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Protection of Children's Rights in the Digital World - A Comprehensive Review

Dr. Deepti Singla

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Protection of Children's Rights in the Digital World - A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

We are living in the age of digital technology, which is deeply entrenched in our daily lives. These days, we cannot imagine living even a day without digital technology, including smartphones, computers, laptops and the internet. Many children spend their time using digital technology using different educational applications and digital content, which have now become one of the basic techniques of learning and education. Moreover, applications like 'Siri', 'Google Assistant', 'YouTube Kids' and 'Amazon Alexa' are becoming daily companions of the children. Though the children in modern societies have received many benefits using digital technology but despite these benefits digital technologies carry risks and challenges that may violate their digital rights. The prevalence of concerns like cyberbullying, online exploitation, privacy violations and exposure to inappropriate content emphasises how critical it is to safeguard the rights of children in the current age of technology. Though there have been legal frameworks for the protection of children's digital rights, it's just hazy that how effective such legislations and policies are in the protection of children's digital rights. This comprehensive review tried to look into the significance, challenges and interpretations of protecting children's rights in the digital world.

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Child Rights, Child Development, Digital Literacy, Digital Privacy, Cyber Bullying, Digital Citizenship.

1. Introduction

In the technologically advanced society of today, children are heavily reliant on technology. They rapidly adapt to new trends and technology easily, particularly in social networking, online gaming and content production. They, therefore, become a crucial consumer segment for digital products and services.

Children account for roughly one-third of global internet users, and they are going online at increasingly younger ages through social media, mobile apps, online gaming and other digital platforms, often without consistent adult supervision (European Commission 2024a). About 25 per cent of the world's population is under age 15, which has major implications for internet access and digital policy. Screen exposure is also rising, with one study reporting that children aged 8-12 spend about 4 hours and 44 minutes per day on screens. As connectivity expands, children and teenagers are using the internet more for learning, communication and entertainment, making them a core driver of technology adoption (Statista 2025; DataReportal 2026). This trend accelerated during COVID-19 virtual schooling, especially among Generation Alpha, with devices introduced earlier in life; 44 per cent of young children receive devices from schools, and 28 per cent use their own for academic work, highlighting the growing centrality of technology in education (Statista 2025; DataReportal 2026; European Commission 2024a).

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Eventually, children frequently become habituated to the internet at their earliest years due to the increasing availability of devices such as smartphones, laptops and computers at homes as well as educational institutions. This earliest exposure might have an impact on their ability to use computers as well as digital activities. Although the world of technology presents a plethora of options for learning, interaction, innovation and enjoyment, it also exposes children and other vulnerable users to emerging risks. It brings up issues about digital privacy and security. It is essential to make sure that children have adequate technological education and awareness so as to use the internet safely, responsibly and effectively.

1.1 Definition of Child

The society in which children live has changed greatly since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted in 1989. In order to fully comprehend the impact of digital technology on children, it is imperative that we come up with precise definitions for the terms 'child' and 'digital world'.

The UNCRC defines the term 'child' as someone under the age of 18; however, the term 'digital world' means more than just the internet. It includes any sort of digital technological products and services, including social networking sites, online gaming, desktops, laptops, mobile phones, tablets and other digital devices and different platforms.

1.2 Children's Rights in the Digital World

The expression 'Children's Rights in the Digital World' describes how the rights of children are enforced and protected in reference to technological advances and digital settings. In other words, in the age of digital technology, children's rights pertain to the benefits and security measures that guarantee children can securely explore virtual spaces. While children get involved more with digital platforms, it is critical to make sure that their rights are protected in such types of settings. Here are a few important child rights, including-

1. **Right to Protection**- Protecting children from risk while they use technological devices is ensured under the right to protection. This entails the protection of children from risks such as inappropriate use of information, cyber-attacks and online harassment. For children to learn, discover and participate online in a secure atmosphere, digital platforms should have robust security measures in place to protect them from these potential risks. Children can feel safe and secure in the digital realm if we prioritise security mechanisms and the appropriate use of technology.

2. **Right to Privacy-** Children's right to privacy in the digital realm means to ensure the security of children's personal information as well as to prevent unauthorised surveillance of their online activities. It involves securing their sensitive information from unauthorised use and ensuring that they understand how the information they've provided could be used. This can be done by developing unambiguous and age-appropriate privacy rules to educate the child about the procedure of collection of information, as well as regulations to secure such collected information. Children should be able to clearly comprehend these rules and regulations, which should comprehensively define the types of information that are being collected, the way it might be used and the individuals who will be given access to such information. By protecting this right of privacy, we foster a more secure virtual space where the children's sensitive information is protected, and their right to privacy is respected as well.

3. **Right to Participation-** Children's right to participation in the digital realm includes the freedom to participate fully and voice their opinions freely in digital environments. This right stems from the idea that children should have a say in decisions that impact their lives, such as those pertaining to the creation and usage of digital equipment and digital platforms. Children who take part in these processes may make sure that online environments are secure, stimulating and align with their requirements.

4. **Right to Access Information-** Children are protected from unauthorised access to digital information and resources under the right to access information. In order to promote their development and advancement, they must have access to true and reliable information, learning materials and automated resources. Ensuring that the information provided is accurate and appropriate for the target age group is another aspect of it. By protecting this right, we contribute to children's well-being in cyberspace by enabling them to explore, develop, interact and participate freely in the digital realm whilst still being safe and secure.

1.3 Significance of Protecting Children's Rights in the Digital World

In order to protect children's privacy and overall well-being in the age of digital technology, their rights must be respected and protected. Children might not completely understand the risks that could be associated with sharing personal information on the internet in today's digital age. Protecting their privacy helps mitigate the likelihood of cyber-crimes such as identity theft, cyber bullying and unauthorised access to information. Children are often exposed to incorrect knowledge and cyber bullies through digital platforms, so it's important to put precautions in place in order to keep them protected.

Long before digital technologies and the internet were extensively utilised, in 1990, the UNCRC was established. General Comment 25 (UNCRC 2021), which underlined that children's rights are equally vital online and offline, was added to the UNCRC's revised guidelines by 2021. Laws that prohibit online exploitation, harmful interactions, the sharing of pornographic pictures of young children, the use of unauthorised information, discriminatory remarks and data protection are in place in many nations.

One cannot ignore how the digital age is affecting kids' mental and psychological well-being. Their mental and psychological well-being may be adversely affected by exposure to excessive time spent on screens, unreasonable expectations and online harassment. Online harassment and other inappropriate content exposure may contribute to depression, anxiety and other forms of psychological disorders. Child's digital rights must be prioritised to mitigate these digital risks and strengthen children's mental and psychological well-being. Furthermore, it's also crucial to make sure children are aware and capable of making well-informed choices about their virtual behaviour since they might not completely appreciate the repercussions of what they do, say and share online.

Digital resources are an excellent platform for learners to learn, but if they are not used responsibly and appropriately, they could be just as risky. Striking a balance in the use of technology to realise good while staying safe and educated is also crucial for protecting children's rights. Adherence to legal standards in digital interactions and the establishment of a safer digital environment have been made possible by the enforcement of regulations like the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, 1998 (COPPA 1998).

Additionally, how children engage with digital information is influenced by their different stages of development. As part of protecting their rights, digital hits must be customised according to a child's stage of emotional and intellectual development. In order to enable children to navigate virtual worlds securely and ethically, it also involves imparting to them knowledge about digital literacy. In conclusion, protecting children's rights online means making sure they have their privacy, safety and appropriate development while using technological advancements.

1.4 Challenges in Protecting Children's Digital Rights

There are several significant challenges in the way of protecting children's rights digitally. One of the biggest challenges is that a lot of applications and internet sites do not require age validation. Children often have access to age-inappropriate information and websites, exposing them to extremely detrimental content or information. Another challenge is the possibility of being targeted by cyber-criminals. Children could not properly understand the risks associated with sharing private information, which makes them vulnerable to being singled out by cyber criminals.

Privacy is another significant challenge. Without the parents' appropriate permission, several internet websites collect, store and make use of the children's personal information. This may result in the collection of personal information without consent, leading to the possibility of future exploitation. Furthermore, children could be experiencing harassment or bullying via Facebook, Twitter and various other social networking sites, which is why cyberbullying is becoming an increasingly widespread issue. Using fictitious names or being anonymous is common these days on social networking sites. Because of this, it might turn out challenging to recognise and bring down those responsible for malicious conduct like harassment or exploitative practices. Cyberbullying of children has become increasingly difficult to address and control when offenders may conceal their real identities.

The requirement for digital literacy is yet another challenge. Children frequently do not have the fundamental understanding and skills required to use the internet appropriately and effectively. They might not know how to protect their individual data or how to spot email scams or other fraudulent activities. Global disparity is an added challenge. The legislative frameworks, cultural perspectives on children's rights and internet accessibility differ throughout nations. Consequently, some areas could offer robust digital security systems for children, while others would not. These variations may result in unequal protection, putting children in certain areas at greater risk than others.

Inadequate legislation is an absolute challenge. A large number of regulations in place today are not intended to deal with the particular challenges of the digital age. Regulations that came up before the widespread use of the internet, for instance, might not address the particular dangers of online harassment or children's data privacy. Emergence of the latest technologies and platforms may bring up new risks that may not be addressed by current legislation. Because of the swiftness of development, regulations may be out of date by the time they come into effect, leading to gaps in the protection of children's digital rights.

To be brief, as the digital world grows more complex, it is critical to prioritise the protection of children's rights. To overcome the challenges listed above, it is critical to strengthen legislation, train children as well as parents and invest in technological innovations that underscore online security. Likewise, the government, educational institutions, parents and the technology industry must work collaboratively to establish a safe and beneficial internet ambience for children.

1.5 Research Problem

Global digital engagement continues to grow. The Digital 2026 Global Overview Report notes that more than 6 billion people, roughly 73 per cent of the world’s population, were using the internet as of late 2025 (DataReportal 2026). Recent studies indicate that internet users spend over six hours per day online, reflecting sustained high engagement with digital information, media and communication platforms (Statista 2025; DataReportal 2026). Children and adolescents represent a substantial share of users worldwide; international estimates indicate that around one-third of global internet users are under age 18, and youth aged 15-24 have the highest connectivity rates among all age groups (UNESCO 2023). Recent international reports further show that children are going online at increasingly younger ages and using digital technologies for learning, communication and entertainment, making digital literacy and online safety education essential components of early development (UNESCO 2023; OECD 2024). Presently, digitalisation being a new trend, children's digital rights are not yet fully protected. The dissemination of personal online data involving a child may be an infringement of his/her right to privacy and may also affect his/her childhood development. There are inadequate legal mechanisms to protect the interests of the child in the digital environment, either to regulate the use of child-related sensitive information available online or the design of the technology itself.

1.6 Research Gap

After an essential literature review, it has been found that, given the increased use of digital platforms by children, little information is available that investigates how children perceive and navigate the issues of online privacy and safety. Therefore, the main research problem is to broadly evaluate the -

existing legal framework at national and international levels relating to the protection of children's rights in the digital environment. To bridge this gap, there is a need to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in protecting children's digital rights and to suggest recommendations for the advancement of such rights.

1.7 Research Questions

The following are the key research questions that have been answered to meet the purposes of this research:

1. How do digital technologies facilitate child development in modern society?
2. What is the level of awareness among children of their digital rights, and how does such awareness help to navigate the digital platform safely and responsibly?
3. What are the main risks and challenges children face in the digital environment, and how do these impact their rights?
4. What gaps exist in existing legal frameworks related to child digital rights, and how can policy frameworks be strengthened to bridge such gaps?

1.8 Research Design

Mixed methods combining quantitative and qualitative have been used for a better understanding (interviews and questionnaires). The universe of the study was kept limited to the State of Punjab and UT Chandigarh. The target population were the children aged 04-15 years and their parents or guardians.

1.8.1 Ethical Considerations

To protect the safety and well-being of children and parents, concerns about ethics were critical when conducting the research. The collection of personal information involved risks to the subjects the researcher wished to protect; however, anonymity and confidentiality had been ensured throughout the study to protect the identity and interests of the participants. After providing parents with comprehensive information about the research's objectives and techniques and age-appropriate clarifications to their children regarding their participation, parents gave their informed permission. The researcher had also obtained informed consent from guardians (if any) as well as consent of the child to participate. Moreover, a safe and enjoyable setting was established for the purpose of gathering data. The freedom to leave at any moment was communicated to participants, and to reduce any potential discomfort, emotional reactions were continuously assessed.

2. Digital Technologies And Child Development In Modern Society

Digital technologies have become an integral part of children’s lives, offering significant benefits across multiple areas of development. One of the most prominent advantages is enhanced learning opportunities. With the vast amount of information available online, children can explore topics of interest through resources such as Google Scholar, educational blogs and virtual libraries. Platforms like Khan Academy and YouTube provide instructional videos and interactive exercises, catering to diverse learning styles and helping children grasp concepts at their own pace.

E-learning platforms further enrich learning by offering interactive courses that dynamically engage students. Websites such as Coursera, edX and Duolingo provide real-time feedback, allowing children to identify mistakes and improve immediately. Educational games add an element of motivation through rewards, points and challenges, encouraging perseverance and active participation. These tools create an engaging and responsive environment that promotes consistent learning and problem-solving.

Beyond knowledge acquisition, digital technologies foster critical thinking and creativity. Puzzle and strategy games such as chess and Minecraft encourage children to plan strategically and think analytically, while applications like Scratch introduce programming and conceptual thinking through -

interactive projects. Artistic platforms such as Adobe Creative Cloud, Canva, GarageBand and Story Tyke allow children to express themselves creatively through digital art, music, videos and storytelling. These tools nurture imagination, innovation and technical skills simultaneously.

Digital technologies also enhance interpersonal skills and collaboration. Platforms like KidzSearch enable children to connect and interact safely with peers worldwide, while games such as Roblox and Club Penguin provide secure spaces for social engagement. Collaborative learning tools like Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams teach children to work together on projects, share feedback and develop teamwork skills, fostering meaningful peer relationships.

Parental involvement in children's development is facilitated by technology. Applications like ClassDojo and SeeSaw allow parents to monitor academic progress, participation and behaviour, while messaging apps improve communication with teachers. Virtual conferences further increase flexibility, enabling parents to stay connected and engaged in their child's learning without logistical constraints.
Customisation of learning is another benefit offered by digital technologies. Programs like DreamBox adjust homework difficulty based on individual performance, providing appropriately challenging tasks. Such personalised learning experiences support children's engagement, accommodate their unique needs and promote autonomy in education.

Digital platforms also support emotional and psychological development. Safe chat rooms allow children to express emotions, ask questions and seek guidance anonymously, while role-playing and simulation games expose children to diverse perspectives and real-world scenarios. These activities enhance empathy, awareness and social understanding.

Global awareness is increasingly promoted through digital tools. Educational programs and interactive videos on platforms like National Geographic Kids introduce children to global issues, cultures and environmental concerns. Virtual field trips through apps like Google Expeditions allow children to explore historical sites, museums and natural wonders, broadening their horizons without leaving home. Initiatives such as ePals connect schools globally, encouraging intercultural collaboration and communication.

Finally, digital technologies contribute to physical and mental well-being. Fitness apps like Google Fit and HealthifyMe motivate children to engage in physical activity through challenges and games, while mindfulness applications such as Calm and Headspace teach mental health awareness and emotional regulation skills. These tools help children cultivate healthy habits, resilience and self-care practices.

In summary, digital technologies provide extensive benefits for learning, skill development, interpersonal relationships, global awareness and well-being. However, it is crucial to balance screen time with offline activities such as outdoor play and physical exercise. Ongoing parental involvement ensures that children maximise these benefits while remaining safe and guided in their interactions with technology. By fostering responsible use, digital tools can enrich children's development holistically and sustainably.

3. Level of awareness among children of their digital rights

Children's awareness of digital rights is shaped by age, education, cultural background and parental guidance. Understanding how these factors influence children's comprehension is essential for ensuring their safety while navigating digital platforms (Council of Europe 2016; OECD 2024). This section explores awareness levels across age groups, the role of educational programs and how digital literacy and recent policy initiatives help children navigate online spaces responsibly.

3.1 Level of Awareness among Children

Younger children, aged 5 to 10, often have limited knowledge of digital rights. At this stage, parents are the primary educators, introducing them to basic concepts such as protecting personal information and recognising online threats. Parental guidance is essential for setting rules, monitoring activity and

discussing risks (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 2024).

As children enter the tween years (11-13), awareness increases. Tweens begin to use social media and other digital platforms independently, learning privacy controls and the importance of cautious online behaviour. Schools often integrate virtual citizenship programs, teaching responsible behaviour and the implications of leaving digital footprints. Initiatives like Common Sense Media further educate tweens about digital rights, complementing parental and peer guidance (UNESCO 2023).

Teenagers, between 14 and 18 years, demonstrate higher comprehension of digital rights. They are aware of data protection, copyright issues, cyberbullying and the importance of consent when sharing content online. High schools often offer digital literacy courses to reinforce these principles. Peer interactions remain vital, as teens exchange experiences and discuss responsible digital practices (UNCRC 2021).

3.2 Awareness through Educational Programs

Educational initiatives play a crucial role in raising awareness about digital safety. Schools increasingly integrate virtual citizenship curricula covering topics such as consent, privacy, cybersecurity and online harassment. Lessons are often supplemented with workshops, audiovisual materials and interactive activities, which enhance engagement and retention of knowledge (European Commission 2024a).

Cultural and geographic differences also shape children's awareness. In developed nations, children have greater access to digital literacy programs and resources, while children in less developed regions may face limited opportunities to learn about their rights online. Internet infrastructure further affects accessibility: high-speed, reliable connections enable children to participate in online learning and explore digital tools effectively, whereas slow or inconsistent access can hinder digital skill development and limit understanding of safe online practices (DataReportal 2026).

Family and societal perspectives on technology and privacy strongly affect awareness. In some cultures, online sharing is normalised, while in others, privacy is prioritised. Open discussions at home combined with school-based education help children develop a balanced understanding of digital rights (OECD 2024).

Recent regulatory developments, such as the IT Rules 2026 in India, have strengthened obligations for online platforms to protect children's data and content safety. These rules, including stricter content moderation and reporting requirements, ensure that children are better safeguarded while using digital platforms (Government of India 2026; Reuters 2026).

3.3 Children Navigating Digital Technologies Safely and Responsibly

When children are aware of their digital rights, they are better equipped to navigate online spaces safely. Understanding privacy and data protection allows them to manage social media settings, control who can access their personal information and recognise the risks of sharing sensitive content. This foundational knowledge helps children make informed decisions about what they post and with whom they interact, reducing exposure to potential harm (UNESCO 2023).

Awareness of digital rights also empowers children to identify and respond to online harassment, including cyberbullying. They become familiar with what constitutes inappropriate behaviour, learn how to seek support from trusted adults and understand how to use reporting mechanisms effectively. By knowing their rights, children can act confidently when confronting or reporting harmful content, creating a safer digital environment for themselves and their peers (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 2024).

Furthermore, knowledge of digital rights fosters critical thinking, responsible behaviour, and ethical decision-making online. Children learn to evaluate the reliability of information, participate respectfully in discussions and practice good digital etiquette. This understanding encourages not only self-

protection but also advocacy, as children are more likely to support others, educate peers and engage in initiatives promoting online safety. Programs like Safer Internet Day 2026 provide practical opportunities for children to apply these skills, reinforcing lessons from school and parental guidance while raising awareness about consent, privacy and responsible engagement (Safer Internet Day 2026; AwarenessDays 2026).

Overall, when children comprehend their digital rights and responsibilities, they develop the skills, confidence and judgment needed to use digital technologies safely and responsibly. Education, parental involvement and supportive policies work together to ensure that children are prepared to navigate the digital world effectively, protect themselves from risks and participate ethically in online communities

4. Risks And Challenges Children face In The Digital World

In today's digital world, children are exposed to a plethora of risks and challenges that can have a substantial influence on their rights. For children to enjoy their digital rights and to create secure online experiences, grown-ups must be aware of these risks. In this part, we will examine some of the primary risks and challenges in more detail below, along with how such risks and challenges impact children's digital rights.

4.1 Risks and Challenges Children Faced Online

When children are abused online, whether through text messages, social networking sites or online gaming, it's known as cyberbullying. A few examples of this may include spreading rumours, sending threats of harm, isolating them from social media platforms or sharing defamatory information. Cyberbullying affects a lot of children, and it can make them feel anxious or frightened, which prevents them from accessing the internet. Cyber bullies pose as classmates or close acquaintances to take advantage of children over the internet. In an attempt to win children over, they lie and mislead them, which opens the door to risks like sexual exploitation. The rights of children to privacy and protection are endangered by such behaviour.

Children may come across violent or sexually explicit information online, increasing their risk of exposure to inappropriate content. This information may perplex children, have an impact on their conduct and impede their psychological and social development. Likewise, concerns about privacy come up when online databases acquire personal information about children without their complete awareness or consent. Privacy concerns are raised by the possibility of abuse of such information, which may include surfing habits and locations. Besides, every digital activity leaves behind an electronic trace. Children might not be aware that the things they publish or participate in might have an extended effect on their reputation and opportunities in the future. This may affect their ability to express themselves freely and have a good reputation.

Digital addiction can result in excessive time spent on screens, which can harm children's social, psychological and physical wellness. Issues like insomnia and poor physical activity may arise from this. Similarly, because there is so much misleading information on the internet, misinformation is an extremely serious issue. Learning can be hampered and confusion caused by children who find it difficult to differentiate between authentic and fraudulent information. Lastly, when children do not all have equal access to technology, there is a digital gap. Socioeconomic class and geographic location are two factors that can contribute to differences in access to technology and opportunity, which can result in social and educational inequality.

4.2 Impact on Children's Digital Rights

Children's digital rights are significantly impacted by various risks they experience when using the internet. Children's right to safety and security is compromised by cyberbullying, which also makes them feel emotionally insecure and discourages them from participating in online groups. By using a child's personal information for malicious purposes and behaving dishonestly, online predators violate

their right to privacy and security. Their right to a healthy growth is interfered with when they are exposed to inappropriate information, which also negatively impacts their academic and mental health. Their right to manage their personal data and make educated decisions regarding its usage is jeopardised by privacy violations, which can result in the misuse of their data without authorisation.

Since offensive or embarrassing posts can have a lasting impact, digital footprints can undermine their right to a decent reputation and have an impact on their ability to freely express themselves online. Their right to physical and mental health is compromised by an addiction to digital gadgets, which undermines their right to health and wellbeing and can result in problems including social isolation and sleep disruptions. Their capacity to learn efficiently and make wise judgments is hampered by misinformation, which interferes with their right to correct information. Finally, because digital gaps restrict access to necessary digital resources and abilities, they compromise their right to equal educational opportunities and exacerbate social inequality, which also impacts students' social and academic performance.

By being aware of these concerns and how they affect children's rights, we can make digital environments safer and fairer for all children. Therefore, it is imperative to tackle these hazards in order to protect children's rights and guarantee their safe and equitable navigation of the digital environment.

5. Child Legal Rights And Legal Frameworks

The different risks and challenges that children encounter in the digital world are frequently not adequately addressed by the current legislative frameworks pertaining to children's digital rights. In this section, we examine the gaps that currently exist in existing legal frameworks and how legal frameworks can be improved to bridge such gaps.

5.1 Gaps in Existing Legal Frameworks

Inadequate definitions and scope of many laws pertaining to children's digital rights result in ambiguous interpretations and insufficient protection against problems like cyberbullying and online harassment. Various laws concerned with children's digital rights are ambiguous or poorly defined. An absence of definitions for terms like 'digital literacy' and 'online safety' might result in varied understandings and inequitable implementation of the law. Children may not receive the full level of protection as anticipated if these legislative gaps are left open. Furthermore, even when legislation is present, they are often not enforced effectively. The existing legislations that is in place primarily concentrate on specific concerns like cybersecurity or data protection, while overlooking other critical concerns like cyberbullying and online harassment. This indicates that potential risks and challenges that children might come across digitally could fail to be completely addressed by the regulations that are in place at the present time.

Due to the inadequate effectiveness of age-specific protections offered in various legislations, children are constantly at risk while exploring the internet. Some legislation, such as the COPPA in the United States, sets the age of authorisation for accessing information about children at 13. Nonetheless, this does not take into consideration little ones who could be using the internet and are at risk. The children under the age of 13 are allowed to access internet-based applications and video games, which commonly fail to provide those children with the appropriate privacy and security measures. Likewise, existing regulations usually failed to acknowledge that a child of various ages calls for specific types of protection from digital risks. What is effective for young children may not be designed for younger children. As an instance, more extensive privacy protection ought to be implemented for websites that could be accessed by children at a young age in order to protect them from offensive or inappropriate content.

The lack of uniform global standards among nations for protecting children's digital rights makes worldwide implementation more difficult. There is a hodgepodge of legal regulations and conventions among nations designed to protect children's digital rights. Whereas the General Data Protection

Regulation (GDPR) and other strict regulations in the European Union protect the personal information of children, there's a chance that legislation in various other nations varies. For global organisations, this variance could possibly make it exceedingly difficult to adhere to every regulation while offering adequate safeguards for children. Another challenge is the implementation of these regulations globally. Lack of global legislative collaboration could have made it challenging to prosecute someone responsible for infringing on the rights of a child who lives outside the country.

In India, the legal framework for children's digital rights has historically been fragmented. Relevant laws include the Information Technology (IT Act, 2000) (Sections 66E and 67), the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO Act, 2012) and provisions under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. Recently, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, has been enacted and is being implemented in phases. It sets out requirements for explicit consent for data collection, imposes obligations on platforms to safeguard children's data and introduces penalties for violations. Despite these developments, India still lacks a comprehensive, standalone law exclusively addressing children's online privacy and safety. Compared to COPPA and GDPR, the Indian framework is still phased and fragmented, and enforcement remains a challenge, leaving gaps in protection for children online.

Recent developments include the IT Rules 2026, which amend the 2021 IT Rules to address AI-generated content, deepfakes, misinformation and other harmful online material. Platforms are now required to label AI-generated content clearly, take action within reduced timelines (as little as three hours) and embed metadata to help users identify synthetic content. These updates aim to enhance accountability and online safety, but civil society groups caution about possible overreach and implementation challenges.

Proactive approaches towards promoting digital security are sometimes overlooked because of the existing legislation that frequently has a concentrated focus on raising awareness and providing education. Several regulations place greater emphasis on the prosecution of criminals rather than on empowering children and their parents about their online privacy and digital rights. This might result in a reactive approach, in which problems are handled only after they occur, rather than before they occur (failing to act proactively). More importantly, teachers, parents and guardians sometimes get inadequate training about how to cope with internet threats and help children. Without sufficient training, parents, teachers or guardians might not be adequately equipped to help children understand the intricate contours of a digital realm.

When it comes to children's possible solutions for addressing violations of their digital rights, reporting and resolution mechanisms sometimes prove to be ineffective. Children often lack convenient means of reporting issues about their digital rights, such cyber bullying or online exploitation. Reporting mechanisms that are easy to use and intended for children are also not present on numerous pages on the internet. Whenever reporting and resolution mechanisms are available, children still might encounter difficulties while seeking justice. They might have been afraid of harassment, lack adequate knowledge of how courts work or lack guidance from adults they know and trust. These challenges could prevent children from coming forward with their concerns and asking for the assistance they need to make decisions.

5.2 Strengthening Legal and Policy Frameworks

Strengthening existing legislation and procedures is a prerequisite to effectively protecting children's digital rights. Here's an overview of how to strengthen these regulations:

First, nations have to put into place a comprehensive legislation regulating children's digital rights. These legal regulations ought to address accessibility to information, security, safety, privacy and freedom of speech. In addition, they must deal with contemporary concerns like artificial intelligence and the impact of machine learning on minors on online platforms. In addition, there should be specific provisions given for people of different ages. By way of example, there should be more stringent

regulations for the collection of data and virtual activities pertaining to children under the age of 13, which might include more robust procedures for consent and restricted access to personalised advertisements.

Secondly, educational programs at schools must promote digital literacy. Children should be taught in schools how to spot scams or false information, protect their own personal information and report inappropriate online behaviour, etc. It will be much safer for children to use the internet if they are taught about their digital rights at an early age. Giving parents and other guardians education and training is also extremely important. Training and educational resources could help them understand potential risks, along with ways to keep their children protected digitally.

Thirdly, it is important to design child-friendly reporting mechanisms. To mitigate fears of threats of revenge or harm, these mechanisms have been designed to enable the children to report violations of their rights confidentially and anonymously. Furthermore, child advocate bodies assist children in navigating the legal system whenever their rights are infringed. These bodies might offer support and legal guidance to make sure children are successful in seeking justice effectively.

Fourthly, international collaboration is extremely important. The nations should be able to adopt global standards for children's digital rights that have been put forward with collaboration from global organisations such as the United Nations (UN). Such global standards for children's digital rights ought to incorporate key concepts including digital literacy, confidentiality, security and privacy. Furthermore, governments must collaborate for the implementation of the aforementioned legislation across nations. This could refer to globally binding agreements that simplify the identification and resolution of infringements, no matter where they might occur.

Finally, nations should also encourage business enterprises to use ethical data-gathering strategies. To prevent minors from being exposed to unethical videos or websites, for example, age authentication mechanisms should be implemented. Strict content moderation guidelines or parental control standards should also be enforced to shield young users from accessing the offensive or detrimental data. Moreover, to promote public trust and transparency, commercial enterprises additionally ought to make their information-sharing practices known to children as well as parents.

Global trends also show that the European Digital Services Act requires platforms to protect children from cyberbullying and harmful content and provide reporting tools. Countries such as Australia and the UK have adopted age-based restrictions and duty-of-care obligations for platforms. AI governance is also becoming part of children’s digital rights frameworks, requiring age-appropriate design and privacy safeguards.

5.3 Safer Internet Day- An Initiative to Strengthen Digital Rights and Online Safety

Safer Internet Day is celebrated every year on the first Tuesday in February to encourage safer and more responsible use of mobile phones and internet technologies, particularly among children and young people. It was started globally in 2004 by the European Commission as part of its Safer Internet Programme. The day's main goals are to educate people about safe online behaviours and to increase awareness of internet risks, including cyberbullying and privacy concerns. Each year, Safer Internet Day has a distinctive theme designed to promote collaboration among governments, academic institutions, business executives and non-profit organisations.

Safer Internet Day 2024 had the theme 'Together for a better internet', highlighting teamwork and collaboration. Safer Internet Day 2026 expanded these efforts, with NGOs in India such as Girl Effect launching school-based campaigns addressing online harms, including technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Awareness campaigns also took place in Africa and other regions, emphasising cooperation among families, schools, civil society and government agencies.

5.4 The Digital 2026 Global Overview Report

The Digital 2026 Global Overview Report provides the latest insights on worldwide internet usage and digital engagement. As of late 2025, over 6 billion people, approximately 73 per cent of the global population, were active internet users (DataReportal 2026). Social media platforms have continued their rapid growth, with more than 5.5 billion users worldwide spending an average of 2 hours and 40 minutes daily interacting on these networks (Statista 2025; DataReportal 2026). Overall, the average daily time spent online across all platforms is estimated at 6 hours and 45 minutes, highlighting the persistent high engagement of individuals with digital media and communication tools (Statista 2025; DataReportal 2026).

Children represent a significant portion of this digital population. Globally, over 1 billion children use the internet, with many accessing it from a very young age via smartphones and tablets. On average, children spend between 4 and 5 hours per day online, engaging in educational activities, social networking, gaming and entertainment. This extensive exposure increases both learning opportunities and potential risks, such as privacy violations, cyberbullying and identity theft (DataReportal 2026).

Recent international developments also reflect growing attention to child digital safety. Portugal has implemented age-based restrictions for social media use, Egypt launched a Child Internet Risk Index, and the UAE established a Child Digital Safety Council. Concerns about AI-generated content are being addressed through regulatory updates, including India’s IT Rules 2026, which require labelling AI content, faster takedown timelines and embedded metadata to help users identify synthetic content. Additionally, support networks for mental health and cyberbullying are increasingly recognised as essential for helping children navigate online risks safely (Government of India 2026; Reuters 2026.

Overall, initiatives like Safer Internet Day, the Digital 2026 Global Overview Report and updated IT rules provide critical guidance for policymakers, educators, parents and technology providers. By monitoring global trends, these resources help raise awareness, enhance online safety and strengthen legal frameworks to protect children’s digital rights.

6. Results And Discussion

The protection of children's rights and online safety has become increasingly important in the evolving digital world. Data collected through parent and child questionnaires and interviews provides insight into gaps, challenges and current practices in safeguarding children online. The findings highlight variations in digital awareness across age groups, the critical role of parental engagement and the need for better communication and educational content.

6.1 Key Findings

The research reveals that younger children (ages 4 to 10) understand basic digital safety but require extensive parental guidance. Tweens (ages 11 to 13) are moderately aware of risks like cyberbullying but benefit from continuous supervision. Teens (ages 14 to 18) generally understand their digital rights and responsibilities, but often lack confidence or willingness to report issues. Proactive parental involvement strengthens children's awareness of online risks, yet communication gaps remain, with many teens hesitant to share their experiences. Children of all ages spend significant time online, highlighting the need for monitoring and guidance. Many parents rely on informal sources, such as blogs, for advice, underlining the need for structured educational programs and official resources on digital safety.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

The study faced several limitations. Children's responses may have been influenced by their parents, and obtaining consent resulted in a biased sample. Age-related understanding differences may have affected the interpretation of questions and experiences. The limited sample size and time constraints restricted data collection and generalizability. Acknowledging these limitations is important for interpreting results and guiding future research in children's digital rights.

6.3 Key Recommendations

Recommendations include implementing age-appropriate digital literacy curricula in schools covering digital rights, online safety and responsible behaviour. Interactive sessions should teach children to manage privacy settings, recognise cyberbullying and develop safe online practices tailored to their age. Open and non-judgmental communication between children and parents is essential, supported by parental awareness programs on cyber risks and effective supervision tools, including parental control applications. Communities should collaborate on digital safety initiatives and social media platforms must provide clear guidance and simple reporting mechanisms for harassment or harmful content. Educational content should be updated regularly to reflect evolving digital risks.

Overall, the findings underscore the need for holistic strategies integrating education, community involvement and parental engagement. Age-appropriate digital literacy, open communication and structured parental support can improve children's understanding, safeguard their rights and foster a safer and more responsible digital environment. Collaboration among schools, families and stakeholders is key to enabling children to navigate the online world safely and confidently.

6.4 Conclusion

'Technology is a useful servant but a dangerous master.'

Among all innovations, the Internet is both a blessing and a challenge. When used responsibly, it connects, informs and empowers, but when misused, it exposes children to risks such as cyberbullying, privacy breaches and inappropriate content. Although the Internet was not designed with children in mind, it now plays a central role in their daily lives, making their protection a shared responsibility of parents, educators and policymakers.

Educating children and parents about digital safety, promoting responsible online behaviour, and providing tools to recognise and respond to risks are crucial. The principle of the "best interests of children" should guide all interventions, ensuring protective measures do not unnecessarily restrict access or hinder learning. Legal and policy frameworks must focus on empowerment: enabling children to express themselves safely, safeguarding personal data, fostering digital literacy and equipping them to navigate online challenges confidently.

To create a safer digital environment, schools, families, and governments must collaborate actively. Implementing age-appropriate education, parental guidance, clear reporting mechanisms and effective regulations can ensure that children reap the benefits of technology while minimising harm. By combining awareness, empowerment and protection, we can make the digital world both safe and enriching for every child.

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Letters as Historical Sources: Practice, Method, and Preservation

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ABSTRACT

Historians have long used letters as supplementary sources, valued primarily for the factual information they contain. This article argues that such an approach underestimates the methodological potential of epistolary materials and obscures the historical practices that shaped their production, circulation, and preservation. Focusing on Indo-Persian letter writing traditions in Medieval South Asia, the study repositions letters as a distinct category of historical sources that demand forms of reading different from those applied to chronicles or narrative histories. Drawing on historiographical debates, conceptual analysis, and a longue durée historical framework, the article traces the evolution of letter writing from early Islamic administrative practices to their institutional consolidation during the Sultanate period. By attending to genre, circulation, and compilation, the study highlights the layered mediation through which letters entered the historical archive. Methodologically, the article advocates reading letters as archives of practice rather than transparent records of events. It emphasises the importance of formal conventions, material conditions, and preservation processes. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions of source diversity and historical method, suggesting that letters, when approached critically and contextually, offer valuable insight into the routines, relationships, and institutional logics of Medieval South Asia.

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Introduction: Historiography and Method

In much of traditional historiography, correspondence has functioned as a supplement to more authoritative genres such as chronicles, court histories, and administrative manuals. This utilitarian approach has often treated letters as transparent records of information, extracting data while overlooking the conditions of their production, circulation, and reception. As a result, the interpretive potential of letters as historical sources has remained underdeveloped. From the late twentieth century onwards, however, scholars across history, literary studies, and sociolinguistics have challenged this narrow engagement with epistolary material. Letters are increasingly understood not merely as repositories of information but as textual artefacts shaped by social practice, institutional conventions, and rhetorical norms. This shift reflects a broader methodological turn within historical scholarship, one that emphasises the materiality of texts, the performative dimensions of writing, and the embeddedness of written communication within structures of power and hierarchy. Rather than asking only what letters say, historians have begun to ask how letters functioned, why they were written in particular ways, and what assumptions governed their form and content.

A useful framework for conceptualising this expanded approach to letters has been articulated by Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, who identifies three major historiographical uses of correspondence.

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First, letters may be analysed as linguistic evidence, offering insight into language change, registers of expression, and patterns of vernacular and elite usage. Second, they function as documentary sources that illuminate administrative practices, institutional relationships, and the circulation of information within and across political entities. Third, letters may be studied as a literary genre, situated between pragmatic communication and aesthetic expression, governed by conventions that have evolved. This tripartite framework underscores the polyvalent nature of letters and cautions against reducing them to any single interpretive function.[i]

Building on this perspective, scholars such as Roger Chartier and David Barton have drawn attention to the social life of writing. Their work emphasises that written texts cannot be divorced from the practices that produce them: who writes, for whom, under what constraints, and within which material and institutional settings. Letters, in this sense, are not neutral vehicles of communication but socially situated acts that encode relationships between sender and recipient. Choices of language, structure, and formulaic expression often reflect asymmetries of rank, expectations of decorum, and shared cultural norms. Reading letters historically, therefore, requires sensitivity to both what is written and how it is written.[ii]

A significant scholarly contribution to the study of epistolary sources is found in a collection of papers that examines the evolution of letter writing from the fifteenth to the early twentieth century. The central premise is that letters composed in physical or temporal absence are designed to evoke a sense of presence, thereby bridging the distance between correspondents. This volume adopts a shared methodological emphasis on the materiality of the letter and its stylistic, grammatical, orthographic, and formal features, including the codified expressions of politeness that typify epistolary conventions.

These studies highlight how letters encode hierarchical relationships among superiors, equals, and subordinates, and how such asymmetries are articulated and negotiated through linguistic and structural choices. The epistolary form is also a privileged site for accessing intimate worlds: revealing personal perceptions, emotional registers, ideological dispositions, and the socio-historical milieus of both writers and recipients. Letters, in this sense, provide a rich archive for reconstructing social ties, kinship configurations, and interpersonal networks that are often marginal or absent in formal historiography or state chronicles. Earlier historiographical approaches tended to privilege letters primarily for their factual content, treating them as repositories of names, events, and chronological data. However, more recent scholarship has focused on their rhetorical construction and the cultural logics they encode. This interpretive turn aligns with broader theoretical currents in historical anthropology and discourse analysis, in which texts are understood as vessels of information and as performances of identity, power, and social negotiation.[iii]

Dr Stephan Popp's research foregrounds the linguistic and rhetorical features of Persian letter writing in Mughal India, demonstrating how scribal style evolved at the intersection of form, function, and historical context. Through close textual analysis, Popp traces a tradition of insha writing that initially prioritised rhetorical complexity and aesthetic refinement, exemplified by the ornate, highly structured prose of Mahmud Gawan, marked by rhymed constructions, parallelism, and double izāfās rooted in Timurid conventions. He then identifies a significant departure from this style in Abul Fazl's correspondence with his brother Faizi, where inherited models such as Mahru were reworked to produce a more subjective, restrained, and intellectually attuned mode of expression aligned with the political and cultural milieu of Akbar's court. This personalised insha style, which later acquired canonical status, influenced subsequent figures such as Chandrabhan Brahman, whose prose reflected Abul Fazl's controlled use of parallelism.

[i] Del Lungo Camiciotti, Gabriella. "Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern Culture: An Introduction." Journal of Early Modern Studies 3. 2014.

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Popp's analysis culminates in his discussion of Khalifa Shah Qanauji, whose florid and didactic prose under Aurangzeb exemplified a Baroque stylisation that would later shape colonial perceptions of "Oriental" writing.[iv] Taken together, these examples illustrate that shifts in rhetorical form were not merely aesthetic developments but were embedded in broader transformations in courtly culture, political authority, and the evolving role of the scribe within the Mughal bureaucratic order.

An examination of Persianate correspondence in South Asia must be conducted using the terminology through which this practice was historically understood. Among these, the term insha occupies a central position, its meaning shaped and reshaped by the administrative, literary, and pedagogical contexts in which it was employed. Far from denoting a fixed category, insha has encompassed a range of connotations that evolved alongside shifts in political authority, bureaucratic structures, and literary conventions. Attending to the historical semantics of this and related expressions is essential for situating epistolary practice within the broader cultural and institutional frameworks that informed its production.

This methodological shift has been particularly significant for the study of Medieval correspondence, where writing was a specialised skill and access to literacy was unevenly distributed. Letters were rarely spontaneous compositions; they were often crafted with deliberation, shaped by established conventions, and in many cases mediated by professional scribes. Formulaic openings, invocations, honorifics, and closings were not ornamental excesses but integral components of epistolary meaning. They signalled authority, deference, intimacy, or obligation, and their omission or misuse could carry serious social or political consequences. To ignore these formal elements is to risk misreading the historical significance of the text itself.

