More importantly, both texts consistently foreground Dalit women's embodied experiences of labour, hunger, sexuality, illness, silence, and resistance placing the female body at the centre of caste and gender critique. Through poetry and narrative prose, Charal transforms lived bodily suffering into testimony, where personal experience becomes a form of political and epistemic intervention. By closely reading *Andhar Bil* and *Poems of Chandalini*, this paper examines how Dalit women's voices emerge not as marginal narratives but as critical sites of knowledge that challenge caste hierarchies, patriarchal structures, and the silences of mainstream Bengali literature.

While this paper focuses closely on the works of Kalyani Thakur Charal, her writings must be read in dialogue with the wider tradition of Dalit women's writing in India. Across regions and languages, Dalit women writers have used literature as testimony to record embodied suffering, social exclusion, and everyday resistance. Writers such as Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, also foreground the Dalit woman's body as a site of labour, discipline, humiliation, and survival. Like Charal, their narratives do not seek aesthetic distance but insist on lived experience as a source of knowledge. What unites these writers is a shared emphasis on the everyday food, work, touch, hunger, illness, sexuality, and silence as sites where caste and patriarchy operate together. Testimony, in this tradition, is not only about remembering violence but about exposing how oppression becomes routine and normalized. Charal's poems on burnt lungs, silenced emotions, and the demand to be human resonate with these broader concerns, even as they remain rooted in the specific social and cultural context of Bengal. Reading Charal alongside other Dalit women writers from other regions allows us to see her work not as an exception but as part of a collective Dalit feminist literary practice that challenges national narratives of equality and progress. Her writing thus contributes to an all-India tradition where Dalit women speak not from the margins but from positions of critical authority.

In Dalit literature, testimony should not be understood simply as the narration of personal experience. Rather, it functions as a critical form of knowledge shaped by social location. The importance of Dalit women's testimony becomes clear in the debates initiated by Gopal Guru, especially in his essay Dalit Women Talk Differently. Guru argues that Dalit women speak from a position shaped by both caste oppression and patriarchal control. Because they experience these two forms of domination simultaneously, their voices cannot be adequately represented within either Dalit male discourse or mainstream feminist frameworks. Testimony, therefore, is not a personal confession but a form of knowledge rooted in historically produced suffering and exclusion.

Guru's intervention marked an important shift in Indian sociology and feminist thought by placing social location at the centre of analysis. He shows that how one understands social reality depends on where one is positioned within structures of caste, gender, and power. Dalit women's lived experiences, according to Guru, offer insights into social relations that are often invisible to dominant groups. This argument is closely aligned with standpoint theory, particularly Sandra Harding's idea of "strong objectivity," in her essay titled *Strong Objectivity: A Response to the New Objective Question* which suggests that marginalized groups can develop a more critical understanding of society because they experience its inequalities directly. In the Indian context, Dalit women's testimonies thus become crucial tools for analysing caste, patriarchy, and state power together rather than in isolation. The concept of testimony, however, also raises questions of representation. Guru warns that Dalit women's voices are often either absorbed into non-Dalit feminist narratives or sidelined within Dalit political movements dominated by men. As a result, Dalit women face both external marginalisation and internal silencing. This double exclusion makes autonomous articulation essential. The formation of independent organisations such as the National Federation of Dalit Women must therefore be seen not only as political initiatives but also as epistemic acts. By speaking for themselves, Dalit women assert control over how their experiences are named, interpreted, and circulated. Testimony here becomes a claim to authority over meaning rather than a plea for recognition.

Sharmila Rege extends and refines this argument through her formulation of a Dalit feminist standpoint. While she recognises the importance of difference, Rege cautions against treating difference as an end in itself. An excessive focus on plurality, she argues, can fragment political struggle and weaken collective resistance. For Rege, Dalit women's testimonies should not be read merely as

expressions of identity or cultural difference. Instead, they must be understood as structural critiques that expose Brahmanical patriarchy, caste-blind feminism, and the limitations of left politics. Testimony, in this sense, is collective and historical rather than individual and experiential alone.

The debate between Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, particularly in the book titled *The Cracked Mirror*, further complicates the idea of testimony by questioning claims to authenticity. While Guru stresses the ethical importance of lived experience, Sarukkai asks whether experience alone can guarantee representational legitimacy. This tension highlights that testimony is not a transparent reflection of reality but a politically situated form of narration shaped by power, mediation, and context. At the same time, both scholars agree that dismissing Dalit women's voices in the name of theoretical caution risks reinforcing the very hierarchies that critical scholarship seeks to challenge.

Seen within this framework, testimony emerges as a narrative, political, and methodological practice. It challenges the appropriation of Dalit women's experiences by savarna feminism, exposes patriarchal domination within Dalit movements, and resists attempts by the state to absorb or neutralise dissent. Scholars such as Gail Omvedt further situate such articulations within broader traditions of political dissent in India, where marginalised groups "talk differently" in response to institutional failure and unfulfilled promises of equality.

It is within this intellectual tradition that the present paper locates its reading of *Andhar Bil* and certain poems from the book of poetry *Poems of Chandalini*. By foregrounding silence, bodily pain, partial speech, and narrative absence, the novella and the poems function as a form of Dalit feminist testimony in literary form. These works do not seek to resolve suffering or offer closure. Instead, they strive to record lived realities as they are experienced, asserting that even fragmented and muted voices produce valid knowledge. Through this lens, Dalit women's testimony emerges not as a marginal narrative but as a powerful critique of social reality itself.

Kalyani Thakur Charal's work exemplifies how literature can serve as testimony and weapon simultaneously. Her poems, often stark in imagery and unflinching in tone, articulate the pain, anger, and resilience of Dalit women who have long been rendered invisible. They challenge the sanitized narratives of Bengali society, exposing the contradictions between its progressive self-image and the persistence of caste hierarchies. Her novella *Andhar Bil* extends this attempt

into narrative form, weaving together strands of lived experience, memory, and collective suffering. Through its exploration of displacement, humiliation, and survival, *Andhar Bil* foregrounds the voices of women who resist both the everyday violence of caste society and the erasure of their subjectivities. Charal's choice of language is plain, direct, and at times confrontational, portraying her refusal to conform to elite literary norms, embodying instead a Dalit feminist aesthetic rooted in lived reality.

By situating her work within the broader context of Dalit women's writing in India, it becomes clear that Charal's literary interventions are not isolated but part of a larger tradition of writing from the margins. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege have emphasized in her work *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonies* that Dalit women's literature cannot be read solely as art but must be understood as testimony, as a political strategy to reclaim subjecthood and expose structural injustices . In this light, the very act of writing becomes survival. Charal's oeuvre, therefore, is not just literature, it is an articulation of defiance, a refusal to remain silent in the face of erasure.

Silence, Marginalisation and Politics of Voice. The history of Bengali literature is often narrated as one of progressive refinement, where voices of reason, aesthetics, and humanism converged in the works of canonical writers. Yet beneath this grand narrative lies a silence that has systematically erased Dalit women's voices. Their lived experiences of poverty, humiliation, and exclusion rarely found representation in the celebrated Bengali canon dominated by upper-caste men. This exclusion was not accidental; it was a cultural strategy that mirrored the social hierarchies of caste and gender. Women in general, as scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita remind us, were long denied space in literature, but Dalit women faced the compounded marginalization of being both women and Dalit forced into what Gayatri Spivak once called the "shadowy space of the subaltern," where speaking itself became an act of resistance.

Kalyani Thakur Charal's book titled *Poems of Chandalini* emerges from this very space of imposed silence. Her writings reject the sanitized narratives of Bengali modernity and instead speak the raw language of survival and defiance. *Poem 17*, for instance, offers a striking portrayal of internalized violence and the disciplining of emotion:

"In an intimate emotional spell

someone said, 'Don't cry. Be mechanical.'

Overpowered by self empathy

I slapped myself and said

'Be Mechanical.

Be Mechanical."

The poem portrays a chilling dialogue between affect and suppression. To "be mechanical" is to internalize the demand that Dalit women bury their pain, conceal their grief, and move like cogs in a machinery that thrives on their silence. The self-slapping here is not just physical but symbolic because it reveals how patriarchal and casteist societies have so successfully normalized the erasure of Dalit women's emotions that the women themselves become agents of their own silencing. Yet in narrating this act, Charal refuses silence; the very articulation of suppression becomes a form of voice.

Poem 18 extends this exploration of silenced subjectivity into the domain of daily life and nature. The poem opens with lush imagery:

"Orange morning, wet bamboo leaf morning

golden sun rays morning

green carpet morning…"

But this beauty is immediately undercut by the intrusion of despair: "…yet

to uplift the mind I run towards you.

Because you are the reason for a damp mind…

Then rapidly murmur

nothing has happened, all is well

nothing has happened, say nothing has happened

all is right…"

Here, the repeated refrain "nothing has happened" is a powerful metaphor for denial, it is an echo of how Dalit women are trained to dismiss their own suffering, to maintain an outward calm even when weighed down by centuries of systemic oppression. Nature's beauty is present, but it cannot heal the "damp mind," suggesting how social realities deform even the most intimate human

encounters with the world. Silence is thus both imposed externally and cultivated internally, but the act of writing ruptures this enforced muteness.

To understand the significance of these poems, we must locate them within larger theoretical frameworks. Gopal Guru's seminal essay titled *Dalit Women Talk Differently* argued that Dalit women's experiences cannot be subsumed under either mainstream feminism or Dalit male discourse. Their voices represent an epistemic rupture, a way of speaking forged in the crucible of caste and gender oppression. Sharmila Rege later developed this into what she called a Dalit feminist standpoint, insisting that Dalit women's testimonies should not be treated as mere autobiographical accounts but as critical knowledge that destabilizes Brahmanical patriarchy and its universalist claims. In *Poem 17* and *18,* Charal embodies precisely this standpoint. Her articulation of suppressed emotion, mechanical survival, and denial exposes the layered violence of caste and patriarchy while simultaneously affirming that even broken speech is a form of defiance.

The politics of voice in Charal's work is also inseparable from her self-identification as a Dalit womanist. As noted in her interviews, her writing is an act of protest, her pen is her weapon. This aligns with Alice Walker's concept of womanism, adapted into the South Asian context where Dalit womanism emphasizes inclusivity, communitarian resilience, and ecological rootedness. Charal's poems, though intensely personal, are always communal; they echo the lives of countless Dalit women who must murmur "nothing has happened" to survive, even as their silence hides centuries of accumulated trauma.

By situating *Poem 17* and *18* in this framework, we can see how Charal's work directly responds to centuries of exclusion. Where the Bengali literary canon once thrived on erasing Dalit women, she insists on narrating the pain of erasure itself. Her poems dismantle the myth that Bengal is free of caste, reminding us that marginalization is not only external but internalized, not only political but emotional. Through the poetics of repetition, negation, and contradiction, Charal exposes the mechanics of silence and simultaneously breaks it.

Narrative Resistance in Andhar Bil. Kalyani Thakur Charal's novella *Andhar Bil* occupies a unique space in Bengali Dalit literature. Neither a straightforward autobiography nor a purely fictional novel, it is best read as a novella that blends memory, autobiography, and community narrative. Through this hybrid form, Charal reconstructs the lived experiences of Dalit women in Bengal,

making visible what mainstream Bengali literature has long obscured. The bil, or marshland, functions as a metaphor for this memory work: stagnant yet layered, its still waters preserve the sediment of everyday sorrows. Where official histories and canonical literature remain silent, *Andhar Bil* insists on bearing witness, foregrounding women's voices as the carriers of collective memory and survival.

One of the striking features of the text is its frank engagement with sexuality and morality within the everyday lives of Dalit women. In Subhadra's story, for example, her son is labeled immoral because his birth is linked to her lascivious brother-in-law. This narrative, told casually within the community, illustrates how women's bodies become sites of rumor, blame, and moral policing. Subhadra herself is denied autonomy over her story, as her son's behavior is explained through a patriarchal and superstitious lens. What Charal does by recording this anecdote is exactly what Rege describes: she transforms a silencing mechanism into testimony. The story is no longer a private whisper used to shame Subhadra but a written account that forces readers to confront how women's sexuality is policed and pathologized. It destabilizes dominant literary traditions that sanitize or omit such embodied realities of Dalit women. From Rege's standpoint theory, this is not merely storytelling but an epistemic act: Subhadra's story, once filtered through patriarchal judgment, is reframed by Charal as a collective truth about how Dalit women's lives are narrated and controlled by others.