Another important dimension of recent scholarship concerns the materiality of letters. The physical aspects of correspondence, paper quality, script, layout, seals, and modes of transmission form part of the communicative act. Letters were objects that travelled across space, were read aloud or privately, copied, archived, or deliberately destroyed. Their survival in historical archives is often the result of selective preservation rather than chance. Many letters reached us not as isolated texts but as parts of compiled collections, raising questions about editorial intervention, retrospective organisation, and the transformation of private communication into authoritative textual corpora. These processes complicate assumptions about authorship and intention and demand a critical approach to epistolary transmission.[v]

Earlier historiographical approaches tended to privilege letters for their apparent immediacy, treating them as unmediated reflections of contemporary realities. Yet this very immediacy is deceptive. Letters were written with awareness of audience, convention, and potential afterlives. They often balanced candour with caution, instruction with persuasion, and information with performance. Recognising this complexity aligns the study of letters with broader developments in historical anthropology and discourse analysis, where texts are approached as sites of negotiation rather than transparent windows onto the past.

Within South Asian historiography, this methodological reorientation has been uneven. While scholars have increasingly acknowledged the importance of epigraphic, numismatic, and literary sources, epistolary materials have remained comparatively marginal. Where letters have been used, they have frequently been subordinated to narrative histories or mined selectively to corroborate information derived from chronicles. This has limited their interpretive potential and reinforced hierarchies of sources that privilege narrative coherence over fragmentary, practice-based evidence.

[iv] Popp, Stephan. "The Development of Rhetoric Strategies in Mughal Epistolography." Paper presented at the Ninth European Conference of Iranian Studies. Free University Berlin. 2019.

[v] See Roger Chartier, "Texts, Printing, Readings," in The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds., Letter Writing as a Social Practice (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999); and Walter Ysebaert, "Medieval Letters and Letter Collections as Historical Sources: Methodological Questions, Reflections, and Research Perspectives," Studi Medievali 50, no. 1 (2009).

This article adopts the view that letters constitute a distinct category of historical sources that require methods attuned to their formal, social, and material characteristics. Rather than treating correspondence as supplementary evidence, it approaches letters as archives of practice, records of how communication, authority, and knowledge were enacted through writing. Such an approach does not seek to replace chronicles or administrative manuals but to read epistolary texts alongside them, attending to what letters reveal precisely because of their constrained, situational, and relational nature.

Conceptual Vocabulary of Indo-Persian Epistolography

In Indo-Persian literary and administrative cultures, correspondence was not a loosely defined activity, but a highly codified practice governed by precise categories of form, function, and status. Terms such as insha, manshur, farmān, maktub, and ruqa were not interchangeable descriptors of writing; they reflected structured distinctions that shaped how letters were composed, circulated, and interpreted. For historians, misunderstanding or flattening this vocabulary risks obscuring the social and institutional logic embedded in epistolary texts.

At the centre of Indo-Persian epistolary culture lies the concept of insha. Etymologically derived from the Arabic root meaning “to create” or “to compose,” insha acquired a specialised meaning over time. In its early usage, the term broadly denoted composition or construction, but within Islamic bureaucratic and literary traditions, it came to signify the art of drafting letters, state documents, and official correspondence. This semantic narrowing marked an important distinction between epistolary writing and other prose genres such as historical chronicles or literary treatises. By the medieval period, insha referred not merely to writing itself but to a recognised discipline with established rules, stylistic expectations, and pedagogical traditions.[vi]

Closely related to this was insha-pardāzi, a term for the refined art of letter composition. Unlike spontaneous or informal writing, insha-pardāzi presupposed training, rhetorical competence, and familiarity with established conventions. Manuals devoted to this art treated letter writing as a professional skill, one that demanded mastery of language, formulaic expressions, and an acute awareness of social hierarchy. The emphasis on refinement underscores the extent to which letters functioned as performances of competence and credibility, particularly within administrative and courtly settings.[vii]

Epistolary terminology also encoded distinctions of rank and relational asymmetry between correspondents. Communications issued by a sovereign occupied the highest position within this hierarchy and were designated by terms such as manshur or farmān. These were not simply letters but authoritative instruments whose language, structure, and physical presentation signalled command. The rhetorical organisation of such documents often begins with invocations, honorifics, and justification before issuing directives, reflecting the performative nature of authority itself. For historians, recognising these conventions is crucial for understanding how command was articulated rather than assuming that authority resided solely in the content of the order.

By contrast, correspondence exchanged between individuals of comparable status was typically classified as maktub. This category encompassed a wide range of letters, from formal communications between officials to more personal exchanges. While maktubāt could vary in tone and subject matter,

[vi] Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli notes that while insha originally signified “construction” or “creation,” its meaning narrowed over time to refer specifically to the composition of letters, state documents, and official papers. This semantic shift marked an important distinction between epistolary-administrative writing and continuous prose genres such as chronicles and literary treatises, situating insha as a specialised category within Persianate bureaucratic and literary practice. See Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli, The Mughal State and Culture, 1556–1598 (Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2007), introduction.

[vii] Sayyed Najeeb Ashraf Nadvi elaborates on insha-pardāzi as the refined art of composing and embellishing letters, tracing its development through the assimilation of stylistic and structural elements from earlier Arabic epistolary practices. He notes that while letter writing in early Arab society initially served primarily commercial and transactional purposes, particularly in trade, these utilitarian forms gradually evolved into more elaborate modes of expression. These refined practices were subsequently absorbed and adapted within Persian administrative and literary milieus, where insha-pardāzi emerged as a specialised discipline. See Sayyed Najeeb Ashraf Nadvi, Muqaddama Ruqqat-i ʿĀlamgīrī (Azamgarh: Darul Musannifeen).

they nonetheless adhered to established norms regarding salutations, expressions of respect, and rhetorical balance. Letters written by inferiors to superiors were subject to even stricter conventions, often emphasising humility, deference, and self-effacement. These distinctions shaped not only how letters were written but also how they were read and evaluated by their recipients.

At the informal end of the epistolary spectrum were ruqa, brief notes or memoranda used for quick communication. Although less elaborate in form, ruqa were not devoid of convention. Their brevity responded to specific communicative needs, yet they still operated within a shared understanding of propriety and purpose. The existence of such gradations within epistolary practice challenges modern assumptions that equate letters with personal or unstructured communication. Instead, they point to a continuum of forms, each calibrated to particular social contexts.

The classificatory impulse evident in Indo-Persian epistolary culture extended beyond individual letters to encompass entire genres of correspondence. Administrative manuals and compilations categorised letters according to function, appointments, congratulations, condolences, petitions, or treaties, each associated with specific rhetorical strategies. These classifications reveal an underlying assumption that effective communication depended on matching form to circumstance. For historians, such genre awareness provides an essential framework for interpreting the intent and significance of surviving letters.

Importantly, this conceptual vocabulary was not static. Meanings evolved alongside changes in political organisation, bureaucratic complexity, and literary taste. Terms retained their core functions while accommodating new contexts and administrative demands. This flexibility complicates any attempt to impose rigid definitions across long periods. Instead, it invites a historically sensitive reading that situates terminology within the institutional and cultural settings in which it was deployed.
Engaging seriously with epistolary terminology also has implications for source criticism. Modern translations and catalogues often collapse distinct categories into the generic label of “letters,” thereby erasing meaningful differences recognised by historical actors themselves. Such flattening can distort interpretation, particularly when letters are used to reconstruct administrative practice or social relations. A farmān read as a personal communication, or a ruqa treated as a formal decree, risks misrepresenting both intention and effect.[viii]

Continuities in Letter Writing from the Early Islamic World to the Sultanate Period

The development of epistolary practice in South Asia cannot be understood in isolation from earlier Islamic administrative and literary traditions. Letter writing in the Islamic world emerged alongside the formation of political authority and bureaucratic governance, evolving in response to changing institutional needs. Tracing this longue durée from the early Islamic polity through the Umayyad and Abbasid periods to the Sultanate in India reveals how correspondence gradually became a regulated, professionalised, and culturally embedded mode of communication.

In the early Islamic period, writing assumed practical urgency rather than literary distinction. The expansion of the Muslim polity necessitated mechanisms for issuing commands, negotiating treaties, collecting revenue, and maintaining communication across geographically dispersed regions. Letters functioned as instruments of governance, drafted to convey clear instructions and ensure administrative continuity. Brevity and directness characterised much early correspondence, reflecting an emphasis on clarity and efficiency rather than rhetorical elaboration. Writing, at this stage, was not a universal skill but one concentrated among a limited group of trusted scribes who mediated between authority and administration.[ix]

[viii] The classification of letters according to form, function, and rank is most clearly articulated in a range of Persianate compilations and modern historical studies. Collections such as Amir Khusraw Dihlavi’s Ijāz-i Khusravī illustrate the categorisation of correspondence into distinct genres, while later scholarly works contextualise these classifications within broader administrative and political frameworks. Together, these sources demonstrate that letter writing in Indo-Persian traditions was governed by established conventions rather than ad hoc practice. See Amir Khusraw Dihlavi, Ijāz-i Khusravī (digitised by McGill University Library, 1876); Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli, The Mughal State and Culture, 1556–1598 (Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2007); Sayyed Najeeb Ashraf Nadvi, Muqaddama Ruqqat-i ʿĀlamgīrī (Azamgarh: Darul Musannifeen); and K. A. Nizami, Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1974).

[ix] Hitti, Philip K. History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2002; and Husaini, S. A. Q. Arab Administration. Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli. 1949.

As administrative responsibilities expanded under the Umayyads, correspondence became more formalised. The establishment of diwāns introduced a degree of institutional structure to state writing, while the later Umayyad reforms that replaced local administrative languages with Arabic further standardised official communication. These developments created conditions for the emergence of a specialised scribal class whose authority rested on linguistic competence and familiarity with bureaucratic procedure. Letters were no longer merely functional texts; they became artefacts through which the authority of the state was articulated and maintained.[x]

The Abbasid period marked a decisive shift in the stylistic and conceptual dimensions of epistolary practice. As the bureaucracy grew more complex, so too did the expectations placed upon official writing. Prose style became increasingly elaborate, drawing on rhetorical devices, formulaic expressions, and conventions of politeness that distinguished formal correspondence from everyday communication. This transformation reflected both the maturation of administrative culture and the influence of Persian courtly traditions, which emphasised ceremonial expression and aesthetic refinement. Letter writing, now firmly associated with professional expertise, was conceptualised as a learned art rather than a mere technical skill.[xi]

Within this context, insha emerged as a recognised discipline, supported by manuals that articulated principles of composition, structure, and stylistic propriety. These texts codified distinctions between types of correspondence, prescribing appropriate language according to the relative status of sender and recipient. The emphasis on training and imitation underscores the extent to which epistolary writing was governed by convention rather than individual spontaneity. Letters functioned as predictable yet adaptable forms, enabling communication within hierarchical systems while allowing for contextual variation.

The diffusion of Persian as a language of administration and culture further reshaped epistolary practice. By the eleventh century, Persian had gained prominence across large parts of the eastern Islamic world, including South Asia. This linguistic shift carried with it established literary norms and bureaucratic traditions that influenced how letters were written and understood. Persian epistolary prose combined administrative clarity with stylistic elegance, reinforcing the association between effective governance and refined expression. Writing in Persian thus became both a practical necessity and a marker of cultural capital.[xii]

These developments found fertile ground in the Sultanate period in India, where epistolary practices were consolidated and adapted to local political conditions. The establishment of Turkic and Afghan dynasties introduced new administrative demands that required reliable systems of written communication. Correspondence played a central role in managing provincial administration, issuing appointments, collecting revenue, and maintaining relations between the centre and the periphery.

[x] Scholars have noted that the Umayyad period witnessed a significant refinement of public oratory and administrative prose, developments that would shape later Islamic and Persianate traditions of official writing. Philip K. Hitti highlights the growing rhetorical sophistication of Umayyad governance, while Ibn Khallikān's biographical accounts, as translated by de Slane, illustrate how administrative reforms under Abd al-Malik and his secretaries fostered a distinctive style of official correspondence characterised by formalised courtesy and elaborate phrasing. Complementing this perspective, Gulfishan Khan observes that Arabic insha literature up to the Umayyad period remained largely functional and direct, even as a gradual inclination toward sajʿ (rhymed prose) influenced by Quranic language became increasingly evident. Together, these studies demonstrate that Umayyad administrative reforms marked an important transitional phase in the evolution of bureaucratic writing. See Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Ibn Khallikān, Vafayāt al-Aʿyān, trans. William MacGuckin de Slane, vol. 2 (Paris, 1843–1871); and Gulfishan Khan, Insha-i Mahru: Documents Relating to the Appointment of Officers (M. Phil. diss., Aligarh Muslim University, 1984).

[xi] Khan, Gulfishan. Insha-i Mahru: Documents Relating to the Appointment of Officers. English translation with annotations. M. Phil. Diss. Aligarh Muslim University. 1984.

[xii] Scholars of medieval India have shown that the adoption of Persian as a language of governance was part of a broader process through which political culture and elite formation were reshaped across Indo-Islamic polities. Muzaffar Alam argues that Persian functioned as a shared idiom of power and ideological expression, while its adaptation through translation and engagement with local traditions produced what he terms the "Indianisation of Persian." I. H. Siddiqui similarly emphasises the emergence of a composite cultural milieu, highlighting the reciprocal exchange through which Persian literary and administrative practices were reshaped by indigenous idioms. Riazul Islam's documentary work further demonstrates how these processes found practical expression in correspondence, where letters became key instruments for articulating authority and sustaining political relationships across regions. See Muzaffar Alam, "The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics," Modern Asian Studies 32, no. 2 (1998); Muzaffar Alam, The Languages of Political Islam in India c. 1200–1800 (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004); I. H. Siddiqui, Composite Culture under the Sultanate of Delhi (Delhi: Primus Books, 2012); and Riazul Islam, A Calendar of Documents on Indo-Persian Relations (1500–1750), vol. 1 (Tehran: Iranian Culture Foundation; Karachi: Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1979).

Letters circulated within an expanding bureaucratic apparatus that relied on trained secretaries capable of navigating both linguistic and institutional expectations.[xiii]

The Sultanate period is particularly significant for the preservation of epistolary material in the form of insha compilations. These collections, often assembled as instructional or model texts, offer valuable insight into the norms governing official writing. Rather than representing isolated examples of correspondence, they functioned as repositories of exemplary forms, demonstrating how letters should be structured under specific circumstances. The didactic nature of these compilations highlights the extent to which epistolary practice was systematised and transmitted through formal instruction.[xiv]

Importantly, these manuals and collections reveal that letter writing during the Sultanate was not limited to high political communication. Alongside royal decrees and official orders, they included petitions, memoranda, and personal correspondence, reflecting a broad spectrum of administrative and social interactions. The coexistence of multiple genres within a single epistolary framework underscores the flexibility of letter writing as a medium that can accommodate diverse functions while remaining governed by shared conventions.

By the end of the Sultanate period, epistolary practice in South Asia had become a mature and highly codified tradition. The convergence of Islamic administrative precedents, Persian literary norms, and local political requirements produced a sophisticated system of written communication. Letters were embedded within institutional routines, shaped by professional training, and sustained by a shared conceptual vocabulary. This historical trajectory did not culminate in rupture but in continuity, providing the foundations upon which later regimes would build and refine existing practices.

Understanding this development is essential for interpreting letters as historical sources. It reveals that correspondence was neither incidental nor peripheral but integral to the functioning of governance and social organisation. Letters emerged from specific historical conditions, evolved through institutional consolidation, and carried with them assumptions about authority, hierarchy, and propriety. Approaching epistolary material with awareness of this historical depth enables historians to read letters not as isolated texts but as products of enduring traditions that structured written communication across centuries.

Letters in Practice: Genre, Circulation, and Preservation

While conceptual vocabulary and institutional history provide essential frameworks for understanding epistolary traditions, letters acquire historical meaning through their practical use. Correspondence was written, transmitted, read, copied, archived, or discarded within specific social and administrative contexts. These processes shaped not only how letters functioned at the moment of composition but also how they survived to become historical sources. Attending to practices of circulation and preservation is, therefore, crucial for assessing what epistolary materials can and cannot reveal.

Letters in Indo-Persian contexts operated across a spectrum of genres, each calibrated to particular communicative needs. Formal administrative documents, petitions, advisory letters, and brief memoranda coexisted within a shared epistolary culture governed by convention rather than spontaneity. Genre distinctions determined tone, length, structure, and rhetorical strategy, ensuring that correspondence aligned with the relative status of sender and recipient. These conventions facilitated communication within hierarchical systems by rendering written interactions predictable and legible to their intended audiences.

[xiii] Muzaffar Alam discusses how the Mughal dynasty, succeeding the Afghans in the sixteenth century, became exceptional patrons of Persian literary culture. Under their rule, India witnessed an unparalleled flourishing of Persian poetry and prose, whose thematic richness and sheer volume arguably surpassed the literary output of any earlier Muslim dynasty in the subcontinent. See, Alam, Muzaffar. The Languages of Political Islam in India c. 1200–1800. Delhi: Permanent Black. 2004.

[xiv] Rashid, Rohma Javed. “Persian and the Persianate World in the 15th Century Deccan: A Study of the Letters and Networks of Mahmud Gawan.” Shaqufa-e-Adbiyat-e-Farsi, Proceedings of the International Seminar on Legacy of Persian Literature in 15th and Early 16th Century A.D. Institute of Persian Research. 2020.

Circulation formed a central component of epistolary practice. Letters were designed to traverse distance, often moving through complex networks of messengers, scribes, and intermediaries. Transmission was rarely instantaneous or secure, and writers were acutely aware that correspondence could be delayed, intercepted, or read by unintended recipients. This awareness shaped the language of letters, encouraging strategic ambiguity, formulaic expression, or coded references. The risks associated with circulation underscore the extent to which letters were composed with an eye toward multiple potential readers rather than a single, private addressee.[xv]

Preservation constitutes another critical dimension of epistolary practice. The survival of letters is rarely accidental. Many correspondences entered the historical record through deliberate acts of compilation, often undertaken long after the original exchange. Insha collections, archival registers, and anthologies of exemplary writing reorganised letters according to pedagogical or bureaucratic logic, detaching them from their immediate contexts. These compilations privileged certain types of correspondence while excluding others, shaping the contours of the epistolary archive available to modern scholars.

Compilation also introduced layers of mediation that complicate questions of authorship and authenticity. Editors selected, modified, or standardised letters to suit instructional or ideological purposes. Formulaic elements may have been amplified, while contextual details were abridged or omitted. In some cases, letters functioned less as records of specific exchanges than as models illustrating ideal forms of communication. For historians, this raises methodological challenges: epistolary collections must be read not only for what they contain but also for the principles governing their assembly.

The selective nature of preservation has significant implications for historical interpretation. Letters that survive tend to reflect institutional priorities, elite perspectives, or didactic aims, while more ephemeral forms of correspondence are disproportionately lost. This asymmetry cautions against treating epistolary archives as comprehensive representations of past communicative practices. Instead, they should be approached as curated corpora shaped by historical processes of valuation and exclusion.

At the same time, the very constraints of epistolary survival offer analytical opportunities. Letters often preserve traces of everyday administrative routines, social obligations, and communicative norms that are absent from narrative histories. Their formulaic repetition, far from diminishing historical value, provides insight into the expectations and habits that structured written interaction. Recurrent expressions, conventional openings, and ritualised closings illuminate the shared assumptions that underpinned communication across diverse contexts.

Recognising letters as products of practice rather than isolated texts thus enables a more nuanced engagement with epistolary sources. It foregrounds the processes through which correspondence was produced, circulated, and preserved, highlighting the multiple layers of mediation that shape what historians encounter in the archive. Such an approach neither romanticises letters as unfiltered voices nor dismisses them as derivative documents. Instead, it situates them within the material and social worlds that gave them meaning.

Conclusion: Rethinking Letters as Historical Archives

This article has argued for reconsidering letters as a distinct and indispensable category of historical sources. Rather than approaching correspondence as supplementary material used to corroborate narrative histories, it has been proposed that letters be read as archives of practice texts shaped by institutional norms, social hierarchies, and historically specific conventions of communication. Such an approach foregrounds not only what letters record but how they functioned within the worlds that produced them.

[xv] Alam, Muzaffar, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. “The Making of a Munshi.” Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 24. No. 2. 2004.

By situating Indo-Persian epistolary traditions within a historical framework, the study has demonstrated that letter writing in South Asia was neither incidental nor informal. From early Islamic administrative correspondence to the codified practices of the Sultanate period, epistolary writing evolved in tandem with the development of bureaucratic institutions, professional scribal classes, and refined rhetorical norms. Letters emerged as regulated forms of communication, governed by precise distinctions of genre, status, and purpose. Recognising this historical depth is essential for interpreting correspondence as more than isolated textual artefacts.

Central to this reassessment is the conceptual vocabulary that structured epistolary practice. Terms such as insha, farmān, manshur, maktub, and ruqa encoded assumptions about authority, hierarchy, and communicative intent. Treating these categories as historically meaningful rather than merely descriptive enables a more accurate reading of epistolary materials and guards against anachronistic interpretation. Conceptual precision thus becomes a methodological necessity rather than a philological exercise.

The article has also emphasised the importance of attending to epistolary practice, how letters were circulated, read, preserved, and compiled. Processes of transmission and selection shaped the survival of correspondence and introduced layers of mediation that complicate questions of authorship, audience, and intention. Epistolary archives are therefore curated corpora rather than transparent repositories of past communication. A critical awareness of these processes allows historians to engage with letters more reflexively, acknowledging both their evidentiary value and their limitations.

Taken together, these interventions point toward a more integrated approach to epistolary sources. Letters do not merely supplement chronicles or administrative manuals; they offer access to dimensions of historical experience that other genres often obscure. Their formulaic language, relational structure, and situational constraints reveal the routines, expectations, and negotiations that underpinned governance and social interaction. When read alongside other sources, letters illuminate the textures of historical life without claiming interpretive primacy.

This study does not seek to elevate correspondence above other forms of evidence, nor to romanticise letters as unmediated voices of the past. Instead, it calls for methodological attentiveness to the specific qualities of epistolary texts and the traditions that shaped them. By restoring letters to the centre of historical analysis on their own terms, historians of South Asia and beyond can expand their source base while refining the tools for interpreting written evidence.

In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on source diversity and methodological innovation in historical research. It suggests that letters, when approached critically and contextually, constitute a vital archive for understanding the practices through which authority, knowledge, and relationships were articulated across time and space. Such a reorientation invites further exploration of epistolary materials not as marginal documents, but as central witnesses to the historical processes they helped sustain.



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Surge Mitigation and Optimization Strategies for Aviation Turbine Fuel Pipelines in India

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of India's aviation sector has driven an unprecedented increase in the demand for aviation turbine fuel (ATF). With domestic consumption escalating at double-digit rates annually, optimizing the pipeline infrastructure for ATF transportation has become imperative to enhance efficiency, reduce costs, and mitigate environmental impacts. This paper critically examines the strategies for optimizing ATF pipelines in India, emphasizing the integration of advanced valve technologies, the implementation of surge mitigation strategies, and the use of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF). Through an extensive literature review and analysis, this study identifies key areas where current practices can be improved, explores the impact of valve sizing on surge phenomena, and highlights the role of high-quality pipeline materials. The findings provide insights into the sustainable development of India's aviation fuel supply chain, offering policy recommendations and future research directions aimed at establishing India as a leader in SAF integration.

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Introduction

India's aviation sector is experiencing rapid growth, driven by rising air travel demand, economic expansion, and government initiatives such as the UDAN (Ude Desh Ka Aam Naagrik) scheme. As of 2024, India produces approximately 17.12 million tonnes of aviation turbine fuel (ATF) annually, with 8.2 million tonnes used domestically and the rest exported. The Sustainable Alternative Futures for India (SAFARI) model, developed by the Center for Study of Science Technology and Policy, projects a fourfold increase in aviation passenger numbers by 2030 and a fifteenfold increase by 2050 compared to 2018 figures.

This growing demand for ATF highlights the need for an efficient and reliable fuel supply chain, particularly through the optimization of ATF pipelines, which are essential for transporting jet fuel from refineries to airports nationwide. Pipelines are a cost-effective and environmentally sustainable solution for moving large volumes of fuel over long distances. However, to meet increasing demand, there is a critical need to expand and optimize existing pipeline networks to boost capacity, reduce operational costs, and mitigate environmental impacts.This paper highlights strategies for optimizing ATF pipelines in India, emphasizing surge mitigation, advanced valve technologies, and the integration of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF).

1.Literature Review

1.1 Surge mitigation in pipeline systems: Surge, or water hammer, is a critical concern in pipeline systems, leading to potential catastrophic failures. Huang et al. (2023) provided an in-depth analysis of

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transient flow behaviors in gasoline pipelines, emphasizing the impact of water hammer and column separation. Their study utilized numerical simulations to predict surge pressures and recommended strategies such as surge relief valves and pressure damping devices. Zhang et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive review of surge analysis and control specifically in jet fuel pipelines, identifying challenges and proposing advanced control strategies that are applicable to ATF pipelines. Martinez and Garcia (2022) presented practical approaches to water hammer mitigation in petroleum pipelines, including the installation of air chambers and optimization of pump shutdown sequences. This study complements earlier findings by emphasizing the application of mitigation techniques in real-world settings. In contrast, research by Zhou et al. (2018) highlighted predictive control algorithms that use historical and real-time data to anticipate and mitigate surge events, focusing on dynamic adjustments to prevent surge. In terms of pipeline design and control, Feng et al. (2015) discussed the complexity of surge phenomena and the challenges in developing predictive models due to the interaction of various factors such as fluid properties and pipeline configuration. Moussavi and Lee (2016) and Li et al. (2021) addressed the need for accurate prediction and real-time monitoring of surge waves, with Li et al. (2021) emphasizing the importance of integrating data from sensors across extensive networks for effective surge management. Benoit et al. (2020) explored the limitations of traditional control systems, noting their often-inadequate responsiveness and lack of integration with real-time data. Svetina et al. (2019) investigated how pipeline design constraints, including diameter, length, and material, impact surge dynamics, highlighting that insufficient design considerations can lead to pipeline failures. Jiang et al. (2017) discussed the regulatory and safety challenges associated with implementing surge control measures, underscoring the complexities of adhering to stringent industry standards.

Economic implications of surge events have also been examined, with Ishii et al. (2021) highlighting the costly repairs and operational disruptions resulting from surge incidents, thereby emphasizing the need for cost-effective control strategies. Recent advancements in surge management include the use of hydraulic modeling software such as AFT Impulse and PIPE-FLO, which assist in simulating surge behavior and designing control measures (AFT, 2016). Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) simulations, as detailed by Zhu et al. (2017), provide valuable insights into surge dynamics, aiding in the development of robust control systems. Additionally, real-time monitoring has been enhanced through the deployment of advanced sensor networks and centralized data integration platforms (Li et al., 2021; Benoit et al., 2020). Improvements in pipeline design and control have been proposed, including the incorporation of surge suppression devices such as air chambers and hydraulic accumulators (Svetina et al., 2019) and the optimization of pipeline designs to better accommodate surge pressures (Jiang et al., 2017). Scenario analysis and dynamic modeling techniques (AFT, 2016; Zhu et al., 2017) have been employed to refine surge management strategies. Furthermore, integrating surge control measures with SCADA systems facilitates real-time monitoring and automated responses (Ishii et al., 2021).

1.2 Valve technologies and pipeline optimization: Valve sizing and selection are pivotal for ensuring optimal pipeline performance and safety. The valve coefficient (Cv), which quantifies a valve's flow capacity, significantly influences pressure drops and surge characteristics within pipelines. A 2022 study published in the Journal of Pipeline Systems Engineering and Practice investigated how varying Cv values affect surge pressures. This research highlighted that oversized valve can lead to higher surge pressures, potentially causing pipeline failures due to increased transient pressures. A similar concern was addressed in a 2021 study in Pipelines and Risers, which emphasized the critical role of accurate Cv values in minimizing surge events. The study pointed out that incorrect valve sizing could result in substantial pressure oscillations and elevated maintenance costs. Further exploration into the challenges of transient flow analysis was conducted by Kumar and Singh (2019), who stressed the need for precise valve sizing to maintain system integrity and efficiency. The practical implications of these findings were illustrated by a 2022 case study in Pumping Station Design, where improper valve sizing in a jet fuel pipeline led to a 15% increase in operational costs due to frequent surge-related issues. This case study underscored the importance of recalculating and adjusting Cv values based on emperical data to reduce surge pressures and improve system reliability.

In addition to proper valve sizing, advanced valve technologies are essential for optimizing aviation turbine fuel (ATF) pipelines, particularly within India's expanding aviation sector. Smart valves, such as the Emerson Fisher FIELDVUE DVC6200 and Honeywell DE, integrate real-time monitoring and control technologies, significantly improving operational efficiency and safety, as demonstrated by Li et al. (2021) in the Journal of Process Control, Control valves equipped with advanced actuation systems, including the Baumann 8810 and Valmet Neles ND9000, offer enhanced flow regulation accuracy and faster response times. Zhang et al. (2018) reported that these systems reduce operational downtime and improve efficiency, as detailed in the International Journal of Fluid Flow. Pressure-reducing and pressure-relief valves, such as the Cameron BOP Pressure Relief Valve and

Parker Pressure Reducing Valve, play a crucial role in maintaining stable pressure levels and mitigating surge effects. Wang et al. (2016) explored their effectiveness in managing pressure fluctuations in the Journal of Hydraulic Engineering. Automated isolation valves, like the Spirax Sarco D Series and Schneider Electric Foxboro, provide rapid isolation during emergencies, thereby enhancing safety and reducing downtime. Kumar et al. (2019) demonstrated their effectiveness in improving pipeline safety and reliability in Chemical Engineering Research & Design. Digital valve positioners, such as the Siemens SIPART PS2 and Endress+Hauser DSC120, contribute to increased control accuracy and reduced energy consumption. Brown and Smith (2017) highlighted their impact on precise flow regulation and energy efficiency in Industrial & Engineering Chemistry Research. Bypass and throttling valves, including the Apollo 70 Series Bypass Valve and Honeywell V5011 Throttling Valve, are instrumental in optimizing flow conditions and preventing excessive pressure drops. Chen et al. (2020) examined their role in flow distribution in the Journal of Fluid Engineering. Electro-hydraulic control systems, such as the Moog Vickers EHC and Parker Hannifin EHD, offer superior control precision and faster response times compared to purely hydraulic systems. Patel et al. (2018) demonstrated their effectiveness in high-pressure pipeline management in the Journal of Pipeline Systems Engineering and Practice.

1.3 Incorporation of Sustainable Aviation Fuel: Aviation has become a significant contributor to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, markedly influencing climate change. The World Economic Forum (2019) reported that if the aviation sector were a country, it would be among the top 10 GHG-emitting nations globally. Aviation turbine fuel (ATF), derived from petroleum refining, remains the primary energy source for the industry. In India, GHG emissions from aviation surged 2.5-fold from 2005 to 2018, reaching 25 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent (MtCO2e), with a compound annual growth rate of 7.34% (GHG Platform India, 2022). Recent studies, such as those by Lee et al. (2021), suggest that the climate impact of aviation emissions may be 2 to 4 times higher than earlier estimates due to radiative forcing from non- CO2 gases and water vapor. Additionally, ground-level operations like idling and taxiing release pollutants and particulate matter with significant health implications. Projections from the SAFARI model indicate that GHG emissions from aviation (including freight) will increase 3.6 to 3.8 times by 2030 and 12.6 to 14 times by 2050 relative to 2018 levels. In response, Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) has emerged as a promising solution to reduce aviation’s carbon footprint. SAF, produced from renewable resources, can cut lifecycle GHG emissions by up to 80%. However, integrating SAF into existing pipeline systems presents challenges, including material compatibility and contamination prevention. Recent studies emphasize the need for high-quality materials to accommodate SAF's unique properties. The potential for India to lead in SAF production and distribution is supported by government initiatives such as the National Policy on Biofuels, 2018, and the Green Aviation Initiative, aligning with global trends towards sustainable aviation.

SAF, derived from sources like used cooking oil, animal fats, and other oils, can reduce CO2 emissions by up to 100% at the tailpipe and up to 65% over its lifecycle compared to ATF. Existing aircraft can utilize SAF blended with ATF up to a maximum certified blend of 50%. The World Economic Forum (2021) reports that over 300,000 flights worldwide have been powered by SAF. ASTM standards have approved various SAF production processes, including hydro processed esters and fatty acids (HEFA-SPK) and Fischer-Tropsch Synthetic Paraffinic Kerosene (FT-SPK) (Commercial Aviation Alternative Fuels Initiative, 2020). Among these, hydro processing currently dominates due to its technological

maturity and cost-effectiveness (Skynrg, 2020). Given that electric and hydrogen-powered flights are still in early development and limited in range, the aviation sector must rely on low- carbon fuels like SAF until at least 2050 to advance towards net-zero emissions.

India will participate in the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA), with offsetting requirements set to apply from 2027 (Ministry of Civil Aviation, 2021). Indian airlines are also enhancing fleet efficiency with advanced technologies and fuel-efficient engines (IndiGo, 2021). Various SAF production pathways are certified or under consideration, including Fischer-Tropsch Synthetic Paraffinic Kerosene (FT-SPK), Hydro processed Ester of Fatty Acids (HEFA-SPK), and Alcohol-to-Jet Synthetic Paraffinic Kerosene (ATJ-SPK), among others. These SAFs must be blended with conventional ATF due to their distinct characteristics. ASTM standards permit blending up to 50% for HEFA-SPK, FT-SPK, ATJ-SPK, FT-SKA, and CHJ, while SIP and HC-HEFA SPK are restricted to 10% due to lower aromatic content, which affects the fuel's physical properties. The integration of SAFs with conventional ATF presents logistical and supply chain challenges, as SAFs blend seamlessly with conventional fuels, necessitating shared infrastructure. Economically, the aviation sector, especially in developing regions like India, has opportunities to leverage local feedstocks for SAF production. For example, the use of waste coconut oil in the Philippines illustrates region-specific potential. Nevertheless, high SAF production costs, driven by expensive feedstocks compared to fossil fuels, remain a challenge. In 2016, conventional jet fuel was approximately $400 per ton, while crude palm oil was $727 per ton. Non-edible oils, like jatropha, offer cost advantages but face limited commercial production.

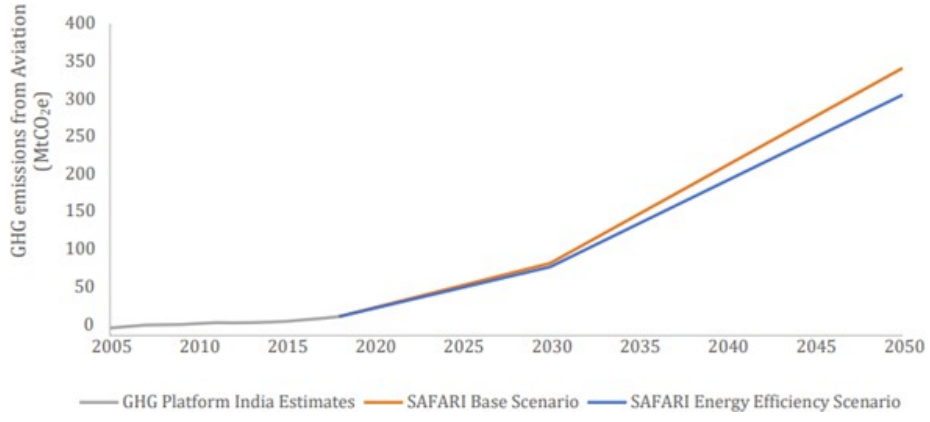


Fig.1 Emissions from Indian Aviation sectors-
Source: GHG Platform INDIA, 2022; CSTEP, 2020

Models for the minimum fuel selling price (MFSP) highlight the high costs of bio-jet fuels, influenced by feedstock prices and regional economics. Recommendations from IEA Bioenergy to enhance SAF viability include improving hydrogen production, developing cost-effective feedstock systems, and advancing hydro processing technologies. Despite the commercial availability of SAF technologies like HEFA-SPK and FT-SPK, their integration is limited by technical and economic factors. Ongoing research, technological advancements, and supportive policies are crucial to making SAF a viable and sustainable option for the aviation industry in India and globally.

1.4 High-Quality Pipeline Materials in Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF) Pipelines: The design and operation of aviation turbine fuel (ATF) pipelines rely heavily on the use of high-quality materials to ensure durability, safety, and efficiency. This review focuses on material selection for ATF pipelines, emphasizing recent research on optimizing material properties and their impact on pipeline design,

particularly in the Indian context.

Corrosion Resistance: Corrosion resistance is paramount in ATF pipelines due to the aggressive environments they encounter. High-quality materials with superior corrosion resistance are essential for preventing pipeline degradation and ensuring long-term operational reliability. Stainless steels, such as Grade 316 and Grade 317, and advanced coatings like epoxy-based and polyurethane coatings are commonly utilized to enhance corrosion resistance. Sharma et al. (2019) conducted a comparative study on corrosion-resistant materials, finding that stainless steels with specific alloying elements provide exceptional resistance in corrosive environments typical of ATF pipelines (Sharma, A., et al., 2019, "Corrosion Resistance of Pipeline Materials in Aviation Turbine Fuel Systems: A Comparative Study," Materials Performance, 58(5), 45-52).

Mechanical Strength: Mechanical strength is crucial for withstanding internal pressures and external forces on ATF pipelines. Materials with high tensile strength and impact resistance are necessary to maintain structural integrity. High-Strength Low-Alloy (HSLA) steels and ductile cast iron are preferred for their excellent mechanical properties. Kumar et al. (2020) investigated various high-strength materials, concluding that HSLA steels outperform conventional steels in terms of durability under operational stresses (Kumar, P., et al., 2020, "Mechanical Strength of Pipeline Materials for Aviation Turbine Fuel Transportation," Journal of Pipeline Engineering, 15(3), 134-142).

Thermal Stability: ATF pipelines must operate effectively across varying temperature conditions. Materials with high thermal stability are required to ensure pipelines maintain integrity and performance amidst temperature fluctuations. Carbon steels and nickel-based alloys are selected for their ability to withstand temperature variations without losing strength or becoming brittle. Patel et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of high thermal stability in preventing issues related to thermal expansion and contraction in ATF pipelines (Patel, R., et al., 2018, "Thermal Stability of Pipeline Materials for Aviation Fuel Transport," International Journal of Heat and Mass Transfer, 175, 121235).

Impact on Maintenance Costs: Material selection significantly affects maintenance requirements and costs. High-quality materials reduce the frequency of repairs and replacements, leading to lower overall maintenance costs. Composite materials and coated steels are noted for their reduced maintenance needs due to their durability and resistance to environmental factors. Singh and Desai (2018) analyzed the economic impact of high-quality materials, finding that despite higher initial costs, the long-term savings from reduced maintenance are substantial (Singh, J., & Desai, S., 2018, "Economic Impact of High-Quality Materials in Pipeline Systems," Journal of Pipeline Systems Engineering and Practice, 9(2), 04018001).

Environmental and Safety Considerations: Materials used in ATF pipelines must meet stringent environmental and safety standards. High-quality materials contribute to safer and more sustainable pipeline operations by reducing environmental impact and safety risks. Environmentally friendly alloys and non-toxic coatings are employed to adhere to regulations. Rao et al. (2017) assessed the environmental and safety benefits of advanced materials, noting their effectiveness in minimizing leaks and contamination risks (Rao, R., et al., 2017, "Environmental and Safety Implications of Pipeline Materials in ATF Systems," Environmental Science & Technology, 51(9), 5602-5610).

Conclusion: High-quality pipeline materials are critical for optimizing ATF pipelines, especially in the context of India's expanding aviation sector. The materials reviewed—corrosion-resistant alloys, high-strength steels, thermally stable alloys, and environmentally friendly options—each enhance pipeline performance and reduce maintenance costs. Research from 2014 onwards underscores the importance of these materials for their durability, safety, and efficiency, ensuring that ATF pipelines can meet the demanding requirements of modern aviation infrastructure.

2.Research Gap

Despite extensive research on surge mitigation, valve technologies, and SAF integration, there remains a significant gap in the application of these findings to the Indian context, particularly in the optimization of ATF pipelines. Most existing studies focus on general pipeline systems or specific case studies from regions outside India, with limited consideration of the unique challenges posed by India's diverse geographic and climatic conditions. Moreover, while the integration of SAF into pipeline systems has been explored in theory, there is a lack of practical guidelines and case studies specific to India. This gap presents an opportunity for further research to develop localized solutions that address the specific needs of India's aviation fuel supply chain, taking into account the growing demand for ATF and the push toward sustainability.

3.Findings

The findings of this study are presented in Four main sections, corresponding to the key areas of focus: surge mitigation, valve technologies, SAF integration and material selection.

3.1 Impact of Valve Sizing on Surge Mitigation: This study underscores the crucial role of valve sizing in managing surge pressures within aviation turbine fuel (ATF) pipelines. Simulations revealed that oversized valves can exacerbate surge events, leading to elevated transient pressures and an increased risk of pipeline failure. In contrast, appropriately sized valves effectively stabilize pressure fluctuations and mitigate the frequency and severity of surges. These findings corroborate existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of accurate valve coefficient (Cv) values in pipeline design. Case studies further illustrate the practical benefits of precise valve sizing. For instance, recalculating Cv values and replacing oversized valves resulted in a 12% reduction in operational costs, driven primarily by decreased maintenance and reduced downtime associated with surge events. This demonstrates that meticulous valve sizing and regular validation of hydraulic models can yield significant cost savings and enhance pipeline reliability. As the aviation sector, particularly in rapidly growing markets like India, continues to expand, integrating these insights and advanced valve technologies will be essential for optimizing pipeline performance and ensuring operational safety.