Charal's testimonial mode in *Andhar Bil* is further deepened through her attention to the Dalit female body as a site where deprivation, discipline, and perception itself are shaped by caste. A striking example appears in the description of Kamalini's relationship with soap and water as stated in page 25 of the book:

"Kamalini uses soap at intervals of fifteen days or a month. When her mother can manage the time, she gets some hot water and takes Kamalini to the tubewell. As she washes her, she seems to be peeling off a layer of her skin. The soapy water gets into her eyes and burns and the girl shakes herself like a goat being killed… Even when she weeps, Kamalini thinks the eyes of grown up people surely never feel burning pain, and perhaps this is why they do not weep."

This reveals how the most basic acts of hygiene are experienced as violence rather than care. Cleanliness, often celebrated within dominant social discourse as a marker of civility and moral order, here becomes a painful and alien practice

imposed on a Dalit child's body. Kamalini's belief that "grown up people surely never feel burning pain" points to an early internalisation of inequality, where suffering is perceived as natural to her own body but absent from others. The Dalit child's body is thus constructed as fundamentally different which is more vulnerable, more exposed, more expendable. In this sense, Charal's narrative aligns closely with the theoretical significance of Dalit testimony as articulated by Sharmila Rege: lived experience here is not anecdotal but epistemic, producing knowledge about how caste is inscribed on the body long before political consciousness is formed. Kamalini's reluctance to use soap becomes a form of embodied resistance, a refusal shaped not by ignorance but by repeated harm.

Equally revealing is Charal's handling of silence in the episode involving the girl from the Biswas family, a Scheduled Caste community positioned slightly higher within the internal hierarchies of caste. The narrative describes her marriage to a non-resident chandsi and shifts its emotional focus entirely to a young artist as observed in page 26 of the book:

"The unrequited love makes the artist boy shed tears and wet his chest… Curious boys and girls like Kamalini gather round. They see the artist shedding tears, he has no brush in his hand."

What is striking here is not only the recognition of artistic sensitivity and emotional depth in a Dalit man thereby challenging stereotypes that deny Dalit subjects' creative interiority but also the complete erasure of the woman herself. Although she functions as the object of desire, she is denied voice, emotion, or reflection. Her thoughts, fears, or consent remain unrecorded. Even within a narrative that seeks to recover Dalit lives, Charal deliberately exposes how women's subjectivities are sidelined, with male suffering and aspiration occupying narrative centrality. This absence is not a failure of representation but a critical exposure of patriarchal narrative logic at work within marginalised communities themselves. Through this silencing, Charal demonstrates how Dalit women often exist as muses, symbols, or catalysts for male emotion rather than as speaking subjects. The woman from the Biswas family is doubly marginalised: first by caste within the broader social order, and then by gender within her own community's storytelling. By foregrounding this imbalance without resolving it, Andhar Bil compels readers to confront how even narratives of resistance can reproduce gendered erasures. This intervention reinforces the paper's argument

that Dalit feminist testimony is essential precisely because it reveals not only oppression from above but also hierarchies operating within marginal spaces.

Equally powerful is the depiction of Kamalini, who considers herself 'a bit masculine' and derives satisfaction from her independence as a street vendor. Her negotiation with gender roles complicates stereotypical portrayals of Dalit women as merely passive victims. Selling palm or papaya for a few rupees may seem trivial, yet in the text it symbolizes agency, resilience, and survival amidst poverty. Moreover, Kamalini's participation in the formation of a Women Matua Group marks a significant intervention in the religious and cultural life of the community. Traditionally barred from practices such as beating the donka or leading religious congregations, these women break taboos by performing kirtan and organizing worship. Their public defiance of scriptural prohibitions, 'the sacred texts say women are forbidden to hold the butt of the plough' which exemplifies how community spaces themselves become arenas of contestation. By placing these women at the heart of religious practice, Charal not only recovers their voices but also reimagines tradition itself as pliable and open to feminist reinterpretation.

The novel further foregrounds women's vulnerabilities within patriarchal structures of kinship and sexuality. The description of widows who live in men's households, recognized only in relation to the dead like 'X's widow, Y's widow' shows how women are denied independent identities. Similarly, Haran kaka's two wives, who quarrel daily but remain trapped in the household, highlight the entrapment of women within polygamous arrangements justified by poverty and social acceptance. These narratives echo Rege's insistence that Dalit women's standpoint illuminates how caste patriarchy operates not only through exclusion from public spaces but also through intimate familial arrangements. Charal's portrayal of such dynamics lays bare how survival itself is negotiated through endurance, compromise, and often silence.

The text also draws attention to the violence of child marriage and reproductive expectations. Kamalini's astonishment at Angoorbala's second marriage after menstruation dramatizes how women's bodies are policed through ritual and custom. The practice of remarrying a child-bride upon puberty naturalizes the idea that a woman's value is tied to reproductive capacity. The later account of a mother who dies after her seventh child reinforces this burden: "A son, at least one, is necessary. Otherwise does the clan exist?' The loss of life is normalized, even sanctified, through religious consolation. Yet Charal's narration refuses

to accept this normalization. By embedding these tragedies in her narrative, she challenges the silence surrounding maternal mortality and reproductive exploitation in Dalit women's lives.

Lastly, the lines, "But in the end, she cannot go to Santiniketan… Her older brother says… Kamal has no opinion of her own." show us how Kamalini's voice is muted at a crucial stage in her life. The decision about her education is not hers to make; her desires, ambitions, or opinions are irrelevant. Her brother's word becomes final, and her silence becomes normalised. This reveals how even when Dalit girls show promise and opportunity arises, patriarchal authority whether in the family or society strips them of agency. Kamalini is not portrayed as unintelligent or uninterested; rather, she is denied the right to choose, reflecting how systemic control operates by silencing women's voices in everyday decisions. However, Charal transforms Kamalini's muted moment into testimony, ensuring that what Kamalini could not say becomes part of a collective Dalit feminist voice. Kamalini's voiceless within the story becomes Charal's resistance outside it.

What emerges from these fragments is a testimonial mode, similar to the voices in Charal's poetry. Like *Poem 17'*s insistence on "being mechanical" or Poem 18's refrain of "nothing has happened," Andhar Bil testifies to how women internalize silence and denial as strategies for survival. However, while the poems often present interior monologues of grief and suppression, the semi-novel extends these voices into a communal register. Its dialogic form, where stories are exchanged in kitchens, fairs, and religious gatherings, ensures that individual pain is always embedded within collective memory. In this sense, poetry and prose serve the same political project: transforming silenced suffering into narrative resistance.

Poetic Voices of Resistance: Kalyani Thakur Charal's Poems from Poems of Chandalini. Kalyani Thakur Charal's *Poems of Chandalini* resonates as a counter-canon of Bengali literature, a space where Dalit women's pain, resilience, and defiance are etched into verse. Her poetry exposes the structural violence of caste and patriarchy while simultaneously transforming writing into a space of survival and agency. Through sharp imagery of the body, labor, and everyday landscapes, Charal creates a language of resistance, reclaiming subjecthood for Dalit women and foregrounding their voices in a tradition that historically erased them.

Poem 22 from *Poems of Chandalini* depicts the smoldering inner turmoil of unfulfilled desires: "More you fire up things

I burn myself more

in flames of unfulfilled desires

I burn slowly"

Here, the metaphor of burning conveys both physical suffering and emotional erosion under systemic oppression. The female body becomes the site of exploitation but also the vessel of defiance, refusing to be extinguished despite the flames. The slow burn symbolizes endurance, a refusal to collapse under the weight of humiliation. By voicing this inner fire, Charal converts silence into testimony, transforming private grief into political speech.

In *Poem 25*, the imagery shifts toward the violence of marital and social institutions: "I'm your candle flame

burnt cotton

the girl's fate

her sad eyes

in a marriage attire…

a wife committed suicide."

Here, marriage which is sanctified in patriarchal discourse is unveiled as a site of despair and death. The bride, clothed in ritual finery, becomes a symbol of entrapment and silenced suffering. The juxtaposition of luminous imagery (candle, flame, stars) with tragedy (suicide, fate) reinforces the contradictions of womanhood under patriarchy. Charal uses the metaphor of the body in flames to denounce gendered exploitation, refusing to let such violence remain hidden behind ritual sanctity.

Poem 34 deepens the theme of abandonment and collective grief:

"You promised me so much,

but all you got me was a sky full of sorrows

that fall like stars from outer space every night…

Tell her that existence in this world is inhumane in itself."

Here, the landscape itself, sky, stars, moon becomes an image of broken promises and inhuman existence. The cosmic imagery mirrors the vastness of Dalit women's despair, yet by articulating sorrow as falling stars, Charal transforms it into a visible, shared experience. This move from private abandonment to cosmic scale asserts the universality of caste and gendered violence while centering Dalit women's voices as narrators of truth.

Next, *Poem 35* powerfully foregrounds the Dalit woman's body as the primary site where caste and patriarchy intersect. The violence described in the poem is not abstract or symbolic alone; it is enacted directly upon a woman's body, particularly her lungs, which represent breath, voice, and life itself. The poem begins with an image of forced purification:

"When you were blowing into the furnace

my lungs pulled out

and they turned red like charcoal tikkas

because you wanted them pure like yourself."

Here, the demand for purity is directed at a woman's body, exposing how caste ideology operates through gendered control. The furnace becomes a metaphor for Brahmanical society that seeks to discipline and cleanse Dalit women, not to purify them but to burn them into submission. The woman's lungs being "pulled out" suggests extreme vulnerability and violation, indicating how Dalit women's bodies are imagined as available for correction, punishment, and pain.

The reference to "charcoal tikkas" is particularly significant because it reduces the woman's body to an object meant for consumption and disposal. This image echoes the long history of Dalit women being treated as expendable labouring bodies rather than as full human subjects. The damage inflicted is not momentary; it is prolonged and intimate. The poem's attention to wounds, pus, and bleeding,

"Even now, the puss persists, and it bleeds"- emphasises how caste violence marks the female body permanently. Pain does not end, it settles into the flesh and becomes part of everyday existence.

The speaker's search for healing further reveals the gendered nature of suffering:

"I've applied a variety of ointments…sold on Gede local trains.

There were no treatments

that could alleviate the discomfort."

The use of local, makeshift medicines sold on trains points to the absence of institutional care for Dalit women's bodies. Their pain is treated as normal, inevitable, and unworthy of serious attention. The lack of cure reflects how Dalit women are expected to endure silently, managing injury through resilience rather than justice or repair.

What transforms the poem into Dalit feminist testimony is its closing address to the oppressor:

"Do you know what these burnt lungs say?

Stay well, wherever you are and with whomever you are

Stay well."

Despite the severe bodily harm inflicted on her, the woman does not speak from hatred or revenge. Instead, she asserts moral strength and emotional restraint. This gesture resists dominant stereotypes that portray Dalit women as either passive victims or uncontrollably angry subjects. The woman's voice here is calm, self-aware, and ethically grounded, asserting dignity even in suffering.

When read through the lens of Dalit feminist theory, Poem 35 shows how testimony emerges from the injured female body. The woman's lungs speak not only of pain but of endurance and selfhood. By allowing the woman's body to narrate its own wounds, Charal converts private suffering into collective knowledge. The poem insists that Dalit women's embodied experiences are not marginal or incidental but central to understanding caste violence. In doing so, it reinforces the claim that Dalit women's testimony offers a crucial and irreplaceable perspective on social reality.

Poem 43 crystallizes the spirit of self-assertion:

"Do not adorn me as moon on the head

I will become a new moon

Allow me to walk the earth's surface

Allow me to be human."

This demand to 'be human' is perhaps the most direct articulation of Dalit women's resistance. Rejecting ornamental roles and symbolic idealization, Charal insists on recognition of Dalit women's material, lived humanity. The metaphor of the new moon signifies renewal, visibility, and cycles of change, marking a shift from silence to articulation.

Poem 47 shifts Charal's focus from intimate bodily injury to the everyday operation of caste power within social and institutional spaces, while still keeping the Dalit woman's body at the centre of this violence. The poem exposes how caste hierarchy continues to function even within supposedly modern, constitutional settings. The figure of the Kayastha girl, married into a Brahmin household, becomes crucial here. Although she herself faces discrimination

"her mother-in-law does not savour dishes cooked by her"

she reproduces the caste hierarchy by asserting superiority over her tribal colleague:

"Look at my junior

where she sits in the hierarchy!"

This moment reveals how caste prejudice is internalised and enacted through women's bodies, where food, labour, and proximity become markers of purity and pollution. The tribal woman's body is not only excluded but actively disciplined. Charal shows how constitutional rights are violated through everyday acts of humiliation and revenge:

"Flouting constitutional right

she exacts her vengeance on her."

The woman's body here becomes the site where institutional power is exercised through denial of dignity, opportunity, and recognition. Importantly, the poem exposes the hypocrisy of caste meritocracy by contrasting this treatment with the unchecked promotion of upper-caste men: "that baidya born man

has jumped over at least ten others… and got his promotion."

While Dalit women are scrutinised and punished, upper-caste male bodies move freely through structures of power without accountability.

Charal further reveals how caste oppression is sustained collectively, not accidentally. Trade union leaders, political figures, and bureaucratic systems are shown to protect upper-caste interests while erasing evidence of injustice:

"RTI will bring you no results

Because all documents have been destroyed."

The destruction of records mirrors the historical erasure of Dalit women's suffering, rendering their bodies visible only as targets of control, not as subjects of rights. Violence here is not always physical; it is administrative, systemic, and deeply gendered.

What makes this poem particularly significant within a Dalit feminist framework is its insistence that caste violence does not operate only through overt brutality but through everyday gestures like food refusal, workplace hierarchy, denial of promotion, and silencing through paperwork. Dalit women's bodies are positioned at the lowest rung of this system, constantly watched, judged, and disciplined. By naming these mechanisms, Charal transforms institutional injustice into poetic testimony. The poem asserts that the Dalit woman's body is not only a victim of caste but also the lens through which the workings of caste society can be most clearly understood.

Lastly, *Poem 51* marks a significant shift in Poems of Chandalini from individual suffering to collective political awakening. The poem is brief but forceful:

"The early birds call

I call

Wake up black men and women!

Thousand-years-asleep-men and women

Wake up!"

Here, Charal moves beyond personal pain and speaks directly to the Dalit community as a collective. The repetition of the call to 'wake up' transforms the poem into a rallying cry, urging Dalit men and women to recognise their long history of oppression and silence.

The phrase 'thousand-years-asleep' is particularly important. It does not suggest ignorance or passivity but points to a condition imposed by centuries of caste domination. Sleep here functions as a metaphor for enforced silence, denial of rights, and systematic exclusion from knowledge, power, and self-recognition. By naming this historical sleep, Charal identifies caste oppression as a long-term structural condition rather than an individual failure.

The poet's voice, 'I call' is significant because it establishes the Dalit woman not merely as a victim but as a political speaker. After documenting bodily injury, hunger, humiliation, and silencing in earlier poems, the Dalit woman now assumes the role of one who awakens others. This is a crucial reversal of power. The Dalit woman's voice is no longer confined to testimony alone; it becomes directive and mobilising. She speaks not only for herself but to her community, asserting moral and political authority.

The reference to 'black men and women' further universalises Dalit experience while retaining its rootedness in caste oppression. The term signals shared histories of marginalisation and racialised bodies, allowing the poem to resonate with global struggles against structural inequality. At the same time, the inclusion of both men and women is important. Charal does not isolate Dalit women's struggle from that of Dalit men; instead, she insists on collective awakening while retaining the Dalit woman's position as the speaker who initiates this call.

When read within the framework of Dalit feminist testimony, *Poem 51* represents the culmination of resistance. Earlier poems expose what caste and patriarchy do to the Dalit woman's body and psyche. This poem, however, imagines a future-oriented politics rooted in awareness and action. Testimony here evolves into mobilisation. Thus, it reinforces the central argument of this paper that Dalit women's poetry is not limited to narrating suffering but actively participates in reshaping social consciousness. By calling her community to wake up, Charal positions Dalit women not at the margins of political thought but at its very centre as thinkers, leaders, and agents of transformation.

Conclusion: From Silence to Speech

In both *Poems of Chandalini* and *Andhar Bil*, Kalyani Thakur Charal demonstrates how writing becomes an act of survival and defiance for Dalit women. Her poems, with their stark imagery of burning lungs, damp minds, and the plea to be human, capture the intimate violence of caste and gender oppression while refusing silence. Her novella, on the other hand, situates

these struggles within community narratives, exposing how child marriage, widowhood, polygamy, and religious taboos shape women's everyday lives. What unites the two genres is their testimonial quality, each line and story stands as evidence against centuries of invisibility. Is this not resistance at its sharpest edge, when narration itself becomes a weapon that unsettles the foundations of caste and patriarchy?

By placing Charal's work alongside Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint, we see that these are not isolated experiences but collective epistemologies, ways of knowing and speaking in the world differently. They demand that we read literature not just as art but as politics, as testimony, as resistance. And what greater contribution can literature make than to wound privilege, to fracture complacency, and to demand recognition of the humanity of those deliberately denied it? Hence, 'Writing from the Shadows' is not just a metaphor for exclusion, it is a strategy of survival, a declaration of war against silence. Charal's words reclaim the erased spaces of Bengali Dalit women, reminding us that every line, every fragment of memory, every burst of anger is a step toward dignity. And so isn't it time we ask: if shadows can speak with such fire, how long will we keep pretending not to hear? If the margins have carved a language of defiance, how much longer can the center ignore its own trembling ground?

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Mapping Indian Feminisms: In Pursuit of an Intersectional Dalit Standpoint

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Abstract

This paper aims to engage with the multiple constructions of 'women' through history specifically with an intent to amplify the ideas pertaining to gender and sexualities in the Indian context. It postulates arguments around areas like construction of Indian womanhood and how it is problematised with intersecting structures of gender, caste, class, religion, and sexuality. The paper evaluates notions like the body and violence meted out based on gender; evolution of 'gender' and 'sexuality' through history and the contemporary ruminations. While tracing the trajectory of Indian feminisms through a multitude of books such as those by Maitreyee Chaudhari, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, Radha Kumar, Sharmila Rege, Anandita Pan to name a few, it seeks to identify the term Indian feminism not as a monolithic homogenous narrative, but as one rooted in different epistemic practices. The paper analyses how the notions of patriarchy as constituted of gender binarism, has come to be challenged through the intersectional lenses of caste, class, religion, sexuality and so on. The paper will endeavour to incorporate a variety of references ranging from fiction, theoretical texts, films, and real-life cases etc.

Keywords: Indian Feminism, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Dalit feminist standpoint, Ambedkar

Introduction

Feminism as a theoretical framework along with its indicators and specifications is constantly developing and transforming. As a movement, feminism has been through a wave of reforms when adopted and adapted by both Western and post-colonial societies. Feminism in the western world focused on the legal reforms for women and worked toward equality through legislature. The core

emphasis was the public domain and the key priority was outside of home and family structure. Their central goal was to seek an equal engagement of women in the public domain. However, they did not seem to address the issue by examining the role of patriarchy as a systemic force endangering equality for women. Contemporary feminism aims to address these concerns through an investigation of the experiences of women in both public and private spheres. This helps towards an examination of women subordination within domestic environment as well. Additionally, contemporary feminism also examined problems such as the double burden of reproductive and productive labour, wage gaps, and the hierarchical nature of the workplace. It also exposed the present understanding and rigidity of social identities like femininity and masculinity, along with biological determinism. Furthermore, the support groups or people identifying as feminists have undergone a significant transition. It means that the spectrum is wider now and does cover more people than just women. It includes a wider range of anti-hegemonic groups, including LGBTQI people, non-binary people, people who question ableism, amongst others.

The study of Indian feminism has been undertaken from varied approaches and diverse standpoints. Maitreyee Chaudhuri, in her book *Feminism in India*, details conceptual parameters that locates Indian feminism at the intersection of activism and history. She illustrates a glaring disconnect between activity and theory in her examination of Indian feminism. Chaudhuri contends that feminism in India has unceasingly looked at Western feminist paradigms to grasp nuances of advance women's rights and gender equality. In the Indian context, Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's two-volume anthology, *Women Writing in India*, stands as a monumental collection of women's literary works spanning centuries, representing a significant repertoire of Indian women's writing. In the preface, Tharu and Lalitha explicitly state that their primary objective in compiling these two volumes was to challenge "critical assumptions, historical circumstances, and ideologies that generally have been hostile to women's literary production (Tharu and Lalita xvii)." The method employed to unearth women writers from historical periods served a dual purpose: firstly, it aimed to rectify the erasure and marginalization of women within dominant narratives; secondly, it aimed to contribute to a gendered comprehension of those overarching narratives. By actively seeking out and highlighting the works of women writers, this approach sought to correct the historical oversight and neglect of women's contributions. In her influential book *The History of Doing*, Radha Kumar discusses the chronological division of Indian feminism into two distinct phases: pre-independence and post-independence. According

to Kumar, the pre-independence phase is largely defined by the "experience of colonial rule," which significantly influenced the nature and trajectory of feminist activism during that time. On the other hand, the post-independence phase is characterized by the "experience of democracy." The nationalist movement's leaders emphasised the significance of addressing women's issues as a critical component of societal development during the pre-independence era. Partha Chatterjee in his article "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" points out how the image of the nineteenth century modern '*bhadramahila'* or gentle woman was constructed to follow the dualities of "home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine." (Chatterjee 244). This 'new woman,' fashioned to fit the 'new patriarchy,' was not only contrasted with the modern western *memsahibs*, "it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous traditions" (Chatterjee 244). This demonstrates how the social reformist movement addressed the issue of women while maintaining the gender hierarchy.

Feminist movements that began to take shape after India gained its independence, aimed to address several concerns, including the sexual division of labour. The focus shifted significantly because of these issues, from supporting men's supremacy over women to promoting women's economic independence and bodily autonomy. Women started to speak out about issues including unequal pay, gender-based disparities in skilled and unskilled labour, and how society saw domestic work and parenting duties as fundamental obligations rather than as legitimate types of work. Post independence mainstream Indian feminism focused on the recognition that the personal is political while it took up the issues of class and gender. The intersection of personal and political spheres became evident through the emergence of issues such as dowry murder, intrafamilial rape, and custodial rape. These concerns underscored the notion that the human body is not solely the property of an individual, but rather influenced by various social, familial, and economic, and 'oppressive machinery of the state in action' (Desai and Vibhuti 182). All these assertions, however, were based on the erroneous assumption that the idea of an "Indian woman" denotes a single, cohesive group. Religion was never the main analytical emphasis in mainstream feminist discourse, even after the Shah Bano case acknowledged the existence of communal disparities among women.

The 1995 United Nations conference on women in Beijing, which brought together a variety of women from both rural and urban backgrounds onto the international stage, is an example of how the 1990s represented a turning point for women's movements. Moreover, new investigations into India's political

climate were spurred by the Mandal and Masjid occurrences. It was clear then that "one could no longer speak of 'women' without reference to class caste and community" (Sen and Dhawan 25).

This propels the argument further to recognise the alternate strands of Indian feminism. One of them is Dalit feminism. It is imperative to acknowledge that the matter of caste and gender can be examined from various perspectives. One approach involves incorporating the issue of gender within Dalit movements, while another entail initiating an epistemological inquiry into the intersecting mechanisms of caste and gender. Additionally, it is crucial to explore how the presence of Dalit women necessitated a paradigm shift, moving beyond viewing caste as a singular axis of operation to recognizing its intricate relationship with gender. During the latter part of nineteenth century, Dalit women contributed significantly in the non-Brahman movements. Anti-caste movements led by prominent figures like Jotirao Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, and E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar saw an active participation by Dalit women. They offered a formidable challenge to the Brahmanical caste system, effectively in fields such as education, sexuality, and labour. In the 1990s, various autonomous Dalit women's organisations came forth, focusing on the intersecting questions of both caste and gender, nationally as well as internationally. There was a significant diversion in the approach that reformers like Phule proposed to emancipate the shudras, ati-shudras, and women from caste-based oppression from the approach of upper caste reformers who focused primarily on the concerns of upper caste women like sati and widow remarriage. As against these reformers, who neglected the issues of the marginalised groups, Phule's vision challenged the systemic oppression faced not just by Dalits but also women (both Dalit and upper caste), encompassing gender and caste dimensions. By acknowledging the intersecting material and sexual repercussions through which Brahminical patriarchy exploits women from diverse castes, Phule highlights the stark contrast between the labour of lower caste women, both within and outside the household, and the leisure enjoyed by Savarna women. The establishment of the Satyashodhak Sangh aimed to bring recognition to the experiences of lower caste women who are disproportionately affected by the multifaceted structures of caste, class, and gender.