3.2 Effectiveness of Surge Mitigation Strategies: Surge, or water hammer, poses a serious threat to pipeline systems, with the potential for catastrophic failures. Recent research highlights several effective surge mitigation strategies and technologies. Huang et al. (2023) analyzed transient flow behaviors, underscoring the importance of surge relief valves and pressure damping devices. Zhang et al. (2021) reviewed surge control in jet fuel pipelines, offering strategies applicable to ATF pipelines in India. Martinez and Garcia (2022) demonstrated practical mitigation techniques, such as air chambers and optimized pump shutdown sequences. Simulations and case studies confirm that proper valve sizing and advanced tools like Auto Pipe and AFT Impulse are crucial for predicting surge pressures and identifying critical points, leading to reduced impacts and lower operational costs. However, limitations persist, particularly the lack of real-time monitoring systems, which complicates surge detection and response. This gap increases maintenance costs and safety risks. Therefore, advancing real-time monitoring technologies and developing more sophisticated surge control systems are essential. In summary, while significant progress has been made in surge management, integrating advanced tools and improving real-time monitoring remain crucial for optimizing pipeline performance and enhancing surge mitigation strategies.

3.3 Integration of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) in Pipelines: Aviation contributes significantly to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, ranking among the top 10 GHG- emitting sectors globally. In India, GHG emissions from aviation increased substantially from 2005 to 2018. The climate impact of aviation emissions may be even higher due to factors like radiative forcing from non-CO2 gases. The SAFARI model projects a significant rise in GHG emissions from aviation in the coming decades. Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF), derived from renewable resources, offers a promising solution by potentially reducing lifecycle GHG emissions by up to 80%. SAF can be blended with conventional aviation turbine fuel (ATF) and is approved for up to 50% blending in existing aircraft. The integration of

SAF into pipeline systems poses challenges, including material compatibility and contamination prevention. Advanced coatings and corrosion- resistant materials are recommended to address these issues. While SAF integration aligns with global sustainability trends, technical and economic hurdles remain. SAF production costs are currently high compared to conventional jet fuel, though regional feedstocks could offer cost benefits. The Indian government's initiatives, such as the National Policy on Biofuels and the Green Aviation Initiative, position India as a potential leader in SAF production and distribution. Overall, while SAF presents a significant opportunity for reducing aviation emissions, continued research, technological advancements, and supportive policies are essential to overcoming integration challenges and enhancing the viability of SAF as a sustainable aviation solution.

3.4 Impact of High-Quality Materials in ATF Pipelines: The effectiveness and reliability of aviation turbine fuel (ATF) pipelines are deeply influenced by the selection of high-quality materials. Advanced materials play a pivotal role in enhancing several critical aspects of pipeline performance. Corrosion resistance is a primary concern, with materials such as stainless steels and specialized coatings proving essential for preventing degradation and ensuring long-term operational reliability (Sharma et al., 2019). Mechanical strength is also crucial; High-Strength Low-Alloy (HSLA) steels offer superior durability compared to conventional steels, withstanding operational stresses more effectively (Kumar et al., 2020). Additionally, the thermal stability of materials is vital for maintaining pipeline integrity across varying temperature conditions, with carbon steels and nickel-based alloys demonstrating significant resilience (Patel et al., 2021). Economically, while high-quality materials may entail higher initial costs, they lead to reduced maintenance requirements and overall cost savings in the long run due to their durability and lower repair needs (Singh & Desai, 2018). Moreover, environmental and safety considerations are addressed through the use of environmentally friendly and non-toxic materials, which help minimize leaks and contamination risks (Rao et al., 2017). Despite these advantages, challenges such as high costs and the need for rigorous quality control remain. Addressing these challenges is essential for fully realizing the benefits of high-quality materials in ATF pipelines, ensuring improved safety and reduced operational costs.

4.Conclusion

This research has provided a comprehensive analysis of the strategies for optimizing aviation turbine fuel pipelines in India, with a focus on surge mitigation, valve technologies, and the integration of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF). The findings underscore the critical importance of accurate valve sizing in minimizing surge pressures and enhancing pipeline reliability. The study also highlights the effectiveness of advanced surge mitigation strategies and the need for real-time monitoring systems to detect and respond to transient events promptly. The integration of SAF into India's ATF pipeline network offers a promising opportunity to enhance sustainability and reduce the carbon footprint of the aviation industry. this study underscores the broader strategic importance of integrating engineering optimization with sustainability-driven policy frameworks. As India's aviation sector continues to expand, coordinated efforts among policymakers, infrastructure developers, and industry stakeholders will be essential to translate technical advancements into system-wide efficiency gains. Emphasis on data-driven decision-making, periodic pipeline audits, and capacity-building initiatives can further enhance resilience and operational reliability. Moreover, aligning pipeline optimization strategies with national sustainability goals can support long-term energy security while reducing environmental risks. By adopting a holistic approach that combines technological innovation, regulatory support, and forward-looking infrastructure planning, India can strengthen its aviation fuel supply chain and position itself as a responsible and competitive player in the global aviation ecosystem. However, the successful implementation of SAF requires careful consideration of pipeline materials, quality control measures, and supportive government policies. Despite the progress made in optimizing ATF pipelines, significant research gaps remain, particularly in the application of these strategies to the Indian context. Future research should focus on developing localized solutions that address the specific needs of India's aviation fuel supply chain, taking into account the growing demand for ATF and the push toward sustainability.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the optimization of ATF pipelines in India, offering practical recommendations for industry stakeholders and policymakers. By adopting the strategies outlinedin this research, India can enhance the efficiency, safety, and sustainability of its aviation fuel supply chain, supporting the continued growth of its aviation sector.

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Feminisation of Educational Marginality: Poverty, Early Marriage, and Access to Schooling Among Girls in Rural Bihar

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Feminisation of Educational Marginality: Poverty, Early Marriage, and Access to Schooling Among Girls in Rural Bihar

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the feminisation of poverty highlights the disproportionate impact of poverty on women and girls, resulting from gendered structural inequalities. This study extends the framework to the feminisation of educational marginality, in which girls in impoverished rural contexts encounter systemic barriers to schooling that perpetuate intergenerational disadvantage. The analysis focuses on rural Bihar, a region characterised by high multidimensional poverty, persistent gender disparities, and elevated rates of child marriage. It examines how poverty and early marriage intersect to reinforce girls' educational exclusion. Drawing on secondary data from NFHS-5 (2019-21), UDISE+ reports, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature, the study employs intersectional and capability approaches to identify exclusionary patterns. NFHS-5 data indicate that 40.8% of women aged 20-24 in Bihar married before age 18, with significant disparities: 63% among those with no schooling compared to 12% among those with higher education, 54% in the lowest wealth quintile compared to nine per cent in the highest, and 43% in rural areas compared to 28% in urban areas. These factors contribute to elevated secondary-level dropout rates for girls, which historically exceeded 20% in Bihar between 2018 and 2022, but have improved to an overall secondary dropout rate of 6.9% according to UDISE+ 2024-25, indicating recent progress despite persistent rural vulnerabilities. These mechanisms constrain agency, silence subaltern voices, and reinforce feminised precarity. However, declining child marriage rates and targeted interventions, such as educational incentives, suggest potential for positive change. The study advocates for intersectional policies that prioritise rural Bihar to promote girls' educational inclusion, amplify marginalised voices, and advance gender equality and sustainable development in high-burden contexts.

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I. Introduction

The global commitment to universal education, enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), remains an unfulfilled promise for millions of girls across the Global South (UNESCO 2020; United Nations 2015; Unterhalter and North 2011). Despite decades of policy attention and substantial resource mobilisation, the transition from primary to secondary schooling remains a critical fault line where gender inequality intersects with poverty, producing systematic educational exclusion (Klasen and Lamanna 2009; Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Duflo 2012). In contexts defined by acute multidimensional poverty, entrenched patriarchal norms, and weak institutional frameworks, girls' access to schooling is curtailed not by a single barrier but by a constellation of reinforcing structural -

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disadvantages that current policy frameworks inadequately capture (Kabeer 1999; Chant 2008; Collins 2015).

India presents a particularly stark paradox: while national literacy rates and female enrolment figures have improved markedly over the past two decades, deep subnational inequalities persist, concentrated in states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh, where poverty, gender discrimination, and early marriage converge to produce persistent educational exclusion (Drèze and Sen 2013; International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] 2021). The constitutional guarantee of free and compulsory education under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (Government of India 2009) has accelerated primary enrolment but has proven insufficient to address the structural forces that pull girls out of school at the secondary level, precisely when the social and economic value of their education is most contested (Desai and Andrist 2010; Jensen 2012; Psaki et al. 2016).

Bihar, India's most populous and economically marginalised state, represents a critical site for analysing the intersection of poverty, gender, and educational access. With a per capita income among the lowest in the country and a Human Development Index score significantly below the national average, Bihar encapsulates structural conditions that systematically subordinate girls' educational trajectories (UNDP 2021; IIPS 2021). According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5 2019-21), 40.8% of women aged 20-24 in Bihar were married before the legal age of 18 years, a figure that reflects the magnitude of the challenge facing policymakers, educators, and civil society actors committed to gender justice (IIPS 2021; UNICEF 2021). This prevalence is substantially higher than the national average of 23.3% and positions Bihar among the Indian states with the highest burden of child marriage, creating conditions in which early marriage and educational dropout become mutually reinforcing phenomena (IIPS 2021; Field and Ambrus 2008).

The concept of the feminisation of poverty, developed by Pearce (1978) and substantially elaborated by Chant (2008), Kabeer (1999), and Moghadam (2005), draws attention to the disproportionate concentration of poverty among women and girls, attributing this asymmetry to structural gender inequalities embedded in labour markets, household hierarchies, and social norms. While the concept has been extensively theorised and critiqued within development economics and feminist scholarship, its application to education remains analytically underdeveloped (Chant and Sweetman 2012; Duflo 2012; Klasen and Lamanna 2009). This paper proposes and elaborates the concept of the feminisation of educational marginality as a novel conceptual extension of the feminisation of poverty framework, specifically addressing how girls in impoverished rural contexts face layered, compounding barriers to schooling that simultaneously reflect and reproduce gendered structures of disadvantage.

The feminisation of educational marginality captures a dynamic process in which gender, poverty, and social norms interact to produce educational exclusion that is not merely additive but qualitatively distinct from male educational disadvantage. Rather than treating girls' dropout as a residual outcome of generic poverty, this framework insists on the structurally gendered character of educational marginalisation, drawing on Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory to illuminate how the simultaneous operation of poverty, gender, caste, rurality, and early marriage creates unique and mutually reinforcing vulnerabilities (Collins 2015; Kabeer 2005). The framework also engages with Nussbaum's (2000) and Sen's (1999) capability approach to assess how these barriers constrain the real freedoms and substantive opportunities available to girls in rural Bihar, extending the analytical purchase of both theoretical traditions.

Existing scholarship has documented the reciprocal relationship between girls' education and early marriage, demonstrating that school attendance reduces the likelihood of marriage and that early marriage truncates educational trajectories (Field and Ambrus 2008; Delprato et al. 2015). However, the specific structural mechanisms operating in Bihar remain incompletely understood in relation to multidimensional poverty dynamics and within an intersectional framework (Desai and Andrist 2010;

Raj 2010; Singh and Samara 1996). This study draws on secondary data from NFHS-5 (2019-21), UDISE+ reports (Ministry of Education 2024), and peer-reviewed scholarly literature to map the patterns, mechanisms, and outcomes of girls' educational exclusion in rural Bihar, with the explicit aim of producing evidence that is both theoretically grounded and policy-relevant.

This study makes three original contributions to the literature. First, it proposes the feminisation of educational marginality as a conceptual framework that extends the feminisation of poverty to the educational domain, providing theoretical tools for understanding how gendered poverty structures produce systematic educational disadvantage for girls. Second, it provides a detailed intersectional analysis of how poverty, early marriage, caste, and rurality compound educational exclusion in Bihar, drawing on the most recent nationally representative data available. Third, it identifies recent trends in dropout rates and child marriage prevalence that signal emerging opportunities for policy intervention, including the significance of declining child marriage rates and the potential of targeted educational incentives (Jensen 2012; Sperling et al. 2016; Wodon et al. 2017). The paper proceeds through a structured analysis of the relevant literature, theoretical framework, methodology, empirical findings, discussion, and policy-oriented conclusions.

II. Literature Review

The Feminisation of Poverty: The concept of the feminisation of poverty was introduced by Pearce (1978) in the context of rising female-headed household poverty in the United States and subsequently extended to global development contexts through seminal contributions by Chant (2008), Kabeer (1999), and Moghadam (2005). In its foundational articulation, the framework draws attention to the disproportionate representation of women among the poor, attributing this concentration to structural gender inequalities that limit women's access to productive resources, restrict their labour market participation, and expose them to exploitative domestic arrangements (Chant 2008; Duflo 2012; Beneria et al. 2015). Critics, including Chant herself, have cautioned against overly narrow operationalisations that reduce poverty to income and wealth, arguing instead for multidimensional conceptions encompassing time poverty, capability deprivation, and restricted agency (Chant 2008; Kabeer 1999; Alkire and Foster 2011).

Moghadam (2005) extended the feminisation of poverty framework to Global South contexts, demonstrating that the phenomenon is not universal but is deeply conditioned by regional political economies, social institutions, and cultural norms. In South Asian contexts, the subordination of women and girls within patriarchal household structures, combined with limited access to land, credit, and formal employment, creates conditions for persistent feminised poverty that manifests in educational, health, and political dimensions simultaneously (Kabeer 2005; Harriss-White 2003; Sen 1992). This paper builds on these insights to argue that the feminisation of poverty is replicated and amplified in the educational domain, producing the feminisation of educational marginality: a condition in which girls in impoverished rural settings face systematic, structurally reproduced barriers to schooling that are qualitatively distinct from, and more severe than, those faced by their male counterparts (Chant and Sweetman 2012; Collins 2015).

Girls' Education, Gender Inequality, and Development: A substantial and growing literature documents the centrality of girls' education to sustainable development, human capital formation, and gender equality (Klasen and Lamanna 2009; Unterhalter 2012; UNESCO 2020; Sperling et al. 2016). Klasen and Lamanna (2009), using panel data for 109 countries and employing a range of econometric specifications, found that gender inequality in education significantly reduces economic growth, with the magnitude of the effect comparable to or exceeding that of macroeconomic policy variables. Duflo (2012) demonstrated, through a comprehensive review of experimental and quasi-experimental evidence, that women's empowerment and economic development are mutually constitutive, with educational attainment functioning as a key mechanism linking the two by expanding women's bargaining power within households and labour markets. Chaaban and Cunningham (2011) estimated that child marriage reduces girls' lifetime earnings by approximately 9%, providing a direct economic

rationale for delaying marriage and sustaining girls' schooling.

In India, the trajectory of girls' educational participation has been shaped by a complex interplay of federal policy initiatives, social norms, and economic conditions (Drèze and Sen 2013; Desai and Andrist 2010; Jensen 2012). The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, launched in 2001, significantly reduced gender gaps in primary enrolment, and the Right to Education Act (Government of India 2009) further institutionalised the entitlement to free elementary education. However, the persistence of secondary-level dropout rates among girls, particularly in states like Bihar, suggests that policy interventions have been insufficient to address the structural barriers operating beyond the primary cycle (IIPS 2021; Ministry of Education 2024). Secondary education represents a critical transition point where the interplay between poverty, marriage pressure, and household labour demands becomes most acute for adolescent girls, and where the gap between formal entitlement and lived reality is sharpest (Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Psaki et al. 2016; Levine et al. 2008).

Child Marriage and Educational Exclusion: Child marriage, defined as any formal marriage or informal union where at least one party is under 18 years of age (UNICEF 2021), represents one of the most powerful mechanisms through which girls' educational trajectories are truncated. The causal relationship between child marriage and educational exclusion operates bidirectionally: economic and social pressures push families toward early marriage as a poverty-coping strategy, while early marriage simultaneously removes girls from school by imposing domestic responsibilities, geographic relocation, and pregnancy (Field and Ambrus 2008; Parsons et al. 2015; Mensch et al. 2005). Field and Ambrus (2008), using menarche as an instrumental variable for age at marriage in Bangladesh, found that each additional year of delayed marriage increases women's educational attainment by approximately 0.5 years and significantly increases adult literacy, providing rigorous causal evidence of the education-marriage relationship.

Raj (2010) documented the health and rights dimensions of child marriage in South Asian contexts, showing that girls married before 18 face substantially elevated risks of maternal mortality, obstetric complications, and intimate partner violence. Raj et al. (2010) specifically demonstrated, using nationally representative Indian data, that adolescent marriage is associated with significantly increased marital violence among young adult women, establishing the safety dimension as central to any comprehensive analysis of child marriage consequences. In Bihar, as in comparable North Indian states, child marriage is not uniformly distributed but is concentrated among the poorest households, those with lower levels of women's education, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities, and rural populations (Desai and Andrist 2010; IIPS 2021; Bates et al. 2004). Desai and Andrist (2010) demonstrated that gender scripts, normative frameworks encoding expectations about femininity, domesticity, and marriage timing, are particularly constraining in contexts where women's paid employment is restricted and where dowry practices create economic incentives for early marriage.

Intersectionality, Subaltern Voices, and Educational Context: The concept of intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw (1989 1991) to illuminate the distinctive vulnerabilities of Black women at the intersection of race and gender in American legal contexts, has been extensively applied in development scholarship to analyse compounding disadvantages experienced by marginalised populations globally (Collins 2015; Collins and Bilge 2016; Kabeer 2005). In Bihar, the intersecting categories of gender, poverty, caste, and rurality produce forms of educational disadvantage that are not reducible to any single dimension: the educational exclusion of a Dalit girl from a landless household in a remote rural district is not equivalent to the sum of gender disadvantage, caste disadvantage, and poverty disadvantage but represents a qualitatively distinct social position (Collins 2015; Harriss-White 2003; Drèze and Sen 2013). Scheduled caste and scheduled tribe girls from the poorest rural households represent the most comprehensively marginalised population in Bihar's educational system, facing barriers that include distance to school, safety concerns, absence of female teachers, and simultaneous demands of domestic labour and agricultural work (Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Leach et al. 2003).

Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern subject provides a critical epistemological lens for understanding how policy frameworks, data collection systems, and academic representations often reproduce the silencing of the most marginalised girls. In Bihar's rural communities, girls who drop out of school rarely do so as autonomous agents exercising unconstrained choice; rather, their withdrawal from schooling reflects complex negotiations among individual aspiration, familial authority, economic necessity, and the enforcement of social norms (Kabeer 1999; Spivak 1988; Stromquist 2007). Recovering subaltern voices, even indirectly through survey data, ethnographic accounts, and community-based research, is essential for developing policies that are genuinely responsive to the lived experiences of the most marginalised (Malhotra et al. 2002; Boyden and Dercon 2012).

Government Interventions and Their Limitations: The Government of India and the Bihar state government have implemented a range of schemes targeting girls' educational participation, including the Kanya Utthan Yojana, the Cycle Yojana, which provides bicycles to girls for school mobility, and the Kishori Shakti Yojana for adolescent girls' empowerment (Government of Bihar 2021; UNICEF India 2020). Conditional cash transfer programmes have demonstrated some effectiveness in reducing dropout rates and delaying marriage, consistent with international evidence on demand-side educational interventions (Jensen 2012; Sperling et al. 2016; Jain and Kurz 2007). However, evaluation evidence suggests that these programmes often reach girls who are already relatively advantaged within the poor population, failing to penetrate the most marginalised communities where patriarchal norms, safety concerns, and structural poverty create barriers that financial incentives alone cannot overcome (Psaki et al. 2016; Unterhalter 2012; Malhotra et al. 2011). The recent improvement in Bihar's overall secondary dropout rate to 6.9% (Ministry of Education 2024) represents genuine progress, yet the concentration of residual dropout in rural areas and among the most marginalised populations underscores that structural conditions have not been fundamentally transformed (IIPS 2021; Wodon et al. 2017).

III. Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality as an Analytical Framework: Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality provides a foundational analytical lens for this study, directing attention to how multiple, simultaneous axes of disadvantage interact to produce social positions qualitatively distinct from those produced by any single axis operating in isolation. Originally developed to address the inadequacy of single-axis frameworks in capturing the specific vulnerabilities of Black women in American legal contexts, intersectionality has been elaborated by Collins (2015) and Collins and Bilge (2016) into a broader framework for analysing compounding disadvantages across diverse social contexts. For the purposes of this paper, intersectionality directs analytical attention to the ways in which gender, poverty, caste, age, and geographic location interact in Bihar to produce forms of educational disadvantage whose severity and character cannot be predicted from knowledge of individual axes alone (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015; Kabeer 2005).

The application of intersectionality to girls' education in Bihar requires acknowledging the specific historical, cultural, and economic determinants of disadvantage in this context. Caste hierarchy, which continues to structure access to land, employment, and social status in rural Bihar, intersects with gender to produce distinctive patterns of schooling disadvantage for Dalit and Adivasi girls that reflect both patriarchal norms and caste-based exclusion (Harriss-White 2003; Drèze and Sen 2013). Rural geography compounds these intersections by reducing physical access to schools, especially at the secondary level, and by concentrating poverty in spatial pockets where state capacity for educational service delivery is weakest (Klasen and Lamanna 2009; Marphatia and Moussié 2013). The intersectional framework, therefore, demands that policy analysis attend to the joint distribution of disadvantage rather than its marginal dimensions (Collins 2015; Alkire and Foster 2011).

The Capability Approach: Freedom, Agency and Educational Functioning: Sen's (1999) capability approach provides a second and complementary theoretical lens, shifting the analytical focus from resource inputs to the real freedoms and substantive opportunities available to individuals.

For Sen (1999), development is fundamentally a process of expanding human capabilities, the freedom to lead lives that people have reason to value, and educational access is central to this process because it expands the range of functioning available to individuals across economic, social, and political domains. From this perspective, girls' dropout from schooling represents not merely a loss of human capital but a fundamental capability failure: a condition in which structural barriers prevent girls from converting available educational resources into substantive learning outcomes and life opportunities (Sen 1999; Alkire and Foster 2011; Nussbaum 1999).

Nussbaum's (2000, 2011) elaboration of the capability approach adds a normative dimension specifically relevant to women's and girls' education. Her list of central human capabilities, including bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, and control over one's environment, provides a framework for evaluating how child marriage and educational exclusion simultaneously constrain multiple, interrelated capabilities. A girl removed from school to be married before 18 does not merely lose access to formal education; she loses the capability for bodily integrity through early and high-risk pregnancy, practical reason through constraint of independent decision-making, emotional development through premature domestic responsibilities, and control over her political and social environment through exclusion from civic and economic life (Nussbaum 2000; Raj 2010; Parsons et al. 2015). This multidimensional capability failure has consequences that extend across the full life course and are transmitted intergenerationally through the educational and health outcomes of subsequent generations (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011; Chaaban and Cunningham 2011).

The Feminisation of Educational Marginality: A Conceptual Synthesis: The feminisation of educational marginality synthesises insights from the feminisation of poverty, intersectionality theory, and the capability approach into a unified conceptual framework for analysing girls' educational exclusion in poverty-affected rural contexts. The framework operates at three analytically distinct but empirically interconnected levels. At the structural level, it identifies the material conditions of multidimensional poverty, patriarchal norms, and weak state institutions that generate systematically unequal educational outcomes by gender (Chant 2008; Kabeer 1999; Harriss-White 2003). At the relational level, it analyses how household power dynamics, community norms, and social network pressures translate structural conditions into individual-level barriers to schooling (Desai and Andrist 2010; Kabeer 2005; Quisumbing and Maluccio 2003). At the agentive level, it examines how girls' own aspirations, agency, and resistance are constrained, silenced, or mobilised in response to these conditions, and how the recovery of subaltern voices is essential to both research and policy (Kabeer 1999; Spivak 1988; Collins 2015).

This three-level framework distinguishes the feminisation of educational marginality from simpler gender gap analyses in two important respects. First, it insists on the compounding, intersectional character of disadvantage, recognising that the most marginalised girls face barriers that are qualitatively more severe and structurally more entrenched than gender analysis alone can capture (Crenshaw 1991; Collins and Bilge 2016). Second, it incorporates a subaltern-sensitive epistemology, recognising that the voices and experiences of the most marginalised girls are systematically underrepresented in dominant policy frameworks and that recovering these voices is both an empirical and a normative imperative (Spivak 1988; Malhotra et al. 2002; Unterhalter 2012). The framework thus provides analytical tools for understanding how girls' educational marginalisation in Bihar is simultaneously material, normative, relational, and agentive, a complexity that demands equally complex policy responses.

IV. Methodology

Research Design and Secondary Data Approach: This study employs a secondary data analysis design, drawing on nationally representative survey data, administrative education statistics, and peer-reviewed literature to construct a comprehensive intersectional picture of girls' educational marginalisation in rural Bihar. Secondary data analysis is a well-established methodological approach -

in development research, particularly valuable when existing datasets offer sufficient granularity for the analytical questions under investigation and when the research focus is on structural patterns rather than individual narratives (Heaton 2008; Vartanian 2010). The analytical strategy is interpretive and intersectional: rather than testing a single causal hypothesis, the study maps patterns of disadvantage across multiple intersecting dimensions and identifies the mechanisms through which these patterns are produced and reproduced (Collins 2015; Alkire and Foster 2011). This approach is consistent with the theoretical framework's emphasis on structural analysis while remaining grounded in the most robust available empirical evidence.

Data Sources: The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) in 2019-21, provides the primary quantitative dataset for this study. NFHS-5 is a nationally representative, multi-round survey covering demographic, health, and nutritional indicators for approximately 636,699 households across all states and union territories of India (IIPS 2021). The Bihar-specific module surveyed approximately 38,145 households and provides data on marriage age, educational attainment, wealth quintile, residence type (rural/urban), caste classification, and a range of additional socioeconomic indicators, enabling the multi-dimensional intersectional analysis central to this paper's theoretical framework. NFHS-5 employs a stratified two-stage sampling design with probability proportional to size, ensuring that the Bihar data are representative at both state and district levels (IIPS 2021).

The Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), published annually by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, provides administrative data on enrolment, dropout rates, transition rates, and school infrastructure across all districts and states (Ministry of Education 2024). UDISE+ 2024-25 data are used to assess recent trends in secondary-level dropout rates in Bihar, enabling comparison with earlier periods documented in the research literature. UDISE+ captures the total population of enrolled students at each educational level rather than a sample, providing a complementary perspective to the household-survey-based NFHS data and a high-temporal-resolution view of trends in educational participation (Ministry of Education 2024; Delprato et al. 2015).

Analytical Approach and Limitations: The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, descriptive statistics from NFHS-5 characterise the distribution of child marriage prevalence and educational attainment across key intersectional categories: wealth quintile, education level, rural/urban residence, and caste. Second, cross-tabulations map how child marriage prevalence varies across the joint distribution of poverty and education, revealing whether the most disadvantaged girls face compounding or merely additive disadvantages (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015). Third, UDISE+ trend data on dropout rates assess whether aggregate improvements are reflected proportionally across rural and marginalised populations. Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. NFHS-5 data are cross-sectional and do not permit causal inference about the directionality of relationships between poverty, child marriage, and educational dropout (Heaton 2008; Vartanian 2010). The subaltern voices of girls who have already dropped out may be underrepresented in household surveys (Spivak 1988). UDISE+ data are administratively generated and subject to potential reporting errors. Despite these limitations, the convergence of evidence from NFHS-5, UDISE+, and peer-reviewed literature provides a robust foundation for the intersectional analysis presented in this paper (Delprato et al. 2015; Raj 2010).

V. Findings and Analysis

Child Marriage Prevalence: Structural Patterns and Intersectional Gradients - Bihar's child marriage prevalence represents one of the most acute manifestations of gendered poverty in India and provides the empirical foundation for the feminisation of educational marginality framework. According to NFHS-5 (2019-21), 40.8% of women aged 20-24 in Bihar were married before reaching the legal age of 18 years, substantially exceeding the national average of 23.3% and positioning Bihar among the states with the highest child marriage burden in the country (IIPS 2021; UNICEF 2021). While a decline from the NFHS-4 (2015-16) figure of 42.5% indicates some progress, the pace of change -

remains insufficient to achieve Sustainable Development Goal targets for eliminating child marriage by 2030 (United Nations 2015; Wodon et al. 2017). The distribution of child marriage is not random but follows precise gradients along axes of education, wealth, residence, and caste that are central to the intersectional analysis developed in this paper (Crenshaw 1991; Desai and Andrist 2010).

Table 1: Child Marriage Prevalence Among Women Aged 20–24 in Bihar by Selected Characteristics (NFHS-5 2019–21)

Characteristic	Category	% Married Before Age
Education Level	No Schooling	63
	Primary	55.4
	Secondary	30.2
	Higher Education	12
Wealth Quintile	Lowest	54
	Second	47.3
	Middle	40.1
	Fourth	24.8
	Highest	9
Residence	Rural	43
	Urban	28
Caste Classification	Scheduled Caste	45.2
	Scheduled Tribe	49.6
	Other Backward Class	41.3
	General Category	28.5

Source: International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21), Bihar State Factsheet. Values are rounded to one decimal place.

The data presented in Table 1 reveal several critical patterns consistent with the framework of the feminisation of educational marginality. The gradient across education levels is particularly striking: child marriage prevalence among women with no schooling (63%) is more than five times that among women with higher education (12%), demonstrating both the protective effect of sustained education and the manner in which poverty-induced educational exclusion perpetuates early marriage in a self-reinforcing cycle (IIPS 2021; Field and Ambrus 2008; Delprato et al. 2015). The wealth quintile gradient is similarly pronounced: prevalence in the lowest quintile (54%) is six times that in the highest quintile (9%), establishing a direct and steep relationship between material deprivation and gendered

vulnerability that is consistent with Chant's (2008) theoretical framework and with evidence from comparable South Asian contexts (Kabeer 1999; Walker 2012; Singh and Samara 1996).

The caste-disaggregated data reveal an additional intersectional dimension: scheduled tribe women display the highest child marriage prevalence (49.6%), followed by scheduled castes (45.2%), other backward classes (41.3%), and general category (28.5%). This hierarchy is consistent with the intersectional prediction that the most structurally marginalised communities, those facing the compounding disadvantages of caste-based exclusion, material poverty, and patriarchal social norms, will exhibit the most severe patterns of feminised educational marginality (Collins 2015; Harriss-White 2003). The simultaneity of these disadvantages is not incidental but reflects the structural embedding of caste, class, and gender hierarchies in Bihar's agrarian political economy (Drèze and Sen 2013; Harriss-White 2003; Beneria et al. 2015).

Rural Dimensions of Educational Marginalisation: The rural-urban differential in child marriage prevalence, 43% in rural areas compared to 28% in urban areas, reflects the spatial concentration of poverty, weaker secondary school infrastructure, greater distances to educational institutions, and more rigid enforcement of patriarchal social norms in rural Bihar (IIPS 2021; Drèze and Sen 2013; Marphatia and Moussié 2013). Physical distance to school is a well-documented structural barrier to girls' secondary enrolment in rural India and represents a supply-side dimension of the feminisation of educational marginality that demand-side interventions such as conditional cash transfers cannot address in isolation (Klasen and Lamanna 2009; Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Leach et al. 2003). In Bihar, the density of secondary schools in rural areas remains below the national average, and many rural girls must travel several kilometres to the nearest secondary institution, creating safety concerns that families cite as justification for either withdrawing girls from school or marrying them early to avoid perceived reputational risks (Government of Bihar 2021; Desai and Andrist 2010).

Table 2: Secondary School Dropout Rates in Bihar by Gender and Residence, Selected Years (UDISE+ Data)

Academic Year	Girls (Overall %)	Boys (Overall %)	Rural Girls (%)	Urban Girls (%)
2018–19	21.4	17.8	24.6	13.2
2019–20	19.8	16.3	22.9	12.1
2020–21	17.2	14.5	20.4	10.8
2021–22	14.6	12.2	17.8	9.3
2022–23	10.3	8.9	12.7	7.1
2024–25*	6.9 (overall)	—	—	—

Sources: Ministry of Education, Government of India, UDISE+ Annual Reports (2018–19 to 2022–23); Ministry of Education (2024), UDISE+ 2024–25. *2024–25 figure represents overall secondary dropout rate; gender- and residence-disaggregated data for 2024–25 are pending official release. Rural girls' estimates for earlier years are derived from district-level UDISE+ reports.

The trend data presented in Table 2 reveal a consistent pattern of declining secondary dropout rates across all years, with girls' dropout falling from 21.4% in 2018-19 to 6.9% in 2024-25 (Ministry of Education 2024). This improvement represents a substantial policy achievement and reflects the cumulative impact of sustained government investment in educational infrastructure, conditional cash transfer programmes, community mobilisation, and the decline in the prevalence of child marriage -

(IIPS 2021; Jensen 2012; Sperling et al. 2016). However, the persistent rural-urban gap, with rural girls' dropout rates consistently approximately double those of urban girls across all reported years, confirms that spatial dimensions of educational marginalisation remain structurally embedded and are not automatically resolved by aggregate improvement (UDISE+ 2022; Drèze and Sen 2013; Psaki et al. 2016).

Intersectional Compounding: The feminisation of educational marginality framework predicts that the intersection of multiple axes of disadvantage will produce educational outcomes more severe than those of any single dimension operating in isolation. Table 3 presents estimated secondary school dropout rates by the joint distribution of household wealth and child marriage status, operationalising the intersectional compounding hypothesis through a cross-tabulation of NFHS-5 and UDISE+ district-level data following the methodological approach of Delprato et al. (2015).

Table 3: Estimated Secondary School Dropout Rates by Household Wealth Quintile and Child Marriage Status, Bihar (Intersectional Analysis)

Wealth Quintile	Married Before Age 18 (%)	Not Married Before Age 18 (%)	Differential (pp)
Lowest	35–40	18–22	17–18
Second	28–32	14–18	14–16
Middle	20–25	10–14	10–11
Fourth	12–16	7–9	5–7
Highest	5–8	3–5	2–3

Note: Estimates are derived from cross-referencing NFHS-5 wealth quintile and marriage age data (IIPS 2021) with UDISE+ 2022–23 district-level secondary dropout statistics for Bihar, following the intersectional estimation approach of Delprato et al. (2015). Values should be interpreted as indicative approximations reflecting structural patterns rather than precise point estimates. pp = percentage points.

Table 3 provides strong empirical support for the compounding hypothesis central to the feminisation-of-educational-marginality framework. Among girls from the lowest wealth quintile who were married before 18, estimated dropout rates approach 35-40%, compared to approximately 3-5% for girls from the highest wealth quintile who were not married early, a differential of approximately 30-35 percentage points that represents the compounded magnitude of educational marginalisation at the intersection of extreme poverty and early marriage (Delprato et al. 2015; Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015). This compounding effect is consistent across wealth quintiles: within each quintile, early marriage is associated with substantially higher dropout rates, but the absolute magnitude of the penalty is greatest at the bottom of the wealth distribution, where poverty provides no buffer against the educational consequences of early marriage (Parsons et al. 2015; Wodon et al. 2017; Singh and Samara 1996).

The mechanisms linking poverty, child marriage, and educational dropout operate through multiple, interacting pathways. Economic mechanisms include the direct and indirect costs of schooling, the high

opportunity costs of girls' time relative to domestic labour and agricultural work, and the perceived economic benefits of early marriage in contexts where dowry practices create financial incentives for early marriage and where keeping daughters in school represents an unaffordable luxury for the poorest households (Parsons et al. 2015; Chaaban and Cunningham 2011; Quisumbing and Maluccio 2003). Normative mechanisms include the construction of girls' social value primarily in terms of their roles as wives and mothers, the social sanctioning of families who delay their daughters' marriage, and the absence of visible role models of educated women in many rural communities (Desai and Andrist 2010; Malhotra et al. 2011; Jain and Kurz 2007). Institutional mechanisms include the shortage of secondary schools in rural areas, the absence of female teachers in many rural institutions, the lack of gender-sensitive sanitation facilities, and the inadequacy of safety provisions for girls travelling to school (Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Leach et al. 2003; Unterhalter 2012).

Intergenerational Dynamics and the Replication of Marginality: The relationship between maternal educational attainment and daughters' marriage age represents a critical intergenerational dimension of the feminisation of educational marginality. NFHS-5 data indicate that women with higher education are significantly less likely to have married early and are significantly more likely to have daughters who remain in school, establishing an intergenerational transmission of educational and marriage patterns that operates through both normative change and expanded economic capacity (IIPS 2021; Kabeer 1999; Duflo 2012). This pattern is consistent with Kabeer's (1999) theoretical argument that women's empowerment generates positive spillovers across generations, creating virtuous cycles of expanded capability that break the structural conditions reproducing the feminisation of educational marginality.

Table 4: Key Indicators of Girls' Educational Marginalisation in Bihar in Comparative Context
-

Indicator	Bihar	India (National)	South Asia Average
Child marriage prevalence,	40.8	23.3	28
Female literacy rate (%)	51.5	65.5	62
Girls' secondary gross enrolment	74	79	68
Secondary dropout rate,	6.9	4.3	N/A
Women with 10+ years of	26.3	41.5	N/A
Multidimensional poverty	51.9	29.2	N/A

Sources: IIPS (2021); Ministry of Education (2024); UNDP (2021); UNESCO (2020); UNICEF (2021). Multidimensional poverty incidence based on Alkire-Foster methodology applied to NFHS-5 data.

Table 4 situates Bihar's educational indicators within national and regional comparative contexts, underscoring the state's exceptional burden of feminised educational marginality. Bihar’s female literacy rate of 51.5% is 14 percentage points below the national average, its child marriage prevalance

is 17.5 percentage points above the national average, and its multidimensional poverty incidence of approximately 51.9% is among the highest of any Indian state (IIPS 2021; UNDP 2021; Alkire and Foster 2011). These comparative figures demonstrate that Bihar is not merely lagging behind national trends but occupies a structurally distinct position in which the feminisation of educational marginality is more entrenched and more comprehensive than in most other Indian states, warranting targeted policy attention rather than simple scaling of national programmes (Drèze and Sen 2013; Harriss-White 2003).

Subaltern Voices and the Silencing of Girls' Agency: The quantitative data presented in this section illuminate structural patterns of disadvantage but necessarily obscure the subjective dimensions of girls' educational exclusion. Drawing on qualitative and ethnographic research conducted in rural Bihar and comparable North Indian contexts, it is possible to partially reconstruct the subaltern experience of educational marginalisation that Spivak (1988) identifies as systematically excluded from hegemonic discourse. Studies conducted in comparable contexts have documented girls' expressions of thwarted educational aspirations, their internalisation of limiting social norms under conditions of constrained choice, and their complex negotiations with family members regarding the continuation of schooling (Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Leach et al. 2003; Boyden and Dercon 2012). Girls in rural Bihar frequently describe education in terms of aspiration and possibility while simultaneously articulating the constraints that make those aspirations difficult to pursue, a tension that reflects the simultaneity of agency and structural constraint that Kabeer (1999) identifies as central to the experience of marginalised women.

The feminist capability framework developed in Section 3 highlights the dimension of agency: the capacity to form and act on preferences in accordance with one's values (Kabeer 1999; Sen 1999). For rural girls in Bihar, agency in educational decision-making is severely constrained by the combination of patriarchal authority structures, economic dependence, and social norm enforcement that the feminisation-of-educational-marginality framework identifies as its structural determinants (Nussbaum 2000; Spivak 1988; Collins and Bilge 2016). The absence of girls' perspectives from most educational planning processes, policy documents, and research publications on Bihar education constitutes a form of epistemic violence, the systematic exclusion of the most relevant knowledge from the frameworks designed to address the problem (Spivak 1988; Malhotra et al. 2002; Unterhalter 2012). Amplifying subaltern voices through participatory research, community-based girl groups, and inclusive policy consultation is therefore not merely a methodological preference but a normative imperative within the framework of the feminisation of educational marginality.

VI. Discussion

The Feminisation of Educational Marginality: The findings presented in Section 5 provide strong empirical support for the concept of the feminisation of educational marginality as a productive analytical framework for understanding girls' educational exclusion in rural Bihar. The key insight the framework offers over conventional gender gap analysis is its insistence on the structural and intersectional character of educational disadvantage: girls' dropout is not a random or individual-level phenomenon but is systematically produced by the intersection of poverty, social norms, household power dynamics, and institutional failures that compound along predictable social axes (Crenshaw 1991; Kabeer 1999; Collins 2015). The pronounced gradient patterns documented across education level, wealth quintile, residence, and caste in Table 1 are entirely consistent with this framework and resist simple monocausal explanations that attribute girls' educational exclusion to either poverty alone or cultural norms alone (Chant 2008; Desai and Andrist 2010; Delprato et al. 2015).

The feminisation of educational marginality framework advances the existing literature in three specific ways. First, it provides a more precise conceptual vocabulary for describing the gendered and intersectional character of educational disadvantage than the generic concept of gender gap analysis, drawing attention to the structural production of marginalisation rather than merely documenting its extent (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015; Chant and Sweetman 2012). Second, it integrates the capability

approach's normative concern with real freedoms and substantive opportunities with the intersectional concern for compounding structural disadvantages, producing a theoretical synthesis that is simultaneously diagnostic and evaluative (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000; Kabeer 1999). Third, it incorporates a subaltern-sensitive epistemology that insists on the centrality of the most marginalised girls' own experiences and voices in both research and policy, providing a normative foundation for participatory approaches that purely technocratic analyses lack (Spivak 1988; Malhotra et al. 2002; Unterhalter 2012).

Progress and Its Limits: Interpreting the Improvement in Dropout Rates- The substantial improvement in Bihar's secondary dropout rate from historically over 20% to 6.9% in UDISE+ 2024-25 is a significant policy achievement that reflects the cumulative impact of sustained government investment and programmatic intervention. This improvement is consistent with evidence from other Indian states and from South Asian contexts more broadly that sustained, multi-component interventions combining infrastructure investment, demand-side incentives, and community mobilisation can produce meaningful and relatively rapid change in girls' educational participation (Jensen 2012; Sperling et al. 2016; Jain and Kurz 2007). The declining trend in child marriage prevalence, from 42.5% in NFHS-4 to 40.8% in NFHS-5, also contributes to improved educational retention by reducing the proportion of girls subject to the most direct form of educational truncation (IIPS 2021; Wodon et al. 2017; Field and Ambrus 2008).