Mukta Bai, an eleven-year-old student enrolled in Phule's educational institution, emphasises the relevance of knowledge accessibility using the values upheld by Phule and the objectives of Satyashodhak Sangh. Muktabai goes beyond simple education to establish a connection between the factors contributing to

lower castes' deprivation, such as the loss of land rights, internal hierarchies that are common among them, and the different experiences and situations that women from upper and lower castes have when giving birth. Elucidating the caste division within lower communities she writes in her essay, "About the Griefs of the Mangs and Mahars": "But the mahars here, no less untouchable than the mangs… consider themselves to be the superior to mangs, so much so that they do not allow even the shadow of a mang to fall over them" (Mukta bai 216). Here, the hierarchy within lower caste communities and the Dalit patriarchy are apparent.

During the Ambedkarite era spanning the 1920s to 1950s, key focal points revolved around education, sexuality, and labour. The significance of women's entitlement to education and employment, as pivotal factors in the advancement of Dalit communities, was consistently emphasized by Ambedkar within his contentious proposal, the Hindu Code Bill. Sharmila Rege, in her book titled *Against the Madness of Manu*, contends that the opposition faced by the Bill from various segments of the savarna groups substantiates its intention to disrupt the prevailing caste and patriarchal controls over the realms of production and reproduction.

Ambedkar pushed for women to develop self-respect and discouraged them from taking on jobs like devadasi and prostitution. He promoted adopting behaviours like maintaining cleanliness and dressing modestly, like upper caste ladies. These behaviours were meant to subvert the Brahminical social order, which stigmatised lower caste women with outward signs of "impurity," "sexual availability," and "immorality." Ambedkar's intimate ties to Dalit feminism can be ascribed to his understanding that caste operates by endogamy and the sexism of women is subjugated. He thought Manu's codification of Brahminic ideas of the perfect woman into state laws had a big part to play in maintaining and strengthening the hierarchical systems "by which marriage, kinship, and the degradation of women link structurally in reproducing graded inequality in society" (Rege 144). In *Annihilation of Caste*, he writes "I am convinced that the real remedy is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste" (Ambedkar 36).

Dalit women's activism has made a significant contribution by redefining patriarchy as "Brahmanical Patriarchy." This acknowledgement has demonstrated that the experiences of women in India are not monolithic. Within texts like the *Manusmriti*, the ideologies of Brahmanical Patriarchy are

intricately woven into the fabric of the caste system. This results in distinct sets of rules governing the realms of sexuality, marriage, and labour for both Savarna and Dalit women. By interpreting patriarchy through the lens of Brahmanical Patriarchy, a transformative shift occurs, as it unveils how various oppressive characteristics impact different groups of women. This perspective brings to light the intersecting dynamics of oppression and underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences within the larger framework of caste-based power structures. Uma Chakravarthy defines Brahminical patriarchy as "A set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes… It incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives and *pativrata* women who are valorised and a structure of rules and institutions by which caste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion" (Chakravarti 34).

In the 1980s, significant incidents like the Mathura rape case and the Bhanwari Devi rape case brought the subject of violence against women to light, forcing mainstream feminism to address it. These incidents had a big influence on feminist discourse about violence. The rape case involving Bhanwari Devi outraged feminists and independent groups the most out of all of these incidents. While the National Federation of Women focused on analysing rape in terms of class dynamics and the right to bodily autonomy, an important aspect that often went overlooked was the influence of caste identity. Dalit feminists, on the other hand, drew attention to how rape against Dalit women in public spaces served as a means to undermine the "masculinity" of Dalit men, while simultaneously reinforcing the notion of the sexual availability of lower caste women who engaged in social activism beyond the confines of the domestic sphere.

The 1990s is credited with the emergence of independent and autonomous Dalit women's organisations such as the National Federation of Dalit women or NFDW (1995) and the All-India Dalit women's forum (2006) which evolved out of "a strong feeling that the Dalit women need to organise themselves in order to address their special needs and problems" (Subramaniam 59-60). NFDW 's participation in the UN World Conference against racism held in Durban in 2001, marked a watershed moment for Dalit women's organisations. Eva-Maria Hardtmann notes that dalit women's presence in Durban "should also be seen in contrast to the dominance of men in leadership positions within the Dalit movement locally/regionally in Indian and also in Dalit diaspora"

(Hardtmann 219). Subramaniam points out that such "assertion of the *Dalit* women's experience through the forum of their organisations drew the attention of mainstream feminist activists and academicians and led to a major debate on the plurality vs unity within the women's movement" (Subramaniam 60).

It becomes clear that the ideas of an all-encompassing 'Indian woman' or a specific 'Indian feminism' are false as a result of the effort to outline a whole historical panorama of Indian feminism. In India, the many components that make up the concept of 'woman' vary greatly depending on things like class, caste, religion, ethnicity, and more. As a result, it is crucial to have conversations about identity, diversity, and intersectionality in order to recognise and understand the heterogeneity that defines the 'Indian woman.' The historical trajectory of feminism has encompassed a complex interplay between the concepts of difference and sameness. On one hand, feminist scholarship has sought to establish a unified feminist subjectivity by highlighting shared experiences among women. However, this narrative of universalism has not gone unchallenged. Feminist movements emerging from non-white, non-western contexts have interrogated the application of difference, scrutinizing its role in perpetuating the self/other binary. For a considerable duration, the notion of 'self' primarily denoted the white western woman, while the 'other' encompassed non-white, non-western women. This definition accentuated essentialist boundaries between Western and Third World feminisms.

In the context of First and Third World feminisms, Chandra Talpade Mohanty has astutely observed that the colonial legacy establishes a dichotomy between these two spheres and plays a role in shaping Western feminism. This shaping occurs through a process of objectification, whereby Third World women are positioned as objects to be studied, enabling Western feminism to establish itself as the subject. Through the claim of possessing "knowledge" about Third World women, Western feminism asserts its superiority as a generator of theoretical frameworks, while relegating Third World women to the role of providers of empirical evidence. Mohanty presents a critique of the methodologies employed by Western feminism in representing Third World women, frequently resorting to cultural reductionism that reifies and confines these women as passive victims, devoid of agency and subjectivity. Mohanty argues that instead of viewing men and women as fixed entities defined solely by their predetermined gender roles within society, attention should be directed towards examining how economic structures, colonial legacies, religious systems, familial dynamics, and other institutions actively engage in shaping and delineating gendered identities.

Accordingly, Mohanty advocates for an intersectional approach within feminism, one that recognizes and addresses the interplay of multiple social categories and power dynamics.

Intersectionality encompasses the examination of how various forms or systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination intersect and interact with one another. It serves as a methodological framework for analysing the interconnections between multiple dimensions of identity and the diverse ways in which social relationships and subject formations are shaped. The conceptualization of intersectionality emerged as a response to the critiques put forth by feminists of colour, with a particular focus on the experiences and perspectives of black women. As legal theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw argues, intersectionality rejects the single axis framework often embraced by both feminists and anti-racist scholars, instead analysing "…the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's… experiences." (Crenshaw 1244). Intersectionality offers a critical perspective on the tendency to abstract and generalize the object of knowledge by advocating for an approach that centres on the lived experiences of those who constitute the object of knowledge. By doing so, it challenges the oversimplification and homogenization of categories such as 'woman,' acknowledging instead the existence of multiplicities and differences among women. It suggests that a fruitful understanding of these diversities can be achieved by commencing the analysis from the standpoint of women's experiences. A significant implication of the intersectional framework is that both marginalized and privileged groups can serve as starting points for intersectional analysis, facilitating an exploration of the interconnected systems of oppression and domination.

In this context, the significance of Leslie McCall's conceptualization of intersectionality is underscored, particularly in relation to her inter-categorical and intra-categorical approaches. By inter categorical approach, McCall refers to the identification of "relations of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimension" (McCall 1773), while the intra-categorical approach "interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself" where it shows a critical stance towards categories that are primarily seen through a single axis of identity. This helps us identify not just the uniqueness of black women's experiences, but also difference within. Within the realm of intersectional analysis, the intra-categorical distinction is not only acknowledged in relation to white women but also in relation to black men. Consequently, black feminism

serves to elucidate the intricate and distinctive dynamics of race and gender as they pertain to black women, aspects that often elude the perceptions of both anti-racists and white feminists. Black feminists assert that black women are frequently portrayed as victimized subjects by black male authors, while white feminists tend to include them merely as tokens driven by a sense of guilt. (Walker 231-32). Such assessment can become very useful for the Indian context as well. Mary E. John's "Intersectionality: Rejection or Critical Dialogue?" and Nivedita Menon's "Is Feminism About Women" explore the relevance of the methodology of intersectionality in the Indian context. Menon argues that the concept of intersectionality is redundant within the Indian context, given the preexisting diversity present in Indian feminism. On the contrary, Mary E. John supports the notion of intersectionality, as it provides an inclusive platform for all marginalized voices, without prioritizing or favouring any particular group over others. She argues that despite the apparent existence of gender, class, caste, and religion, "the particular trajectories taken by Indian feminism" have not always reflected a "successful engagement with the problem that intersectionality identifies, namely, the working out of the simultaneity of structures of oppression, especially for those occupying locations of marginality" (John 74).

The theory of intersectionality assumes a critical role within the discourse on Indian feminism. In the past, Indian feminism frequently encountered difficulties in comprehending the intricate interplay between factors such as religion and caste. Conventional feminist perspectives often employed a unidimensional lens centred solely on gender-related issues, disregarding the imperative need for a comprehensive understanding of the diverse influences impacting women from various backgrounds. Consequently, the notion of difference and intersectionality emerges as an inseparable and intricate facet of this narrative. This marks a paradigm shift as it departs from the enforcement of homogeneity and moves forward to a theory that acknowledges diversity, and aims to understand the manner in which varied social structures, along with gender, impact various groups of women in different aspects. MacKinnon in her essay, "Intersectionality as Method: A Note." emphasizes the importance of particularity within the framework of intersectionality. She argues that the knowledge gained from the lived realities of specific groups should not be understood as limited, constraining, and narrow. Instead, she asserts that particularity aims to foster a more minute comprehension of systemic dynamics. In the Indian context, Dalit feminism emerges as an intersectional political movement, which acknowledges and engages in understanding differences among groups and in the process

rework the critical lenses of mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics. Intersectionality, functions as a critical theoretical framework and examines the interlocking systems of operation, offering a crucial methodology for examining and critically analysing differences.

In the context of the post-independence era, feminist discourse has explored the various concerns pertaining to the notion of the "body" and its intersection with violence. Violence, as a subject of theoretical inquiry, has been approached from two distinct perspectives: physical and sexual violence on one hand, and the manifestation of more implicit forms of violence that engender mental repercussions on the other. The examination of gender violence has been handled from two approaches in feminist theorising. The first viewpoint examines the male-female dichotomy and how the fundamental sexual differences between the sexes result in various forms of violence. Researchers have since broadened their study's focus to include violence directed at people or organisations that stray from traditional gender roles, opening new research directions. Force is seen as a power that is central to enforcing any kind of violence. However, it becomes important to access and evaluate the larger conceptual framework inhabiting violence by interrogating the authenticity of different kinds of violence. This investigation will help us to understand and differentiate between socially acceptable acts of violence and those that are not. Gender-based violence as a mechanism ensures that the individuals or groups which occupy non-dominant or marginalised positions are always at a disadvantage. The violence which results from this is deeply entrenched in the very fabric of the society, in all its social and cultural forms, framed by the specific structures, norms, and values. In addition, the manner in which gender violence is experienced across groups is not uniform. It is influenced by the social identities located at the intersections of privileges and oppression. Gender violence is witnessed in different forms, comprising physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, and socio-economic dimensions. It becomes important to acknowledge that the fundamental basis of gender violence lies in the unequal power structure perpetuated by patriarchy.

Mainstream Indian feminism has confronted the issues of gender-based violence. Issues such as dowry, domestic violence, and rape have been deliberated upon widely by feminists. The prevalence of private/public dichotomies makes the issue of dowry of great significance in the Indian context. Radha Kumar's work, *The History of Doing* presents a collection of narratives that shed light on domestic violence and dowry-related deaths. These accounts highlight how both the community and law enforcement authorities often perceive these incidents

as "family matters," relegating them to the realm of privacy. This perception persists across different social strata, encompassing diverse classes, castes, and religions, including even the social elites. The stigma of victimisation is one of the main reasons that such acts typically go unreported. According to Radha Kumar, the stigma stems from the patriarchal perception that "a woman's life is necessarily dependent on a man" (Kumar 117). Uma Chakravarti terms this as a women's social identity. In her article, "Gender, Caste and Labour: Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood", she writes, "A woman is recognised as a person when she is incorporated into her husband--only then does she become a social entity and in that state, she is auspicious, a 'sumangali', a 'saubhagyavati" (Chakravarti 2249).

The incidence of violence against women, which usually takes place in the home, has wide-ranging effects on women, including single women and widows, in addition to married women. The idea of the domestic sphere includes a woman's married home as well as the natal home. There has been a significant re-evaluation of what constitutes violence against women as our understanding of domestic abuse has grown. Insightful feminist scholars have argued forcefully that problems like violence resulting from dowry practises are not only private affairs but are inextricably political. Such instances of violence are deeply influenced by power dynamics rooted in patriarchy, social class, caste hierarchies, religious affiliations, and other intersecting factors. Feminist discourse surrounding violence against women has played a crucial role in highlighting the interconnected nature of gender and class-based discriminations that women face. In the context of traditional Indian social structures, where it is widely assumed that girls will eventually move to their marital households, they often experience ongoing disadvantage within their natal homes, particularly concerning educational opportunities and property rights. Consequently, issues such as spousal abuse and dowry assume a more complex form.

Within feminist theory and activism, rape has been subject to various conceptualizations. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, in her work *Real and Imagined Women* emphasizes that rape serves as a manifestation of male sexual domination. As such, it is widely recognized as a prominent and extreme form of patriarchal oppression, stripping women of any agency over their own bodies. Feminist perspectives on rape also aim to situate it within a broader intersectional framework, where they recognise that "patriarchy is not the only structure of oppression in society and that privileges and handicaps are heterogeneous distributed unevenly among categories of both men and women" (Rajan 73).

Feminist criticisms of rape in India revealed it as a systemic issue that often stemmed from an impacted a group. Thus, most of the cases of reported rapes were institutional rapes-- in the hands of the police, army, landlords, upon women of oppressed classes and castes. As Sunder Rajan mentions, "rape as a phenomenon in contemporary India more properly understood as the expression of male violence, sanctioned by various modes of social power, rather than of sexual desire" (Rajan 73). Mathura rape case is a glaring example.

Historically, in feminist discussions, the concept of violence has been theorised predominantly in the form of physical and sexual violence directed towards women. But violence is executed not just through force but also through disadvantaging, discrimination at workplace, displacement, and so on. Additionally, it would be wrong to assume that violence is a homogeneous form that is inflicted on women alone. There are different kinds of violence that affect different marginalised groups differently. One can consider dowry deaths as examples of Brahminical patriarchy and the rape of Mathura as an example of caste and gender intersection. There is also a need to examine the various ways in which different identity groups are impacted by gender-based violence. It is imperative to understand the ways in which heteronormativity and sexuality disproportionately marginalizes communities that deviate from the conventional binary norms. As posited by Nivedita Menon, normative heterosexuality is founded upon entrenched caste and gender norms. The institution of marriage, specifically a heterosexual union, primarily aims to guarantee the propagation of offspring who will perpetuate the paternal lineage. But this generating sexuality also needs to be legitimate, that is "within the bounds of marriage limited by caste and community boundaries" (Menon 34). This is the reason why Ambedkar proposed inter-caste marriages in place of endogamy to abolish the caste system. He asserted that this change would help eliminate caste disparities. In her analysis, Menon emphasises how important it is to integrate the concerns of heteronormativity in feminist investigations, particularly in relation to the institution of the family. She contends that within the realm of feminist discourse, the substantial emphasis placed on critiquing issues, such as dowry and domestic violence, inadvertently perpetuates the notion that a conventional heterosexual family unit would naturally be devoid of such forms of violence. Notably, the prevailing framework acknowledges the heterosexual configuration of the family while solely gauging the varying degrees of violence and the status of women within it. Menon posits that this analytical approach fails to interrogate the very foundation of the family structure, as it effectively endorses the heterosexual patriarchal family as an

indicator of social stability. The attention directed towards dowry and domestic violence is primarily invoked when the underlying stability of the heterosexual family unit is disrupted. She astutely observes that while it is undoubtedly crucial to confront and address these manifestations of violence, it is equally imperative to critically examine the heteronormative foundations upon which the notion of family is predicated. In this regard, she advocates for a shift in focus, urging us to divert our attention away from an exclusive consideration of homosexuality and instead scrutinize the mechanisms through which procreative heterosexuality engenders specific forms of oppression and violence. A basic review of violence within the context of feminist analysis, therefore, demands a critical assessment of the underlying assumption of heteronormativity. It not only broadens the focus of the investigation to include men and boys as well as women, ensuring a more inclusive understanding of the problem, but also, highlights the fact that violence can take many different forms and is not limited to physical or sexual cruelty. The displacement of people should also be regarded as a form of violence.

To conclude, I would like to say that, contemporary feminist thought goes beyond a restricted focus on supporting legislative changes to combat discrimination. Its present course is focused on the complete emancipation of women and explores a variety of concerns. Apart from acknowledging the gendered aspect of both the public and private spaces that women inhabit, this thought also examines the challenge that reproductive and productive labour create, the ever-increasing wage gap, the hierarchy that functions at all workplaces, and the contemporary focus and attention that social media posits on the changing face of feminism. As a fundamental concept, feminism opposes the historical rigid categories of identity construction including masculinity, femininity, as well as biological determinism. In the process, it endeavours to empower the marginalised sections that have been always constrained by societal norms and expectations, envisioning a more equitable and inclusive world. This enables us to comprehend that there is an inherent diversity among the marginal sections including women, and it is not a homogenous category. Furthermore, it recognises that there are other systems of oppression like caste and class that work in close association with gender. This recognition leads us to the concept of intersectionality. The lens of intersectionality helps us to signify a departure from the imposition of monolithic concept of gender and instead emphasize the importance of understanding how various social identities, when intersecting with gender, impact different marginal groups in distinct ways. Intersectionality functions as a meaningful tool for examining and critically analysing the

intersections of various oppressive structures. It enriches our understanding of the way different groups are affected by different patriarchal oppressions. The concept of "difference" plays a key role in recognising the diverse forms of oppression and the way it affects various groups in different proportions. This helps pave a way for a more inclusive approach in devising a methodology that is cognisant of the diversity and ensures that all groups are sufficiently represented and their concerns addressed and substantiated.

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Graphic Intimacies: Queer Form, Urban Alienation, and the Lesbian Gaze in Amruta Patil's Kari

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Abstract

Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) is a historical record in Indian graphic fiction, as it opened a new dimension in the representation of a lesbian protagonist. Through this genre, Amrutha Patil has subtly explored fragmented identity and the fineness of the graphic novel. These qualities include its interplay of image and text, its non-linear sequencing, and its symbolic visual metaphors, coherently a distinctly queer experience of urban alienation. The novel records the journey of its eponymic heroine (Kari) and her situation post-suicide pact with her lover, Ruth. This has left their unnamed "Smog City." Kari's navigation of this heteronormative metropolis is mirrored in the book's aesthetic: a muted, claustrophobic palette of greys and sepias, punctuated by moments of surreal, symbolic colour. This portrayal has revealed the central themes of the city: as a character of suffocating conformity, the queer body as a centre of both decay and resilience, and finally as the graphic form itself in a "queer medium." The article consequently places *Kari* within the post-millennial incline of Indian graphic novels and its posterity relevance in establishing a visual language for queer female desire.

Keywords: queer theory, lesbian portrayal, urban alienation, trauma, complex relations

1. Introduction

Graphic novel as a serious literary form in India began in the early 2000s. Since then, it has provided a new voice for representing marginalised voices. Amidst this, Amruta Patil's *Kari* is often hailed as the first Indian graphic novel by a woman author. This seminal novel is unique in its themes of queer identity, loneliness, and urban life, and thus stands out in this tradition. It is not

just a story with pictures revealing the harsh life on Kari. Instead, it explores the inherent hybridity of the graphic medium to give form to the liminality of its protagonist's existence, between heartbreak trauma and survival, between perceptibility and indiscernibility, and between the hyper-real city and a surreal inner world. This article explains how Amruta Patil's narrative and artistic potency create a queer gaze that challenges the heteronormative composition of the urban landscape. Through the novel's visual metaphors, its management of the body, and its non-linear structure, we conclude that *Kari* is not merely a story about a lesbian woman, but a formal experiment in queer narration itself.

2. Discussion

In Sanskrit and other Indian languages like Marathi (the author's native tongue), *"Kari"* (करी) stands for "black" or "dark." This is the most immediate and powerful meaning, connecting to the novel's central imagery. The city is perpetually grey and polluted. Kari's name reflects her environment. She is a 'being' of this dark, smog-filled landscape. In the form of an emotional state, the colour black symbolises her grief, depression, and the "sediment of sadness" that fills her after her breakup with Ruth. It represents the emotional abyss she navigates, and finally, in the form of the river. The dark, polluted river that flows through the city is a central symbol. Kari is inseparably linked to this water, having been saved from suicide by it. She is, in a sense, a daughter of this dark river. This is what the story begins with, Kari and her lover Ruth's attempted double suicide. Ruth leaves the city after being saved, while Kari remains in the suffocating "Smog City" (a fictionalised Mumbai) to navigate heartbreak and a pervasive heteronormative society.

i) Challenging heteronormativity: The smog of the city acts as a powerful metaphor for the choking quality of a society that accepts everyone is straight. Kari faces constant pressure from her roommates, who suggest that she find a man rather than a coworker who invasively asks if she is a proper lesbian. The novel's sharp description of this environment does not suggest that Kari's homosexuality is the cause of her struggles.

ii) Smog city & Urban Alienation as a Heteronormative Ecology: According to the novel, the smog is not just pollution; it is the atmospheric pressure of society that lays expectations that Kari must fit. The novel's opening lines establish this statement: "The city was a smog city. We lived in its belly, Ruth

and I. We breathed its air, ate its food, and dreamt its dreams. Or tried to" (Patil 5). This immediately cages the city as an organic, intense entity. The phrase "or tried to" signifies Kari's failure to assimilate into the city's dominant "dreams", the heterosexual life script. Her alienation is environmental, and she is a 'being' struggling to survive in an environment that is conflicting with her. The imagery of living in the city's "belly" suggests consumption and carceral frame. The act of breathing, typically an autonomic and life-sustaining process, becomes a deliberate struggle. The failure to "dream its dreams" is a direct result of this toxic inhalation. Kari cannot assimilate because the city's fundamental ecology is incompatible with her being. The smog is the environmental condition of heteronormativity. It is everywhere, difficult to see through, and harmful to long-term health.

Kari's alienation is not merely an external condition but becomes a physiological condition. The trauma of her suicide pact with Ruth, which opens the novel, leaves her feeling internally blocked and stagnant, mirroring the city's own dysfunctional systems and internalising the city's toxins, reflecting on her survival, Kari states, "I was left with a sediment of sadness. It settled in my veins, thick and slow like the water in the city's drains" (Patil 18). This poignant simile directly connects her emotional state to the city's failing infrastructure. The sediment of sadness is a leftover product of her trauma. It clogs her internal passages just as waste clogs the drains. This demonstrates the interpenetration of the environmental and the psychological as a key concept in queer ecology. The city's decay is a metaphor for her own emotional immobility. Its decaying infrastructure, such as clogged sewers and polluted rivers, reflects Kari's internal passivity and emotional clog after her traumatic separation from Ruth. Kari's alienation in social spaces (e.g., parties, offices) is reflected through the conversations that revolve around heteronormative themes like marriage and family, revealing her inability to adjust.