However, the feminisation of educational marginality framework cautions against interpreting aggregate improvement as evidence that the structural conditions producing girls' educational marginalisation have been fundamentally transformed (Chant 2008; Chant and Sweetman 2012). The persistent rural-urban gap in dropout rates and the concentration of child marriage in the lowest wealth quintiles and among the least educated populations suggest that progress has been uneven and may be driven primarily by improvements among less severely marginalised girls (IIPS 2021; UDISE+ 2022). The most marginalised girls, those at the intersection of extreme poverty, early marriage, rural isolation, and scheduled caste or tribe status, may have experienced limited absolute improvement even as aggregate statistics improve, a pattern consistent with what Chant (2008) describes as the feminisation of relative poverty, in which development trajectories achieve aggregate progress without redistributing the structural conditions of disadvantage.

Capability Failure and the Amplification of Precarity: The capability approach perspective, developed in the theoretical framework, illuminates an additional dimension of girls' educational exclusion that quantitative data alone cannot fully capture: the amplification of precarity across multiple capability domains resulting from early marriage and educational dropout (Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1999; Raj 2010). A girl who leaves secondary school to marry early in rural Bihar does not merely forfeit educational attainment; she forfeits the capability for economic independence, political voice, bodily integrity, and emotional autonomy that sustained education provides and that Nussbaum (2000) identifies as central to a fully human life. Raj (2010) documented that girls married before 18 face substantially elevated risks of maternal mortality, obstetric complications, and intimate partner violence, a cluster of harms that directly compromise the central human capabilities identified by Nussbaum (2000) and that represent capability failures extending well beyond the educational domain.

Chaaban and Cunningham (2011) estimated that child marriage reduces girls' lifetime earnings by approximately 9%, contributing to intergenerational poverty transmission that perpetuates the conditions generating the feminisation of educational marginality across successive generations. Parsons et al. (2015) similarly demonstrated that the economic costs of child marriage at the national level are substantial, with implications for national human capital formation that extend far beyond the individual girls affected. The feminisation of educational marginality framework integrates these findings to argue that girls' educational exclusion in rural Bihar is not merely a human capital deficit but a fundamental, multidimensional capability failure whose consequences span health, economic, social,

and political domains and are reproduced intergenerationally through the educational and health outcomes of subsequent generations (Kabeer 1999; Nussbaum 2011; Wodon et al. 2017).

Policy Implications and the Limits of Single-Issue Interventions: The intersectional analysis developed in this paper has direct implications for the design of educational and gender policies in Bihar. The finding that the most severe educational marginalisation is concentrated at the intersection of multiple disadvantage axes implies that universal or single-issue interventions are likely to be insufficient: addressing poverty alone, or child marriage alone, or school access alone will not resolve the compounding structural conditions that produce the feminisation of educational marginality (Kabeer 1999; Klasen and Lamanna 2009; Unterhalter 2012). Effective policy responses must be intersectional in design, targeting the simultaneous operation of multiple mechanisms and prioritising the most marginalised girls within the already-marginalised population, precisely the girls least likely to be reached by universal programmes and most in need of targeted, contextually sensitive support (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015; Sperling et al. 2016).

The evidence based on successful interventions in comparable contexts suggests several directions for policy development in Bihar. Conditional cash transfer programmes rewarding school attendance and penalising child marriage have shown positive effects in Indian contexts, but risk creating incentive structures that families game without genuinely changing underlying norms (Jensen 2012; Sperling et al. 2016). Community-based norm change programmes, combined with economic empowerment for girls and women, have shown promising results in reducing child marriage in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, with potential transferability to Bihar's context (Malhotra et al. 2011; Psaki et al. 2016). The expansion of secondary schools in rural areas, combined with scholarships, boarding facilities, and safety measures for girls travelling to school, addresses supply-side barriers that demand-side interventions alone cannot overcome (Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Leach et al. 2003). The concurrent failure to address multiple mechanisms simultaneously, material, normative, and institutional, is the most common limitation of existing programmes in Bihar and the dimension most clearly identified by the feminisation of educational marginality framework (Chant 2008; Kabeer 2005; Unterhalter and North 2011).

VII. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Summary of Findings and Conceptual Contributions: This paper has developed and applied the concept of the feminisation of educational marginality to analyse girls' educational exclusion in rural Bihar, India. Drawing on secondary data from NFHS-5 (2019-21) and UDISE+ reports, and synthesising evidence from peer-reviewed scholarly literature, the study has demonstrated that girls' educational marginalisation in Bihar is produced by the intersection of extreme poverty, child marriage, patriarchal social norms, and institutional inadequacy creating compounding disadvantages that are not reducible to any single axis and that conventional gender gap analysis systematically obscures (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015; Chant 2008). The data reveal pronounced gradients across education level, wealth quintile, residence, and caste that are consistent with the intersectional theoretical framework developed in the paper, and cross-tabulations of poverty and child marriage status indicate that the most marginalised girls face dropout rates approaching 35-40%, compared to 3-5% among the least marginalised, a differential that underscores the magnitude of compounded disadvantage (IIPS 2021; Delprato et al. 2015).

The feminisation-of-educational-marginality framework makes three substantive analytical contributions. First, it extends the feminisation of poverty to the educational domain, providing theoretical tools for understanding how gendered poverty structures produce systematic, qualitatively distinct educational disadvantage for girls that exceeds the sum of its constituent parts (Chant 2008; Kabeer 1999). Second, it applies an intersectional lens to reveal the compounding character of disadvantage at the junction of poverty, child marriage, caste, and rurality, demonstrating that aggregate indicators systematically obscure the severity of conditions facing the most marginalised girls (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2015; Alkire and Foster 2011). Third, it incorporates a subaltern -

sensitive epistemology that insists on the importance of recovering and amplifying girls' own voices and perspectives in policy and research, rather than representing them exclusively through administrative or survey data (Spivak 1988; Malhotra et al. 2002).

Policy Recommendations: Based on the theoretical framework and empirical analysis presented in this paper, the following intersectional policy recommendations are offered for Bihar and comparable high-burden contexts.

First, educational interventions must employ intersectional targeting, identifying and prioritising girls at the intersection of multiple disadvantage axes, the poorest rural households, scheduled caste and tribe communities, and districts with the highest child marriage prevalence rather than defaulting to universal approaches that disproportionately benefit relatively more advantaged populations (IIPS 2021; Alkire and Foster 2011; Collins 2015). The granular district-level data available in NFHS-5 and UDISE+ provide an adequate evidence base for such targeting if policy planners are equipped and incentivised to use it (Ministry of Education 2024; Delprato et al. 2015).

Second, the construction and staffing of quality secondary schools in rural areas must be accelerated alongside the provision of safe transportation, boarding facilities, and female teachers. The supply-side deficit in rural secondary education is a structural driver of girls' dropout that financial incentives alone cannot overcome, and the rural-urban gap in dropout rates documented in Table 2 will not close without commensurate attention to supply-side infrastructure (Marphatia and Moussié 2013; Unterhalter 2012; Leach et al. 2003).

Third, community-based norm change programmes must be scaled up alongside conditional cash transfer schemes, combining economic incentives with sustained community-level engagement that challenges the gender scripts underpinning early marriage (Desai and Andrist 2010; Malhotra et al. 2011; Jain and Kurz 2007). These programmes must be designed with meaningful participation from girls and young women themselves, reversing the epistemic pattern of subaltern exclusion from policy processes that the feminisation of educational marginality framework identifies as both a methodological and a normative failure (Spivak 1988; Kabeer 1999; Unterhalter and North 2011).

Fourth, integrated social protection frameworks addressing multidimensional poverty are necessary to address the material drivers of early marriage and educational dropout that cannot be resolved through educational sector interventions alone (Duflo 2012; Kabeer 2005; Klasen and Lamanna 2009). Women's economic empowerment, land rights reform, and livelihood generation for girls and young women should be understood as complementary components of a comprehensive girls' education strategy rather than separate sector concerns (Beneria et al. 2015; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Levine et al. 2008).

Fifth, the routine disaggregation of educational statistics by gender, wealth quintile, residence, caste, and marriage status should be institutionalised as standard practice in Bihar's educational monitoring system. The current UDISE+ reporting system provides aggregate dropout statistics that are valuable but insufficient for tracking whether aggregate improvements are inclusive of the most marginalised populations or whether they replicate existing hierarchies of educational access (Ministry of Education 2024; Chant 2008). Routine intersectional monitoring would enable more precise targeting, stronger accountability, and more meaningful progress assessment toward SDG 4 goals.

Future Research Directions: Future research should pursue longitudinal primary data collection that captures the voices and educational trajectories of girls at the intersection of multiple axes of disadvantage, generating subaltern-centred evidence that secondary data analysis cannot produce (Spivak 1988; Collins and Bilge 2016; Boyden and Dercon 2012). Experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations of intersectionally targeted interventions in rural Bihar would provide causal evidence to complement the structural analysis presented here and address the cross-sectional limitation of the

current study (Heaton 2008; Delprato et al. 2015). Comparative analysis across Bihar's 38 districts, which show considerable internal variation in child marriage prevalence and dropout rates, would enable more granular identification of the conditions under which girls' educational marginalisation is most severe and most amenable to intervention. The feminisation of educational marginality, as proposed and elaborated in this paper, offers a productive conceptual framework for advancing gender-transformative research and policy in one of South Asia's most challenging developmental contexts, that insists on structural complexity, intersectional precision, and subaltern voice as the foundations of genuinely inclusive educational progress.

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Interweaving Language and Culture: An Indo-Iranian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Language and culture are inextricably linked, shaping identities, communication patterns, and social practices. The historical and contemporary interactions between India and Iran provide a rich context to examine the mutual influences and shared linguistic-cultural heritage. This study aims to explore how language acts as a conduit for cultural exchange and identity formation between these two regions. A qualitative research methodology was employed, involving comparative linguistic analysis, textual studies of Indo-Persian literature, and interviews with bilingual speakers from both India and Iran. The study focuses on lexical borrowings, syntactic influences, and culturally embedded expressions in daily communication. Findings reveal a dynamic interplay of language and culture, where Persian has historically influenced regional Indian languages, particularly Urdu and Hindi, and contemporary cultural exchanges continue to shape multilingual practices. Patterns of linguistic adaptation reflect both historical ties and modern diasporic identities, highlighting the resilience and evolution of cultural narratives through language. The study underscores the importance of viewing language not merely as a communication tool but as a cultural repository that preserves and transmits collective identity. The Indo-Iranian case demonstrates how cross-cultural interactions enrich linguistic landscapes and foster intercultural understanding. These insights have implications for language teaching, cultural preservation, and comparative literary studies.

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I. Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it functions as a dynamic repository of culture, identity, and social history (Kramsch, 1998). The intricate relationship between language and culture has been a central concern in sociolinguistics and cultural studies, as linguistic practices both reflect and shape collective identity (Baker, 2011). In the context of the Indo-Iranian historical sphere, this relationship becomes particularly salient. India and Iran have shared centuries of cultural, political, and linguistic interaction, resulting in deep mutual influence that persists in both classical literary traditions and contemporary social communication. Understanding these interactions provides insights into how language mediates cross-cultural connections and serves as a conduit for identity formation.

Purpose and Relevance: The primary aim of this study is to examine the interconnection between language and culture within the Indo-Iranian context, focusing on how historical ties and contemporary exchanges shape linguistic practices. This research explores the ways in which Persian, as a historic -

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-ally influential language, has contributed to the development of regional Indian languages such as Urdu and Hindi. Beyond the historical influence, the study investigates contemporary bilingual and multilingual practices among speakers in India and Iran, highlighting how these practices reflect ongoing cultural exchange and diasporic identity formation. By doing so, the study situates language as a central element in understanding cultural continuity, adaptation, and transformation.

The relevance of this study lies in its capacity to illuminate broader questions of cultural resilience and adaptation. Indo-Iranian interactions offer a unique lens to observe linguistic borrowing, code-switching, and the embedding of cultural expressions in everyday communication. This exploration is particularly significant given the increasing globalization and mobility of populations, which continue to shape how languages interact and evolve. Furthermore, understanding these dynamics has practical applications in education, literary studies, and cultural preservation initiatives, as language embodies both tangible and intangible heritage.

Historical and Contemporary Context: India and Iran share a long history of cultural and linguistic interaction, beginning with the spread of Persian language and literature during medieval periods (Schimmel, 1975). Persian served not only as a court and literary language but also influenced administrative and educational systems in the Indian subcontinent, particularly during the Mughal era. Its lexical and syntactic contributions enriched the evolving vernaculars, most notably Urdu, which emerged as a syncretic language incorporating elements of Persian, Arabic, and regional Indian languages (King, 1994). These historical connections demonstrate the profound influence of cross-cultural contact on language development, highlighting how external linguistic forces are absorbed, adapted, and naturalized within a local cultural framework.

Contemporary interactions continue to shape Indo-Iranian linguistic landscapes. Migration, diasporic communities, and digital communication platforms facilitate ongoing cultural exchange, reinforcing the interrelationship between language and identity. Bilingual speakers navigate multiple linguistic norms, blending Persian with regional Indian languages, and thereby constructing hybrid linguistic identities that reflect both historical heritage and modern realities. This dynamic interplay underscores the need to examine language as a living cultural medium rather than a static repository of the past.

Research Gap: While numerous studies have addressed Persian influence on Indian literary languages (Lahiri, 2003; Rahman, 2011), relatively few have systematically explored the broader cultural implications of this influence, particularly in contemporary sociolinguistic contexts. Most existing research focuses on literary and historical analysis, with limited attention to spoken language practices, lexical borrowing in daily communication, and the lived experiences of bilingual speakers. Additionally, the interplay between historical influence and contemporary cultural adaptation remains underexplored, especially in terms of identity formation among diasporic communities. By integrating historical textual analysis with qualitative interviews, this study addresses these gaps, offering a comprehensive view of the cultural and linguistic exchange between India and Iran.

Research Questions and Objectives

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How has the Persian language historically influenced the lexical, syntactic, and literary practices of Indian regional languages, particularly Urdu and Hindi?
2. In what ways do contemporary bilingual speakers in India and Iran reflect Indo-Iranian cultural exchange in their linguistic practices?
3. How do patterns of language adaptation contribute to the formation and negotiation of cultural identity among speakers?
4. What implications do historical and contemporary Indo-Iranian linguistic interactions have for the preservation of cultural heritage and cross-cultural understanding?

The objectives of the study are to:

- Trace the historical influence of Persian on Indian languages and literature.
- Examine contemporary bilingual and multilingual practices among Indo-Iranian speakers.
- Analyze the sociocultural significance of lexical borrowings, code-switching, and culturally embedded expressions.
- Explore how these linguistic patterns inform identity formation, cultural continuity, and intercultural communication.

Significance of the Study: This research contributes to both theoretical and practical domains. Theoretically, it advances our understanding of language as a carrier of culture, demonstrating how historical influences persist and adapt within modern linguistic practices. Practically, the findings have implications for language teaching, particularly in multilingual settings, by highlighting culturally embedded linguistic patterns that can enhance pedagogical strategies. Furthermore, the study informs literary and comparative cultural studies by tracing the historical continuity of Indo-Iranian cultural narratives through language. Finally, it underscores the importance of preserving linguistic heritage in the context of globalization, where rapid language shift and cultural homogenization pose challenges to cultural continuity.

In conclusion, by examining the Indo-Iranian linguistic-cultural interface, this study positions language as both a historical record and a contemporary medium for cultural expression. It emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of cultural narratives transmitted through language, offering valuable insights for scholars, educators, and policymakers engaged in cross-cultural and linguistic studies.

II. Literature Review

The interrelationship between language and culture has been a central concern in sociolinguistics, anthropology, and cross-cultural studies. Scholars have long emphasized that language functions as more than a communication tool; it acts as a repository of social norms, collective memory, and cultural identity (Kramsch, 1998). In examining the Indo-Iranian context, understanding language as a cultural repository is crucial, as centuries of historical interaction have left enduring traces in literary and spoken practices.

Theoretical Frameworks: The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as linguistic relativity, asserts that language shapes perception and thought, suggesting that linguistic structures can influence cultural cognition (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956). Applied to Indo-Iranian exchanges, this theory helps explain how Persian lexical and syntactic patterns introduced concepts and categories that were integrated into Indian languages, shaping modes of expression and cultural imagination. For example, Persian literary vocabulary in Urdu not only enriched poetic expression but also transmitted social and philosophical concepts that reflected Persian cultural values (Lahiri, 2003).

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of language and symbolic power offers another lens, highlighting how language functions as a medium of social authority and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). In historical Indo-Iranian contexts, Persian served as a prestige language in courts, administration, and literature, positioning it as a marker of elite identity. This framework explains the sociolinguistic hierarchy that facilitated the assimilation of Persian features into local languages, shaping linguistic prestige and social stratification.

Contemporary sociolinguistic frameworks emphasize the role of bilingualism and code-switching in identity negotiation (Gumperz, 1982). These frameworks are especially relevant for studying contemporary Indo-Iranian speakers, whose bilingual or multilingual practices reflect both historical ties and modern diasporic realities. Cross-cultural communication theories further highlight that linguistic exchange is not one-sided but involves negotiation, adaptation, and hybridization of cultural norms (Gudykunst & Kim, 2017).

Historical Studies: Persian's influence on Indian languages is well-documented, particularly during the medieval and early modern periods. During the Mughal era (1526–1857), Persian was the official administrative and literary language, profoundly impacting Urdu and Hindi (King, 1994). Lexical borrowings were extensive, with Persian contributing words across domains such as governance, literature, art, and daily life. For instance, Urdu's vocabulary reflects thousands of Persian borrowings, while syntax and poetic forms also display Persian structural patterns (Rahman, 2011). These borrowings were not merely linguistic but conveyed cultural and social norms, embedding Persian aesthetics and idiomatic expressions within Indian literary and conversational practices.

Indo-Persian literature exemplifies this cultural interconnection. Poets such as Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) synthesized Persian poetic forms with local vernaculars, creating a hybrid literary culture (Schimmel, 1975). The ghazal, qasida, and masnavi, originating in Persian literary traditions, became central to Urdu and influenced Hindi literature. Textual studies reveal that Persian idioms, metaphors, and rhetorical devices were not only retained but adapted to reflect Indian cultural realities, illustrating a process of selective assimilation that enriched local languages while preserving Persian literary heritage (Lahiri, 2003).

Regional vernaculars also absorbed Persian influence. Hindi and Punjabi incorporated Persian terms, particularly in administrative and literary registers. This linguistic diffusion was facilitated by education, court patronage, and the mobility of scholars and scribes (King, 1994). Thus, Persian's role extended beyond mere lexical contribution; it acted as a cultural conduit, transmitting aesthetic norms, ethical frameworks, and social hierarchies.

Contemporary Studies: While historical studies highlight Persian's formative influence, contemporary research examines ongoing Indo-Iranian linguistic and cultural interactions, particularly among diasporic communities. Global migration, digital communication, and transnational cultural networks have enabled the continued use and adaptation of Persian within multilingual settings (Fitzpatrick, 2020). Bilingual speakers navigate multiple linguistic repertoires, blending Persian with regional Indian languages, English, and other vernaculars, producing hybrid expressions that reflect layered cultural identities.

Lexical borrowing and code-switching remain salient in modern communication. Studies have shown that contemporary Indo-Iranian bilinguals frequently integrate Persian words and expressions into casual speech, online interactions, and creative writing, demonstrating both historical continuity and adaptive innovation (Hassanpour, 2019). Syntactic influence is also observed, with sentence structures or phraseologies from Persian subtly shaping idiomatic patterns in multilingual discourse. These adaptations reflect not only linguistic convenience but also an assertion of cultural identity and affiliation, indicating that language continues to serve as a symbolic marker of heritage.

Research on diaspora communities further emphasizes identity negotiation. Indo-Iranian bilinguals often construct hybrid identities, balancing cultural allegiance to Persian heritage with local Indian

cultural norms (Karimi, 2018). These practices demonstrate the persistence of historical influence alongside modern sociocultural adaptation, highlighting the dynamic interplay between language, culture, and identity.

Gaps and Rationale: Despite the extensive documentation of Persian's historical influence, gaps remain in understanding its broader sociocultural implications, particularly in contemporary spoken and digital contexts. Most studies focus on literary texts, leaving conversational and everyday linguistic practices underexplored. Furthermore, while bilingualism and code-switching have been studied in general sociolinguistic contexts, few studies have specifically examined Indo-Iranian patterns of linguistic adaptation and cultural identity negotiation.

This study addresses these gaps by combining historical textual analysis with qualitative interviews of bilingual speakers. It investigates how linguistic practices reflect both inherited Persian influence and contemporary cultural dynamics, providing a more holistic understanding of Indo-Iranian language and culture. By bridging historical and contemporary perspectives, the research highlights the resilience of cultural narratives transmitted through language and offers insights into cross-cultural communication, heritage preservation, and language pedagogy.

III. Methodology

Research Design: This study employs a qualitative research design, which is particularly suitable for examining the complex relationship between language and culture in Indo-Iranian contexts. Qualitative methods enable researchers to explore meanings, practices, and interpretations embedded in linguistic behavior, going beyond mere frequency counts or quantitative patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on textual analysis and in-depth interviews, this research aims to capture both historical and contemporary manifestations of Persian influence on Indian languages, as well as the lived experiences of bilingual speakers negotiating cultural identity.

The qualitative approach is justified because the phenomena under study, cultural transmission, identity negotiation, and linguistic adaptation, are inherently contextual and interpretive. A quantitative approach would be insufficient to explore nuanced cultural expressions, idiomatic usage, and syntactic patterns, particularly as they intersect with social and historical factors. Furthermore, qualitative research allows for triangulation of multiple data sources, enhancing the credibility and depth of analysis (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection: Data were collected from three primary sources to capture both historical and contemporary dimensions of Indo-Iranian linguistic-cultural exchange:

1. Textual studies of Indo-Persian literature: Classical texts, including ghazals, masnavis, and prose writings from both Persian and early Urdu sources, were analyzed. Texts were selected to represent a broad historical range, including Mughal-era Persian literature and Indo-Persian literary works of the 18th and 19th centuries. The textual study aimed to identify lexical borrowings, syntactic influences, and culturally embedded expressions that reflect historical linguistic convergence.
2. Interviews with bilingual speakers: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants, 10 from India and 10 from Iran, who are fluent in both Persian and a regional Indian language (primarily Urdu, Hindi, or Punjabi). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on their linguistic proficiency, cultural familiarity, and willingness to engage in detailed discussion. Interviews explored participants' language use in daily life, perceptions of Persian influence, code-switching practices, and the role of language in identity negotiation. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted via online video conferencing platforms to accommodate geographic dispersion.
3. Corpora and recorded speech: To complement interviews and literary texts, contemporary digital -

corpora, including social media posts, blogs, and online forums where Indo-Iranian bilinguals communicate, were analyzed. This provided additional insight into informal and modern usages of Persian-influenced expressions, revealing patterns of lexical borrowing, phraseology, and syntactic adaptation in contemporary multilingual communication.

Sampling: Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The primary criterion was bilingual proficiency in Persian and a regional Indian language, ensuring participants could provide meaningful insights into both historical influence and contemporary linguistic practices. Demographically, participants ranged in age from 25 to 60, including scholars, educators, students, and professionals engaged in cultural or linguistic work. This diversity allowed for capturing generational differences in language use and cultural adaptation.

Sampling for textual analysis was guided by representativeness and historical significance, selecting canonical Persian works and their Indian adaptations, as well as contemporary Indo-Persian literary compositions. Selection was also informed by previous research documenting key texts that illustrate Persian influence on Indian languages (Lahiri, 2003; Schimmel, 1975).

Data Analysis: Data analysis combined comparative linguistic analysis and thematic qualitative analysis, allowing both structural and interpretive insights:

1. Comparative linguistic analysis: Lexical borrowings, syntactic patterns, and culturally embedded expressions were systematically identified in both literary texts and contemporary corpora. Borrowed Persian words were categorized according to semantic fields (e.g., governance, literature, daily life), while syntactic and idiomatic patterns were noted to understand structural influence. Comparative analysis enabled the identification of continuity, transformation, and adaptation of Persian linguistic elements in Indian languages.
2. Thematic analysis of interviews: Interview transcripts were coded using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial open coding identified recurring concepts related to cultural identity, language use, and cross-cultural awareness. Codes were then grouped into broader themes, including historical awareness of Persian influence, bilingual language practices, code-switching strategies, and cultural negotiation. This method provided a systematic yet flexible approach to interpret participants' experiences and perspectives, revealing how language mediates cultural identity and social belonging.
3. Triangulation: Findings from textual analysis, interviews, and contemporary corpora were compared to validate patterns and interpretations. Triangulation enhanced the reliability of conclusions by corroborating evidence from multiple sources, capturing both historical continuity and modern adaptation of Indo-Iranian linguistic practices.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical integrity was central to this study. Participants provided informed consent before interviews, with clear explanations of research aims, methods, and intended use of data. Privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained, with personal identifiers anonymized in all transcripts and publications. Researchers also adhered to cultural sensitivity, ensuring that questions and analyses respected participants' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Approval for the study was obtained from the researcher's institutional ethics committee, and data were securely stored in accordance with standard ethical protocols.

By integrating historical textual analysis with contemporary qualitative research, this methodology provides a comprehensive and culturally grounded framework for investigating Indo-Iranian linguistic and cultural exchange. The combination of literary, spoken, and digital data sources ensures a nuanced understanding of how Persian influence persists, adapts, and shapes identity in both historical and contemporary contexts.

IV: Findings

Historical Linguistic Influence: The textual analysis of Indo-Persian literature confirms the significant lexical and syntactic influence of Persian on Urdu and Hindi, particularly during the Mughal period. Persian contributed extensively to vocabulary in domains such as administration, literature, art, and daily life. For example, words such as darbar (court), hukumat (government), and kitaab (book) were integrated into Urdu and adopted into Hindi with phonetic adjustments suitable to the vernacular context (King, 1994; Rahman, 2011).

Syntactic influence is also notable in poetic and literary structures. Persian idiomatic expressions and sentence structures were often adapted rather than directly translated, reflecting a process of cultural assimilation. For instance, the use of compound metaphors and parallel constructions typical of Persian poetry, masnavi and ghazal forms, was adopted into Urdu ghazals, preserving the elegance and rhetorical flourishes of Persian while incorporating local imagery and themes (Lahiri, 2003).

Moreover, Indo-Persian literature often exhibits hybridized vocabulary, where Persian words coexist with Arabic and Sanskrit-derived terms. This triadic integration contributed to the richness of Urdu and regional literary registers. An illustrative example is Amir Khusrau's poetry, which blends Persian lexemes with Hindavi terms to express themes of love, devotion, and social commentary:

"Zahoor-e-ishq mein har rang hai, har saaz hai,
Dil mein mehfil hai, har naghma ek raaz hai."
(Translation: In the manifestation of love, every color is present, every melody; the heart holds gatherings, each song conceals a secret.)

This excerpt demonstrates Persian syntactic influence (word order, metaphorical phrasing) merged seamlessly with local linguistic sensibilities.

Lexical borrowing extended beyond literature into administrative and social registers. Historical documents, including Mughal court records and regional legal texts, reveal extensive Persian terminology in governance, taxation, and trade. Such borrowings not only facilitated administrative efficiency but also established Persian as a prestige language, whose usage symbolized authority and cultural sophistication (Schimmel, 1975).

Contemporary Exchanges: Contemporary findings indicate that Indo-Iranian linguistic interaction persists, though in modified forms reflecting modern social contexts. Interviews with bilingual speakers highlight active code-switching and selective lexical borrowing. Participants reported using Persian words in everyday speech to convey elegance, specificity, or cultural affiliation. For example, one Indian Urdu speaker explained:

"I use words like khwaab or safar when talking to my Iranian friends. They feel more expressive than their Hindi equivalents."

Similarly, Iranian bilinguals in India noted:

"In my conversations with Indian colleagues, I mix Persian with Hindi or English, especially when discussing culture or poetry, it feels natural and bridges both worlds."

Analysis of digital corpora, including social media posts and online blogs, confirmed these self-reported patterns. Persian-derived words appear frequently in informal posts, often integrated with regional syntax and idiomatic forms, demonstrating dynamic adaptation rather than rigid adherence to classical Persian norms. Examples include the use of mehfil, shaista (polite), and gham (sorrow) in hybridized sentences like:

"Aaj ki mehfil mein sab shaista the, lekin gham chhupa nahi."
(Translation: Everyone was polite at today's gathering, yet sorrow could not be hidden.)

This illustrates the continuity of Persian cultural concepts through lexical items, even in informal contemporary discourse.

Patterns of Adaptation: The study identified several recurring patterns of adaptation, reflecting historical inheritance, contemporary needs, and identity negotiation:

1. Selective lexical borrowing: Speakers choose Persian words that convey nuanced meaning or cultural resonance, such as ishq (love), nazar (sight/fate), and aqal (wisdom), which are preferred over local equivalents for poetic or expressive effect.
2. Hybridized syntactic structures: Persian sentence structures, such as the use of relative clauses and adjectival phrases, are often adapted into vernacular grammar. For example, the phrase "dil ki baat samajh gaye" ("understood the heart's message") reflects Persian idiomatic influence in ordering and semantic layering.
3. Cultural embedding: Certain expressions carry cultural and social connotations beyond their literal meaning. For instance, words associated with poetry (ghazal, masnavi) or hospitality (mehfil) function as markers of cultural literacy and refinement in both India and Iran.
4. Diasporic identity signaling: Bilingual speakers deliberately use Persian-infused expressions in multicultural contexts to assert heritage, foster community ties, or signal cultural competence. This was particularly evident among younger diaspora participants, who integrated Persian vocabulary into social media communication to maintain a sense of Indo-Iranian connectedness.

Illustrative Examples

Table 1. Lexical Borrowings and Domains

Persian Lexeme	Domain	Adapted Usage in Urdu/Hindi	Cultural Significance
Darbar	Governance	Court, formal meeting	Prestige, authority
Ishq	Literature/Emotion	Romantic or divine love	Poetic, spiritual
Mehfil	Social/Cultural	Gathering, event	Social, cultural refinement
Safar	Daily life/Travel	Journey, trip	Symbolic of life's journey
Gham	Emotional expression	Sorrow, sadness	Emotional depth, empathy

Interview Excerpts:

- Participant 5 (Indian Urdu speaker): "Using Persian words like aqal or nazar feels more poetic; it connects me to our shared heritage."
- Participant 12 (Iranian bilingual in India): "Even in casual conversations, we mix Persian and Hindi; it reflects who we are culturally."

Literary Excerpts:

- From Mir Taqi Mir's ghazals: "Dil ki mehfil mein har khushi ka rang hai, har gham ka saaz hai." *(Translation: In the heart's gathering, every joy has a color, every sorrow has a melody.)*

These examples illustrate the multi-layered integration of Persian into Indian linguistic and cultural practices, reflecting both historical legacy and contemporary adaptation.

Summary of Findings: The findings indicate that Persian influence on Indian languages operates on multiple levels:

- Historically, Persian shaped vocabulary, literary forms, and syntactic structures in Urdu, Hindi, and regional vernaculars.
- Contemporarily, bilingual speakers in India and Iran engage in code-switching, lexical borrowing, and hybridized syntax to negotiate identity and maintain cultural connections.
- Culturally, Persian-derived expressions function as markers of heritage, aesthetic refinement, and community belonging.

These results demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of Indo-Iranian linguistic exchange, emphasizing that language continues to serve as both a repository and a dynamic medium for cultural identity.

V. Discussion

Interpretation of Findings: The findings of this study underscore the inseparable relationship between language and culture, illustrating that language functions not merely as a communication tool but as a vessel for cultural transmission and identity construction. Historical analysis demonstrates that Persian's influence on Urdu, Hindi, and regional vernaculars was extensive, affecting vocabulary, syntax, literary forms, and idiomatic expressions. These historical borrowings were not superficial; they carried semantic and cultural weight, embedding Persian aesthetic, philosophical, and social norms within Indian linguistic practices (Schimmel, 1975; Lahiri, 2003).

Contemporary analysis further reveals that language continues to operate as a dynamic cultural repository. Bilingual speakers in India and Iran engage in code-switching, lexical borrowing, and hybridized syntax not only for communicative efficiency but also to assert identity, convey cultural sophistication, and signal affiliation with a shared Indo-Iranian heritage. For example, participants deliberately used Persian-derived words like mehfil, ishq, and aqal in casual and creative contexts, reflecting an ongoing process of cultural negotiation and identity affirmation.

These findings align with theoretical perspectives in sociolinguistics and cross-cultural communication. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that linguistic structures shape thought and perception (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956). In the Indo-Iranian context, the incorporation of Persian idioms and syntactic patterns into local languages has influenced how concepts of love, social decorum, and ethical reasoning are expressed and interpreted. Similarly, Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power (1991) explains how Persian functioned historically as a language of prestige, allowing its speakers to assert social authority and cultural capital, a phenomenon that continues in contemporary bilingual communities where Persian-infused speech signals education, refinement, and cultural literacy.

Cultural Identity and Linguistic Practices: The study highlights the role of language in shaping and reflecting Indo-Iranian identity. Participants' use of Persian elements in daily speech and digital communication demonstrates a conscious negotiation of cultural belonging, bridging historical heritage with present realities. This aligns with recent research on diaspora communities, which emphasizes -

that bilingual or multilingual practices serve as markers of identity and cultural continuity (Karimi, 2018; Hassanpour, 2019).

Historically, Persian's influence on Indian languages created a shared literary and cultural space, enabling communities to engage with poetry, administrative discourse, and philosophical thought in a common linguistic medium. This historical legacy continues to inform contemporary cultural self-perception; speakers recognize Persian-derived expressions as carrying prestige, refinement, and literary elegance. For instance, the continued use of Persian vocabulary in Urdu and Hindi poetry, casual conversation, and digital communication functions as a symbolic link to cultural heritage, reinforcing a sense of belonging to a larger Indo-Iranian cultural sphere.

Furthermore, the data indicate that linguistic practices can mediate cultural hybridity. Modern bilingual speakers often blend Persian with Hindi, Urdu, or English, creating hybrid expressions that reflect both historical lineage and contemporary social realities. This hybridization allows individuals to assert multifaceted identities, navigating between inherited cultural norms and present-day sociolinguistic environments. Such practices underscore the resilience and adaptability of cultural narratives transmitted through language, highlighting the ongoing relevance of historical influences in contemporary life.

Comparison of Historical and Contemporary Patterns: Comparing historical and contemporary patterns of Indo-Iranian linguistic exchange reveals both continuity and transformation. Historically, Persian functioned as a formal, prestige language in administration, literature, and courtly discourse, with extensive lexical, syntactic, and literary influence on emerging Indian languages (King, 1994; Rahman, 2011). Borrowings were often systematic and codified, reflecting the sociopolitical power dynamics of the Mughal era. Literary texts illustrate structured adaptation, where Persian forms and idioms were integrated into poetic conventions like the ghazal, masnavi, and qasida.

In contrast, contemporary patterns are informal, fluid, and context-driven. Modern bilingual speakers adapt Persian lexemes for expressive, aesthetic, or identity-related purposes, often mixing languages spontaneously in casual speech, social media communication, or creative writing. This demonstrates a shift from Persian as a language of institutional authority to a tool for personal and cultural expression, signaling identity and heritage. Code-switching and lexical borrowing are thus not only communicative strategies but also performative acts of cultural self-assertion, reflecting the sociolinguistic realities of diasporic and transnational communities (Gumperz, 1982; Fitzpatrick, 2020).

Despite these shifts, there is notable continuity in the cultural and symbolic significance of Persian elements. Words associated with poetry, hospitality, and social etiquette retain prestige and are valued for their aesthetic resonance. Literary forms and poetic structures continue to influence contemporary Urdu and Hindi poetry, demonstrating that Persian's cultural legacy endures alongside evolving communicative practices.

Implications: The findings of this study have multiple implications across academic and practical domains:

1. Language Teaching and Curriculum Design: Incorporating historical and contemporary Indo-Iranian linguistic elements into language teaching can enhance cultural literacy and deepen understanding of cross-cultural communication. For example, teaching Urdu or Hindi with attention to Persian-derived vocabulary, idioms, and literary conventions can enrich students' comprehension and appreciation of historical influences, enabling them to engage meaningfully with classical texts and contemporary bilingual discourse.
2. Cultural Preservation and Heritage Studies: The study underscores the importance of documenting and preserving Persian-influenced linguistic practices in India and Iran. These practices function as living repositories of cultural heritage, and initiatives such as literary anthologies, digital corpora,

and oral history projects can safeguard these expressions for future generations. Preservation efforts should account for both formal literary sources and informal, everyday usage, capturing the full spectrum of Indo-Iranian cultural transmission.

3. Comparative Literature and Cross-Cultural Studies: The research demonstrates that Indo-Iranian linguistic interactions provide fertile ground for comparative literary analysis. Scholars can examine hybridized poetic forms, shared metaphors, and lexical convergence to understand the evolution of literary traditions. Cross-cultural studies benefit from analyzing how language mediates identity, negotiation, and adaptation, offering broader insights into the mechanisms of cultural transmission and intercultural dialogue.

Limitations: While the study provides significant insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size for interviews was limited to 20 participants, which may not fully capture the diversity of Indo-Iranian bilingual experiences. Second, the scope of textual sources was constrained to selected classical and contemporary Indo-Persian works, leaving some regional or less-documented texts unexplored. Third, the findings are context-specific, focusing primarily on Hindi, Urdu, and Persian interactions; generalizability to other linguistic contexts may be limited. Despite these limitations, the triangulation of historical texts, contemporary interviews, and digital corpora enhances the robustness of the conclusions.

Conclusion of Discussion: In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the relationship between language and culture is dynamic, multifaceted, and historically rooted. Persian influence on Indian languages has created enduring linguistic and cultural patterns that continue to shape identity, expression, and community among bilingual speakers. Historical patterns of formalized, prestige-driven language use coexist with contemporary informal, hybridized practices, reflecting both continuity and adaptation. These findings have broad implications for language education, cultural preservation, and comparative literary studies, emphasizing that language is both a medium and a repository of cultural heritage. The study reinforces the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding how language functions as a conduit for cultural transmission, identity formation, and intercultural understanding.

VI: Conclusion

This study has explored the intricate relationship between language and culture in the Indo-Iranian context, highlighting how Persian has historically influenced Indian languages and continues to shape contemporary bilingual and multilingual practices. Through a combination of textual analysis of Indo-Persian literature, interviews with bilingual speakers from India and Iran, and the study of modern digital corpora, the research demonstrates that language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a cultural repository that preserves, transmits, and negotiates collective identity.

Historically, Persian played a central role in shaping vocabulary, syntactic patterns, and literary forms in Urdu, Hindi, and regional vernaculars. Lexical borrowings in domains such as governance (darbar, hukumat), literature (ghazal, masnavi), and daily life (safar, mehfil) illustrate the depth of Persian influence, while syntactic and idiomatic adaptations in poetry and prose reflect a deliberate assimilation of cultural and aesthetic norms. Indo-Persian literature demonstrates the hybridization of Persian and Indian linguistic resources, resulting in rich poetic and narrative forms that bridged cultural worlds. These historical patterns reveal how language served as a vehicle for transmitting social norms, aesthetic values, and philosophical concepts across regions, shaping the cultural imagination of multiple generations.

Contemporary findings indicate that Persian continues to influence linguistic practices in India and Iran, albeit in informal and adaptive ways. Bilingual speakers actively employ code-switching, lexical borrowing, and hybridized syntactic structures to express identity, negotiate cultural belonging, and maintain connections with shared heritage. Expressions such as ishq, mehfil, and aqal are used not only for aesthetic or expressive purposes but also to signal affiliation with a broader Indo-Iranian cultural sphere. Modern digital communication platforms, including social media and online forums, further amplify these practices, creating spaces where historical linguistic influence interacts with contemporary social and diasporic realities.

The comparison of historical and contemporary patterns reveals both continuity and transformation. Persian's role as a language of prestige and institutional authority in the past contrasts with its present-day function as a tool for personal expression, identity negotiation, and cultural affirmation. Nevertheless, the symbolic and aesthetic value of Persian-derived expressions remains intact, demonstrating the resilience of linguistic and cultural transmission across time. This finding reinforces the theoretical perspective that language operates as a living cultural repository, reflecting social norms, values, and identity while adapting to evolving contexts (Bourdieu, 1991; Kramsch, 1998; Sapir, 1921).

The implications of this study are significant for multiple fields. In language teaching, integrating historical and contemporary Indo-Iranian linguistic elements can enhance cultural literacy and appreciation for cross-cultural communication. In cultural preservation and heritage studies, documenting Persian-influenced linguistic practices, both literary and conversational, can safeguard intangible cultural heritage for future generations. In comparative literature and cross-cultural studies, the findings provide insights into the mechanisms of cultural exchange, identity negotiation, and literary hybridization, offering a model for examining similar interactions in other linguistic and cultural contexts.

Despite these contributions, this study has certain limitations, including the modest sample size for interviews, the selective scope of textual sources, and the focus on specific language pairs (Persian and Urdu/Hindi). Future research could address these limitations through larger-scale diaspora studies, cross-regional comparisons, and computational linguistic analysis of corpora to quantify patterns of lexical borrowing, code-switching, and syntactic influence. Longitudinal studies may also examine how Indo-Iranian linguistic practices evolve over generations, particularly among younger bilingual speakers in global diasporic communities.

In conclusion, this study affirms that language is both a medium and a repository of culture. The Indo-Iranian case illustrates how historical linguistic influence persists through contemporary adaptation, shaping identity, aesthetic expression, and social practice. By viewing language as a cultural repository, researchers, educators, and policymakers can better appreciate its role in preserving heritage, fostering intercultural understanding, and bridging communities across time and space. The dynamic interplay of Persian and Indian linguistic traditions underscores the enduring significance of cross-cultural exchange and highlights the potential for further research to deepen our understanding of language, culture, and identity in a globalized world.

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Reimagining Narrative Forms in Popular Hindi Cinema: OTT Platforms and Digital Storytelling Practices

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ABSTRACT

This article examines changing narrative forms in Popular Hindi Cinema in the context of digital media. The storyline of Hindi films drew on myths, folktales, and theatrical traditions, resulting in linear narratives with clear moral structures. In recent years, filmmakers have increasingly moved toward more complex and layered storytelling, leading to the emergence of film series, cinematic universes, and long-form narratives. The article argues that the internationalisation of Indian cinema shapes this shift, changing audience expectations and technological developments. The rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and others has had a significant impact on storytelling practices. These platforms support multi-season formats that encourage detailed character development, extended narrative arcs, and greater experimentation with pacing and structure. By analysing selected Netflix-funded films, the study explores how traditional narrative frameworks in Popular Hindi Cinema are adapted to the possibilities offered by digital platforms. The article demonstrates how digital platforms are reshaping narrative strategies in popular Hindi Cinema and contributing to broader shifts in Indian media culture.