Consequently, this urban alienation is explicitly tied to her queer identity. The city's design and social fabric exclude her, forcing her into invisibility. Her coworker Cyrus reduces her identity to a fetish ("a proper lesbian?"), illustrating how the city commodifies her difference instead of accepting it. Her nighttime persona, "Danger Chhori," who unclogs sewers, symbolises a desperate attempt to cleanse the toxicity of the city, and by extension, her own life. Kari's alienation compels her to take refuge in herself so she can resist internally. Kari adopts to seek belonging in the city, for this she cultivates a rich inner world and finds solace in small, subversive acts (like her sewer-cleaning).



Figure 1: Kari and the sewer. *Kari* **(Patil 32-33)**

It focuses on her core landscape, in turn, which fabricates the narrative of the text. The sewer, a dark, fluid space, equals Kari's ambiguous, strange identity and her fantasies, "I, Kari, twice born, who trawl the drains dream after dream, can smell the sewer everywhere. My thoughts keep returning to the city's lower intestines. To the gutters and hastily dug out canals that empty her bladder and swell her arteries with clean blood" (Amruta Patil, p. 41). These images draw the details of the protagonist rowing a boat, her figure surrounded by water from all sides. Interestingly, these portray the action of maneuvering without reaching any end, leading to her alienation in the smog city. This imagery commemorates exploration over seclusion and uncertainty over form. It is the sewer that links one part of the city to another, one part of consciousness to another, and is a serpentine space. The repetition of these watery images sets the tone, and the exploration of Kari's identity as a queer woman, as she repeatedly returns to the sewers throughout the text.

Therefore, this echoes a form of queer resilience characterised by the ability to endure and create meaning outside the dominant social structures. The descriptive elements are intensified when displayed with a muted colour palette, cramped panels, and repeated descriptions of pollution, thereby creating a sense of tangible alienation. This subtle imagery of the city's oppressive weight is visible through Kari's eyes. Moreover, the prevalent use of greys, sepias, and dull blues lends the entire novel a sombre, depleted quality; hence, the visual representation is the smog of urban life and grief. The claustrophobic panels and layout generate a feeling of claustrophobia and imprisonment. This reflects Kari's feeling of being trapped in the city and within her own life. Amruta Patil's page compositions often use small, compact panels that can constrain the artwork, mirroring how Kari's life and emotions feel boxed in.

The selection of these visuals is closely connected to one of the main themes, alienation. The alienation shown is not just a superficial urban loneliness but is precisely connected to Kari's existence as a queer woman in a heteronormative society. The city's lumbering, oppressive view highlights the polluted, cramped visuals, representing the social pressures and dogmas that led her to feel like a stranger. This portrayal is well-fettered with queer urban theory, which analyses how cities impose heteronormativity through spatial and social strata. Kari's experience illustrates how marginalised often exist in a state of liminality, physically present in the city but psychologically isolated from its rhythms.

3. Urban Loneliness and Identity

For Kari, it is her estrangement that led her to loneliness and quench her identity of self-gender. The city resembles a living entity that reflects Kari's inner state. The packed yet isolating metropolis echoes her alienation. Her nighttime alter-ego, "Danger Chhori," who unclogs the city's sewers, represents her attempt to cleanse the toxins she feels around her as well as herself, thus repaying the city that saved her. Kari faces the internal danger, representing her depression, her suicidal imagination (the "sly wish to exit"), her emotional turbulence, and her feeling of being out of the rhythm with society. The city (Anger City) amplifies this inner danger. She ensnares herself in danger. The nickname expresses her internal state, making it a point of condescending recognition between her and Ruth.



Figure 2: Kari and loneliness (Patil 40)

Therefore, at the core, the art becomes integral to the story narration. For instance, the intro visual resonates with Frida Kahlo's famous 1939 painting,

"The Two Fridas." It visually represents the deep, devoted connection between Kari and Ruth. The incident is not a narrative event but an influential visual reference in the opening section of Amruta Patil's *Kari*. The visual consciously resonates with Frida Kahlo. In Kahlo's painting, two versions of the artist sit side by side, connected by a vein that links their hearts. One Frida, in traditional Tehuana dress, represents the woman loved by her ex-husband and the other, in a white European-style dress, represents the rejected Frida. The way they hold hands signifies an intimate connection and sufficiency even during heartbreak. Amruta Patil recreates this composition with Kari and Ruth, depicting them as connected entities and often showing them in the same pose, emphasising their deep bond.



Figure 3 : 'Profound bond' (Patil 10)

The visual implies that, like the two Fridas, Kari and Ruth are also two halves of a single entity. This artistic choice is decisively important for several reasons. Firstly, it confirms an inseparable connection, proving they are psychologically and emotionally attached. Secondly, it indicates the theme of heartbreak. Amruta Patil designs *Kari* as a story created from a similar tremor as in the aftermath of a profound separation. Thus, showing a tone of melancholy, loss, and struggle for identity. The third and most key element is that it emphasises a queer, female-centric lineage. By connecting her work to Kahlo, Amruta Patil places *Kari* within an identifiable artistic tradition of women representing their own experiences. It dawns on a story about female interiority and queer desire, told through a sophisticated visual language. This opening imagery reveals that this is a story about an intimate, symbiotic love between two women, the trauma of its termination, and the subsequent struggle to reanalyse oneself.

4. Queer form complex relationships: The protagonist's complex relationships with Ruth and Angel represent two distinct but interrelated forms of queer relationships. While Ruth functions as the traumatic absent centre of Kari's desire, her friendship with Angel offers an alternative model of companionship. Kari reveals that her roommates, Delna and Billo, flirt with her outright, especially when not with their boyfriends. Kari identifies that their trust in being in a straight relationship disappears when they are away from their boyfriends.

Furthermore, Ruth's physical absence dominates Kari's psychological landscape. Their relationship exists predominantly through memory and desire. This establishes a paradigm of queer desire defined by loss rather than contentment. The novel's opening establishes this connection through absence: "The city was a smog city. We lived in its belly, Ruth and I" (5). The past tense "lived" immediately signals that this relationship belongs to the past. Kari's internal monologue frequently returns to Ruth: "I kept looking for Ruth in the smog. Her absence was more present than anyone's presence" (34). Ruth represents the romantic ideal that remains perpetually out of reach. The focus on memory rather than interaction makes this relationship fundamentally melancholic. Furthermore, the relationship of Kari and Angel blurs every frontier and belief of what a queer relationship looks like. They share a cup of tea, enjoy the sunset and their intimacy. Their passion in their own way of expression is how they speak to each other without words, and they let an eager moment continue without awkwardness. The way Kari ultimately looks at Angel as a whole human being rather than as a sick person who needs to be fixed. It will be assumed that their intimacy is neither physical nor sexual, but rather grows like vines on a windowsill, and their intimacy is never physically connected. However, due to Ruth's absence, Angel's dying body requires attention and physical care. Their friendship is the result of shared vulnerability rather than romantic passion. In Kari's words we understand their bond: "With Angel, there were no explanations needed. We understood decay" (Patil 72). In a key scene, Kari tends to Angel's physical needs: "I bathed her thin body, watching the water trace the paths of her bones. There was no shame, only the terrible beauty of a body being honest" (Patil 89). Angel's cancer created a different kind of affection based on common recognition of tenderness. Ruth and Angel represent romantic loss and physical decay, respectively, and both these forms of vulnerability exist outside heteronormative contexts of relationship success. Their platonic intimacy indicates that queer connection can exist outside romantic concepts, thereby offering a model of care that challenges traditional relationship pyramids. These relationships are not converse but corresponding

aspects of Kari's queer experience. Ruth symbolises the internal landscape of desire and memory, whereas Angel symbolises the external reality of bodily presence and present-moment care. Ruth's absence leads to Kari's melancholy and internal conflict, whereas Angel's presence is filled with physical compassion and moments of empathy. Amruta Patil's artwork strengthens this contrast.

This interpersonal and vigorous intimacy challenges the singular definitions of queer relationships by:

i) Confirming platonic queer intimacy as equally meaningful.

ii) Presenting empathy as a legitimate form of queer intimacy.

iii) Demonstrating how diverse relationships perform different emotional desires.

iv) Intensifying meaningful queer relationships beyond romance

The juxtaposition of these relationships suggests that queer existence relies on myriad forms of connection. They are both the lost memory and the experience of physical care. Through Kari's relationships with Ruth and Angel, Amruta Patil presents a subtle portrait of queer intimacy enriched with both romantic longing and physical care. This complexity resists diminutive representations of queer relationships and instead shows how different forms of relationships work together to experience individuals who navigate alienation and loss. Amruta Patil thoughtfully shows us the many hues of a queer relationship. She explains the numerous ways of queerness and its manifestation from outside of its mainstream, from a straight path or from pre-destined pit-stops or from a fixed destination.

5. The Queer Body and Resilience

Kari handles her body in a complex way. Kari is not attached to a binary. There is fluidity, and so is her gender identity. Hence, when there is no conformity to social gender norms, it always ends with its own struggles. And Kari has never considered or proclaimed her gender conformity. She says, "Although I am not a part of the organism, they like me enough. I am non-threatening and non-intrusive. And women of the world adore tousled boy-girls. They all want to be Wendy to my Peter Pan" (Patil 23). This disclosure provides us a glimpse into Kari's queer innermost thoughts as she is not outwardly rebellious or intrusive.

Besides, Kari's description of her alter-ego, "By night, I was Danger Chhori. I unclogged the bowels of the city. It was my way of giving back to the city that saved me. A strange repayment for a strange debt" (Patil 23). expresses an effective metaphor for queer existence. By connecting in this underground world, Kari actively processes the toxicity that surrounds her. It becomes a "strange repayment" because of its lonely, anonymous, and grotesque characteristics of resilience. In unclogging the city's veins, she operates a symbolic angioplasty on her own. It is like attempting to restore a semblance of flow and life to her dormant survival. This forms the crux of unclogging the self through a direct, hands-on engagement with the source of the blockage. It is expressed when Lazarus, a male colleague, romantically chases her and asks her if she is a lesbian, for which she responds with, 'I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner' (Patil 79). But Kari thinks to herself: "I roll the word 'lesbian' in my mouth, and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshy, salivating, fresh off the boat from Lesbia, and totally inappropriate" (79). This physical description of the word 'lesbian' reflects a similarly sensual image of consuming fruit in Angel's house in a chapter, 'Secret Lives of Fruit, "I play with fruit […] Avocado, kiwi, mangosteen. There are some fruits you do not want to venture into alone. A peach, for one, creature of texture and smell, sings like a siren. A fruit that lingers on your fingertip with unfruit-like insistence, fuzzy like the down on a pretty jaw. Figs are dark creatures too, skins purple as loving bruises. A fig is one hundred per cent debauched. Lush as a smashed mouth. There, I said it again: Lush" (Patil 66).

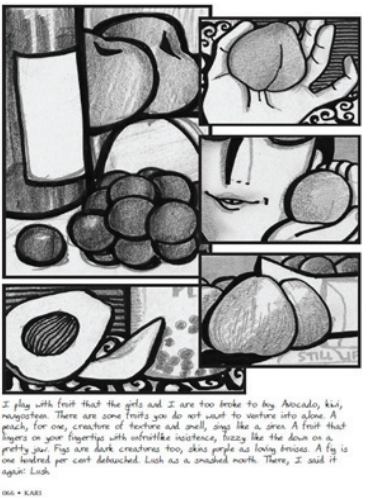


Figure 4: Kari and the fruits (Patil 66)

Later, for Kari, the city becomes unbearable and suffocating. She loses her lover, her friend, her expression to this space. What she refers to as the 'smog city' looks anaemic and dull to her. She merely survives on autopilot here, trying to find a way to breathe and not sink. The sewage water that saved her life also becomes her priority to safeguard. The 'smogcity' has massive and towering buildings which make Kari feel insignificant, negligible and invisible. But on the top of one of these same towering buildings, Kari ultimately finds the courage to live and not 'fall' for love. She quotes, "1) I feel no bird urge. 2) I want to step back, not step off. 3) I still love Ruthie more than anyone else in the world, but I won't be jumping off ledges for anyone any more" (Patil 115).