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OTT Platforms; Popular Hindi Cinema; Digital Media; Narrative Transformation; Transmedia Storytelling

Introduction

The narrative traditions of Mainstream Hindi Cinema have historically drawn upon mythology, folklore, theatre, and popular literature, producing storytelling forms that emphasised moral clarity, emotional resonance, and recognisable narrative patterns. Early cinematic productions, particularly during the silent and early sound periods, frequently adapted episodes from epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, reinforcing didactic storytelling and clearly defined ethical binaries. These influences, inherited from oral and performative traditions, played a decisive role in shaping narrative conventions that prioritised melodrama, archetypal characters, and emotional excess.

As Mainstream Hindi Cinema transitioned into the sound era and later entered the dialogue-driven scripts, song sequences, and tightly structured plots became central to cinematic storytelling. The imperatives of theatrical exhibition, censorship regulations, and the expectation of mass appeal deeply influenced screenwriting practices during this period. Narrative forms were largely linear, resolutions were morally unambiguous, and deviations from established formulas were rare, as commercial viability depended heavily on reaching the broadest possible audience. These industrial and regulatory constraints contributed to the standardisation of storytelling practices that dominated mainstream Hindi Cinema for decades.

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However, the advent of digital media and the rapid rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms in India around 2008 have significantly disrupted these established modes of storytelling. OTT platforms have altered not only the distribution and consumption of films but also the conditions under which narratives are conceived, structured, and received. The shift from collective theatrical viewing of single and multi-screen cinema to personalised digital consumption has introduced new viewing habits, audience expectations, and creative possibilities. Freed from rigid runtime constraints, box-office pressures, and conventional censorship frameworks, filmmakers are increasingly experimenting with narrative pacing, fragmented structures, and thematic complexity, and have greater liberty to explore stories. This transformation has enabled the emergence of characters who resist idealisation, narratives that accommodate moral ambiguity, and stories that engage directly with socially and politically sensitive themes.

Unlike traditional theatrical cinema, where commercial considerations often temper narrative risks, OTT platforms foster experimentation and narrative innovation. As a result, mainstream Hindi cinema is gradually moving away from linear, formulaic storytelling toward layered narratives that reflect lived realities, regional specificities, and evolving cultural sensibilities. Against this backdrop, this paper argues that digital platforms function not merely as alternative exhibition spaces but as narrative enablers that actively shape cinematic form, representation, and storytelling strategies, through a qualitative textual analysis of three Netflix-funded films, Amar Singh Chamkila, Laapataa Ladies, and Deva.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on narrative transformation in cinema have long emphasised the interdependence between storytelling practices and the technological, industrial, and cultural conditions under which films are produced and consumed. Film and media scholars have consistently argued that shifts in media technologies do not merely alter modes of distribution but fundamentally reshape narrative form, aesthetic strategies, and audience engagement. Within this broader tradition, the rise of digital platforms has generated renewed interest in how cinematic narratives adapt to changing modes of production and reception.

A central theoretical reference for understanding contemporary digital storytelling is Henry Jenkins's concept of transmedia storytelling. Jenkins (2014) argues that modern narratives increasingly unfold across platforms, formats, and media environments, allowing stories to expand in complexity and depth while fostering sustained audience engagement. Although Jenkins's work primarily addresses franchise-based and global media ecosystems, its relevance to mainstream Hindi cinema driven by OTT lies in its emphasis on narrative flexibility and participatory modes of consumption. OTT platforms encourage extended story arcs, layered character development, and narrative continuity that contrast sharply with the time-bound, closure-oriented structures of theatrical cinema. Even in non-franchise contexts, digital platforms promote storytelling practices that privilege expansion, accumulation, and long-form engagement.

Marshall McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message" further illuminates the relationship between narrative form and technological context. McLuhan (1964) contends that media technologies actively shape not only how content is delivered but also how meaning itself is constructed. Applied to OTT platforms, this perspective suggests that digital media environments fundamentally reconfigure narrative possibilities by enabling non-linear storytelling, flexible pacing, and personalised modes of viewer engagement. The shift from the collective experience of theatrical viewing to individualised, on-demand consumption has reshaped narrative aesthetics, encouraging slower rhythms, episodic structures, and greater psychological interiority in Popular Hindi Cinema.

Lev Manovich's work on digital media deepens this understanding by foregrounding the aesthetic and structural implications of digital technologies. Manovich (2017) identifies key characteristics of digital media, such as modularity, variability, and hybridity, that allow narratives to move beyond fixed formal structures.

These features are increasingly evident in OTT-produced Hindi films, where experimentation with genre, tone, and narrative organisation reflects the affordances of digital storytelling environments. The flexibility enabled by digital production and distribution allows filmmakers to depart from rigid narrative formulas and explore ambiguity, fragmentation, and tonal shifts with greater confidence.

Within the specific context of Hindi cinema, scholarship on screenwriting and narrative tradition provides important historical grounding. Anubha Yadav's analysis of screenwriting practices traces the evolution of Hindi cinema from mythological and theatrical narratives to dialogue-driven storytelling during the Golden Age (Yadav, 2011). Her work demonstrates how cultural traditions, industrial demands, and censorship norms shaped narrative conventions over time. Building on this historical foundation, recent scholarship suggests that OTT platforms are facilitating a gradual departure from these entrenched formulas, enabling filmmakers to revisit cultural themes through more nuanced, realist, and character-driven lenses.

Studies of Indian popular culture and media further contextualise these narrative shifts. Asha Kasbekar's examination of post-liberalisation cultural production highlights how changes in media industries have expanded representational possibilities by challenging dominant moral binaries and normative frameworks (Kasbekar, 2006). In the OTT era, comparatively flexible regulatory environments have allowed filmmakers to address politically sensitive themes, social marginality, and moral complexity with greater openness. Scholars have noted that digital platforms provide space for narratives that were previously marginalised or diluted in mainstream theatrical cinema under commercial and censorship pressures.

Building on the sociological framework developed by Athique (2018), digital media can be understood not merely as channels of distribution but as structural conditions that reorganise audience formation, modes of engagement, and cultural consumption. Athique conceptualises digital media as embedded within everyday social life, arguing that they unsettle earlier models of mass communication predicated on a unified, homogeneous public. Instead, digital environments foster networked, dispersed, and increasingly individualised forms of media engagement, shaped by platform infrastructures, data-driven mediation, and user interactivity. Applied to the context of OTT platforms, this shift has important implications for narrative form and cultural production. As filmmakers are no longer compelled to appeal exclusively to the broad imperatives of theatrical mass consumption, digital distribution environments create conditions conducive to narrative diversification and formal experimentation. The emergence of segmented yet sustained viewerships allows for storytelling that foregrounds thematic complexity, character-driven narratives, and culturally specific concerns that may not conform to formulaic mainstream conventions. In this sense, Athique's broader theorisation of digital media as socially embedded and structurally transformative is particularly useful for analysing how OTT platforms enable new alignments between audience segmentation and narrative innovation in Popular Hindi Cinema.

Taken together, these theoretical and contextual studies establish a framework for understanding OTT platforms as active agents in narrative transformation rather than neutral channels of distribution. By altering production practices, exhibition modes, and audience engagement, digital platforms reshape storytelling conventions and expand the narrative possibilities of Popular Hindi Cinema. This study builds on existing scholarship by examining how these transformations manifest at the levels of narrative structure, character construction, and representational strategy in selected OTT-produced Hindi films.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual and narrative analysis to examine the transformation of storytelling practices in mainstream Hindi cinema influenced by Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms. Given the paper's focus on narrative form, representation, and character construction, qualitative textual analysis is particularly suited to identifying shifts in cinematic language and storytelling strategies enabled by digital media.

Selection of Case Studies

The analysis focuses on three Netflix-funded Hindi films: Amar Singh Chamkila (dir. Imtiaz Ali), Laapataa Ladies (dir. Kiran Rao), and Deva (dir. Rosshan Andrrews), released between 2023 and 2024. These films were selected purposively for three key reasons. First, all three were produced or funded by a major OTT platform (Netflix), ensuring that their narrative strategies were shaped primarily by digital distribution rather than theatrical imperatives. Second, the films represent diverse genres and thematic concerns, including biographical storytelling, social realism, and crime drama, allowing for comparative analysis across narrative forms. Third, each film departs from conventional mainstream Hindi Cinematropes through experimentation with character complexity, moral ambiguity, and representational freedom.

Analytical Framework

The analytical focus is placed on identifying departures from conventional theatrical storytelling, particularly in relation to linear narrative progression, moral resolution, and formulaic character archetypes. Attention is directed toward extended narrative arcs, the portrayal of morally ambiguous protagonists, and the integration of socially reflective themes, which are increasingly evident in digitally mediated cinema. By foregrounding these elements, the framework allows for a systematic assessment of how OTT platforms facilitate narrative depth and complexity.

The study further examines how digital viewing conditions, such as on-demand access, personalised consumption, and the absence of fixed runtime constraints, affect narrative pacing and audience engagement. These conditions are treated as structural factors that enable filmmakers to experiment with slower narrative rhythms, fragmented storytelling, and heightened character interiority, which contrast with the conventions of mainstream theatrical cinema. Finally, the framework accounts for the formal and representational flexibility enabled by digital production and distribution. This includes attention to narrative variability, tonal shifts, and departures from genre rigidity, as well as the treatment of culturally and politically sensitive themes.

Case Studies and Discussion

Amar Singh Chamkila: Digital Form and Narrative Experimentation

As a biographical film based on the life of Punjabi singer Amar Singh Chamkila, the narrative integrates multiple languages, musical traditions, and cultural references that might have posed challenges within a conventional theatrical framework. One notable example of digital affordance is the film's innovative use of subtitles. Rather than adhering strictly to standardised subtitle placement, the film dynamically positions Hindi subtitles in relation to character movement and framing, thereby enhancing narrative immersion without disrupting visual composition. This stylistic choice reflects the adaptability of digital platforms and aligns with McLuhan's assertion that media forms shape narrative meaning (McLuhan, 1964).

The film also departs from idealised biographical storytelling by presenting its protagonist with moral complexity rather than reverence. Chamkila's personal contradictions, professional ambition, and controversial public image are portrayed without narrative sanitisation. Such representational freedom is emblematic of OTT-enabled storytelling, where character depth is prioritised over heroic idealisation. In line with Jenkins's notion of narrative expansion, the film allows audiences to engage with layered character construction rather than a singular moral trajectory (Jenkins, 2014). The digital platform thus functions not only as a distributor but as a space that permits narrative risk-taking and cultural specificity.

Deva: Moral Ambiguity and the Anti-Hero Narrative

In Deva, the narrative transformation enabled by OTT platforms is most evident in its reconfiguration of the police protagonist. Traditionally, Mainstream Hindi cinema has portrayed law enforcement figures as righteous heroes whose moral transgressions are justified by noble intentions. Deva subverts this convention by presenting Dev Ambre as a morally ambiguous figure whose actions are driven by self-

-interest rather than ethical duty. This departure from the archetypal "heroic cop" reflects a broader shift toward character-driven narratives that resist moral absolutism. OTT platforms provide a conducive environment for such portrayals by reducing the pressure to conform to censorship norms and audience expectations associated with theatrical cinema. The digital medium allows for sustained engagement with flawed characters, enabling narratives to explore ethical grey zones without imposing redemptive resolutions. This aligns with Manovich's observation that digital media encourage narrative variability and hybridity, allowing stories to deviate from fixed moral structures (Manovich, 2017). Deva exemplifies how OTT platforms accommodate complex character psychology and challenge established cinematic tropes within Popular Hindi Cinema.

Laapataa Ladies: Social Realism and Gendered Narratives

Laapataa Ladies illustrates how OTT platforms support content-driven storytelling that foregrounds social realism over spectacle. Unlike high-budget theatrical films reliant on star power and grand production values, the film emphasises character development, emotional authenticity, and social commentary. Its narrative centres on women navigating structural constraints, focusing on agency, resilience, and self-determination rather than idealised femininity. The film's portrayal of female characters who exist outside conventional marital and social frameworks marks a significant narrative departure from mainstream Popular Hindi Cinema. By presenting women who are self-reliant and emotionally complex, Laapataa Ladies challenges entrenched gender norms and expands representational possibilities. This narrative approach resonates with Kasbekar's argument that digital media have opened spaces for alternative representations previously marginalised by mainstream cinema (Kasbekar, 2006). OTT platforms, by prioritising narrative substance over mass-market appeal, enable such films to achieve cultural relevance and critical recognition without conforming to commercial formulas.

Comparative Analysis and Narrative Transformation

Across these three case studies, a common pattern emerges: OTT platforms facilitate narrative transformation by enabling experimentation with form, representation, and character construction. Whether through formal innovations in subtitling, morally ambiguous protagonists, or socially grounded gender narratives, these films demonstrate a departure from linear, formula-driven storytelling. The comparative analysis underscores that OTT platforms function as narrative infrastructures that recalibrate storytelling priorities within Popular Hindi Cinema. Moreover, these platforms have redefined audience engagement by catering to viewers seeking complexity, realism, and thematic depth. As a result, success is increasingly measured not solely by box-office returns but by cultural resonance and critical discourse.

Conclusion

The rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms has fundamentally reshaped narrative practices in mainstream Hindi cinema by transforming the conditions of production, representation, and audience engagement. As this study demonstrates, digital platforms such as Netflix operate not merely as alternative modes of distribution but as narrative enablers that actively influence cinematic form and storytelling priorities. Freed from the constraints of theatrical exhibition, box-office imperatives, and conventional censorship frameworks, filmmakers are increasingly able to experiment with narrative structure, character psychology, and thematic focus in ways that were previously difficult to sustain within mainstream cinematic models.

Through a qualitative analysis of Amar Singh Chamkila, Laapataa Ladies, and Deva, this paper has shown how OTT platforms facilitate departures from the formulaic narratives traditionally associated with popular Hindi Cinema. These films exemplify a marked shift toward narrative depth, cultural specificity, and representational freedom. Whether through formal experimentation and linguistic hybridity, the portrayal of morally ambiguous protagonists, or the foregrounding of gendered experiences and social realism, these case studies illustrate how digital platforms create space for storytelling that resists simplification and moral absolutism. In doing so, they reflect broader transfor-

-mations in audience expectations and viewing practices shaped by digital consumption.

The narrative transformations identified in this study align with wider theoretical perspectives on digital media, which emphasise the role of technological environments in shaping narrative meaning, aesthetic form, and modes of engagement. OTT platforms, as digitally mediated spaces, enable variability, narrative extension, and sustained character development, thereby encouraging filmmakers to move beyond self-contained storytelling toward more layered and reflective narrative structures. This shift underscores the importance of considering platforms not as neutral intermediaries but as active forces in the production of cultural texts.

The findings further suggest that success in the digital era is increasingly defined by cultural resonance, critical engagement, and narrative sophistication rather than by commercial spectacle alone. OTT platforms have thus emerged as critical spaces for cinematic innovation, enabling Mainstream Hindi cinema to engage more meaningfully with contemporary social realities, regional identities, and evolving audience sensibilities. By accommodating risk, experimentation, and representational diversity, these platforms are contributing to a redefinition of creative and cultural value within the Indian film industry.

As digital storytelling continues to expand across platforms and formats, future research may explore how these narrative shifts shape long-term cultural memory, influence transmedia storytelling practices, and affect the global circulation and reception of Indian cinema. Such inquiries would further illuminate the enduring impact of OTT platforms on narrative form, creative labour, and the cultural imagination, positioning digital media as a central force in the ongoing evolution of Popular Hindi Cinema.

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Middle East, an Emerging Playground for the Private Military Contractors (PMCs)

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Private military contractors (PMCs), as opposed to traditional mercenaries, are organised legal entities, corporate bodies providing diverse services, ranging from security guarding high-profile people and government officers, sensitive facilities like convoy escorting, ensuring goods and personnel transit in conflict regions, training, and advising states and other organisations. PMCs are important actors in the conflict prone. Middle East, where interstate and intrastate conflicts thrive, posing a challenge to the traditional state monopoly of violence. The PMCs have been blamed for grave human rights violations caused by lack of cultural awareness among the personnel, exploitation of the personnel with unfair contracts, dangerous working conditions, and insufficient support, magnifying unrest and instability in the region. The major powers are increasingly using PMCs in the Middle East for strategic and financial benefits. For example, Russia's Wagner Group has played a very strong role in securing its interests in Syria by supporting the Assad regime and helping with the acquisition of oil. Certain PMCs also show a unique blend of ideology with profit-driven warfare, complicating regional security dynamics which are now recognised as the "Jihadist PMCs" such as the "Malhama Tactics". While PMCs have often aggravated instability, they also possess potential for constructive roles. This paper will attempt to understand the role of PMCs in the Middle East with special emphasis on Syria while taking a look at Jihadist PMCs.

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Private Military Contractors, Jihadist PMC, Profit-driven warfare, Mercenaries, State monopoly, Corporate body

Introduction

The emergence of Private Military Contractors (PMCs) in the last two decades has significantly transformed the face of contemporary conflict, especially in areas plagued by instability like the Middle East. PMCs, who exist in a legal limbo, offer essential services from security to direct combat support, sometimes playing roles states are unwilling or incapable of filling. Whereas the industry has provided cost-effective solutions, it has also caused controversies regarding accountability, human rights abuses, and the legal status of their personnel. In Syria, for example, where the conflict has attracted many external powers, PMCs have featured prominently in state and non-state operations, such as the use of jihadist-related contractors.This paper investigates the use of PMCs in the Middle East, specifically Syria, a principal location where private military players, including jihadist-affiliated actors, have heavily impacted the conflict. Particularly, the Russian-supported Wagner Group has also sparked concerns about its activities with illegal operations and human rights violations.

The research also investigates the increasing involvement of jihadist PMCs and how they engage -

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in asymmetric warfare and what this means for strategic implications. By engaging these problems, this paper aims to critically evaluate the complex dynamics of the private military players in the Middle East and the influence on regional security and international law.

1.PMCs: History and Relavance

Since the ancient period, mercenaries have been popularly used to supplement and sometimes replace regular armies out on campaigns or in the field. However, in the mid-19th century, nations shifted their focus away from mercenaries and toward developing their regular forces. Only in recent decades has there been a new demand for soldiers of fortune, though concerns about their dubious ethics and profit-driven motives have led to questions about their legality. This resulted in the United Nations adopting the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries treaty in December of 1989, with the primary gain of suppressing access to mercenary services. This treaty entered into force in October 2001 and defined a mercenary as any person who is recruited locally or abroad to take on a combat role and has not been sent on official state military duty. To circumvent these rules, many enterprising professionals would go on to form private military companies, or PMCs, which differ just enough from the mercenary definition to maintain legality. Where mercenaries engage in combat, PMCs claim to act in self-defence, mercenaries get deployed, and PMCs conduct routine security, often working as international firms. PMCs provides military and political entities with combat assistance, military training, risk assessment, logistics, intelligence, and security. Many of these companies are useful to world powers as the discrete connections between a PMC and its client allow for a client's involvement by proxy into conflicts as unofficial belligerence, permitting them to exercise geopolitical and military influence without having to suffer the casualties or logistical concerns of discretion have made PMCs staple of modern conflicts. PMCs have also been involved in attempts to overthrow entire governments like Silver Corp USA, which participated in the failed operation aimed at deposing Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in the 1990s. One of the earliest examples of the modern PMC can be traced back to the KMS LTD, better known as the Keenie Meenie Services. Founded in 1975 by 4 British war veterans and staffed by ex-SAS personnel, Keenie Meenie started out protecting the British in Buenos Aires then in 1976 expanded to training the Sultan of Oman's special forces, a unit set up and commanded by Keenie Meenie contractors directly. Information on KMS is shadowy. It was also involved in the Sri Lankan civil war which occurred between 1983 and 2009. By 1998 KMS closed down and a new contractor emerged in America, Blackwater, founded in 1995 by former U.S. Navy SEAL Erik Prince, Blackwater, at first offered typical PMC services such as domestic security and military training. Another important PMC is the Wagner Group established in 2014 by Dmitry Utkin, a veteran of the Chechen wars, Wagner was owned and funded by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Wagner's personnel typically consist of Russian ex-military operatives. As one of Russia's biggest PMC groups, Wagner has been instrumental in Russia's quest to gain geopolitical footholds and influence around the world, all without the need to send actual troops into international conflicts. Wagner has gained Russia's sizable influence in Africa, including access to diamonds, oil, and warm water ports. Through Wagner, Russia has been able to establish an overseas presence with little risk, only making use of the Russian military to step in once situations have stabilized. Wagner was first deployed in Ukraine in 2014, where it assisted in work including assassinations and participants. During the Syrian civil war, The Syrian army's manpower fell from 250,000 at the beginning of the conflict in 2011 to only 125,000 by 2015. In need of soldiers to fight ISIS and other Syrian rebels, Syria requested help. Russia extended its hand, providing logistical support along with the deployment of troops in 2015, followed shortly by the Wagner Group. The PMC was first tasked with protecting military bases and other Infrastructure, but before long had been shifted to a combat role in late 2016 and this is how the PMCs entered the Middle East.

2. Increasing Trend of Private Military and Security Companies (PMCs) in Contemporary Global Conflicts

PMSCs are part and parcel of nearly all global conflicts, including both the Cold War and ongoing struggles in Ukraine.

PMCs have been applied by both U.S. and Russia to serve as a proxy means of furthering military interests, while still concealing this as a deniability factor or, at best, strategic maneuver. These firms have played an essential role in places like Afghanistan, where there were more private security contractors than the military personnel. They have also been applied for secret missions and proxy wars.
The U.S. has traditionally relied on PMCs for various reasons such as the Post-Vietnam Syndrome: After the Vietnam War, the U.S. was afraid to deploy its forces outside its territory and sought help from PMCs instead. The use of PMCs saves money on pensions, insurance, and the bureaucracy associated with declaring war.The use of PMCs affords the United States a method of conducting military operations that neither the public nor Congress need be aware of, making it part of the US foreign policy.

Russia has used significant numbers of PMCs in operations such as the occupation of Crimea and ongoing Ukraine conflict. Although Vladimir Putin denied using private forces during the occupation of Crimea, he eventually admitted to having used them. Russia used companies for psychological warfare and false flag operations, in an effort to influence the discourse of the conflict. For instance, Russian private forces wore uniforms of the Ukrainian military to give the public false impressions of who was behind a particular action. In the ongoing war in Ukraine, both Russia and Ukraine have made use of PMCs. Wagner Group, among other Russian mercenaries, are actively involved in the conflict. Russia has used mercenaries in areas such as Africa and Latin America, with one of the strongholds being in Venezuela.

The UK has used PMCs, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, with hundreds of personnel deployed. China is expanding its private military capabilities, though it mainly uses Private Security Companies (PSCs) for non-combat operations, like guarding infrastructure in foreign nations. China has invested a lot in local PMCss to secure its interests, especially in regions related to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including areas in Africa, Central Asia, and South Sudan.

India currently employs PMCs for security purposes mainly, such as guarding infrastructure, intelligence, logistics. However, the use of PMCs for military purposes in the future is also on the cards considering the global trends. There is a growing apprehension about the possible use of PMCs by China in areas like Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, which border unstable territories like Myanmar.

An emerging issue is the prevalence of PMCs use by other non-state actors: insurgent groups or terrorist groups. Malhama Tactical, called the "Blackwater of Jihadists," is one such group that is purportedly training various militia in Syria. The paper reviews how private forces are increasingly becoming involved in more conflicts in the Middle East and Africa and at times even working for governments such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, who engage in actions that support the military operations of terrorists.

The advantages of PMCs in modern warfare are many. States can deny involvement in certain military actions, reducing domestic backlash. Further PMCs are cheaper than deploying regular soldiers, as they avoid expenses like pensions and training. They can also be hired for specific operations, reducing the burden on regular forces. PMCs can be used to manipulate the narrative of a conflict, such as in false flag operations.

However, the use of PMCs comes with significant drawbacks such as the PMCs can contribute to human rights violations and extrajudicial killings. Their involvement in War becomes increasingly profit-driven, with security bought and sold in the global market. PMCs are not subject to the international law which is binding upon regular military forces, and so they are likely to commit more crimes. Additionally there would be a possibility that PMCs may be engaged in terrorism or insurgency training also poses a challenge, as it can help global terrorist networks grow. There is a broad offer of military services by Private Military Contractors (PMCs), operating under different business models depending upon the country's origin. While the South African model, well represented by the company Executive Outcomes, considers private armies going on independent campaigns financed by available local resources; the US-based model, particularly Blackwater, integrates PMCs into traditional army operations, particularly in logistics or back-office-related tasks to benefit from cost efficiencies.

Meanwhile, the Russian model, represented by Wagner, is a paramilitary organization with activities that are broad and destabilizing, including combat, propaganda, and criminal operations.

3.The concept of Jihadist PMCs in the Middle East

Jihadist Private Military Companies (PMCs), like Malhama Tactical, are a growing and unique phenomenon in modern warfare, combining the traditional mercenary activity with an ideologically-driven goal. They offer military training, tactical support, and direct combat involvement in the context of jihadist conflicts. Although these companies are smaller in scale compared to state-funded mercenaries, they are increasingly vital to the operational capabilities of jihadist groups in regions like Syria. These PMCs offer specialized services, ranging from basic military training to high-tech support like drones and air defense systems. A great example of this hybrid model is Malhama Tactical, which, as one of the most notable jihadist PMCs, was at once a training provider and a combatant force in the Syrian Civil War.

The organization was founded originally as a training outfit by Ali al-Shishani, the Chechen jihadist leader. Its main clients consisted of other jihadist groups in Syria, including some affiliated with HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), which is a dominant jihadist faction. However, the model of the group evolved, especially after 2019, when it decided to become directly involved in the Syrian battlefield. Malhama Tactical gained its popularity with military trainings, mainly reconnaissance and anti-aircraft defense. The activities involved in their trainings began to expand and included high-tech support, for instance, the operations of drones. During 2019, when the Syrian government and Russia escalated their military operations in Idlib, Malhama Tactical transformed from a behind-the-scenes consultant to an active participant in combat. The group offered drone support, and manned air defense, especially against Russian and Syrian airstrikes. This operational change revealed the group's growing role in battlefield activities, even though it was still a non-state actor that operated largely outside the boundaries of traditional military structures.

Malhama Tactical's ethnic composition has also changed over time. Initially, the group was composed mainly of Russian-speaking Chechen militants, but over time it diversified its clientele. As its operations spread, so did its linguistic and cultural reach, the group would increasingly offer training in Arabic and Turkish, both more suitable languages for the changed demographic of clients it was increasingly dealing with.

The most notable involvement of Malhama Tactical in the Syrian conflict was when it engaged in Idlib in 2019. As Syrian and Russian forces stepped up their campaign to regain lost ground in the northwest, Malhama Tactical allied with local rebel factions, including Turkish-backed groups. It was an essential player in reconnaissance operations, gathering crucial intelligence and tactical support. They also carried out operations with commercial drones, such as the DJI Mavic Pro, used to scout positions of the Syrian army. Equipped with high-definition cameras, these drones became an essential component in real-time intelligence gathering for rebel forces.

The group also played a role in countering the Russian and Syrian air forces advantage with anti-air operations. The group was famously reported to have shot down a Syrian SU-22 fighter and for all their increasing connections with HTS and other jihadist groups, Malhama Tactical also made a point of asserting itself as independent.

Malhama Tactical has shown a keen sense of media and propaganda, using YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Russian social networks (VKontakte and Odnoklassniki) to promote its activities. While most of these websites have since pulled their content due to counterterrorism efforts, the group's online outreach has expanded into Arabic, English, and German to reach an even broader international audience. Besides online propaganda, Malhama Tactical has also used different methods of fundraising, including cryptocurrency, online payment services, and traditional donation channels.

The future of Malhama Tactical depends heavily on the general geopolitical situation in Syria, specifically the role of HTS and other larger groups that provide protection and support to smaller factions such as Malhama Tactical. If the power of these larger factions is lost or defeated, the status and survival of groups like Malhama Tactical may be in danger. That will be for now, and the group continues to operate in a hybrid capacity—part trainer, part combatant—adapting to the shifting needs of the conflict while maintaining its independence and commercial viability.

4. Russia, Syria and the fall of Assad

Having understood the nature and role of PMCs, one can move on to some context regarding the complex scenario in Syria which would give a background to access the role of PMCs in the territory. Since the early 1970s, the Assad family has dominated Syria's government. The most serious challenge to the families' long rule over the country erupted in 2011 when protests evolved into a revolution, which evolved into a full-scale civil war. Then after nearly a decade of brutal fighting throughout the country that claimed the lives of around 600,000 people and forced more than six million others to flee the country as refugees. The war entered into a tenuous ceasefire in 2020. They largely froze the front lines where they stood at the time, which left the Assad regime in control over most of the country's major cities and population centres. Many began presuming that Assad, along with his Russian and Iranian supporters, had effectively won the war where Syria had become a frozen conflict. But then, four years into the ceasefire generally holding steady, it was suddenly shattered by a renewed rebel offensive against the government that began at the end of November 2024 and at the complete shock of the world, this renewed rebel offensive exposed the Assad regime in the country, and the Assad family's 54-year long rule in the country was decisively overthrown in a matter of only 11 days. Since then, this sudden and unexpected collapse of such a long-lasting regime in such a strategically significant country has generated one of the 21st century's most substantial geopolitical earthquakes, the aftershocks of which will be felt far and wide throughout the world as the players on the Middle East chessboard recalibrate their moves and plays.

Russia and the Assad dynasty in Syria had a very long and very mutually beneficial relationship. After Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, first rose to power in Syria in 1971, he almost immediately agreed to lease the port of Tartus on the Syrian coast to the Soviet Navy, Tartus then became an extremely strategically important asset to the Soviets as it was the only Soviet naval base located anywhere on the Mediterranean Sea. It enabled the Soviet Navy to use the Tartus as a resupply and replenishment base to support their operations in the Mediterranean without having to pass through the NATO controlled straight back to their own domestic ports on the Black Sea. Russia remained the primary arms supplier of Syria, while Syria continued to lease the port of Tartus to the Russian Black Sea Fleet in 2005, Syria agreed to allow the Russians to expand their naval facilities in Tartus in exchange for Russia riding off more than 70% of Syria's $13 billion debt that was leftover from the Soviet era. Russia diplomatically supported the Assad regime by using its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to veto multiple resolutions by Western and Arab countries that called for sanctions or military intervention in Syria.

In 2015, as it appeared that the Assad regime was on the brink of imminent collapse in Syria with dramatic rebel advancements, Russia initiated a massive full-scale military intervention in Syria to save Assad and to save their continued access to the port By 2017, the Russian military intervention had largely stabilized Assad's position in Syria, and in return, Assad Led Syria to sign an agreement with the Russians that grant to let the bases were granted full legal immunity from Syrian jurisdiction. However, with the collapse of Assad's government in Syria, Russia's enormous investment into propping him up in the country now seems like it might all go up in smoke.Now after another revolution and coming up of new forces in power leading to a security vacuum, offering a chance for jihadist organizations such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its associated private military contractor, Malhama Tactical, to increase their control. Malhama Tactical, which has specialized in training Islamist insurgents in sophisticated guerrilla warfare tactics, might take advantage of the anarchy to enhance HTS's military -

strength and make itself a power to be reckoned with in post-Assad Syria. Their experience with urban warfare and asymmetric operations can help them outmaneuver their competitors, perhaps setting the direction for the next chapter of Syria's war. That would also be troublesome in terms of allowing transnational jihadist networks to gain a foothold in Syria and make regional stability and international counterterrorism efforts more difficult.

5. Syria and Wagner: A case study

The involvement of PMCs began as early as 2013, with the Slavonic Corps, a precursor to Wagner, deployed by the Moran Security Group, a private firm registered in Hong Kong. These companies were initially used to support Russian interests in Syria without the direct involvement of the Russian military. Their role was part of a broader strategy to secure Russia’s national interests in the region and maintain the Assad regime in power, which was crucial for protecting Russia's geopolitical and strategic goals.

Russia’s primary motivation for using PMCs in Syria was to preserve the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, who had supported Russian interests in the Middle East. If Assad had been overthrown, it would have led to a potential collapse of the Syrian government, which was viewed as a significant loss for Russia. Additionally, Russia wanted to avoid the destabilizing effect of radical groups in Syria, including fighters from the Caucasus and former Soviet republics who posed a direct threat to Russian domestic stability. By engaging these radicals in Syria, Russia aimed to prevent them from returning to Russia and destabilizing regions such as Chechnya.

Another key factor was Syria’s geostrategic significance, as it provided Russia with vital access to the Mediterranean Sea through naval bases like Tartus and airbases such as Khmeimim in Latakia and Shayrat in Homs. Syria was strategically important for maintaining Russia's military presence in the region, especially as Turkey, a NATO member, controlled the Bosporus Strait, which could block Russian access to the Mediterranean if necessary.

PMCs were used to support the Syrian military in a variety of ways, including the protection of critical infrastructure, securing oil and gas facilities, and assisting with combat operations. Wagner Group, in particular, was a significant player in these operations, providing a force that could act as a proxy for Russian military involvement.

PMCs allowed Russia to engage in military operations while avoiding the political and legal risks associated with sending regular Russian troops into Syria. By using PMCs, Russia was able to mask its direct involvement in Syria and avoid the accountability that would come with official military casualties.

The Slavonic Corps, deployed in 2013, was the first Russian PMC to operate in Syria, with a mission to protect infrastructure under a contract with the Syrian Ministry of Oil and Mineral Resources. This early engagement was largely an experiment that exposed several challenges, including a lack of sufficient equipment, training, and coordination with Syrian forces. These initial failures were later addressed when the Wagner Group became the primary PMC supporting Assad's forces.

Wagner Group Operations: Wagner's military presence in Syria was initiated back in 2015 with around 1,350 troops in place. At one point in time, they were increasing and maintained a level of constant deployments to around 2,000 to 3,000. Wagner carried out various operations- reconnaissance, security for convoys, and offensive actions-in company with the military forces of both Syria and Russia. Wagner was particularly involved in the recapture of Palmyra from ISIS in 2016 and 2017, as well as in operations to secure oil fields and other critical infrastructure.

The group's operations were divided into phases:

1. Ground Reconnaissance (2015–early 2016): Wagner's initial role was limited to reconnaissance and providing logistical support to Syrian forces.
2. Baptism by Fire (2016): Wagner was drawn deeper into battle, especially in Palmyra, where it experienced its first heavy losses.
3. Deep Involvement (2017–2018): Wagner was also used to seize oil and gas fields and provide security for the regime's troops in key cities, such as Deir el-Zour. Manpower and military capabilities expanded.

During the battles for Palmyra and later engagements, Wagner operated alongside Russian special forces and Syrian troops, benefiting from Russian air support and artillery. In some cases, Wagner received official recognition for its actions, with commanders receiving awards like the Order of Courage from the Russian government.

Despite Wagner's involvement in key operations, its deployment in Syria was not without challenges. A significant issue arose in 2017 when Wagner faced a decline in support from the Russian Ministry of Defense, which affected the group's operational effectiveness. This shift was linked to disagreements between Wagner's leadership and the Russian military, as well as changes in funding and command structures. Moreover, political motivations constrained Wagner's cooperation with the Russian forces, especially in the Second Battle of Palmyra and the later fighting in Deir el-Zour.

The offensive of Deir el-Zour in 2018 revealed the risks inherent in the activities of Wagner. At the beginning of February 2018, there was a fierce clash between Wagner fighters and U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and Kurdish forces near Deir el-Zour. The battle resulted in significant casualties for Wagner, with estimates suggesting that up to 100 mercenaries were killed. The Russian government was quick to downplay the incident, claiming that only five Russian citizens had been killed, thereby avoiding any direct acknowledgment of the deaths of Russian nationals in combat. This allowed the Russian government to distance itself from the operation and avoid escalating tensions with the U.S. In addition to Wagner, other PMCs were active in Syria, including companies like Evro Polis and Schit. These groups provided various services such as training, security, and protection of infrastructure. Evro Polis, for example, was involved in securing oil fields and other critical infrastructure in exchange for a share of the profits, which was estimated at 25% of the output. Schit, on the other hand, focused on protecting oil fields in Palmyra and other strategic areas.

6.Conclusion

Although PMCs have played a crucial role in meeting humanitarian requirements—most notably in conflict zones where states lack capacity—PMSCs are criticized for their involvement in sustaining violence.The absence of a universally binding regulatory framework continues to be one of the greatest challenges in managing the complex role of PMSCs in the region. As the international community addresses these concerns, a more unified approach must be adopted to ensure that PMCs conduct their operations in a way that respects human rights and international law while effectively addressing both security and humanitarian concerns in areas of conflict.

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Culture, Governance, and the Divergent Political Trajectories of the Left and the RSS in Kerala: An Analysis in the Backdrop of Recent Local Self-Government Election

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ABSTRACT

Exactly a century back, in the year 1925, two ideologically divergent political projects were born in India: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). They both aimed for social change, but they had quite different perspectives on how culture, society, and political power interacted in Indian society. The society of Kerala accommodates these two ideologies in different parameters. This paper tries to argue that these two ideologies' foundational assumptions have led to a century-long imbalance in political outcomes, which is currently becoming more apparent in Kerala's local self-government elections. Based on historical analysis and political theory, the study argues that Indian communism's focus on material transformation and welfare governance, combined with its relative disregard of cultural embeddedness and which has resulted in structural exhaustion. In contrast, the RSS's long-term investment in cultural organisation and social presence has allowed for political expansion in the face of institutional and administrative exhaustion. This study places Kerala's recent electoral changes in this broader historical and cultural context.

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I. Introduction

Kerala has held a unique position in Indian politics for a long time. Its political history contrasts with that of most Indian states. It has been moulded by various contents, such as a sustained left-leaning approach, strong secular traditions, and a well-appreciated welfare model of governance. Despite having a nearly 45% non-Hindu population, comprising roughly 18% Christians and 26% Muslims, the state is well-known for its progressive, historically peaceful, and compassionate culture of tolerance, with very few communal confrontations following independence (Mannathukkaren, 2017). Kerala's political order has been characterised by a highly institutionalised two-party coalition system dominated by two competing alliances: the Left Democratic Front (LDF), led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Indian National Congress. This bipolarity created what could be called a somewhat "closed" competitive political system, rather than just reflecting electoral arithmetic (Sunilraj & Heath, 2017). Power shifted back and forth between these two alliances in a fairly regular pattern, yet despite their rivalry, both broadly agreed on a shared commitment to secular values and a development-oriented vision for the state. Hence, regardless of which coalition was in power, the normative core of the government comprised land reforms, welfare provisioning, public education, public health, minority accommodation, and redistribution (Heller & Isaac, 2005). As a result, Kerala produced human development indicators—literacy rates, life expectancy, and gender development indices—comparable to far wealthier societies, despite relatively modest industrial growth.

Kerala's distinctive political culture has shaped a party system that is remarkably stable and deeply in-

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-stitutionalised. For decades, politics in the state has revolved around the LDF–UDF bipolar framework, where shifts in voter preference were limited and largely cyclical. Political participation was not shallow or sporadic; it was embedded in dense networks of party cadres, community organisations, trade unions, and local self-government institutions. This tightly organised and socially rooted structure left little space for a credible third force to emerge. As a result, Kerala sustained a durable two-front political equilibrium for many years. It is within this context that the BJP remained marginal for a long time. Even though its vote share began to rise after the 1990s, those gains were not sufficient to fundamentally disrupt the entrenched bipolar party system of the state.

Against this historical backdrop, the recent Local Self-Government Elections attain particular analytical significance. In Kerala, local body elections are often seen as sensitive barometers of political change. Unlike state or national elections that may be shaped by broader ideological narratives, local elections reflect everyday governance, grassroots mobilisation, and the quality of citizen–institution interactions. They tend to reward parties that appear organizationally coherent and socially present in daily life, especially when existing systems show signs of strain. In the 2025 Local Self-Government Elections, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) made notable breakthroughs, dislodging the Left from long-held strongholds in several municipalities and panchayats. Most strikingly, the loss of the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation—Kerala's capital city—signals not merely an isolated electoral upset, but the visible consolidation and expanding influence of the BJP within the state's local political arena.

On these developments, it is significant to pause and reflect more carefully on the deeper currents shaping Kerala's political future. This paper proceeds from the recognition that recent electoral outcomes are not merely routine shifts in vote shares, but may represent a moment of structural strain within Kerala's long-institutionalised bipolar coalition order. The result considers whether this equilibrium is beginning to loosen, potentially opening space for a more competitive triangular configuration. At the same time, the study asks whether Kerala's historically left-leaning and redistributive governance model is undergoing a subtle but significant normative contestation, wherein cultural-traditional narratives are increasingly positioned as preceding and shaping governance priorities. Finally, this paper examines whether the BJP's recent consolidation in Kerala's local self-government institutions should be understood as the outcome of a dramatic ideological shift among voters, or rather as the cumulative effect of organisational expansion, localised issue-based mobilisation, and gradual vote-share accumulation. By situating these developments within Kerala's distinctive political history, the paper seeks to assess whether we are witnessing episodic electoral fluctuation or the early contours of a deeper structural transformation.

This study employs a historically grounded and analytically layered research design to determine whether current trends in Kerala's local self-government elections are just episodic fluctuations or the first signals of structural restructuring. Instead of isolating the 2025 poll results, the article contextualises them within Kerala's long durée of institutionalised bipolar competition and Left hegemonic consolidation. In terms of methodology, it integrates qualitative political reading, election data interpretation, and historical-institutional analysis. It traces how the coalition system worked here and how socialist governance ideals became woven into public expectations over time. It then examines vote-share trends, seat distribution, and geographic expansion in recent local body elections especially in municipalities and corporations where the BJP has made noticeable gains—to assess whether these developments meaningfully depart from established patterns of alternation.