Ultimately, the narrative arc is not about the body's succumbing to decay but about its stubborn resilience. The fact that Kari continues to exist is that her breathing, moving, daily routine, her friendship with Angel, and her work act of defiance. Kari's spirit of resilience is not described as a glorious overcoming, but it is a quiet, determined persistence. Her body, though inflicted with trauma, continues to function. Her desire to care for her dying friend Angel is a key example. This physical care, a body caring for another body, is a contrast to the segregation and decay. It poignantly proves that the queer body is not only meant for suffering but also a source of compassion and strength that can nurture life even while surrounded by death and pollution.

5. The Lesbian Gaze

The concept of the Lesbian gaze is rich and complex, as taken by Amruta Patil through her characters. It encompasses desire, alienation, introspection, and a subtle and clear analysis of standardising forms. It is a gaze of internal melancholic but not an explicit desire. Unlike a gaze that is explicitly objectifying or desiring another body, Kari's gaze is predominantly an inward desire. The loss of Ruth is perceived by filtered memory and absence. This is directly proportionate to a psychoanalytic reading of queer subjectivity, where the ego is represented through a melancholic attachment to a lost love object (Judith Butler). Kari's gaze is not about enthusiastically pursuing a new object of desire, but it is about processing the internal emptiness caused by Ruth's departure. The lesbian behaviour of her gaze is therefore less about active watching and more about a wide perception that is regulated by a specific and determining loss that is beyond the comprehension of the heteronormative world.

It is an analytical gaze that implies heteronormativity. Kari's perspective functions as an acute lens that exposes the absurdity and suffocation of

heterosexuality compulsion. Her alienation enables her to see the conventional practices of the heterosexual world as unfamiliar and discursive. At a social gathering where conversations revolve around "babies and real estate," Kari feels like "an island," her mind "a balloon on a slack string" (Patil 34). At this point, the gaze becomes effectively political and acts as a reverse of the "normal." The heteronormative social script is revealed as a bizarre and empty performance, and Kari feels outlandish. Her gaze introduces her to the mundane, showing how places like parties or offices are designed to reinforce heterosexual life cycles. This critical detachment is a survival mechanism, allowing her to maintain a sense of self in a world that seeks to erase her identity.

It is an empathetic gaze that has challenged the male gaze. Kari's gaze at other women is often out of a sense of shared experience and empathy, but is not sensualised or objectified. This is in direct opposition to the traditional "male gaze" (as coined by Laura Mulvey), which sees women as passive objects for sensual pleasure. When Kari observes a woman adjusting her sari, she thinks, "There is a particular loneliness to a woman preparing her armour for the day. A quiet, desperate prayer" (Patil 19). This thought process of Kari reveals that lesbian gaze is not about possession or consumption but about recognition. Kari perceives the "labour", the "armour," and the "loneliness" as complicated in presenting a female body to the world. This emphatic gaze is legitimate and insightful, as is the vulnerability behind the public performance. It defines female identity as a shared condition of navigating patriarchal expectations.

The 'gaze', as Amruta Patil describes, is also largely passive and internal. Kari observes and analyses but rarely acts to change her circumstances within the narrative. Furthermore, her own gaze is not unaffected to being framed and consumed. Her colleague Cyrus lowers her identity to a fetish, asking, "You are a hot kari. Like this... A proper lesbian?" (Patil 28). This comment in the scene is crucial as it demonstrates that Kari's nuanced, interior gaze exists within a power structure that can violently simplify and exoticise it. Cyrus's comment explores the heterosexual gaze co-opting and commodifying queer identity. It provides us a stark reminder that the power to define and "look" is not equally regarded. Kari's sophisticated interiority can be instantly diluted into a stereotype for someone else's consumption.

The gaze is precisely queered through the graphic medium. ultimately, the true novelty of the lesbian gaze in *Kari* is its expression through the graphic novel form. Amruta Patil queers the very mechanics of visual storytelling by not

just describing but making her characters enacted through the interplay of text and image. The muted, often neutral colour palette echoes Kari's emotional state. The layout of panels feels claustrophobic, corresponding to her sense of enmeshment**,** or can break into the surreal. This gaze lets the reader not just talk about Kari's perspective but is forced to *see through it*. Hence, the channel itself becomes the vehicle for the gaze, making it an expression of experience for the reader rather than a purely intellectual belief.

The other incident of this gaze is connected to her female flat-mates, Billo and Delna. Discussing her blissful memoirs with them, Kari recounts, "I love it when the boys aren't around. The girls are a lot cheerier and a lot more interested in one another. I can smell the peaches of Billo's perfume, Delna makes chicken in Coke and stir-fried spinach. On such days, the conversation wanders along a familiar track. Food, gossip, the occult, and then the moot-issue talk that ends either in a head massage or in (Delna's) tears" (Patil 42). The lesbian gaze in *Kari* is therefore a sophisticated and encrusted construct with melancholic and by loss with inert desire. At the same time, it is critically defamiliarising as it spills the heteronormative world as strange and constructed. It is empathetic and connective as well because it sees other women as allies in a shared condition. Finally, Amruta Patil moves beyond a humble portrayal of a lesbian character to a developed, exceptional image and transforms the narrative language to represent a lesbian consciousness. The gaze in *Kari* is less about who Kari looks at and more about the complex, painful, and resilient way she sees the world and her place within it.



Figure 5 : 'The gaze' (Patil 107)

Conclusion

Amruta Patil's *Kari* stands as a landmark work not merely for its representation of a lesbian protagonist, but for its profound integration of queer content with queer form. Through its innovative use of the graphic novel medium, the book translates the internal experience of urban alienation into a tangible visual language. The muted color palette, claustrophobic panel layouts, and evocative symbolism of "Smog City" do more than illustrate a story; they render the suffocating weight of heteronormativity palpable. Kari's "lesbian gaze", a perspective marked by melancholy, critical distance, and a deep, empathetic connection to female experience, is not just described but enacted through the interplay of image and text. This gaze, which exposes the strangeness of the normative world, finds its formal counterpart in a narrative structure that itself resists linear, conventional storytelling.

Ultimately, *Kari* argues that for stories that exist in the margins, the medium itself must be malleable. The graphic novel becomes a "queer medium" precisely because its hybrid nature allows for the expression of fragmented identity, non-linear time, and subjective truth. The novel's conclusion is not one of triumphant assimilation but of resilient endurance, mirroring the ongoing, often solitary work of navigating a world not designed for you. By forging these "graphic intimacies," Patil creates a powerful and enduring testament to the fact that the struggle for representation is as much about *how* a story is told as it is about *who* it tells. *Kari* thus secures its place as an essential text in the canon of queer world literature, demonstrating that new forms of seeing demand new forms of storytelling.

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Posthuman Selves and Algorithmic Memory in the Digital Narratives of Jennifer Egan's Fiction

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Abstract

Jennifer Egan's two interlinked novels - *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and *The Candy House* (2022) - exemplify how posthuman subjectivity and algorithmic memory reshape identity in the digital era. Goon Squad comprises twelve nonlinear, interwoven stories that together form a sprawling narrative network. This polyphonic form intentionally resists a single center and, as one critic notes, "gestures toward contemporary structures of posthumanist sociality". The Candy House picks up these themes by imagining a technology ("Own Your Unconscious") that lets users literally "digitise" and share their personal memories.

In the novel, characters replay curated recollections on demand, dramatizing how memory has become externalized and algorithmically managed. In both texts, Egan shows identity not as an autonomous, continuous core but as a fragmented, networked process co-produced by data, media, and code. Posthumanism (Hayles, Haraway, Braidotti) reconceives the self as decentered and entangled with technology. For example, Rosi Braidotti defines posthuman subjectivity as "distributed" across heterogeneous assemblages rather than located in an isolated individual. Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* similarly uses the cyborg metaphor to "break down" binaries between human and machine. As Marianne Hirsch observes, transmitting memory through machines (rather than through human relationships) would "fundamentally alter how we construct identity". Egan's narratives engage these paradigms: they illustrate how networked environments produce algorithmic memory and fragmented selves, aligning literary fiction with critical debates in digital humanities and information theory.

Keywords: Posthuman identity, algorithmic memory, digital narrative, Jennifer Egan, contemporary American writing

Introduction

Jennifer Egan's acclaimed novels demonstrate how contemporary American fiction increasingly explores the ways in which digital technologies and AI alter the human experience. Contemporary literary authors are now depicting characters whose identities are intertwined with networks, databases, and algorithms. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), a Pulitzer Prize winner, and its loosely related "sibling" novel *The Candy House* (2022) delve into the music industry, memory, and identity in the digital era. These works employ innovative narrative forms—interlinked short stories, non-linear time, multimedia elements—to reflect a world shaped by computers and connectivity (Francesca, 2022). Critics note that Egan's writing "highlights the ways in which literary experiment can break into mainstream markets" while grappling with technological advancement. In other words, she brings digital-age themes into the fabric of contemporary American storytelling.

Key terms in this study include posthuman selves, algorithmic memory, and digital narratives. By posthuman selves we mean identities conceived beyond humanist boundaries – selves decentered from the anthropocentric ego and entwined with machines, networks, and non-human agents. This concept, informed by posthumanist theorists like Hayles (1999) and Haraway (1985), frames our understanding of characters whose consciousness extends into technology. Algorithmic memory refers to memory practices mediated by algorithms and platforms – memory as data, organized, retrieved, and even interpreted by machine processes. Finally, digital narratives are literary works that are shaped by or reflective of digital media: hypertext fiction, interactive stories, or novels employing structures akin to networks and databases. In Egan's novels, the narrative form itself often mimics digital connectivity, and characters' lives illustrate new modes of memory and selfhood under technology.

This paper asks: (1) *How does Egan depict posthuman selves in digital contexts?* (2) *In what ways do algorithmic processes shape memory and identity in her narratives?* (3) *How do Egan's digital-inflected narratives challenge conventional American literary forms and themes?* We approach these questions through a close reading of Egan's texts informed by digital humanities and cultural theory. The analysis is grounded in existing criticism and theory. For example, Eggers (2023) argues that *Goon Squad* uses "the network's apparent formlessness" to explore posthuman relationality in a "connective world". Stamenković (2024) examines how *Candy House* portrays a futuristic

society where social media dominate communication, foregrounding crises of memory and private subjectivity. We synthesize these perspectives with broader discussions of memory, identity, and technology. Our goal is to show how Egan's work both reflects and advances conversations on the "digital self" in American culture.

Digital Narratives and the American Literary Landscape

The turn of the 21st century saw American literature experimenting with digital forms and themes. Hypertext fiction, multimedia poetry, and online storytelling began to blur boundaries between print and screen. Scholars such as Ryan (2004) and Aarseth (1997) describe these as interactive digital narratives or "ergodic literature," where readers actively participate in non-linear stories. Egan intervenes in contemporary literature by blending formal innovation with "political and economic discourses" such as technology and neoliberalism.

Egan has also directly engaged with digital media as a writer. Her short story "Black Box" (2012) was originally serialized on Twitter, demonstrating her willingness to use online platforms. Critics have highlighted this story's focus on "technological mediation of the self," suggesting it allows readers to reflect on "their own modes of technological embodiment". Such experiments foreshadow her later novels. In the era of smartphones and social networks, Egan writes with a consciousness of how data flows and digital connectivity shape narratives. In effect, her books become part of an evolving digital literature, bridging the gap between traditional novelistic form and the logic of networked information. As one scholar observes, the structure of *Goon Squad* and *Candy House* can be understood through the metaphor of a network – an idea borrowed from new media theory – rather than conventional plot-driven narrative (Hinojosa, 2022). In this way, Egan's work heralds a literature of the algorithmic age, where stories are interlinked webs and readers are invited to navigate a "narrative network".