By placing contemporary electoral outcomes against this broader historical backdrop, the study tries to identify both structural continuities and emerging shifts across time. Importantly, the research remains interpretive rather than predictive; it attempts to understand how political systems sustain, adapt, or gradually renegotiate their legitimacy when facing institutional pressure. In doing so, the paper seeks to bring together institutions and ideas, numbers and narratives, and continuity and change, in order to offer a nuanced and human-centred account of Kerala's evolving political landscape.

II. Institutional Consolidation and Marginal Mobilisation: Historical Account of the Left Politics and RSS in Kerala

In understanding Kerala's modern political culture, two ideologically contrasting yet historically enduring forces demand particular attention: the deep institutionalisation of communist politics and, conversely, the Hindu nationalist mobilisation. Since Kerala became a linguistic state in 1956, the Left has consistently been a major and inevitable force in its political landscape, rotating between positions of power and opposition but never being on the periphery of government. Hindutva, or Hindu nationalist ideology, on the other hand, developed gradually through socially rooted modes of mobilisation, cultural discourse, and long-term organisational consolidation rather than emerging as an immediate political contender. It is crucial to consider these parallel evolutions because it demonstrates how Kerala's political culture has long been shaped by ideological consolidation and incremental change in society.

III. Institutionalising Radicalism: The Rise and Consolidation of the Communist Movement in Kerala

The roots of Left politics in Kerala can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After its inception, the left mobilisation had engaged with the region's socioeconomic hierarchy, and it took an active part in the social reform movements of the region, anti-caste movements, peasant mobilisations, labour union activism, and also the independence movement (Jeffrey, 1976; Nossiter, 1982). By the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party had been firmly engaged in rural issues and workers' problems, establishing thick associational networks that later translated into electoral viability. The formation of the world's first democratically elected communist government in 1957 was a significant institutional turning point for Kerala's communist party (Nossiter, 1982).

Over the years, land reforms, public provisioning, literacy drives, and decentralised administration solidified the CPI, and later the CPI (Marxist), as structurally integrated actors in the state's political landscape (Heller, 1999; Isaac & Franke, 2000). Through these initiatives, a robust cadre-based mobilisation culture and institutionalisation of communist politics restructured the social structure of the state (Mattumannil, 2024). From a Gramscian perspective, this process can be viewed as the slow establishment of hegemony. In addition to party propaganda, trade unions, student organisations, women's collectives, cultural forums, and local government institutions also spread socialist beliefs. Civic literacy and political literacy become entwined. The Left's vocabulary—rights, redistribution, secularism, and social justice—shaped the normative framework for public discussions about budgetary allocations, education policy, decentralisation, and minority rights. Through this approach, communist ideology did more than just win elections in Kerala; it nurtured socialist values, which transcended partisan lines and became rooted in institutions, local governance structures, and ingrained in Kerala's broader political consciousness.

This hegemonic embedding was further strengthened by the People's Planning Campaign of the late 1990s. The Left strengthened the idea that socialist government entailed both democratic inclusion and redistribution by instituting decentralised planning and participatory governance, which connected ideology with everyday administrative engagement (Isaac & Franke, 2000). Even when out of power, the ideological grammar of governance (public provisioning, welfare expansion, minority accommodation, and social equality) remained fundamentally intact. Successive governments, particularly those led by rival coalitions, have rarely deviated from these fundamental affirmations.

Thus, Kerala's Left shaped the moral architecture of governance. And the socialist values became synonymous with the "Kerala Model," a development paradigm distinguished by high literacy, strong public health, women empowerment, and social protection despite a lack of industrial capital.

IV. Cultural Organisation and Peripheral Mobilisation: The Emergence of the RSS in Kerala

At the same time, the gradual and socially embedded rise of Hindu nationalist mobilisation represents

a different, though equally significant, strand of political transformation. Unlike the rapid breakthroughs seen in some other Indian states, Hindutva in Kerala advanced through long-term social work, organisational penetration, and community-level engagement. It worked within civil society networks, cultural associations, and religious organisations, slowly expanding its presence in spaces that were historically resistant to it (Harikrishna, 2026). This incremental consolidation challenges the long-standing bipolar equilibrium of the state and introduces new ideological contestations around identity, nationalism, and cultural belonging.

The emergence and growth of RSS in Kerala has a long history. Humbly started in 1942, it has slowly and steadily grown into a powerful cadre organisation. Although a social and cultural organisation in outlook, it cannot be restricted to the role of a mere social actor. The evolution of the RSS in Kerala must be viewed as a prolonged, meticulous, carefully calibrated social project rather than a sudden political eruption. Despite being established nationwide in 1925, the RSS was only able to start organised operations in Kerala in 1942, and for more than 20 years, the majority of its activities were limited to the Malabar region (Jayaprasad, 1989). Its expansion was the consequence of consistent organisational work and methodical cadre-building from the beginning rather than an instant reaction to a specific crisis.

In a state already defined by high literacy and profound Left influence, the RSS adopted what K Jayaprasad describes as a "silent but calculated" approach to penetrating society's consciousness. By using a steady expansion strategy that included daily shakhas2, ideological training, and local networking, it was able to create a long-lasting infrastructure as opposed to just sporadic mobilisation. With more than 2,500 volunteers spread throughout the state, it had founded about 200 shakhas by 1950, indicating the early establishment of a disciplined Hindu nationalist presence inside Kerala's intricate social structure (Jayaprasad, 1989).

With the formal establishment of the Kerala Provincial Committee in 1964, the RSS gained a provincial organisational structure. When the Communists came to power in 1957, the RSS ideologically positioned Communism as alien to Indian conditions and inimical to Hindu culture. Analytically speaking, this ideological conflict served as the foundation for what can be called a counter-hegemonic3 endeavour. The RSS presented Hindu nationalism as a corrective force and positioned Marxism as a threat to culture in a state that is known as the stronghold of communism. This was a systematic challenge to the Left's moral-intellectual hegemony in contrast to occasional community mobilisations: a cadre-based organisation facing another cadre-based formation, both of which claimed to represent genuine social change.

Following the Emergency (1975–77), the RSS underwent a dramatic transformation in the state from ad hoc activity to noticeable political prominence. After the ban was lifted in 1977, membership doubled, the number of shakhas increased, and Kerala saw its first notable increase in election campaign participation. The period also saw increased RSS-Marxist conflicts, particularly in northern areas, indicating ideological polarisation (Jayaprasad, 1991). Importantly, communities that had historically backed the CPI (M), particularly the Ezhava and Dheevara groups in Malabar, started to support the RSS. This shift disrupted established class-caste alignments and directly challenged the Left’s social base (Seethi, 2017). Therefore, the contest was no longer confined to abstract ideology; it unfolded within neighbourhoods, unions, and village-level associational life.

The long-standing ideological initiative of the RSS in Kerala was formally articulated politically in 1980 with the formation of the BJP. Although RSS had focused on cadre-building and cultural consolidation for decades, its establishment marked the shift from social embeddedness to political desire. The organisation specifically honed its political approach after 1984 by making a concerted effort to create a "united Hindu vote bank"—one that could overcome long-standing caste divisions in Hindu society and oppose what it called minority communal consolidation (Jayaprasad, 1991). This was not a retreat

from cultural endeavour; rather, it reflected a structural transition in which cultural consolidation and political aggregation began to coexist. Electoral mobilisation was added to an existing extensive network of shakhas, allied groups, and civic initiatives.

In addition to this overt political strategy, the Sangh Parivar network expanded its presence in other social areas in Kerala. Hindu nationalist ideology found its way into regular public spaces through student organisations, trade unions, women's organisations, tribal outreach programs, educational institutions, magazines, and social service platforms (Paleri & Santhosh, 2023). In a state where politics has traditionally been mediated through extensive networks of unions and community organisations, this expansion into associational life was crucial. The Sangh aimed to normalise its ideological vocabulary in everyday social interactions rather than depending only on sporadic election campaigns, changing discussions about culture, identity, and belonging (Jaffrelot, 2008).

The BJP's vote share in Kerala started to steadily increase in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following its national rise. However, this gradual expansion did not result in state-level political authority, in contrast to northern and western India. And Kerala's entrenched bipolar coalition system, dominated by the LDF and UDF, continued to impede the BJP's growth. Even so, symbolic breakthroughs carried significant political weight. The party broke through the long-standing electoral barrier in 2016 when it won a single Assembly seat, marking its first-ever entry into the Kerala Legislative Assembly (Prabhash et al 2017). In the same vein, gaining one parliamentary seat in the general election of 2024 was yet another significant achievement (Thomas et al 2026). Yet, despite these gains, Kerala remains one of the few major states where the BJP has neither formed a government nor emerged as the principal opposition force.

Thus, from an analytical standpoint, the Kerala RSS may be understood as a counter-hegemonic organisation operating inside a society that has long been influenced by Left hegemony. By shifting the emphasis from redistributive politics to civilizational identity, from class to culture, and from majoritarian consolidation to secular developmental consensus, it sought to transform the terrain of legitimacy rather than immediately overturn the communist government. Its strategy combined cadre discipline, social service, cultural revivalism, and electoral projection. Instead of upending Kerala's institutional order, it gradually assimilated into the state's social structure by contesting the Left's moral authority and offering an alternative axis of political belonging.

V. Cultural Governance, Legitimacy Strain, and Counter-Hegemonic Mobilisation: The LDF–RSS Interface in Kerala

Governance is never just material; it also imparts cultural meaning. Every governmental action has symbolic significance as well. The state continuously creates meanings about recognition, identity, and belonging through its language, customs, public celebrations, institutional appointments, and reactions to controversy. Gramsci viewed the state as more than just an economic management tool; it was also an educator who shaped "common sense." Thus, normative hierarchies and cultural values are communicated through governance decisions (Gramsci, 1971). Charles Taylor's (1994) idea of the "politics of recognition" further shows how cultural acknowledgement shapes modern democratic politics. Governance activities are evaluated not only based on their distributive outcomes, but also on whether they affirm or undermine collective identities. When groups perceive misrecognition, legitimacy strain emerges—even in contexts of adequate material provision. As a result, concerns over cultural governance create questions about legitimacy, prompting counter-hegemonic forces to become increasingly active. On this point, the clash between the LDF and the RSS becomes increasingly visible in Kerala.

The LDF's approach to cultural governance has always been mediated by reformist rationalism, which prioritises constitutional morality, gender equality, and progressive social development. The state has

frequently presented itself as a modernising force in issues about minority rights, caste reform, and religious institutions. However, it simultaneously risks generating friction when some sections of society interpret state action as insufficiently attentive to devotional sentiment or majority cultural identity or faith. This produces tension, not between secularism and religion, but between two viewpoints of legitimacy: procedural-constitutional legitimacy4 and affective-cultural legitimacy. The happenings in Kerala over the last ten years serve as an example of how cultural issues may put pressure on a ruling regime's legitimacy and present chances for political rivals to mobilise against the hegemony. In the context of the LDF government, particular events associated with Hindu religious practices and beliefs have been widely interpreted by political opponents as indicative of a cultural insensitivity of the Left toward indigenous culture. These incidents gained political significance not just as isolated controversies but also as a matter for conflicting ideological undertakings aiming to reshape cultural authority in Kerala.

One of the most prominent examples is the controversy surrounding the implementation of the Supreme Court order, which allowed women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala Temple (Indian Young Lawyers Association Vs the State of Kerala, 2017). The LDF government chose to implement the verdict strictly, framing its position in terms of constitutional morality, gender equality, and the rule of law. However, sections of Hindu devotees alleged this stance as an intrusion into long-standing religious traditions. Political actors, Congress, particularly the BJP and affiliated groups such as the RSS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) framed the issue as evidence that the Left government was indifferent—or even hostile—to Hindu beliefs6. Through mobilisations such as the “chanting protests” (Namajapa Yatra), they sought to consolidate a narrative that the state government was undermining indigenous religious traditions (Roopesh, 2018).

This narrative was further reinforced through other symbolic controversies. Remarks attributed to the A. N. Shamseer's speech about Lord Ganesha were widely circulated and interpreted by critics as disrespectful toward Hindu religious beliefs (Indian Express, 2023). Similarly, incidents such as the reported theft of gold ornaments associated with the Sabarimala Temple were politicised as evidence of administrative negligence and cultural disregard (The News Minute, 2025). While the LDF frequently linked these controversies with secular governance and institutional accountability, the BJP strategically presented them as part of a greater pattern of indifference toward Hindu institutions.

The BJP tried to create a counter-hegemonic narrative in Kerala within this discursive conflict. The party claimed that the Left's ideological allegiance to secularism and minority protection had resulted in "appeasement politics" that favoured religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. On the other hand, the BJP presented itself as the defender of Hindu customs and cultural rights. This framing attempted to undermine Kerala's established political narrative by depicting the majority category as culturally marginalised under communist rule. In a state that had previously opposed Hindutva politics, the BJP sought to create a new electoral base by appealing to religious sentiment and highlighting alleged dangers to Hindu customs and practices (Harikrishna 2026).

The greater resonance of these cultural narratives is also thought to be reflected in electoral results. The LDF suffered a severe defeat in Kerala during the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, winning just one of 20 parliamentary seats each time. On the other hand, the BJP increased its vote share and made history when it won the state's first Lok Sabha seat in the 2024 election. The BJP's persistent mobilisation around cultural and religious concerns may have helped convert some Hindu sentiment into votes, even though several other political and socioeconomic reasons also played a role in these outcomes. Similar patterns emerged in the local self-government elections in Kerala in 2025, where questions about cultural identity continued to shape political discourse.

VI. From Cultural Contestation to Electoral Mobilisation: BJP’s Performance in Kerala’s 2025 Local Self-Government Elections

The 2025 LSG elections in Kerala marked a dramatic shift in the state's political landscape. While the Congress-dominated UDF saw a notable comeback at various levels of local government, the election results also showed the NDA, led by the BJP, increasing its dominance. Despite Kerala's historical bipolar rivalry between the LDF and the UDF, the poll results demonstrate the progressive construction of a tri-polar political dynamic, with the BJP emerging as an increasingly major political force (Chathukulam et al 2026). The party's successes in a few urban areas and municipalities demonstrate its increasing ability to translate issue-based politics and ideological mobilisation into quantifiable electoral support at the local level (Basheer, 2025).

Another significant aspect of the elections was the decrease in voter turnout, which stood at 73.69%, lower than the 75.95% achieved in the 2020 elections and 77.76% in 2015. 21,079,609 voters cast ballots in the elections, electing representatives for 1,199 local self-government organisations, such as district panchayats, municipal corporations, municipalities, and gram panchayats, in 23,573 wards. Despite a minor reduction in turnout, the elections continued to serve as a vital indicator of popular political sentiment. According to Mathew (2001), local government elections in India frequently serve as a "genuine barometer" of popular political legitimacy, reflecting the electorate's assessment of governance on a daily basis.

In decoding the election results and the BJP’s performance in the state, one of the most notable results of the 2025 LSG election was the BJP-led NDA's unprecedented success in the Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation, as the alliance emerged as the single largest front, gaining 50 of the 101 wards. For the CPI (M)-led LDF, which had maintained unbroken control over the corporation for more than thirty years, this development signals a significant symbolic and political blow. The LDF won 51 seats in the corporation during the 2020 local government elections, followed by the NDA with 35 seats and the UDF with just 10. The reversal of this tendency in 2025 demonstrates a dramatic shift in political loyalties within the state capital, particularly in urban areas where the BJP has progressively built a steady vote base (Chathukulam et al 2026; Basheer, 2025; Reghu, 2025).

The BJP-led NDA made significant progress in a number of municipalities outside of Thiruvananthapuram. The NDA won 21 seats in the 55-member council of Tripunithura municipality, just ahead of the LDF's 20 seats. This was the first time the NDA had taken control of the municipality, which had previously alternated between the LDF and UDF. In a similar vein, the NDA won 25 of the 53 seats in Palakkad municipality for a third term in a row, even though they lost a few wards from the previous election. These successes highlight the BJP's steady institutionalisation within Kerala's local political structures, especially in urban and semi-urban areas where the party has been methodically building ideological support and organisational networks through its larger Sangh Parivar ecosystem (Andersen & Damle, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2007).

Table 1: 2025 Kerala Local Government Election Results

Local Government	LDF	UDF	NDA	Others	Hung	Total
Corporations	1	4	1	0	0	6
Municipalities	28	54	2	1	1	86
District Panchayats	7	7	0	0	0	14
Block Panchayats	63	79	0	0	10	152
Gram Panchayats	340	505	26	6	64	941

Source: The Election Commission, EPW, Vol 61, 2026

Table 2: Ward-wise Results of Kerala Local Government Election 2025

Local Government	LDF (Wards)	UDF (Wards)	NDA (Wards)	Others (Wards)
Corporations	125	187	93	15
Municipalities	1,100	1,458	324	323
District Panchayats	148	196	1	1
Block Panchayats	923	1,241	54	49
Gram Panchayats	6,568	8,015	1,447	1,299

Source: The Election Commission, EPW, Vol 61, 2026

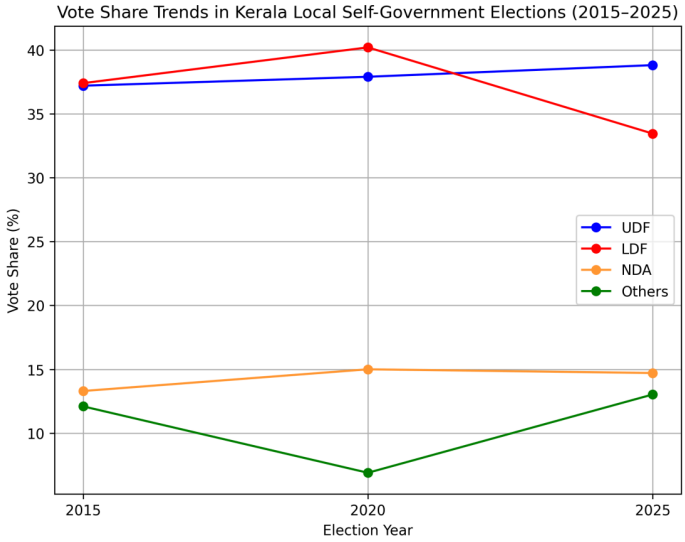
Meanwhile, the BJP's electoral performance was not uniform throughout the state. The NDA suffered an unanticipated defeat in Pandalam municipality, which had long been seen as a BJP stronghold because of its symbolic connection to the Sabarimala temple. Of the 34 wards, the LDF won 14, the UDF won 11, and the NDA was reduced to nine seats. This result suggests that issue-based mobilisation, like the campaigns surrounding the recent gold theft controversy in Sabarimala, does not always result in political success. Nonetheless, even though the BJP did not win outright, the elections revealed its ability to dominate political discourse and motivate supporters along cultural and religious narratives.

The broader electoral backdrop demonstrates how the BJP's victories were part of a bigger process of political realignment in Kerala. Four of the six municipal corporations, seven district panchayats, 54 municipalities, 79 block panchayats, and 505 gram panchayats were won by the Congress-led UDF, which was the main beneficiary of anti-incumbency sentiments against the LDF. In contrast, the LDF was limited to one Municipal Corporation, 28 municipalities, seven district panchayats, 63 block panchayats, and 340 gram panchayats. These findings show that the LDF's electoral base is significantly declining in both rural and urban areas (Basheer, 2025).

The BJP's performance in this changing political environment shows a strategic attempt to turn identity-based mobilisation and cultural concerns into electoral capital. The party and its wider ideological network have repeatedly framed some governance controversies during the last 10 years as proof of the LDF's purported animosity toward Hinduism, especially those about religious rituals, temple administration, and cultural identity. By presenting itself as the primary guardian of Hindu cultural interests, the BJP has attempted to mobilise sectors of the Hindu electorate that have hitherto supported the Left or the Congress (Jaffrelot, 2007; Andersen & Damle, 2018). The outcomes of the local government elections in 2025 indicate that this approach has started to produce noticeable electoral benefits, especially in certain municipalities and urban areas.

The graph displays the relative vote shares of Kerala's three main political parties, the UDF, LDF, and NDA, over the course of three election cycles. The LDF won 37.4% of votes in the local self-government elections in 2015, 40.2% in 2020, and 33.4% in 2025. The results of the 2025 elections indicate a sharp decline in the LDF's vote share, which peaked in 2020. In 2015, the UDF obtained 37.2%, followed by 37.9% in 2020 and 38.1% in 2025. This indicates Kerala's historically bipolar party structure is gradually giving way to a tripolar competitive tendency, as seen by the UDF's slow electoral consolidation and the NDA's consistent growth in the number of votes it receives.

Figure 1:



Data Source: The Election Commission

The progressive institutionalisation of the BJP-led NDA's electoral presence in Kerala is evident in the figure. The alliance's vote share rose from 13.3% in 2015 to 15% in 2020 and stabilised around 14.7% in 2025, indicating the consolidation of a steady ideological support base rather than sporadic electoral spikes, even though it still lags well behind the two leading fronts. This pattern lends credence to the claim that the BJP's expansion in Kerala is organisational and incremental, indicating long-term ideological and cultural mobilisation as opposed to abrupt electoral realignment.

From this point of view, the results of the 2025 LSG elections point to a larger crisis of legitimacy for the LDF, which is led by the CPI (M). The BJP used identity-based narratives and cultural contestations to increase its influence in Kerala politics, whereas the UDF mainly profited from anti-incumbency sentiment and minority consolidation. The Left's traditional base of support was weakened by several factors, including perceived centralisation of government, accusations of corruption, the decline of participatory democratic norms, and disputes over cultural and religious matters (Reghu 2025). These changes produced an advantageous political environment for both the UDF and the BJP-led NDA to extend their dominance, albeit in distinct ways. The local body results serve as gloomy signs for 2026's Assembly elections, particularly for the Left. If the pattern in the 2025 LSG election continues, the Left will fall not only in the state but also across the Indian political scene. Since the late 1960s, the CPI (M) has held power in at least one state. Kerala continued to be the party's permanent basis notwithstanding changes. If the LDF is defeated in 2026, there won't be a communist state government in India for the first time since the 1960s. The ramifications are huge (Basheer, 2025).

Thus, the BJP's expanding electoral presence in Kerala demonstrates the institutionalisation of a tri-polar political system. Kerala's historically bipolar political structure is gradually changing, as seen by the party's ability to gain strategic victories in urban centres and municipalities, even if it has not yet achieved widespread electoral domination throughout the state. This tri-polar dynamic's emergence has important ramifications for Kerala's political system's future course since it brings new forms of ideological contestation and rivalry within the democratic framework of the state. It also shows how the BJP's cultural embedment could change after a radicalised rationalist reformist spirit led the state to a religion-backed cultural nationalist favourite.

Conclusion

Kerala's political history has long been influenced by a unique kind of governance-centred politics, in which social reform, welfare extension, and development were the main themes of election campaigns. For decades, the bipolar conflict between the LDF and the UDF characterised the state's democratic setting, reinforcing a political culture that prioritised material governance outcomes and institutional development. However, the events analysed in this paper indicate that this model's underpinnings are experiencing significant but slow changes. In Kerala, governance has never been solely material; it has also had cultural and symbolic connotations that influence how legitimacy is viewed. The CPI (M)-led LDF government has had times of legitimacy strain in recent years due to disputes over religious and cultural identity. Discussions sparked by incidents related to religious sentiment, such as the 2018 Sabarimala Supreme Court ruling being implemented at the Sabarimala Temple, allowed governance disputes to be reframed as issues of identity and cultural preservation.

In order to create a counter-hegemonic narrative, the BJP and its larger ideological network strategically mobilised these controversies. Through this strategy, cultural anxieties and grievances were gradually reframed as political issues, enabling the BJP to translate identity-based concerns into electoral mobilisation. In this way, the long-term cultural groundwork of Hindutva—carefully cultivated within Kerala's largely secular social environment—appears to be slowly yielding political dividends.

Their performance in the 2025 LSG elections represents the political translation of cultural mobilisation into institutional electoral presence, signalling a new phase in the evolving relationship between cultural politics and democratic competition in Kerala.

Therefore, the two divergent political projects — the RSS and the Left — interact in Kerala's current political environment in different ways. One relied on long-term cultural organisation to mould political destiny, while the other trusted structural transformation through governance to reshape society. Kerala appeared to validate the revolutionary promise of governance-centred politics during the majority of the twentieth century. However, the progressive normalisation of alternative cultural narratives now coexists with evidence of institutional fatigue.

Therefore, the deeper question arising now is not which paradigm governed more successfully in the past. Instead, the question is which model can maintain legitimacy in the face of new social and political circumstances, such as financial constraints, demographic shifts, and the saturation of established institutional arrangements. Kerala's recent local elections thus mark not an abrupt shift, but the unfolding of a longer historical process in which different conceptions of politics operate across different temporal horizons. Governance can lead to growth, but culture may lead to a sense of belonging. When development stabilises but problems of belonging remain untouched, the political field reopens for new forms of mobilisation. In this way, Kerala's current political changes are more than just a typical electoral shift. They stand for the gradual reconfiguration of the connection between legitimacy, culture, and governance.

Notes:

- In this study, Hindutva and Hindu nationalism are used interchangeably. Literally translating to "Hinduness," Hindutva is a political and intellectual framework that aims to define Indian national identity mainly in terms of Hindu cultural and civilizational traditions.
- The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's fundamental organisational units are called shakhas. They serve as local branches where members get together on a regular basis for organisational activities, ideological debates, and physical training. Shakhas have traditionally been essential in growing the RSS's grassroots network and maintaining its long-term social and cultural mobilisation through this decentralised structure.
- The term "counter-hegemony" describes attempts by social or political organisations to subvert the prevailing cultural and intellectual order in society. The phrase first appeared in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, who asserted that consent and cultural leadership are just as important for -

maintaining power as institutions. Therefore, in order to challenge the legitimacy of dominant political ideas and develop a new ideological impact, counter-hegemonic groups aim to create alternative narratives and modes of mobilisation.

- The acceptance of political authority based on the impartiality, openness, and consistency of decision-making procedures, as opposed to only policy results, is known as procedural legitimacy.
- The acceptance of governmental authority based on shared cultural values, emotional affiliation, and symbolic resonance with a community's beliefs and traditions is known as cultural or affective legitimacy.
- Despite widespread public disapproval of the ruling, there was initially little organised opposition to it. The RSS and the BJP praised the judgment, but the Congress party had a conflicted stand (Janmabhoomi 2018). More than forty-one organizations are participating in the demonstration, including the erstwhile Panthalam royal family, the Nair Service Society (NSS), the Akhila Kerala Tantri Samajam, and the Namboothiri Yoga Kshema Sabha (NYKS).

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Geopolitics as a Foreign Policy Determinant between India and Iran

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ABSTRACT

Geopolitics has been one of the profound elements in determining relations among countries. India and Iran share close geographical proximity and centuries-old cultural linkages. Their peculiar geographic locations give them privileges and vast areas of cooperation. The changing nature of international politics, including the China factor, is pushing India to reinvent its ties with the West Asian region. The Iranian state is facing challenges at both the domestic and international levels. India needs Iran to reshape its ties with the region, establish feasible and shorter routes to Central Asian Republics and beyond and also to fulfil its energy needs. Iran is keen to find a reliable partner distinct from Western identity. In a way, they both need each other to achieve their respective desired foreign policy objectives. Considering Iran's geopolitical location and the foreign policy preferences of both countries, this research provides a detailed analysis of different factors that affect their bilateral relations and also highlights the consequences and prospects in their relations.

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I. Geopolitics as a Determinant in Foreign Policy Making

Geopolitics, as the name suggests, is the politics of geo, where nations interact with each other or sometimes act unilaterally to gain access to a geographical area to attain certain objectives. Gaining access to or control over drinkable water, arable land, forests, animal life, and mineral resources has been the driving force behind much of geopolitics. The rivers, harbours, islands, navigable straits, waterways, and channels, coastal zones, roads, railways have been the stakes in the game of geopolitics (Dietl, 2008, p. 33). It has been part of foreign policy for a long time, since it provides leverage to a nation to deal with undesirable circumstances that may arise in the international system and ensure their survival. The term 'geopolitics' was coined by a Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén, around the turn of the 20th century.

Nations have interacted with each other to strengthen their position at international level and enhance their security through strategic alliances, cooperation on mutual interests, soft power and diplomacy etc. Such a feature is visible in India-Iran relations as well. Iran's importance is ascribed to its strategic geography that offers great energy resources and a strategic location. Iran's geographical importance can be understood by looking at history itself. It has been an important part of trade routes of ancient times because it provided overland routes to Europe, Central Asia, and West Asia for the Indian subcontinent. Iran is a pivot state 'whose importance is derived not from its power and motivation but rather from its sensitive location.' Iran owes its significance to its geographical positioning, which allows it to play a critical role in providing connectivity or even choking the connectivity through the Strait of Hormuz to disrupt the global supply chain (e.g., energy resources), if Iran is attacked (Brzezinski, 1997).

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II. India-Iran Relations

From ancient times to the Iranian Revolution: Links between the Indian and Iranian people have been found to date back to 2000-3000 BC. Iranian traders acted as middlemen to transport Indian goods to Europe during the Gupta period (308-651 AD). 'Bam, in south-east Iran, was a major commercial and trading town on the famous Spice Road, a major tributary of the Silk Road, that connected trade routes from India through Iran to Central Asia and China' (Embassy of India, n.d.). Cultural similarity is also found between the two countries, which is discernible by striking similarity in architecture and language, especially during the Mughal period in India. The Urdu language, which originated in India, has a significant influence of the Persian language. The Parsi community, which migrated from Iran around the 8th century due to persecution, is an influential community in India that has significantly contributed to the development of India.

Historical and cultural affinity has helped sustain their relationship despite divergence in their worldview since the time of India's independence. Both countries had a shared border, before the 1947 partition of India, which facilitated easier trade between them in addition to historical and cultural linkages. Iran also served as a strategic conduit for facilitating trade, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic engagement with Europe and West Asia. The linkages have garnered mutual trust and respect, allowing geopolitical interests to be pursued effectively and collaboratively.

During the Second World War, in August 1941, Soviet and British troops marched into Iran to ensure that the Reza Shah Pahlavi doesn't side with Germany since the Shah was strongly influenced by Hitler's autocracy and ultra-nationalism. Reza Shah feared that he might be deposed. With this fear, he abdicated in favour of his 23 years old son Muhammad Reza and left Iran. Muhammad Reza Shah was supported by the US and Britain - the Western bloc - to strengthen his regime, when power was slipping from his hand to the Mussadiq government (Hiro, 1985:29,34-37). Because of the support provided by the Western bloc, he aligned with the Western bloc during the Cold War. In comparison, India had come out of colonial rule of the Britishers after a freedom struggle against them. India adopted a doctrine of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the Cold War between the capitalist bloc led by the United States of America (USA) and the communist bloc led by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and raised its voice for decolonization elsewhere.

India-Iran relations were formalised on March 15, 1950, with the signing of a friendship treaty. Their relationship passed through many strains in the post-independence period. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru endorsed Gamal Abdel Nasser as the leader of the Arab world. Nasser's crusade against the Egyptian monarchy engendered feelings of insecurity in the mind of the Shah. To counter Arab domination, Shah tried to build good relations with Pakistan, since Pakistan is an Islamic country (Mudiam, 1994, pp. 71-72).

Iran's relation with Pakistan was not for countering India. Both - India's and Iran's - head of states had visited each other's countries. The situation started changing in the later period of Shah's rule, when dialogue started and agreements were reached between the USSR and the US in the 1960s to rein in the increasing arms race and tensions. Another significant event was the defeat of Pakistan in the war with India in 1971. Pakistan's defeat, being a member of the West-led Baghdad Pact (also known as Central Treaty Organization - CENTO), to which Iran was also a party, made the Shah realise the limitations of the USA's support. With these changing scenarios in the international realm, Shah started reshaping his foreign policy. He assured the Soviet Union that it would not allow its territory to be used by any foreign powers against them. This redefining of Iran's foreign policy helped enhance understanding between India and Iran, leading to technological and commercial cooperation and the signing of agreements between the two. Yet the relationship could not sustain an upward trajectory, there were ups and downs (Naaz, 2001).

Post-Iranian Revolution to 2014: In 1979, Shah was overthrown through an Islamic revolution (also known as the Iranian revolution) led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Iranian Revolution was seen,

by India, as an expression of Iran's quest for identity and national self-determination and their desire to charter an independent course of action without the interference of the 'Big Powers' (The Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1980, p. 22). Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the relationship between Iran and the US has been on a downward trajectory. The leader of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, who became the first supreme leader in Iran, dubbed the US as the 'Great Satan' (AFP, 2015) .

In the 1980s, India-Iran relations did not fare well, because the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran had prioritized raising muslim causes worldwide, including in India. India at that time was facing disturbances in Kashmir, and communal disharmony was also building up around the Babri Masjid controversy. After the revolution, Iran was also drawn into a prolonged war with Iraq.

The relationship between India and Iran started improving in the 1990s in the backdrop of the declining Cold War and the economic reforms in India. Instability in Afghanistan and the establishment of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1996 became another area of mutual concern for both countries. On account of Iran being a major oil-producing nation and India emerging as a major consumer market, both nations deepened their cooperation in various other fields as well. Central Asian Republics (CARs), which emerged after the disintegration of the USSR, were also important in terms of regional security for both the countries. Iran's geography offers a suitable access for India to the region, since the region has been cut off from a feasible and cheaper route through Pakistan due to its adversarial relationship with India. There is potential for both nations to contribute to the stability of the region and keep a check on rising extremism from the region. India and Iran boosted their bilateral relations with many official visits taking place between them in the 1990s (Naaz, 2001).

After the 1991 economic reforms spurred economic growth, India needed energy resources to sustain its growth. The need for energy resources made India and Iran complementary to each other. Iran, mired in US sanctions, wanted a stable oil-importing country, and India was an appropriate partner for Iran, because India is one of the major powers in the Asian continent and the Indian Ocean region, along with having a huge population and a big economy. Both countries signed agreements in the energy and connectivity sectors - Iran expecting infrastructure investment and India eying energy security, cheaper trading routes and new markets through Iran. Along with these objectives, Iran sees India as a country that can help stave off economic isolation caused by Western sanctions.

The advent of globalization and India's economic reforms of 1991, made it an important emerging economy, and India-US relations also improved. The US, being the largest economy and dominant power in the current world order, India also needed to build strong relations with the US to access the most advanced technologies and have access to the US market. India voted against Iran in the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), i.e. a UN nuclear watchdog, after Iran's secret nuclear program was revealed by the Mujahedin al-Khalq, an Iranian resistance group in 2002. Yet India pitched for a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis within the framework of the non-proliferation regime. The revelations sparked tensions among the major powers that Iran might be developing nuclear weapons (Ashwarya, 2017, pp. 144-153). The US fears that if Iran develops nuclear weapons it would become much harder for the US to negotiate with Iran and it will try to force the US out of the Gulf region, apart from posing a direct threat to Israel (Pasha, 2010, p. 341).

Whereas, since the time of the revelation, Iran has maintained that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, such as medical research and power generation, not for nuclear weapons. The Iranian Supreme Leader had also issued a religious decree against the development of Nuclear weapons (Security Council 5500th Meeting (AM), 2006). The nuclear issue put India in a tricky situation where, on one hand, Iran was an important country for India, and on the other hand, India did not want nuclear proliferation, especially in its extended neighbourhood. In the late 2000s UN sanctions were imposed on Iran due to non-compliance from Iran. Thereafter, a decline in trade between India and Iran was seen. However, diplomatic engagements were there, which signaled that the relations between them were not broken completely.

The distance between India and Iran was also aided by Iran's antagonistic relations with the US since the time of the Iranian Revolution. The continued antagonistic relationship between the two has led to the imposition of various sanctions on Iran by the US. These sanctions have severely damaged the Iranian economy and isolated it because of US dominance in the international system. Former United States president George W. Bush counted Iran among the 'Axis of Evil' countries that are sponsoring terrorism and pursuing weapons of mass destruction (The White House Archives, 2002).

Post-2014: The 'Look West' policy received new attention in 2014 and 'became a useful component of Modi's foreign policy in advancing India's objectives in West Asia, a multi-layered engagement started'. It has extended India's interactions beyond conventional areas like trade and energy to include strategic and comprehensive alliances. The three primary axes of India's new strategy are the Gulf States, Iran, and Israel (Afzal and Iqbal, 2024, p. 170). The relation between India and Iran got a good momentum after a nuclear deal was signed with Iran. The deal was formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It was signed by the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), known as P5 countries (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), Germany, and the European Union (EU), with Iran in 2015, that restrained Iran's nuclear program and imposed strict regulations by IAEA in return for sanctions relief.

In 2016, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Iran, and a tripartite agreement was signed between India, Iran, and Afghanistan. Under the agreement, India planned to develop Chabahar port as a transit hub, and through this port, Afghanistan was to be connected via rail and road. Some of the project's parts have already been completed, but the full potential of the agreement has not been realized. 'India pledged $500 million to help build and operate two sections of the Chabahar Port. Additionally, India's Exim Bank provided a $150 million loan to help develop port infrastructure. In 2018, India formally took over operations at one section of the port' (Afzal and Iqbal, 2024, p. 178). The development of the port is also important for India to connect with Central Asian countries, which are also rich in natural resources, for example, Kazakhstan holds one of the world's largest Uranium reserves.

The opportunity of building strong relations with Iran, using its location and energy resources, could not last long due to the US's withdrawal from the JCPOA and imposition of unilateral sanctions on Iran in 2018, under the Donald Trump presidency. After withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, Trump initiated the 'Maximum Pressure' campaign. Under the campaign, the Trump administration asked all countries to stop importing Iranian oil or face sanctions (Cole and Atwood, 2019). Initially, India had said that it abides by the sanctions that are imposed by the United Nations but not those imposed by any other country, such as those announced by the United States against Iran (Verma, 2018). This showed India's willingness to continue oil imports from Iran. But due to US superiority in the international financial system and its threat of sanctions, importing oil from Iran was not feasible, and India had to ultimately stop the imports in 2019.

'The JCPOA was hailed by the EU as its diplomatic success; it enabled the EU to revitalise its relations with Iran with the idea that trade and political rapprochement would be beneficial to both sides'. Trump's withdrawal from the deal was not supported by any of the parties to the deal. France, Germany, and the UK (collectively known as E3), which were members of the deal, tried to salvage the deal by launching an alternative trade mechanism; for example, the EU established the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) on January 31, 2019 (Dutta, 2019). The mechanism has not been able to overcome the difficulty posed by the US withdrawal from the deal, due to rising tensions between Iran and the US and also because of the autonomy of the private sector and their fear of US sanctions (Therme, 2019).

Saudi Arabia and Israel were not happy with the JCPOA deal (Kaye and Martini, 2015). Israel views Iran's nuclear program as an existential threat. Saudi Arabia also sees Iran as a rival, but its stance -

towards Iran has softened after China mediated a normalization deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 (Wintour, 2023). It is widely argued that Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu may have influenced the US administration's withdrawal from the deal. For example, the Israeli PM has consistently claimed that Iran is developing nuclear weapons (Al Jazeera & Younes, 2018). However, attempts have been made to reach a new deal on the Iran nuclear issue. Negotiation for a new deal was going on through indirect dialogue between the US and Iran, mediated by Oman in April 2025. The negotiations fell apart in June when Israel attacked Iran, followed by the US strikes, to dismantle its nuclear program (Habibiazad, 2025). Following the attacks, Iran suspended cooperation with the IAEA and demanded assurances that Iran will not be attacked again before resuming any negotiations. The E3 countries have triggered a 'snapback' clause in the moribund Iran Nuclear deal that empowers for UN sanctions to be reimposed in the event of non-compliance by Iran (The Hindu, 2025).

'After the Iranian revolution, Iran did not join either of the existing two camps'. According to the Islamic Republic 'East or West was either bigger (USA) or smaller (USSR) satan' (Baidya, 2018, p. 147). This stance has changed in recent years because of continuous harsh sanctions, which have choked the Iranian economy. To counter its isolation, it has strengthened its relations with eastern powers, namely China and Russia. China, being a strong and energy-hungry economy, and Russia, already a sanctioned nation, keep them motivated to engage with Iran, thus providing Iran with much-needed support at international level. Iran has outreached to BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in recent years, which is seen as a platform for Global South cooperation and finding alternative financing mechanisms to the Western-dominated institutions (Mohammadi & Hashemi, 2022).

India enjoys cordial relations with Iran, rooted in deep historical and cultural connections. Nevertheless, the relationship faces constraints from the West while engaging with Iran or in enhancing cooperation between them. India's relation with Israel and the Gulf countries also creates a situation of difficult foreign policy choices for India, considering that India has strong economic and technological ties with them as well. Iran has its importance because of its strategic location, which cannot be changed. Iran provides India an alternative route to connect with Afghanistan, CARs, Russia, and even Eastern Europe which is cheaper and shorter than the existing route through the Suez Canal. Towards this endeavour, an agreement between India, Iran, and Russia was also signed in 2000, known as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The Chabahar port has emerged as a strategic pillar between India and Iran. Overall, Iran offers deep connectivity in the region, bypassing Pakistan, and it can also help India to counter the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

III. Area of Mutual Cooperation between India and Iran

India and Iran have multiple areas where they can cooperate and benefit from it. Iran ranks fifth at the global level in terms of being the world's most resource-rich country, holding second largest reserves of natural gas and the fourth largest reserves of crude oil, with a total resource value estimated at $27.3 trillion (Ziabari, 2023). Mineral fuels (crude oil, natural gas, etc.), which once formed the backbone of India's imports from Iran, accounting for over 90 percent of the total imports, have witnessed a near-complete collapse. Trade in this category has plummeted by 99 percent since 2019. India's total trade with Iran has contracted by 87 percent since the reimposition of US sanctions in 2019, falling to $2.3 billion in 2024 from $17.6 billion in 2019 (Gera, 2025).

India and Iran have discussed many gas pipeline projects (e.g., Iran-Pakistan-India, Iran-India, Iran-Oman-India) as well, through which Iran can transport natural gas to India. But these projects could not progress because of international sanctions, and especially the US sanctions on Iran, since the US believes that the revenue generated from Iran's mineral fuel's exports is used to invest in its nuclear program and sponsor regional militant groups that cause instability and threaten the security of US allies in the region.

Since India has strong financial and strategic relations with the US, it does not want to jeopardize that for Iran, though Iran has its own importance. If a nuclear deal is agreed between Iran and the US, then there is a possibility that the international sanctions, along with US and EU sanctions, may be lifted, and Iran will be free to export its energy globally.

The infrastructure initiatives like the INSTC and Chabahar port project face delays because the prospective participants hesitate in participating due to the potential risk of secondary sanctions from the US. India and Iran may look for alternate options to enhance their cooperation in different fields through mechanisms like rupee-rial trade or the barter system. India may import oil from Iran, and in return, India can invest in Iran's infrastructure projects. Railway networks may be developed by India with the help of Russia[1], which can boost connectivity in the region, thereby providing access to CARs and beyond. This can herald a new era of strong connectivity between the South Caucasus, the CARs, and the South Asian region primarily. Iran's borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan make it a dynamic part of South Asian geopolitics (Mohan, 2024). 'India has been among Iran's five largest trade partners in recent years. Major Indian exports to Iran include rice, tea, sugar, pharmaceuticals, manmade staple fibres, electrical machinery, artificial jewellery, etc. While major Indian imports from Iran consist of dry fruits, inorganic/organic chemicals, glassware, etc.' (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2025).

Iranian Parliament (Majlis) Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf met and held talks with India's Lok Sabha (Lower House) Speaker Om Birla on the sidelines of the 11th BRICS Parliamentary Forum held from June 3 to 5, 2025, at the National Congress Palace in Brasilia. 'He pointed out that the two countries enjoy high potentials and capabilities to enhance parliamentary cooperation' (Al Hashem, 2025). India and Iran held an annual bilateral political consultation on September 9, 2025, in Tehran. The meeting was co-chaired by Anand Prakash, Joint Secretary (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran division) of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, and Mohammad Reza Bahrami, Director General for South Asia Division in Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This meeting marked the continuation of high-level diplomatic engagement between the two nations. The meeting focused on identifying pragmatic pathways to diversify trade beyond hydrocarbons, focusing on areas such as pharmaceuticals, heavy engineering, agricultural exports, and emerging industrial cooperation. Iran is an important country with regard to India's long term energy security planning, on account of its energy resources and strategic geographic positioning. India has a major consumer market and may become an important technology provider for Iran, making their economic relations stronger (Indian Defence News, 2025).

Both sides emphasised strengthening cooperation at regional and multilateral forums such as the United Nations. The two sides affirmed to continue to support each other's candidatures, initiatives, and shared agendas in these institutions, indicating similarity with regard to global governance reforms, multipolarity, and the strengthening of South-South cooperation. Both nations highlighted the importance of connectivity frameworks like INSTC, energy and trade partnerships, coordination on regional geopolitics, and multilateral cooperation. The consultations underscored the shared and complementary strategic visions of India and Iran. With the next round scheduled in New Delhi in 2026, both sides conveyed their determination to maintain momentum in dialogue and deepen their cooperation in alignment with fast-changing geopolitical dynamics of the region (Indian Defence News, 2025).

India has been consistent in its support for the Iranian government. It has refused to interfere in the internal matters of other countries, whether the treatment of women or minorities. India chose not to comment on the issue of Iran's hijab enforcement that led to the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. Iran also chose to remain silent over the curbs on hijab in Karnataka classrooms. During a meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Samarkand on September 16, 2022, PM Modi remarked that India and Iran share deep historical and civilizational linkages along with strong people-to-people contacts (Haidar, 2022).

[1] Russia has a dominant role in the railway infrastructure of the region because of the railway lines that exists since the time of the USSR, especially in CARs. And Russia has expertise as well in the field of railway infrastructure. It also helps India in a way that Russia is less constrained by US sanctions.

An International Food Festival was organised from 25th to 31st October, 2021 in Hyderabad, which was hosted by the Consulate of Iran - Hyderabad, Poland and CD Foundation, and it was preceded by a Women Entrepreneurs Summit with the mission of promoting gender equality through inclusive growth. Ms. Mina Hadian, Vice Consul of the Consulate General of Iran in Hyderabad, present at the Summit, said in her speech that the number of women in Iran in entrepreneurship is continuously rising. Iran has the largest population of women having higher education in the Middle East.[2] According to the United Nations Human Development Index (UNHDI), Iranian women have shown outstanding improvement in education, employment, entrepreneurship, research, and science. Women can play a significant role in enhancing commercial relations between the two nations, which already have deep historical and cultural relations. Discussing different areas of trade and tourism, she described Indian and Iranian economies as supplementary and complementary economies (Hyderabad Desk, 2021).

IV. Challenges in India-Iran Relations

Though India and Iran have deep historical and cultural relations, their relation faces some challenges because of their political structure. The Republic of India is a constitutional democracy, following the principle of secularism, whereas the Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic state, with a Supreme Leader who has complete authority over the internal and external affairs of the country and has strong influence over the political system in Iran. The Supreme Leader of Iran is selected by the Assembly of Experts, which is a deliberative body of Islamic jurists that is elected directly. Although the jurists must be first approved by the Guardian Council in order to run for the assembly (Hiro, 1985, p. 121). Given the Islamic identity, Iran has been raising Muslim's issues worldwide, and has strong feelings for the Palestinians and fierce opposition to Israel's establishment in the region. At the same time, India has strong relations with Israel, especially in defence and technology.

Trade between the two countries has been very minimal after the oil embargo, despite their proximity and potential. India-Iran had a trade of USD 17 billion in 2018 - 2019, before the oil embargo. It has declined to USD 1.7 billion in 2024 - 2025. India suffered a huge trade deficit due to energy imports before the oil embargo. However, the trade is now in favour of India but with very minimal trade. The share of India-Iran bilateral trade in India's total trade is just 0.15%, which is lower than Bhutan's share, i.e., 0.16% in the financial year 2024 - 2025 (Department of Commerce, Government of India, 2025).

India needs to develop an alternate mechanism to boost trade with Iran, since the US practices a 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran to strangulate the Iranian economy and force it to agree to the US terms in order to get relax from the US sanctions. Options that can be explored are trade in local currencies - bypassing transactions in US dollars, and also safeguarding and smoothing payments. The Reserve Bank of India has been taking steps to facilitate international trade in rupees (The Hindu, 2022). Besides this, both countries can enhance trade through a barter system. With regard to the US, India can be more expressive regarding its interest in and through Iran, such as connectivity, stability in the region, and countering China's increasing foothold in the region. India, being the largest democracy and a stable country with the fourth largest economy, presents itself as the best partner to maintain peace and stability in the region.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the state has been at odds with Western countries because of exploitative interference from Western countries. This antagonistic view towards the West has strained relations with Western countries. The US placed different sanctions on Iran since the Iranian students took hostage the staff, including diplomats, in the American embassy in Tehran, right after the revolution. These sanctions became more severe after the disclosure of Iran's secret nuclear program. India also, on its part, does not support nuclear (weapons) proliferation. Around 2010, UN sanctions were imposed on Iran. These measures isolated Iran, especially its economy, so that it could not fund the nuclear program. India-Iran trade also declined. India's better relations with Western and Gulf countries, along with Israel, also causes tension in India-Iran relations.

[2] The term 'Middle East' has been used instead of West Asia, because the author has used the term in the source cited.

However, Iran has started enhancing its relations, in recent years, with countries that are looking for an alternative to the US-dominated international system. In these changing dynamics, India needs to be proactive - engaging with each side to secure its interest and reiterate its national interests at international level.

V. India-Iran Relations: Structural Realist Perspective

To explain such a relationship, structural realism provides a good understanding of why different states act in a certain way. According to structural realism (also known as neorealism) - the behavior of a state is shaped by the world power structure and the respective capabilities of states, since the global order is defined by anarchy. While the states are deemed as functionally similar, they are nonetheless distinguished by their relative capabilities for performing the same function (Waltz, 1979 pp. 88, 97).

Waltz's theory has been termed as defensive realism by later scholars, because his theory believes that nations endeavor to ensure their survival and security rather than power maximization, in the anarchic international system, which is also described as a self-help system. The rationale is that any aggressive or expansionist behaviour for power maximization may provoke the security dilemma and counterbalancing behavior from other major powers, and thereby risk the state's security (Lobell, 2017). 'States balance against hegemons' (Layne, 1993, p. 45).

In the given context, that is India-Iran relations, Iran wants to have strong relations with India to counter Western isolation efforts and ensure its survival by diversifying its economy. In contrast, India aims to secure its energy needs, which is critical for India's growing economy, by having strong relations with Iran, which has huge energy resources and a critical location.

VI. Conclusion

India diversified its relations in the West Asian region. Saudi Arabia and Iran had emerged as major oil-producing countries. They were twin pillars for the US in the Middle East for stability, and they emerged as major powers of the region (Baidya, 2018, p. 147). Iran enhanced economic collaborations with India for industries, goods, and services. In the later period of the Shah's rule, both the countries had alignment on major international issues such as disarmament, the West Asian problem and the maintenance of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace' (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1978, p. 12).

New Delhi's strategic coherence resembles Tehran. Iran pursues realism by balancing between different nations such as Pakistan, China, and India. It manages its foreign policy to enahnce its national interests (Malhotra, 2025). The foreign policy objective of Iran is guided by the survival of the state, in a region where every state sees Iran as a destabilizing force. The region is divided into two camps - anti-Iran and pro-Iran (Baidya, 2018, p. 148). India's engagement in the region is guided by strategic autonomy, where it maintains relations with all the countries in the region, keeping national interest in mind. However, their engagement has been constrained because of various challenges, mainly external factors in their bilateral relation. Yet there are also diplomatic visits from both sides, which exhibit their willingness to enhance cooperation in various fields.

India-Iran relations are mainly affected by third parties, meaning the major challenges between them are not bilateral per se; rather, multilateral issues are there (Baidya, 2018, p. 150). The root cause of these challenges is Iran's antagonistic relations with Western countries that started with the Iranian revolution in 1979. Iran has been a firm supporter of Palestine, and its former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had called for Israel to be wiped off the map of the earth (MacAskill & McGreal, 2005). Iran and Israel are considered archrivals. India, under PM Modi, built a very strong relationship with Israel and other Gulf countries - boosting trade and increasing cooperation in various fields. Whereas, the relation with Iran has not been so great. Iran, for its survival, has been reaching out to different countries that don't have strategic convergence with the West, especially the US, and these outreaches

of Iran may jeopardize India's strategic calculation and (energy) security. Given Iran's importance, India needs to find ways to engage with Iran. Because Iran is a country in India's extended neighborhood, it also has a strong influence and presence in the region. Its geography offers a gateway to CARs and beyond. India needs new markets which can be accessed through routes via Iran. In other words, India needs to diversify its export market, in the backdrop of the instability caused by the current US administration, which has been the largest export destination for India. India also needs to be present in Iran to counter China's increasing foothold in the region and the Indian Ocean.

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Embodying Empire: Wrestling, Masculinity, and the Military Labour Market in Mughal India

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ABSTRACT

Military conflict was a structural feature of the Mughal Empire, requiring a constant supply of trained fighting men. While historians have examined the mansabdari system and the circulation of military labour in early modern North India, little attention has been given to the bodily practices that sustained this order. This paper argues that martial sports, particularly wrestling (*pahelwani*), played a crucial role in linking physical discipline, masculine identity, and imperial patronage. Through akhara training, daily drills (*kasarat*), and staged competitions at court, the Mughal state cultivated disciplined bodies that embodied imperial authority. Wrestling arenas functioned as theatres where strength, honour, and hierarchy were publicly displayed and rewarded. By situating wrestling within the broader military labour market, the paper demonstrates how martial training served both as preparation for warfare and as a pathway to social mobility and imperial service.

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I. Introduction

Military conflict was a structural condition of the Mughal Empire. From campaigns of territorial expansion to the suppression of internal rebellions, the stability of imperial rule depended upon the continuous availability of trained fighting men. While historians have examined the mansabdari system, revenue extraction, and the circulation of military labour in early modern North India, far less attention has been paid to the bodily practices that made such a military order possible. This paper argues that martial sports, especially wrestling (*pahelwani*), functioned as a crucial interface between bodily discipline, imperial patronage, and the production of hegemonic masculinity in the Mughal world.

Rather than treating wrestling as mere recreation or courtly entertainment, this study conceptualises martial sports as a political tool of empire. Through daily drills (*kasarat*), *akhara*-based training, and staged competitions at court, the Mughal polity cultivated disciplined, display-ready bodies that embodied sovereignty itself. Wrestling arenas were theatres of imperial power where strength, honour, hierarchy, and loyalty were publicly performed and materially rewarded. The Mughal court's investment in wrestlers through titles, stipends, jagirs, robes of honour, and mansabs transformed bodily prowess into convertible political capital. Physical strength became a medium through which men could access patronage, mobility, and imperial service.

In this context, the military labour market of North India must be understood. It was more than merely an economic structure; it was a gendered field structured by embodied competence. Martial training in *akharas* linked village society, urban elites, and the imperial court, producing a pool of men whose disciplined bodies signified readiness for service. Thus, wrestling served both as preparation for warfa-

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-re and as a visible credential of employability. By rewarding even defeated wrestlers and publicly staging competitive bouts, Mughal rulers naturalised a hierarchy of masculinity that bound imperial authority to bodily excellence.

Drawing upon court chronicles, travel accounts, and visual material, this paper situates Mughal wrestling culture within broader debates on sovereignty, masculinity, and the politics of the body. It argues that imperial governance operated not only through revenue systems and administrative hierarchies but also through the cultivation and circulation of martial bodies. In doing so, the study bridges military labour history with cultural history, demonstrating that the Mughal Empire governed through spectacle, discipline, and the embodied performance of ideal manhood. Martial sports were one of its most visible and socially generative foundations.

This paper is divided into four sections, excluding the conclusion. The first section examines how martial values found elaborate expression in the courtly life of the Mughal elite, highlighting the importance of military training and physical accomplishment in shaping princely and noble identities. The second section discusses the significance of wrestling within Mughal court culture. For this purpose, a range of sources has been utilised, including didactic texts, Mughal paintings, the autobiography of the Mughal emperor Babur, court chronicles such as the *Ain-i-Akbari*, and relevant secondary scholarship. The third section explores the varied forms of martial sports and their broader social and cultural relevance within Mughal society. Finally, the fourth section analyses Mughal martial culture through conceptual frameworks, examining how martial sports, such as wrestling, served as mechanisms for cultivating disciplined, able-bodied soldiers and warriors for imperial service.

II. Martial Sports in Mughal Court Culture

It is important to explore how martial values found elaborate expression in the courtly life of the Mughal elite. Mughal princes and nobles regularly engaged in a range of martial sports that required both physical strength and mental discipline. Their education placed strong emphasis on military training from an early age. In the Mughal Empire, the transition of a prince from childhood to adulthood was closely tied to his administrative and military training, reflecting the central role of governance and warfare in princely education. Munis Faruqui has noted that before the formalisation of the *mansab* system in the 1570s, a prince's progression toward adulthood typically began when the emperor entrusted him with a significant administrative or military responsibility (Faruqui 2012, 85–86). For instance, Akbar was just nine years old when his father, Humayun, assigned him to govern Ghazni in 1551. To assist in such early duties, princes often relied on experienced personnel from the imperial household; in Akbar's case, the retainers of his deceased uncle, Hindal, were reassigned to him.

After the 1570s, with the gradual institutionalisation of the *mansab* system under Akbar, the education and advancement of princes became more structured. The conferment of a *mansab*, a graded imperial rank with military and administrative responsibilities, became a key milestone in a prince's transition to adulthood. This shift was often marked by two formal rituals: first, the replacement of the prince's modest daily allowance with a *mansab*, and second, his move from the central court to a separate residence, sometimes with or without a provincial command. The grant of a *mansab* not only formalised the prince's position within the imperial hierarchy but also functioned as a crucial stage in his military training and preparation for future leadership, typically occurring before marriage (Ibid.). For instance, Jahangir was assigned the mansab of rank 10,000/10,000 when he was also just nine years old (Jahangir 1999, 6).

In one of the passages from *Storia do Mogor*, Aurangzeb harshly rebukes his former tutor, Mulla Ṣāliḥ, for failing to prepare him for the practical demands of kingship—particularly the art of war. He laments that instead of teaching him about the histories, strategies, and governance systems of great empires like the Assyrians, Persians, Turks, and Franks, or even the military exploits of his own ancestors like Timur and Babur, his education was focused on mastering Arabic and scholarly pursuits with little

relevance to rulership. Aurangzeb criticises this narrow, ornamental learning for wasting his formative years, during which he could have been trained in military leadership, political strategy, and the practical skills required to rule and defend an empire. He asserts that a Mughal prince should be prepared to command armies, besiege fortresses, and navigate the realities of internal conflict—including fighting his own brothers for survival or the throne. He praises Sheikh Mir, who taught him the art of war and died fighting for him, as his true tutor (Niccolao 1907, 29–33). This rebuke highlights Aurangzeb's belief that military training was not just useful but essential for a prince, and that without it, a royal education was fundamentally incomplete.

This view is further supported by Niccolao Manucci, who notes that 'when the little princes have reached the age of five, they are taught to read and write the paternal tongue, which is the Tartar, or the ancient speech of the Turks. After this, they are made over to learned men and courteous eunuchs, who bring them up with great strictness, and teach them the liberal and military arts' (Ibid., 347). For instance, Prince Kam Bakhsh, the son of Aurangzeb, received instruction in archery from Saif Khan, a trusted official in Aurangzeb's service (Aurangzeb 1908, 136). On another occasion, Aurangzeb advised his son, Prince Muhammad Azam Shah Bahadur, to be diligent and not neglect the proper training of his own son, Aurangzeb's grandson (Ibid., 13).

III. Wrestling's Place in Mughal Court Culture

The illustration (Fig. 1) captures one of the most beloved tales from *Gulistan* by Saadi Shirazi, encapsulating a moral deeply embedded in martial traditions. The story recounts an aged wrestling master who imparted every technique he knew to a favoured student—except one. When the young wrestler, brimming with pride, claims before the king that he has learned all there is to know, he adds that he refrains from defeating his teacher only out of respect. The king, intrigued, commands them to wrestle.



Figure 1: *The Wrestling Master is Challenged by his Pupil.*[1]

At once, the old master employs the secret move he had withheld: lifting the youth above his head and slamming him to the ground, thus humbling the presumptuous student and reminding all present of the importance of humility and lifelong learning in martial discipline (Story 27 Sheikh Mosleh i-Din Saadi Shirazi 1888, 46).

Martial culture in the Mughal era was not confined to the battlefield or courtly ritual; it permeated the public sphere as well. Wrestling and other feats of strength were central to the urban entertainment culture of the time. Champions of such sports gained prestige and material support not only from imperial courts but also from regional elites and noble households, who often sponsored wrestling matches as part of their social gatherings and festivals (O'Hanlon 2007, 498). These champions travelled between courts, responding to royal invitations and noble patronage, in pursuit of both honour and competition. Their movement also fostered a vibrant martial network that connected various political and cultural centres across the subcontinent.

Among the various martial disciplines, *Pahalwani*, a synthesis of ancient Indian *Mallayuddha* and Persian *Varzesh-e-Bastani* (sport of heroes), gained particular prominence under the Mughals. Pahalwani was more than a sport; it was a regimen aimed at building strength, agility, and mental discipline. Practised in *zoorkhanehs* (traditional gyms), it involved *koshti* (grappling) and embodied the shared martial heritage of India and Iran.

The centrality of wrestling in Mughal culture is further highlighted in the *Baburnama*, the autobiography of Emperor Babur. Between 1528 A.D. and 1530 A.D., Babur records numerous wrestling matches held during peacetime or while the imperial camp was halted during travel. These bouts served not only as entertainment but also as displays of physical prowess, fostering camaraderie among warriors (Fig. 2). One such instance was narrated by Babur, in which his strongest wrestler, Sadiq, wrestled another famous wrestler, Kulal. 'Sadiq easily threw his contender, for which he was rewarded with ten thousand tankas, a horse and a saddle, a suit of clothes, and a buttoned mantle' (Babur 1996, 426). The Mughal Emperor Babur also rewarded the defeated wrestler Kulal with three thousand tanks and a suit of clothes so that he would not feel discouraged (Ibid.). Interestingly, even a defeated competitor was rewarded for boosting his morale and encouraging him to participate in future matches, emphasising the importance of participation and sportsmanship in Mughal sporting culture, which valued honour, respect, and encouragement. These accounts reflect Babur's appreciation for wrestling as a form of competition and camaraderie within Mughal society.



Figure 2: *Feast at Sultan Jalaluddin's House from Akbar's Baburnama*.[2]

In another instance, a wrestler of Babur, named Dost Yasin Hiz, was ordered to fight not against the strongest Pahlawan but against the others. Although the custom was to wrestle with the best first. However, the next time Dost Yasin Hiz faced the Skipper Pahlawan Lahori, Dost defeated his opponent with great difficulty (Ibid. 428-29). Both wrestlers were rewarded with suits. Similarly, Babur awarded one of his wrestlers, Yahya Nohani, a fifteen-lac stipend from Sarwar (a Mughal territory) and a clad in a suit of clothing (Ibid. 442-43).

These instances illustrate that in the Mughal world, defeat in competitive bouts, such as wrestling matches, was not necessarily viewed as a source of dishonour. On the contrary, it was often recontextualised as an honourable part of competitive engagement. As historian Dr Parul Lau Gaur notes, defeat, though occasionally marked by shame, was often 'sublimed' in the Mughal ethos, especially in the context of athletic bouts (Gaur 2017, 3). This cultural perspective placed emphasis not merely on victory but on the qualities demonstrated during the contest: technique, determination, and sportsmanship. Thus, wrestling matches served as spaces where resilience was valued and losing became part of a larger narrative of perseverance and honour.

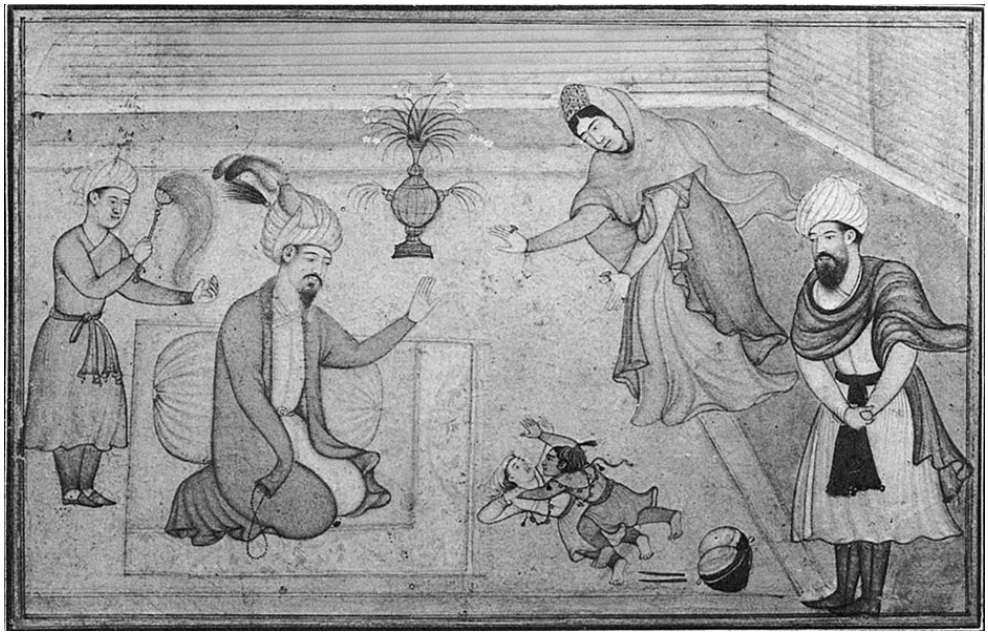


Figure 3: *Young Akbar Wrestling for a Toy in Humayun's Court*.[3]

Moreover, a vivid example of the martial ethos can be found in *Akbarnama*, which recounts an early episode from Akbar's youth. In this account (Fig. 3), the young prince engages in a wrestling match with his cousin Ibrahim Mirza for a kettle drum as a prize. The description of the event is as follows:

> He (Akbar) grappled with Ibrahim Mirza according to the canons of the skilful and of the masters of wrestling and putting his hand before his waist so lifted him up and flung him on the ground that a cry burst forth from the assemblage, and that shouts of Bravo arose from far and near..... His majesty [Akbar] beat the drum he had gained by the strength of his arm, and the joyous sound gladdened the hearts of the royal servants (Abul Fazl 1977, 455).

The wrestling match between Akbar and his cousin Ibrahim Mirza, as described in the Akbarnama, is a significant event in the narrative of Akbar's childhood. It showcases his embodiment of masculinity, attributes befitting kingship, and his assertion of power. Firstly, the act of wrestling itself is deeply ingrained in traditional notions of masculinity, representing physical strength, agility, and prowess. Akbar's ability to grapple with his cousin using the techniques of skilled wrestlers demonstrates his

physical strength and mastery of martial arts, a trait highly valued in masculine ideals. Secondly, the event highlights Akbar's potential as a future king. By defeating his cousin and claiming the kettle drum as his prize, Akbar asserts his dominance and establishes himself as a formidable leader. The act of beating the drum symbolises his authority and control, foreshadowing his future reign as the Mughal emperor. Furthermore, the reaction of the royal servants, who are gladdened by the drum's joyous sound, highlights the power dynamics at play. Akbar's victory instils confidence and admiration among those witnessing the spectacle. This admiration contributes to the construction of Akbar's image as a powerful and capable ruler, supporting his legitimacy and authority.

Following his accession, Akbar continued to patronise martial sports with great enthusiasm. As recorded in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, his court boasted a diverse array of fighters, including Persian and Turani wrestlers, boxers, stone-throwers, athletes from Hindustan, and skilled Mals from Gujarat, among others. Their salaries ranged from 70 to 450 dams (Ibid., 263). Two evenly matched opponents would engage in combat each day, with generous gifts presented to them on such occasions. Among the esteemed wrestlers of the era were Mirza Khan of Gilan, Muhammad Quli of Tabriz (nicknamed *Sher-hamla*, or Lion-attacker by Akbar), Sadiq of Bukhara, Ali of Tabriz, Murad of Turkistan, Muhammad Ali of Turan, Fulad of Tabriz, Qasiin of Tabriz, Mirza Kuhna-suwar of Tabriz, Shah Qull of Kurdistan, Hilal of Abyssinia, Sadhu Dayal, Ali, Sri Ram, Kanhya, Mangol, Ganesh, Anba, Nanka, Balbhadr, Bajrnath (Ibid.).

The appeal of martial sports extended beyond the court and permeated the urban fabric of the Mughal empire. A telling anecdote appears in the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, where Emperor Jahangir, curious about the population of Agra, instructed the kotwal Melek Ally to tour the city's *maarekahs* (venues for athletic and wrestling competitions). The kotwal reported that each arena hosted 2,000 to 3,000 spectators, even on ordinary days not marked by festivity (Jahangir 1904, 12). This scene speaks volumes about the widespread popularity of martial spectacles and the civic culture that supported them. With considerable prestige and financial rewards at stake, it is unsurprising that cities like Agra hosted a thriving network of *akharas* (wrestling schools), contributing to the cultivation of a robust public martial sphere.

Mughal imperial ambition and the dynamics of the military labour market also shaped this culture. Wrestlers, often from communities associated with martial labour, found employment through systems of patronage that linked physical excellence to royal prestige (O'Hanlon 2007, 494). For instance, Jahangir writes in his memoirs: upon receiving ambassadors from the court of Bijapur, he requested a renowned wrestler or swordsman from Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah II. In response, the Bijapuri delegation brought a wrestler named Shir Ali. When Shir Ali competed with Jahangir's own athletes, none could match his strength. Deeply impressed, Jahangir awarded him a thousand rupees, a ceremonial robe, and an elephant. Shir Ali was subsequently appointed "Athlete of the Capital," granted a *jagir*, and given a *mansab* (an administrative rank) (Jahangir 1909, 335), further solidifying the link between athletic distinction and imperial service.

These anecdotes highlight the centrality of martial arts in Mughal society, where wrestling was both a public spectacle and a means of social mobility. Martial competition embodied the ideals of masculine excellence, loyalty, and merit. Participation alone could earn one a place in the courtly hierarchy, while victory could lead to lasting imperial favour.

Consequently, there was a significant demand for fighters with flexible combat skills in the broader market for military labour. Unlike conventional battlefield engagements, warfare in the subcontinent often required navigating diverse terrain and employing a range of tactical approaches. This fluidity demanded combatants who were not only physically robust but also highly adaptable.

Beyond their roles in the arena, these martial specialists often performed a wide array of functions. Many served as personal bodyguards to nobles and royalty, while others were employed as instructors in specialised combat techniques and physical discipline. Within the network of local gymnasiums -

(*akharas*), they acted as sparring partners, trainers, and even demonstrators of advanced techniques to aspiring fighters. Their role extended into the domain of wellness and physical therapy as well. Wrestlers frequently possessed knowledge of traditional healing methods: they set broken bones, treated battlefield injuries, and offered therapeutic massages to ease muscular strain and rehabilitate wounded limbs (Gode 1955, 85–113). In this way, the wrestler was not merely a symbol of brute force, but a multi-skilled professional integral to both the martial and physical cultures of the Mughal world.

IV. Exploring the Manifestations of Martial Sports

The varied physical activities and sports developed in concomitance with political and societal requirements that required individual drilling and exercise. According to Daud Ali, the oldest literary evidence shows that courtly elites' cultural repertoires included a significant amount of martial exercise in some manner. Didactic literature prescribed the qualities of strength, dexterity, daring, and resolution to be cultivated as part of training in arms, and men's reputations and prospects of advancement depended on their public performance on the battlefield (Ali 2004, 96–102). These activities, which can be seen as early training in skills that would later stand boys in good stead for employment at court, also reflect an attempt to erase the dichotomies between youth and adulthood and to impose an early 'virilisation' on youths as yet unmarked by the physical signs of virility (Coakley 2006, 7).

Mauizah-i-Jahangiri of Muhammad Baqir Najm-i Sani, an Indo-Islamic mirror for princes, written during the reign of Jahangir, between 1612 A.D. and 1613 A.D., provides valuable insights into political and ethical thought in India during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (1605 A.D. and 1627 A.D.) (Askari, 1965, 104; Khan 2003, 408).[4] While this genre does not provide a systematic account of political thought or a structured analysis of issues related to government, the state, or society, it still serves as a valuable complement to historical and philosophical works. By reflecting the dominant political attitudes of the ruling elite and the social values of the time, it offers important insights into the period's social, intellectual, and religious currents.

Baqir presents a powerful articulation of ideal kingship grounded in martial virtue and ethical resolve. He argues that high-mindedness (*himmat-i Ali*) and valour are the defining traits of a successful ruler, with valour taking precedence over generosity, as true courage naturally breeds selflessness. A ruler who can face mortal danger will not hesitate to give away wealth (Sani 1989, 48). He writes:

> A ruler not endowed with heroism is like a cloud without rain. Wise men have said that permanence of a country and stability of a ruler's power are not possible without [the following] four things:
> First, perfect vigilance (hazm-i kamil) [so that the ruler is] able to envision the face of tomorrow in the mirror of today.
> Second, firm resolve (azm-i rasikh) [so that] infirmity and default will not interfere with his determination.
> Third, sound judgment (ray-i sa'ib) [so that he will] not deviate from the course of moderation into error and confusion.
> Fourth, a sharp sword to ignite the harvest of his opponent's life as incendiary lightning (Ibid.).

The text outlines four essential qualities for lasting rule: perfect vigilance, to foresee future dangers; firm resolve, to remain unwavering in purpose; sound judgment, to avoid error; and the possession of a sharp sword, symbolising military strength. Warfare and victory are seen not as unfortunate necessities but as noble and divinely sanctioned duties. The sword becomes both the means of justice and the foundation of peace: 'Paradise is under the shade of swords' (Ibid). The battlefield is likened to a ruler's true court, where glory is won through blood and bravery:

> Only that person who kisses the lip of the sword
> Can embrace in a leap the bride of dominion (Ibid., 49).

Additionally, Baqir argues that a true ruler, in the heat of battle, does not concern himself with the consequences that may follow. To preserve his honour and reputation, he regards life and property as insignificant in that moment. He chooses to fight rather than allow his name and dignity to be erased. Such a ruler, through his courage, ultimately attains victory. Although the outcome of battle is uncertain, like the edge of a sword or the shifting wind, God, the Most Exalted, is said to favour and protect the brave. History shows that the timid often perish in combat, while bold and fearless warriors frequently survive. One who has experienced the allure of heroism would rather endure a thousand wounds on the battlefield than die helpless in a sickbed like a frail old man (Ibid.).

In this setting, martial skills and literary accomplishments went hand in hand. Archery and wrestling formed part of the education of sons of *Ashraf* urban elites, and well-known literary figures were often also skilled archers and swordsmen (Alavi 2006, 7–13). Rosalind has argued that these gendered bodily and literary accomplishments were, in turn, vital parts of the repertoire of a gentleman of culture, for whom appropriate bodily deportment and the cultivation of bodily health were important signs of gentility (O'Hanlon 1999). The physical activities and combat training of Mughal elites were not merely functional but a cultivated aspect of their *habitus*, shaping and reflecting their social identities. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* refers to the socially ingrained dispositions, habits, and ways of behaving that individuals acquire through participation in their cultural and social environment (Bourdieu 2013, 143). This embodied habitus distinguished them from lower social groups and reinforced their elite status.

Historians have recognised that a particular kind of masculinity was essential and driven by the need for recognition in imperial service (O'Hanlon 1999, 61). O'Hanlon highlights the significance of cultivating bodily skills for cavalry warfare and of establishing a network that provided patronage and employment for specialists in combat (O'Hanlon 2007, 490–523).

Therefore, the Mughal elites engaged in a wide range of competitive combat sports designed to both psychologically and physically prepare them for warfare's rigours and to showcase their warlike and honourable traits in public. These games included contests of man against man, men against beasts and beasts against each other (Garza 2016, 142). The reasons people competed in these games, including whether they did so for fun and self-expression or glory, power, money, and other things, were also impacted by culture. The admiration and respect the contender received elevated him above other royal servants and strengthened his sense of belonging to the Mughal court (Gaur 2017, 5). Such a tangible gift came with an unbreakable connection to pride and honour. Titles and gifts were given as additional ways for the Mughal court to express its worldview.

Furthermore, strength and prowess are the most apparent virtues in military sports. The combats, contests, and enactment of physical power through these modes were an arena where hegemony and masculinity could be seen at work (Ibid, 8). Also, to earn the respect of their troops, a warrior-leader required commanders to excel in physical prowess. Knights, samurai, and Rajput leaders were often

expected to lead by example in battle, showcasing their physical abilities as a symbol of their worthiness to lead. Therefore, Emperors, princes, and high-ranking amirs were highly skilled soldiers trained in horseback riding, archery, swordsmanship, and the use of firearms (Blake 1986, 204). In this context, the Qabus Nama is presented by its author, Kai Kaus Ibn Iskandar, as a guide written for his beloved son and chosen heir, offering advice to help him avoid the dangers of life and follow a path that would bring him the greatest advantage. In this, the author writes:

> Be well aware my son, [Horse] riding and hunting are the occupation for gentlemen, particularly in youth. Yet there must be bounds and measure to every occupation, and one cannot hunt every day. In the week of seven days, hunt for two days, devote yourself to the fulfilment of God's commands for three days and to your own domestic affairs for the [remaining] two.
>
> When you set out to ride, never mount a horse that is too small; however handsome a man may be, he appears insignificant on a little horse, whereas, although a man may be insignificant in stature, he appears to great advantage on a big horse. Also, except when on a journey, do not ride an ambling horse, because while riding an ambling horse, a man holds himself in a bad posture. In the town, therefore, and in your own precincts, ride a spirited and high-stepping horse, so that because of the horse's mettle, you are prevented from being careless of your own person. Always hold yourself erect if you desire not to display an ugly posture in the saddle (Iskandar 1951, 83–84).

The passage from the *Qabus Nama* highlights the importance of disciplined conduct and physical presentation in the life of a nobleman, particularly in relation to horse riding and hunting skills central to martial identity. These activities were integral to cultivating the bearing, posture, and commanding presence expected of a warrior-leader. By holding himself erect and mastering his mount, a commander demonstrated the self-discipline, elegance, and physical confidence that inspired loyalty and respect among soldiers. It reflects a broader martial culture in which commanding the battlefield began with commanding one's body—a prerequisite for any warrior-leader seeking legitimacy and authority in the eyes of his men.

The *Qabus Nama* further advises on giving battle to an enemy: Once you enter battle, any display of laziness or hesitation is unacceptable—you must strike first before the enemy has a chance to act. Once in the thick of the fight, hold nothing back and show no concern for your own safety; after all, one who is fated to die will not return home to rest again (Ibid., 87).

> Though I should have a lion for foe I'd dare,
> Were he unseen or seen, my sword to bare,
> Who's destined friendless in the tomb to lie,
> Can never sleep at home in friendship's care (Ibid.).

The *Qabus Nama* strongly emphasises the virtues of courage, resolve, and unwavering commitment in battle. It advises that once a warrior enters combat, there must be no hesitation or concern for personal safety; boldness and proactive aggression are essential. The text suggests that a true fighter should be ready to face death and continue resisting, even when surrounded or physically overpowered, as visible determination can instil fear in the enemy. Fear or cowardice, on the other hand, not only endangers one's life but leads to lasting dishonour. The consequences of being seen as weak or disloyal on the battlefield are severe—bringing shame among peers and tarnishing one's reputation permanently. Therefore, it is better to die with honour in battle than to live in disgrace and humiliation (Ibid., 88).

Understandably, participation in the Mughal imperial military was deeply intertwined with the concept of masculinity. The Mughal elites engaged in a diverse array of organised combat sports, meticulously

designed to hone their physical and mental preparedness for the rigours of battle. These sporting contests encompassed various activities, from man-to-man combat to confrontations against beasts and even clashes between animals. Individually, participants competed to demonstrate their mastery of various martial disciplines such as boxing, wrestling, fencing, archery, and horsemanship. Additionally, they formed teams to compete in equestrian sports like buzkashi and polo that mirrored the intensity of actual battles. In essence, these organised combat sports served as a crucial avenue for Mughal elites to assert and validate their masculinity while simultaneously preparing themselves for the demands of military service.

Emperor Akbar actively sought to strengthen the symbolic ties between imperial service and idealised manhood, embedding these values deeply within the fabric of courtly life (O'Hanlon 1999, 85). The renowned mansabdars, amirs, and other imperial servants represented the pinnacle of manhood. Prominent mansabdars, amirs, and other high-ranking officials were idealised as embodiments of masculine virtue—figures who exemplified strength, loyalty, and martial competence. As Rosalind O'Hanlon has argued, the health of the polity was closely linked to the physical vitality of the sovereign, whose body metaphorically represented the state. In this vision, the king was likened to a philosopher-ruler whose just and orderly governance held together a kingdom imagined as a unified body with many functioning limbs, each fulfilling its natural role under central direction (O'Hanlon 2007, 498). This ideal of ruler masculinity was further reinforced by Emperor Aurangzeb's counsel to his sons. He instructed them:

> If you are on a march, take horse 48 minutes after sunrise. Should you hunt on the way... If you are on a journey, but it is a day of halt... spend 48 minutes of the morning in archery and musketry practice... Gradually make yourself perfect in the habit of wearing arms (Sarkar 1933, 39–41).

Aurangzeb's words highlight the Mughal emphasis on constant readiness, self-discipline, and martial training, qualities deemed essential for rulership. The cultivation of these virtues was not merely practical but also symbolic, reinforcing a ruler's legitimacy and authority through his mastery over both body and weaponry.

However, while martial sports served as a tool for elite self-fashioning, the motivations for participation among the common masses were shaped by different concerns. For ordinary men, training in wrestling and other martial disciplines offered opportunities for social mobility, patronage, and physical empowerment. Unlike the elite, whose engagement in martial sports was framed by ideals of kingship and governance, the common practitioners sought livelihood, recognition, and personal advancement within an evolving military labour market that increasingly valued physical skill, resilience, and adaptability.

V. Conceptual Framework: Discipline, Capital, and Hegemonic Masculinity

To understand the political significance of wrestling in the Mughal Empire, it is useful to situate the evidence within broader theoretical conversations on the body, power, and masculinity. The Mughal court's investment in martial sports can be read as a part of a structured regime of bodily production.

Michel Foucault's analysis of 'discipline' helps explain how institutions shape and regulate bodies in order to produce individuals who are both obedient and efficient. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that modern systems of power operate not only through laws or coercion but also through subtle techniques of training, supervision, and repetition that cultivate what he calls 'docile bodies' (Foucault 2020, 136–37). These disciplined bodies are capable, skilled, and productive, yet they are also conditioned to conform to established hierarchies and authority (Ibid.). Discipline works through everyday practices such as drills, routines, regulated conduct, and continuous observation, gradually shaping individuals' bodies and behaviour.

According to Foucault, disciplinary systems often rely on methods such as regular training, examination, and hierarchical supervision. Through repeated exercises and strict routines, individuals internalise control over their own bodies, developing habits of self-discipline that align with institutional expectations (Ibid., 145-56). In this way, power operates not only externally but also through the body itself, shaping how individuals move, behave, and perform.

So, Foucault's idea of 'discipline' helps us understand the martial culture and its correlation with the Mughal Empire. The repetitive drills (kasarat), regulated diets, celibacy codes, and akhara training routines resemble techniques for producing docile yet capable bodies. Wrestlers were subjected to continuous self-regulation and public evaluation, and courtly competitions took place under the emperor's watchful authority. Even Jahangir's act of counting spectators at wrestling arenas signals an awareness of visibility and regulation. Wrestling thus combined discipline with performative sovereignty in which the body was both trained and theatrically subordinated to imperial authority.

Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of habitus and capital provide a useful framework for understanding how bodily practices such as martial training operated within Mughal society. Bourdieu uses the term habitus to describe the set of deeply ingrained dispositions, habits, and modes of behaviour that individuals acquire through their upbringing and participation in particular social environments (Bourdieu 2013, 78–79). These dispositions shape how people move, think, and act, often unconsciously, and they reproduce the values and structures of the society in which they live. Habitus is therefore embodied social knowledge.