Posthuman Selves in Jennifer Egan

Both *The Candy House* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* explore the dissolution and transformation of the isolated modern self in a networked age. In *Candy House*, Egan introduces a range of speculative technologies that render the psyche data-accessible. The protagonist Bix Bouton – a tech entrepreneur – creates Mandala, a company whose signature innovation is an app called "Own Your Unconscious." This app promises users the ability to scan their brains and offload memories to a cloud-based database. Users can later "download" these

memories or share them with others. In effect, individual experience becomes a shared, searchable commodity. As one reviewer notes, "the novel presents the possibility of digitizing one's memory" and asks "how much of our experience should we render into tech hegemonies in the name of connection?" (Francesca, 2022). In Egan's imaginative universe, users literally upload their conscious and subconscious data onto devices – procedures described as "externalizing one's consciousness" onto memory chips. This effectively decouples mind from body. Characters debate suicide versus "backing up" their minds, and a character named Lulu even transmits data via a biometric port on her toes, blurring the line between flesh and hardware (Francesca, 2022).

The effects of this technology on identity are profound. As Mandala co-founder Pippa Lassiter cynically observes, these memory technologies reduce humans to manipulable components: "Mandala reduces the human to the simple components, and thus offers their posthuman, technological counterparts back to the consumers" (Stamenkovic, 2024). In other words, personal identity is treated algorithmically, as a composite of data bits that can be edited or erased. This "industrialization of memory" mirrors the posthuman critique: agency no longer resides solely in the embodied individual but is distributed across machines and networks. Egan dramatizes this when her characters' sense of self is literally constructed from curated memories. As Vanessa Francesca writes, in *Candy House* "writing is low philosophy, memory is…low identity: we create ourselves from the way we anthologise, edit, and erase the past" (Francesca, 2022). The metaphor is apt: identity becomes analogous to a manuscript under continuous revision, a process that algorithms facilitate.

A Visit from the Goon Squad similarly illustrates posthuman selves, albeit in a more implicit, emergent way. Its ensemble cast of characters – musicians, executives, students – navigate a world where communication technologies subtly reshape behavior and self-understanding. In the final chapter, set in a near-future New York ravaged by climate change, we meet Lulu, a "handset employee" who is essentially connected at all times via her mobile "T" device. Egan explicitly labels Lulu "a living embodiment of the new 'handset employee' – paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent" (Hinojosa, 2022). Lulu's very presence collapses boundaries: her "theoretical omnipresence" makes no sharp distinction between home and work, and between person and device. She even finds face-to-face conversation too "loud" and prefers texting, reflecting how the digital medium becomes her primary mode of being. In Lulu, the posthuman self is exemplified: she is a subject whose

identity is continuously mediated by technology, who exists as much in the network as in her own skin.

The networked nature of identity pervades Egan's character dynamics. Fabian Eggers (2023) argues that *Goon Squad* uses the notion of a narrative network to probe posthuman sociality: characters replace one another like interchangeable nodes in an ever-evolving network. For example, Alex DeLuca takes over the role of assistant from another character, symbolizing how human roles can be swapped within a system (Hinojosa, 2022). Notably, Eggers emphasizes that Egan's text "gestures toward contemporary structures of posthumanist sociality," highlighting how individuals in *Goon Squad* are entwined in webs of technology and global capitalism (Hinojosa, 2022). This insight applies also to *Candy House*, where characters routinely outsource their cognition: one man attempts to use algorithms to chart his life's trajectory, reducing relationship decisions to game theory.

Moreover, Egan foregrounds the fragmentation of the unitary self. Her interlinked stories often resist the clear hero-villain dichotomy; protagonists intermingle with antagonists in ambiguous ways (Francesca, 2022). This narrative fragmentation mirrors the ontological fragmentation of her characters. The "posthuman" identity here is not a singular soul, but a patchwork of influences, memories, and algorithmic profiles. As one scholar notes, Egan's fiction "accepts as [its] premise a world where the category of reality no longer holds out the promise of orientating the self" (Stamenkovic, 2024). In other words, traditional anchors of identity (place, narrative continuity, even coherent consciousness) are dissolved. Instead, Egan portrays selves as dynamic assemblages – part human, part data – whose cohesion depends on digital networks.

Algorithmic Memory and Digital Consciousness

Central to Egan's posthuman vision is the idea of algorithmic memory – memories processed, stored, and retrieved by algorithms rather than by organic brains. *The Candy House* takes this to the extreme. Every person in Mandala's ecosystem can offload personal memories into a shared digital repository. For example, one service called "MemoryShop" not only stores conscious recollections but even allows users to "remove painful memories" from their minds. Another device lets someone tap into the consciousness of another person by streaming "elements of one's personality" to the skin (Stamenkovic, 2024). Eventually Egan introduces "Collective Consciousness," a project through

which countless individuals upload their minds to a central server, creating a searchable archive of human experience. These fictional technologies depict memory as utterly externalized: memories become data points in a collective database rather than ephemeral, private moments.

Egan dramatizes how algorithmic memory reshapes personal and collective identity. By enabling people to access and curate all past experiences at will, Mandala's services effectively outsource cognition. Recall theorist Paul Ricœur's idea that we "read" our memories and give them narrative meaning. In *Candy House*, Ricœur's interpretive memory is supplanted by algorithms. Francesca points out that Ricœur distinguishes between reading memories as sequences of facts or as performative interpretations, but when memory is "externalised into a piece of hardware," the novel asks, "what happens to the process of interpretation we use to sustain it?" (Francesca, 2022). In Egan's world, algorithmic systems flatten and reify memory: what was once fluid and subjective becomes fixed and analyzable.

Contemporary theory helpfully captures this shift. Media scholar Benjamin Jacobsen argues that today's platforms cause us to "remember with algorithms". He coins "algorithmic emplotment" to describe how algorithms "construct and tell narratives about us," weaving data, experiences, and people into "coherent… narratives in the present". Egan's fiction enacts this idea. Mandala's algorithms literally re-plot users' pasts according to neat categories and themes. Characters note that memories curated by the system feel inhumanly clean and sometimes alien. As one character in *Goon Squad* (Rebecca) laments, words like "friend," "real," and "story" have been "shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks" by digital culture (Hinojosa, 2022). In *Candy House*, the process of offloading memory inverts human remembrance: when Lulu encounters her own digitized consciousness, she must question what is real and what has been mediated.

Egan also gestures at the ethical dimensions of algorithmic memory. The narrative evokes concerns like surveillance and data ownership. For example, *Candy House*'s social media company Mandala is named after a meditation object – a "lure for a process of soul-searching that ends in profit for a privileged few" (Francesca, 2022). This nods to Shoshana Zuboff's critique of "surveillance capitalism," in which even our private thoughts and emotions become extractable "behavioral surplus" for corporate use (Francesca, 2022). In Egan's story, subscribers willingly sacrifice privacy by contributing every dream and longing to Mandala's algorithms. The novel thus dramatizes how

digital memory practices can lead to profound social costs: intimacy becomes transaction, and forgetting – a human need – is rendered difficult in a permanent database.

Other contemporary writers mirror these themes. Egan's speculations fit within a broader literary pattern in which algorithmic or AI agents shape human fate. For instance, one may compare Candy House's collective mind to Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* (2020) or Octavia Butler's AI worlds in "Dawn" (1987), where technology redefines memory and self. But unlike pure science fiction, Egan maintains a human scale: even as characters interface with machines, their emotions and crises remain intimate and personal (Francesca 2022). In summary, algorithmic memory in Egan's novels is not just a gadget – it is a narrative driver that rearranges consciousness. Through it, Egan interrogates how technology reconstitutes what it means to remember and to be oneself in the digital age.

Thematic Concerns and Broader Implications

Egan's digital narratives foreground several major themes of the 21st-century "American self," reconfigured through posthuman and algorithmic lenses. Fragmentation of identity and narrative is paramount. Both novels shatter linear storytelling and singular points of view. As *Goon Squad* opens with one character and leaps to another decade's story in the next section, readers experience time as a "relentless progress" that fractures lives (Hinojosa, 2022). This mirrors how identities are fractured by networks and media. Instead of a unified autobiography, Egan presents a collage: memories and personas scatter across chapters. This narrative fragmentation dramatizes the postmodern condition of dispersed selves. It also echoes critical claims that the digital age dissolves coherent personal narratives into data fragments. As a result, the novels invite readers to piece together meaning across disparate segments, reflecting how we increasingly compile our stories from tweets, feeds, and profiles rather than a single life chronicle.

A second theme is the American self in relation to technology and the "many Americas." Egan's characters inhabit diverse worlds that collectively suggest a multiplicity of American experiences. We see tech utopians like Bix Bouton and Lulu's corporate world in New York, but also characters in academia, struggling musicians, and characters abroad (The Candy House has sections set in Argentina, for instance). In this way Egan embraces a "Many Americas" sensibility: identity is not monolithic but hybrid. However, algorithms tend to

flatten this diversity into stereotypes and metrics. *Candy House* explicitly shows this: one chapter ("The Affinity Charm") introduces a woman who, by cultural trait analysis, is deemed a "Universal Ally" to every group, yet she instinctively knows that this label does not fit her lived reality (Francesca, 2022). This scenario illustrates how algorithmic classifications can erase the nuances of identity. In doing so, Egan suggests that technology can both connect and homogenize cultural differences, posing questions about authenticity and representation in multicultural America.

Memory, surveillance, and digital culture intertwine in Egan's thematic concerns. Memories are no longer personal archives but part of a shared commercial system. This resonates with real-world social media practices (e.g. Facebook Memories), where platforms remind us of past posts algorithmically. One study notes how users find such "algorithmic memory" both intrusive and nostalgic. Egan dramatizes the extremity of this: *Candy House* portrays memory as capital. Characters literally sell or donate their memories. This raises questions akin to the "right to be forgotten" debate: what should remain private? What can we delete? Moreover, Egan probes the tension between experience and capital. Francesca (2022) observes that Egan's characters cry out for authenticity in a world that tries to commodify even our "screaming" – the raw human moment – into an experience to be bought and sold. The novels thus critique digital surveillance: we are constantly watched and profiled, and our inner lives become fodder for profit.

Finally, Egan's work contributes to broader literary discourse on identity and technology. By positing conscious computers and memory banks, she intersects with posthumanist critiques of the American self. The implication is that traditional notions of a stable, sovereign identity must be rethought. This aligns with theorists like Rosi Braidotti who argue for understanding the self as fluid and entangled with machines. Egan's stories enact an "implication": as Michael Rothberg (2019) suggests, we are implicated in each other's experiences, not isolated individuals. In *Candy House*, literal mind-sharing creates a collective "implicated subject" – one person's memory might once have felt like another's. The novels suggest that in the algorithmic age, the boundaries between personal and communal, real and virtual, victim and agent become blurred. In an era of surveillance and data mining, Egan preserves the importance of play, art, and human-scale perspective. Her final stance is cautiously hopeful: though technology reshapes us, narrative and empathy remain vital instruments for imagining new forms of life and community (Francesca, 2022) .

Conclusion

Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* use inventive narrative form and speculative technology to explore what it means to be human in the digital age. They depict posthuman selves – characters who extend beyond their bodies and whose identities are co-constructed with machines and networks. They dramatize algorithmic memory by showing memory as a transferable, searchable commodity, raising profound questions about authenticity, privacy, and the nature of consciousness. Structurally, these novels break from conventional American literary realism: time is non-linear, stories are networked, and language is sometimes fractured ("shucked… to husks" (Hinojosa, 2022)). Through these techniques, Egan challenges the reader to reconsider the notion of a unified self and a stable narrative truth.

Our analysis reveals that Egan's digital narratives capture the fragmentation of identity in contemporary society. In her world, individual histories are written as data points, and lives are lived inside algorithmic processes. Yet Egan never loses sight of human complexity. Even as she shows technology's encroachment, she foregrounds the human emotions behind it – love, regret, aspiration – highlighting that narratives, whether human or machine-made, carry our need to make sense of experience.

For literary studies and digital humanities, Egan's work suggests new directions. Scholars might further examine AI-authored or AI-shaped fiction to see how authorial agency changes. Cross-cultural comparisons of digital literature could reveal how posthuman themes play out in non-American contexts. The question of the American self also merits more research: how do diverse American voices adapt or resist the digital and posthuman condition? Finally, Egan's fiction reminds us that as technology advances (perhaps one day to AI-generated novels), the essential project of storytelling – to "render human experience into art" – remains crucial. She invites us to imagine futures where the line between human and machine is continually renegotiated, and where literary imagination can shape those futures with sensitivity and creativity.

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