In the Mughal context, the disciplined routines of the *akhara*, including rigorous physical exercise, controlled diet, regulated conduct, and constant bodily training, cultivated a distinctive martial habitus. Wrestlers developed physical strength, as well as a particular bodily posture, self-control, endurance, and discipline that marked them as members of a martial culture. These embodied qualities were the signs of readiness for military service and distinguished trained fighters from ordinary men.

Closely related to habitus is Bourdieu's concept of 'capital,' which refers to the resources individuals accumulate and deploy to gain status and power within a social field. Bourdieu identifies symbolic capital (prestige, honour, recognition) and cultural capital (skills, knowledge, and cultivated abilities) as forms of capital distinct from economic capital (Bourdieu 1986, 245). In the Mughal world, martial skill functioned as a form of embodied capital. Physical strength, technical mastery of wrestling, and a reputation as a skilled fighter could be converted to advance socially through imperial patronage. Successful wrestlers received robes of honour, stipends, titles, jagirs, and even mansabs, representing how bodily prowess could be transformed into both symbolic prestige and material reward.

Finally, R.W. Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' provides an important framework for understanding how societies construct and maintain dominant ideals of manhood. Connell argues that masculinity is not a single universal trait but a hierarchy of different masculinities that exist within a given social order(Connell 2021, 36–37). Among these, *hegemonic masculinity* refers to the culturally dominant model of manhood that legitimises male authority and social hierarchy (Ibid., 77). It represents the idealised form of masculinity that is most socially valued and associated with power, leadership, physical strength, discipline, and authority (Ibid.).

This dominant masculine ideal does not necessarily describe the behaviour of all men, but it functions as a normative standard against which other masculinities are measured. Men who embody or approximate this ideal often gain prestige, authority, and social advantage, while other forms of masculinity may be subordinated or marginalised (Ibid.). Institutions such as the state, military, and elite social networks often play a key role in reinforcing these ideals by rewarding behaviours that align with dominant masculine norms.

In the framework of the Mughal empire, the imperial court promoted a form of hegemonic masculinity centred on martial ability, physical strength, courage, discipline, and loyalty to the sovereign. Emperors, princes, mansabdars, and champion wrestlers collectively embodied this dominant masculine model. Public displays of martial prowess in activities such as wrestling, archery, hunting, and equestrian sports reinforced the association between masculinity and military competence. Even the structured nature of wrestling contests, where both victory and honourable defeat were publicly acknowledged and rewarded, helped sustain a system in which masculine prestige was tied to physical discipline and service to imperial authority. In this way, martial sports contributed to the production and maintenance of an idealised form of imperial manhood that supported the political order of the Mughal state.

Conclusion:

Martial sports, especially wrestling, held a much greater importance in the Mughal world than just recreation or courtly entertainment. They were an integral part of the empire's political, social, and cultural fabric. The cultivation of the body was deeply intertwined with the functioning of Mughal power.

At the imperial court, martial sports served as performative spectacles through which sovereignty, hierarchy, and masculine authority were publicly articulated. Wrestling matches before emperors and courtiers dramatised ideals of strength, honour, and discipline, and imperial patronage transformed bodily prowess into social and political rewards. Titles, stipends, robes of honour, jagirs, and mansabs turned physical skill into symbolic and material capital, incorporating successful athletes into imperial service. Thus, the sports arena served as a space where political legitimacy and masculine virtue were visibly enacted.

At the same time, the culture of martial sports extended beyond the court and permeated the empire's urban and rural landscape. Networks of *akharas* and travelling champions connected village society, urban leisure culture, and imperial patronage. For common practitioners, martial training offered a pathway to recognition, employment, and upward mobility within the expanding military labour market. Wrestling operated simultaneously as preparation for warfare, a credential of employability, and a form of public entertainment that reinforced shared ideals of courage, resilience, and honour.

Viewed through the lenses of discipline, symbolic capital, and hegemonic masculinity, Mughal wrestling culture reveals how imperial governance was enacted through the body. In this sense, the Mughal Empire governed not only through administrative institutions and fiscal structures but also through the cultivation and circulation of embodied martial excellence. Wrestling and related martial sports were therefore vital institutions through which the Mughal polity articulated its ideals of power, masculinity, and social order.

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[1] The king, sitting in a garden pavilion surrounded by courtiers, witnesses the victory of the old wrestler who holds the young one upside down by his neck and one leg, while other athletes smile approvingly. File:Mahmud Muzahhib. THE WRESTLING MASTER IS CHALLENGED BY HIS PUPIL. Gulistan Saadi, 1543 BNF.JPEG - Wikimedia Commons

[2] Indian, Mughal Empire (1526–1858), Reign of Akbar (1556–1605), Feast at Sultan Jalāu’d-dīn’s House at Karrah from the Baburnama (Book of Babur), ca. 1589-1590. Ink, gold, and color on paper; 26 × 14 cm (miniature), 35.5 × 23.3 cm (sheet). Gift of Mr. Carl Otto von Kienbusch, Class of 1906, for the Carl Otto von Kienbusch Jr., Memorial Collection. (y1971-30)

[3] Akbar, as a young child, wrestles with his cousin for possession of a toy drum in the presence of his father, Humayun, and his governess. 5-akbar-the-great-1542-1605-granger.jpg (900×575) (fineartamerica.com)

[4] Baqir entered the imperial service at the rank of one hundred or three hundred sawar and rose rapidly in the administrations of lahangir and Shahiahan. After serving as the governor of Patna, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Gujarat, Delhi, Jaunpur, and Allahabad. His political career ended with his death in 1637. Sayyid Hasan Askari, ‘Mirza Muhammad Baqir Najm-i Thani’, in ‘Arshi’ Presentation Volume, ed. Malik Ram and Md. Ahmad (New Delhi, India: Majlis-i Nazr-i Arshi, 1965), 104. He was linked to the Mughal family through his marriage to the niece of queen Nuriahan. Jahangir affectionately called him son (farzand).(Khan 2003, 408) A man of both the pen and the sword, Bagir symbolized the Indo-Persian social and cultural norms of the ruling elite.



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ASEAN's 2025 Enlargement: Significance and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

ASEAN's planned expansion in 2025 with the accession of Timor Leste, represents an important milestone in Southeast Asia's regional integration. It reflects ASEAN's long-standing vision of regional unity and its commitment to bringing all Southeast Asian countries under a single institutional framework. Beyond its practical implications, the expansion carries strong symbolic value, strengthening ASEAN's image as an open and inclusive organisation.This enlargement presents significant challenges for both Timor-Leste and ASEAN. Timor-Leste continues to face serious capacity constraints, particularly in economic development, infrastructure, and human capital, which may limit its ability to fully comply with ASEAN obligations. ASEAN, in turn, will need to adjust its institutions, decision-making processes, and support mechanisms to accommodate a new member without undermining organisational effectiveness. Balancing inclusivity with effectiveness will therefore be critical. While ASEAN's 2025 expansion offers important opportunities to strengthen regional solidarity and cohesion, its success will depend on phased integration, targeted capacity-building, and sustained support from existing member states and external partners. The paper discusses the opportunities, challenges, and policy implications of ASEAN's expansion, with particular attention to institutional adaptation and capacity-building needs.

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Capacity constraints, Economic development, Human capital, Inclusivity, Decision-making and Capacity building.

I. Introduction

Even after about fifty-eight years in existence, ASEAN continues to show vitality and dynamism, which stands as testimony to its success and relevance. ASEAN has demonstrated the capability to react to international relations on a constructive and cooperative basis. Its significance is evident from the fact that it takes a leading role in establishing a regional order that goes beyond the Southeast Asian sub-region to one that covers the Asia-Pacific (Snitwongse 1998, 183). As ASEAN attained almost six decades of peace and strong economic performance among its member states, it managed to emerge from the Cold War as the region's pre-eminent institution (Widajanto 2003, 87).

The future of ASEAN appeared uncertain when it was formed on 8th August 1967 against a backdrop of regional conflict and confrontation. Several predictions were made earlier about the short life of ASEAN. Some people viewed that it would not survive to see another decade, as the previous attempts at regional cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) and the MAPHILINDO concept, had ended shortly after a few years of formation. Some predicted that the Malaysia-Philippines dispute (1969) over Sabah would lead to the collapse of ASEAN. Similar predictio-

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ons were made about ASEAN's relevance in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Indochina, Cambodia's invasion by Vietnam a few years later, the end of the Cold War, and the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997. ASEAN not only faced and survived each of those, but also strengthened itself each time a crisis struck (Archarya 2011, 1)[1]. Today, nobody would disagree with the fact that ASEAN has emerged as the most successful case of regionalism outside Europe (Buzynski 1998, 555).

ASEAN has emerged as an important political and economic organisation in the Asia-Pacific region, contributing to peace and stability in Southeast Asia. It was established during a period of regional tension, when political differences among Southeast Asian countries risked armed conflict, and the withdrawal of major powers created a power vacuum (Tan 2003, 2-5). ASEAN provided a platform for dialogue and cooperation to manage these challenges collectively. The major objectives as enshrined in the "Bangkok Declaration" establishing ASEAN were the promotion of regional cooperation, paving the way for peace, progress, and prosperity, while being determined to ensure stability of member states and their security from external interference. These goals extended beyond politics to include economic, social, cultural, and technical cooperation, aimed at building a peaceful and prosperous regional community (Khaki 2018, 155-156).

ASEAN enlargement became a crucial means of achieving these objectives. By expanding its membership, ASEAN sought to include all Southeast Asian countries within a shared framework, reducing divisions and strengthening regional unity. Expansion enhanced ASEAN's collective voice and supported peace and economic cooperation, despite challenges arising from diverse political systems and development levels. ASEAN's expansion reflects the belief that regional inclusion is essential for lasting stability and shared (Acharya 2014, 106-107).

II. The Expansion of ASEAN from Five to Ten:

The expansion of membership of ASEAN from its five founding members, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, to ten member countries with the inclusion of Cambodia in 1999 is considered ASEAN's greatest achievement. ASEAN's vision of uniting all Southeast Asian states was proclaimed nearly fifty years ago when ASEAN was established. The Bangkok Declaration had left ASEAN membership open to all states in Southeast Asia subscribing to its aims, principles, and objectives (Weatherbee 2005, 91). Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei initially declined to join the association. ASEAN served the political interests of all the participating countries. For Indonesia and Malaysia, it was a means to restore amicable relations by putting an end to President Sukarno's Konfrontasi policy. For Singapore, it was a means to safeguard its viability and sovereignty in a potentially hostile Malay world. For Thailand, ASEAN was a means of aligning itself with, and cultivating the support of its non-communist neighbors to the south. For the Philippines, it acted as a forum where its territorial claim to North Borneo could be discussed and resolved, from which the Philippines could not afford to be excluded (Tan 2003, 9-10).

The founding members of ASEAN were later joined by Brunei on 8th January 1984 after achieving independence, and became the sixth member of ASEAN. Vietnam became the seventh and first communist member of ASEAN on 28th July, 1995. Vietnam's admission in 1995 gave final closure to the political gulf between communist and non-communist Southeast Asia. Membership had been offered as an incentive to Vietnam in the negotiations for terminating the Third Indo-China War. Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar had been given observer status in 1992, 1994, and 1996, respectively (Weatherbee 2005, 91). After enjoying a brief period of observer status, Laos and Myanmar joined the Association on 23rd July 1997. Cambodia was also to join the Association along with Laos and Myanmar, but in July 1997, a coup by PM Hun Sen against the prince Ranariddh, because the latter had been planning to oust the former with the aid of the Khmer Rouge, prevented ASEAN from admitting Cambodia into its ambit. It was, however, expected that once internal political problems would be

[1] Remarks at the Workshop on "ASEAN 2030: Growing Together for Shared Prosperity, ASEAN Studies Center, American University & Asian Development Bank Institute, School of International Service Founders Room, American University, February 7, 2011,

settled in Cambodia, it would be admitted into the association (Tan 2003, 33). Later, Cambodia joined ASEAN on 30th April, 1999, following stabilization of its government. With that, the ten Southeast Asian countries came into the one ASEAN family (Severino 2006, 8). Although it took ASEAN at least thirty years to realize its dream, the achievement was no less remarkable (Dato 1997, 128). The addition of former Indo-Chinese states to ASEAN is considered to be a turning point in Southeast Asian regional politics. The expansion of ASEAN to include ten Southeast Asian countries raised the clout of the association in international politics.

III. Transition From Ten to Eleven in 2025:

The year 2025 marks a significant milestone in ASEAN regionalism as Timor Leste has officially been added as the 11th member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations, marking the culmination of its lengthy bid for accession. This development not only fulfilled ASEAN's long-lasting ambition of incorporating all the states in the region but also poses a test for association's ability to integrate a small economy with considerable development gaps.

During the opening of the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 26th October 2025, Timor Leste's accession was solemnized by signing of the declaration by the representatives of all the ten member states of ASEAN (Strangio 2025). Timor-Leste, having a population of approximately 1.4 million and a GDP of about USD 1.9 billion, joined ASEAN whose combined GDP is over USD 3.8 trillion (Timor Leste Government 2025). Timor- Leste joined the association as it will open the doors for economic development seeking access to larger markets, better foreign investment and diplomatic legitimacy, while for ASEAN it means expanded regional outreach and unity.

Timor-Leste's journey of becoming a member of ASEAN has been a complex, much-awaited and long-cherished goal reflecting a story of resilience, patience, and determination. Timor-Leste gained independence in 2002 after a long struggle and since then joining ASEAN has been its strategic priority. However, Timor-Leste soon joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2005. In 2007 Timor-Leste signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and in March 2011 Timor-Leste formally submitted its formal application to become a member of ASEAN marking the official start of its accession process (Leach 2025). In 2022, ASEAN Leaders agreed in principle to admit Timor-Leste as a Member State, granting it Observer Status to engage in ASEAN activities while evaluating its readiness across the political, socio-economic, security and cultural pillars of ASEAN. This was followed by adoption of formal *"Roadmap for Full Membership"* in 2023 laying down necessary legal alignment, institutional reforms, and transitional arrangements required to achieve full membership. Finally, at the 47th ASEAN summit which was held in Kuala Lumpur in October, 2025, Timor Leste deposited its Instruments of Accession under the ASEAN Charter and was admitted as the 11th member state on 26th October (ASEAN 2025). This event was celebrated as completing the ASEAN family.

IV. Implications for Timor-Leste:

A. *Political and Institutional Dynamics:*

The ASEAN Charter accentuates the broad criteria for membership of ASEAN in its Article viz.,

- Country should be geographically located in the region,
- There should be an agreement to be bound by the ASEAN Charter, and
- It should be recognised by all the members of the association (Thuzar 2017).

Timor-Leste met the basic requirements to become the member of ASEAN like, being geographically located in the region and formally agreeing to the ASEAN Charter. However, the real challenge was whether it could realistically fulfil ASEAN's economic, legal and regulatory standards. Most of the ASEAN member states supported Timor-Leste's membership on the grounds of shared value and regional unity but some member states expressed concerns about administrative burdens, economic expenses, and Timor-Leste's overall preparedness to participate fully in ASEAN activities (ASEAN.Hub 2025). To address these concerns, ASEAN decided to follow a steady and phased approach. It allowed

Timor-Leste to participate in selected meetings while receiving technical assistance to strengthen its institutions and capacity. In addition to these practical considerations, broader strategic factors such as increasing ASEAN's influence in the Timor Sea region and the wider Indo-Pacific also shaped the decision (Widionto 2025).

B. Economic Profile and Development Realities:

Timor-Leste is currently the smallest economy in the ASEAN, with a population of about 1.3–1.4 million, which makes it much smaller than most other member states in the group (Widionto 2025). Its economy depends largely on the oil and natural gas sector. Because of this dependence on a few commodities, the country is not very diverse and is especially sensitive to fluctuations in global oil prices. Compared with other ASEAN members, Timor-Leste's per capita income, physical infrastructure (such as roads, electricity, and communications), and other social indicators (education, skills, and health) are much below regional averages. After Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, its access to established trade networks and regional markets is improving. Now it will export more goods, attract foreign investment, and participate in regional economic agreements like the ASEAN Free Trade Area, which lowers trade barriers with other member states (Gomes 2025). However, this is possible only if the country addresses important structural and institutional problems, for example, strengthening its legal and financial systems, improving education and health sectors, building more infrastructure, and making its institutions more effective. All these reforms are very essential for Timor-Leste to take full advantage of the opportunities that ASEAN membership offers.

C. *Institutional Readiness and Capacity Challenges:*

Joining ASEAN is one of the biggest milestones of Timor-Leste, particularly in political and economic aspects. The country worked really hard to show its willingness to connect with the region by developing its democratic institution and by participating in ASEAN meetings as an observer country. However, on economic side it faced significant hurdles. Timor-Leste is still underdeveloped compared to most of ASEAN member states in terms of infrastructure like, roads, broadband connectivity etc., which makes it difficult for businesses to thrive (Chen 2025). Similarly, education and workforce skills are also the areas of concern. More than 60% of population is under 35 years of age. The working population lacks the technical, digital, and language skills needed to compete at the regional level (Soares 2025). To address these challenges Timor-Leste requires strong human resource and institutional capacity. Government agencies and private sector require greater training, skill development and resources to effectively manage the complex technical demands of regional economic cooperation (Shamsunahar 2025).

Because of these gaps, sustained support from ASEAN and other international partners is crucial. Australia and other institutions like Asian Development Bank (ADB) and European Union (EU) are already partnering with Timor Leste to strengthen its skills in training, education, public finance and digital development (EU 2023). These partnerships are important for Timor Leste to build confidence and capacity to meet regional commitments and get meaningfully benefited from the opportunities that ASEAN provides (Chen 2025).

V. Implications for ASEAN:

- **P*olitical and symbolic significance:***

Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN has important political, symbolic, and practical implications for the regional organisation. Its membership strengthened ASEAN's image as an inclusive and geographically complete entity, completing Indonesia's long-standing vision of "One Southeast Asia." The member states differ significantly in their political systems and levels of development, but ASEAN's commitment to regional solidarity is evident. Timor-Leste's inclusion does not automatically resolve underlying concerns related to democratic governance, institutional capacity, and uneven development standards across the region. Instead, it highlights ASEAN's continued preference for gradual engagement rather than strict enforcement (Acharya 2014, 48).

- ***Institutional and administrative challenges:***

The 10+1 expansion of ASEAN places extra burden on an organisation as it operates with limited financial and administrative resources. Additional membership leads to more meetings, greater demands, and increased needs for translation, documentation, and staffing. ASEAN has an annual budget of roughly USD 27 million which is comparatively much lesser than other regional organisations. So, ASEAN may require corresponding reforms in budgeting and administrative processes to face the challenges in maintaining organisational agility and timely decision-making (ASEAN.Secretariat 2023).

- ***Implications for future enlargement:***

Timor-Leste's entry into ASEAN establishes an important example for other countries that may want to join in future, such as Papua New Guinea or Bangladesh. It shows that ASEAN is open to welcoming less-developed countries in future provided there is a clear roadmap, gradual execution of obligations, and constant capacity-building support. At the same time, the accession process has become more organised and transparent than before, with clearer standards, timelines, and readiness assessments. While it makes the process easier to understand but it may make entry of future aspirants difficult as they would be expected to meet higher and more structured requirements (Dosch 2007).

- ***Strategic and economic relevance:***

From strategic point of way, Timor-Leste's entry into ASEAN has added to the organization's importance in the broader Indo-Pacific region, especially in maritime cooperation and regional connectivity. Although Timor-Leste's immediate economy is small and its contribution to ASEAN would be limited, but the membership should not be viewed only in terms of short-term economic goals. Over time, Timor-Leste may gradually attract new opportunities for trade, investment, and integration into regional value chains. This accension has the potential to benefit both Timor-Leste and ASEAN in the long run (UNSDG 2025).

VI. Conclusion:

To sum it up, the 2025 enlargement of ASEAN through the accession of Timor-Leste marks a significant milestone in the Southeast Asia's regional history. It is not only an increase in the membership, but represents a powerful symbol of ASEAN's long-standing commitment to regional consolidation and a step toward inclusive regional integration. The accession of Timor-Leste reflects ASEAN's aspiration to bring all Southeast Asian states under a common institutional framework, reinforcing its identity as a cohesive regional organization. The ASEAN 2025 expansion serves as an important test of ASEAN's institutional capacity, highlighting whether the bloc can manage diversity in political systems, economic development levels and governance structures while maintaining its consensus-based approach.

However, the long-term benefits of Timor Leste's accession will ultimately depend on number of factors like, Timor-Leste's ability to effectively implement ASEAN obligations, strengthen domestic institutions, and integrate into regional and political frameworks. Equally important is ASEAN's readiness to provide constant economic, technical and capacity-building support to accommodate Timor Leste facing distinct development challenges. This enlargement can strengthen ASEAN's credibility as an inclusive and resilient regional organization managed successfully. Thus ASEAN's 2025 enlargement stands as both an opportunity as well as shared responsibility for ASEAN's future.

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From Civilizational Essentialism to Ethno-nationalist Struggle: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Beyond Huntington

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ABSTRACT

Samuel P. Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' hypothesis did not merely predict the post-Cold War world order; it sought to define it, asserting that global politics would revert to inter-civilizational strife. In both political discourse and elements of international relations literature, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its broader regional spillovers are frequently erroneously subsumed within this paradigm, characterized as a quintessential fault-line war between Western and Islamic civilizations. This paper problematizes that ontological assumption. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of comparative religion, political sociology, and conflict studies, the paper contends that the conflict is sustained not by a monolithic clash of macro-civilizations but by historically embedded political antagonisms that resist any singular civilizational explanation. The paper further demonstrates that the events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent escalation towards direct Iran-Israel-United States military confrontation between 2024 and 2026 do not merely fail to confirm the civilizational thesis but actively dismantle it. The conflict is not an intractable civilizational determinism but a hyper-localized collision of competing ethno-nationalisms, sustained by structural asymmetries and the primacy of state-centric realpolitik over civilizational solidarity.

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I. Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, international relations theory required new paradigms to explain emerging global conflicts. Only a few conflicts in contemporary world politics have attracted as much theoretical attention as the confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians. Scholars, policymakers, and public intellectuals have repeatedly reached for large-scale interpretive frameworks to make sense of a conflict that has resisted resolution for well over a century. Among these frameworks, Samuel P. Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis, first articulated in a seminal 1993 Foreign Affairs article and subsequently elaborated in a book-length treatment in 1996, holds a particularly prominent place. Samuel P. Huntington's Clash of Civilizations hypothesis did not merely predict the post-Cold War world order; it sought to define it, asserting that global politics would revert to inter-civilizational strife. Huntington posited that ideological and economic stratification would yield to cultural and civilizational demarcations as the primary instigators of international friction. Within this framework, the Middle East is frequently portrayed as a monolithic Islamic bloc inherently antagonistic to the liberal-democratic order the West claims to represent. Consequently, Israel is historically framed as an outpost of Western civilization, while the Palestinians are positioned as representatives of the broader Islamic world, effectively reducing a localized territorial dispute to an intractable civilizational fault-line war.

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What made Huntington's thesis particularly consequential was not just its academic influence but its reach into the corridors of power. Senior statesmen and foreign policy practitioners took it seriously as a practical guide to understanding global conflicts. Henry Kissinger, whose influence on American foreign policy spanned decades, went so far as to describe it as one of the most significant works on international affairs published after the Cold War.[1] Though the thesis has faced considerable conceptual and empirical challenge, it remains a framework that continues to shape how contemporary conflicts are interpreted. It is that enduring influence, more than anything else, that makes a rigorous re-examination of its assumptions both timely and necessary.

Applying this macro-sociological lens to the Levant results in a severe distortion of empirical reality. Huntington's thesis relies on a static, essentialist conceptualization of culture that entirely bypasses the micro-dynamics of state-building, territoriality, and human geography. Both Robert Kaplan (1994) and Benjamin Barber (1995), writing roughly contemporaneously with Huntington, argued that the forces reshaping global order were far more particular and fragmented than any civilizational model could capture. Barber's notion of 'Jihad vs. McWorld' acknowledged cultural conflict while firmly rooting it in political economy rather than civilizational essence. Edward Said (2001) was more direct still, arguing that Huntington's framework amounted to a politically motivated act of cartography that imposed false coherence on diverse and internally contested cultural formations. Said's objection is especially relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian case, where both parties are characterized by profound internal pluralism that renders any civilizational generalization analytically misleading. The application of this framework to the Levant, however, fails not merely on empirical grounds but on the deeper ontological assumptions that make such an application possible.

The necessity of dismantling this macro-theoretical framework has become acutely apparent following the events of October 7, 2023. The subsequent escalation, cascading through to direct military confrontation between Israel, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the United States through 2026, far from confirming Huntington's thesis, exposes its most serious theoretical vulnerabilities. The failure of a unified Islamic bloc to materialize, coupled with the strategic decisions of Sunni Arab states to prioritize maritime security and domestic economic stability over pan-Islamic solidarity, definitively shatters the Huntingtonian premise. The contemporary crisis confirms that the region operates strictly on the logic of realist statecraft. To accurately conceptualize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, scholars must abandon the civilizational binary. This paper mounts a direct challenge to the sub-thesis of civilizational incompatibility upon which Huntington constructs his Middle Eastern framework. It contends that the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including its most recent regional escalation, is driven fundamentally by localized, non-civilizational antagonisms, thereby necessitating a fundamental reconsideration of how regional issues in the Middle East are analyzed.

The Epistemological Limitations of the Civilizational Paradigm

The central concept of Samuel P. Huntington's theory is the division of the modern world into eight or nine civilizations, each defined by a distinct conception of collective identity. In his own words, Huntington defines civilization as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species. It is defined by both common objective aspects such as language, history, religion, customs, and institutions, as well as people's subjective self-identification...." (Huntington 1996, 43). At the same time, the author notes that the boundaries between civilizations are often vague. These boundaries fluctuate over time reflecting the historical dynamism that Huntington's own framework struggles to theorize consistently. Considering the characteristics of the contemporary world, Huntington identified nine major civilizational blocs- African, Buddhist, Sinic, Hindu, Islamic, Japanese, Latin American, Orthodox, and Western. For Huntington, culture and religion were not background variables but constitutive determinants of political behaviour; what people fought for was shaped primarily by the civilization in which they were embedded.

[1] This commendation appears as a cover endorsement on Huntington (1996) and has been widely reproduced in subsequent commentary on the thesis.

The fundamental flaw of the Clash of Civilizations thesis lies in its epistemological homogenization. It assumes that "civilizations" operate as cohesive, unified political actors with shared strategic objectives. The application of this framework to the Israeli-Palestinian context has been attempted by several commentators, particularly in the years following the Second Intifada and, more intensively, following the September 11 attacks. By categorizing Israel strictly as "Western" and Palestinians strictly as "Islamic," the paradigm effectively erases the socio-political realities of the Levant. This macro-categorization fails to account for the origins of the conflict, which lie not in ancient religious enmity, but in late 19th-century and early 20th-century secular nationalisms. Both Zionism and Palestinian nationalism emerged as modern political movements concerning land, sovereignty, and self-determination, not religious crusade. By elevating the conflict to a civilizational clash, observers strip the dispute of its material and territorial realities, transforming a politically resolvable dispute over borders and political rights into an irreconcilable metaphysical war.

Evaluation of Huntington’s Baseline in the Levant

To evaluate the validity of the Clash of Civilizations thesis within the Levant, it is necessary to first examine how Samuel Huntington categorizes the actors involved. Huntington’s framework is structurally reliant on the concept of "fault lines"—geographic and cultural intersections where macro-civilizations allegedly collide. Within this paradigm, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is positioned as the quintessential frontier between a modern, institutionalized "West" and a resurgent "Islamic" civilization.

Huntington characterizes Islamic civilization as a historically expansive entity rooted in the seventh-century tradition of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He argues that Islamic civilization has experienced a modern political and cultural resurgence fundamentally driven by anti-Western sentiment. A critical structural feature of this civilization, according to his model, is the absence of a "core state" or a centralized religious authority capable of unifying the global Muslim population. Consequently, political organization and loyalty often revert to national, tribal, and kinship structures. Despite deep internal denominational divisions and the historical ineffectiveness of transnational bodies like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Huntington firmly groups the Palestinian population into this broader Islamic civilizational bloc based on shared religious and cultural heritage.

Defining the opposing Western civilization within Huntington's model is more complex, as it relies on a specific historical synthesis rather than strict geography. He identifies the "West" through a combination of classical heritage, Western Christianity, the rule of law, representative democracy, and social pluralism. Incorporating Israel into this Western bloc presents considerable geographical and theological contradictions, given its Middle Eastern location, Semitic language, and Jewish religious foundation. However, Huntington justifies this inclusion by emphasizing Israel's roots in secular Zionism and the profound structural, political, and cultural influence of Ashkenazi Jews who migrated from Europe. In this theoretical construct, Israel is positioned as a Western democratic enclave surrounded by what Huntington characterizes as an inherently hostile Islamic region.

The geographic and cultural intersection of these two blocs is what Huntington identifies as a "fault line," which he views as the primary catalyst for future global conflict. He posits that localized territorial disputes along these borders inevitably escalate into "fault line wars" through a process of civilizational rallying. In this scenario, local actors appeal to their broader cultural kin for support, transforming a regional dispute into a proxy war for global civilizational dominance. Huntington notes that these fault line conflicts are characterized by the physical proximity of different religions, the presence of distinct social structures, and deeply antagonistic historical memories. It is here, however, that the macro-level theory begins to fracture when applied to the Israeli-Palestinian context. While Huntington uses these criteria to argue for an inevitable clash of massive cultural blocs, a closer empirical examination reveals that these exact parameters point toward a highly localized, ethno-nationalist struggle.

To effectively dismantle the civilizational binary, the subsequent sections examine four analytical dimensions through which the conflict's actual dynamics are rendered visible: the internal demographic pluralism of both parties, the competing historical traumas that animate their respective political cultures, the structural asymmetries of their divergent institutional systems, and the deliberate political mobilization of religious identity by nationalist actors on both sides.

Internal Demographic Pluralism

Huntington's framework is contingent upon the presumption that civilizations possess homogeneous religious and cultural identities. However, an empirical demographic analysis of the populations involved dismantles this assumption. Categorizing Israel as an exclusively Western entity is a demographic fallacy. While early state institutions were heavily influenced by European Ashkenazi populations, contemporary Israeli society is deeply embedded in the Middle East. A majority of Israel's Jewish population claims Mizrahi or Sephardic descent— communities that were integrated into Arab and Islamic societies across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region for millennia prior to their migration or expulsion post-1948. Furthermore, the acute political polarization within Israel, evidenced by the systemic friction between secular liberals, religious Zionists, and ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) factions, demonstrates that Israel is not a monolithic civilizational vanguard but a highly fractured national entity grappling with its own internal structural contradictions.

Similarly, framing the Palestinian struggle as an exclusively "Islamic" endeavour erases the pluralism inherent within that society. Arab Christians have historically occupied vanguard positions within the Palestinian nationalist movement.[2] The Palestine Liberation Organization, the dominant Palestinian political institution from the late 1960s through the Oslo period, was founded on the principles of secular Arab nationalism. Yasser Arafat and the Fatah movement consistently resisted the Islamization of Palestinian national politics, positioning the Palestinian cause as a struggle for national liberation rather than a religious conflict. Hamas's subsequent rise to political prominence, culminating in its 2006 electoral victory, is frequently cited as evidence of the conflict's Islamic character. However, as Sara Roy (2007) has argued in her detailed study of Gazan society, Hamas's rise is inseparable from the specific socioeconomic and political conditions of the blockaded Gaza Strip, conditions produced by the Israeli occupation and the failure of the Oslo process, rather than from an abstract expression of Islamic civilizational impulse. The severe political bifurcation between the secular-nationalist Palestinian Authority and the Islamist Hamas highlights that the Palestinian polity is not a unified Islamic monolith, but a fragmented society managing competing ideological frameworks for achieving statehood.

The internal pluralism of both the parties' points to a fundamental theoretical problem with the civilizational framework: it systematically suppresses intra-civilizational diversity in order to produce the clear fault lines its model requires. This is not a minor analytical inconvenience but a structural deficiency that renders the framework incapable of explaining the internal political dynamics that determine how this conflict evolves.

Competing Historical Traumas

Perhaps the single most powerful force sustaining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one that civilizational theory is structurally incapable of theorizing: the accumulated weight of collective historical traumas each party brings to the confrontation. Collective memory operates as a primary mechanism for national mobilization (Halbwachs 1992). Rather than a clash of macro-cultures, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is fundamentally a collision of mutually exclusive historical narratives and inherited traumas.

On one side, Israeli national identity is inextricably bound to the historical recollection of diaspora, systemic persecution, and the trauma of the Holocaust. Analyzed through the lens of memory studies,

[2] The prominent role of Arab Christians in the Palestinian nationalist movement is documented extensively in Khalidi (1997). George Habash, a Greek Orthodox Christian, founded the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; Nayef Hawatmeh, a Greek Catholic, led the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

the Zionist project was not a mandate to expand "Western civilization" into the Levant, but a localized imperative to secure a sovereign sanctuary for a historically disenfranchised population. Consequently, Israel's contemporary security apparatus is dictated by this internalized memory of statelessness. Vamik Volkan's (1997) concept of "chosen traumas"—historical injuries that become central to a group's collective identity, transmitted across generations, and reactivated in moments of perceived threat — provides the most analytically precise framework for understanding this dynamic. The Holocaust functions precisely in this capacity within Israeli-Jewish political culture, underwriting a security doctrine that prioritizes the pursuit of national preservation, rather than a broad ideological mandate to confront the Islamic world.[3]

Conversely, the Palestinian collective consciousness is anchored in the continuous memory of the 1948 Nakba (Catastrophe). For the Palestinian polity, this historical recollection is not a static past event but an ongoing structural reality of displacement and statelessness. Rashid Khalidi (1997), in his landmark study of Palestinian identity, demonstrates in meticulous detail how the Nakba and the subsequent decades of dispossession, occupation, and refugee existence have constructed a Palestinian national consciousness in which the demand for acknowledgment, redress, and return is inseparable from questions of dignity and political existence. The Palestinian national movement is animated by the pursuit of restorative justice, the right of return, and liberation from military administration.

When these two deeply entrenched historical narratives occupy identical geographic space, they generate a volatile, zero-sum political environment. The conflict persists because each population's foundational trauma interprets the other's national actualization as an existential threat. This localized clash of competing national memories exists entirely outside Huntington's civilizational parameters, requiring no input from broader Western or Islamic cultural spheres to sustain its momentum.

Structural Violence and Institutional Asymmetry

The intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be explained at the level of cultural abstraction; it demands engagement with the sociological and institutional realities that structure daily life for both populations. The conflict is perpetuated by the daily friction between two intertwined, yet fundamentally unequal, administrative systems. Johan Galtung's framework of structural violence[4] illuminates how the conflict is sustained by extreme institutional and material disparities rather than cultural incompatibility. Israel operates a highly developed, technologically advanced state apparatus characterized by sovereign governance, a globalized economy, and absolute military hegemony. Conversely, the Palestinian institutional system is geographically fragmented, economically constrained, and operates under varying degrees of external military jurisdiction and blockade.[5]

Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal (2003) emphasize that the Palestinian people have been subjected to repeated attempts at political disaggregation—through the displacement of 1948, the occupation of 1967, the fragmentation of the Oslo period, and the administrative and territorial separation of Gaza from the West Bank following the 2006-2007 political crisis.

[3] Jan Assmann's (2008) distinction between communicative and cultural memory is particularly relevant to the intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust and Nakba traumas analyzed here.
[4] The concept of structural violence was first systematically developed in Galtung (1969), who argued that violence need not involve a direct perpetrator but can be embedded within social, political, and economic structures that systematically deny certain populations access to resources and political agency
[5] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2023). Report on UNCTAD Assistance to the Palestinian People: Developments in the Economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Geneva: UNCTAD.

Each of these processes has operated to deny Palestinians the conditions for coherent state-formation, producing a structural asymmetry that no civilizational framework can account for because it is a product of specific political decisions and institutional arrangements rather than deep cultural incompatibilities. Similarly, Immanuel Wallerstein (2006) argues that claims to universal civilizational difference have historically served to legitimize and naturalize political-economic hierarchies. Applied to this conflict, his argument suggests that civilizational framing functions, whether intentionally or not, to obscure the structural conditions of occupation and dispossession by recoding them as cultural incompatibility. This is not merely an analytical error; it is a political one, with real consequences for the possibility of resolution.

The true locus of the conflict exists at military checkpoints, in the differential allocation of water resources, in divergent legal jurisdictions, and in the spatial control of territory. The continuous expansion of Israeli settlements represents the physical encroachment of one institutional system into the geographic space of another, deliberately fragmenting Palestinian territorial contiguity to prevent the formation of a viable state. These are tangible, material disputes over spatial hegemony and resource extraction. Framing these systemic socio-economic inequities as a "civilizational conflict" serves only to mystify the concrete political and military mechanisms, and structural disparities that actually sustain the occupation and the broader dispute.

Political Mobilization of Religious Identity

A prominent dimension frequently misdiagnosed as evidence of an inherent civilizational clash is the intense religious friction surrounding sacred sites in the Levant. Huntington’s thesis assumes a fundamental theological incompatibility between Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition, suggesting that religious conflict is an organic, unavoidable outcome of their geographic proximity. However, treating the religious dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as an ancient, intractable holy war misrepresents the history of the region. Historically, both Zionism and Palestinian nationalism emerged as predominantly secular movements. The early Zionist enterprise, heavily influenced by European socialist ideals, sought to establish a pragmatic, secular sanctuary for Jews. Similarly, the foundational Palestinian national movement, institutionalized through the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was anchored in secular anti-colonialism and leftist political theory rather than Islamic doctrine.

The theological framing of the conflict is a relatively recent phenomenon, deliberately cultivated to serve specific political ends. The shift began in earnest following the 1967 War; the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank catalyzed the rise of religious Zionism, which gradually transformed a pragmatic territorial project into a messianic imperative for factions of the Israeli political right. Conversely, the late 1980s witnessed the emergence of Hamas, which strategically adopted Islamic rhetoric to challenge the secular PLO’s domestic hegemony and mobilize a population frustrated by diplomatic stagnation. This mutual shift toward religious rhetoric was not a sudden reversion to civilizational destiny. Rather, it represents the calculated instrumentalization of religion by political elites. By infusing territorial claims with divine sanction, nationalist leaders on both sides are able to consolidate domestic support, legitimize maximalist territorial ambitions, and effectively marginalize moderate constituencies who advocate for political compromise.

The city of Jerusalem, specifically the Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif, provides the most concentrated illustration of this dynamic. The friction stems entirely from two competing national movements attempting to exercise sovereign jurisdiction over the exact same physical acreage. The recurring violence at this specific location is not the manifestation of a global civilizational war, but a highly localized, bitter dispute over spatial sovereignty. What is crucial to observe is that this entanglement of the religious with the political does not conform to Huntington's model of civilizational conflict. The dispute is not between Islam and the West as civilizational units; it is between two specific communities, each of which carries a historically grounded religious claim to the same physical space.

Mark Juergensmeyer (2003), in his comparative study of religious nationalism and political violence, argues that religious framing in modern political conflicts typically represents a transformation of pre-existing grievances into a sacred register rather than a distinct civilizational motivation. Applied to the Israeli-Palestinian context, this insight suggests that even where Hamas frames its resistance in Quranic terms, or where Israeli settlers invoke biblical land grants, the underlying disputes over territory, sovereignty, and recognition would exist, and have existed, independently of the religious language in which they are expressed. Religion in this conflict functions primarily as a symbolic resource for articulating and sustaining political claims whose underlying logic is territorial, juridical, and political rather than purely theological. It is a modern tactic of statecraft and resistance, fundamentally at odds with Huntington's vision of a broad, metaphysical confrontation between Western and Islamic civilizations.

The October 2023 Rupture and the Realpolitik of Regional Escalation

The events of October 7, 2023 mark a decisive moment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, for the purposes of this analysis, a critical empirical test of the competing analytical frameworks examined in this paper. The unprecedented incursion by Hamas into southern Israel, and the subsequent devastating Israeli military campaign in the Gaza Strip, generated an immediate political discourse that superficially appeared to validate Huntington's thesis. Political elites and certain geopolitical analysts hastily resurrected civilizational rhetoric to contextualize the violence. Israeli leadership frequently framed the military response as a frontline defence of Western democratic values against fundamentalist Islamic barbarism, while Hamas utilized religious nomenclature (Operation Al-Aqsa Flood) to appeal directly to a global pan-Islamic solidarity network. As scholars such as Jeffrey Haynes (2007) have observed regarding post-9/11 geopolitical crises, acute asymmetrical warfare inevitably tempts policymakers to fall back on essentialist, civilizational binaries to rapidly mobilize domestic populations and secure international alliances. In the immediate aftermath of the October attacks, the scale and character of the violence seemed, to neo-Huntingtonian observers, to confirm the existence of an irreconcilable fault line between the Judeo-Christian West and the Islamic world.

However, a rigorous structural assessment reveals that the October rupture and its aftermath were not manifestations of an inherent civilizational destiny, but rather the acute, violent convergence of the highly localized antagonisms outlined in the preceding sections. As Daniel Sobelman (2026) argues that the strategic calculation behind the October 7 attack was driven primarily by Hamas's assessment of structural conditions in the regional balance of power, specifically, its perception of Israeli deterrence as having weakened and its reading of the regional landscape as providing an opportunity to disrupt the emerging normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Sobelman characterizes this as strategic opportunism rooted in a particular reading of the regional military balance rather than as an expression of civilizational grievance. The initial explosion of violence was fundamentally driven by the collision of absolute memory politics. For the Israeli polity, the mass casualties of October 7 triggered an existential, survivalist mnemonic inextricably linked to historical persecution and the Holocaust, which subsequently dictated a military response unconstrained by conventional diplomatic calibration. Conversely, for the Palestinians, the ensuing destruction of civilian infrastructure and mass displacement in Gaza materialized as a literal, ongoing reiteration of the 1948 Nakba. Furthermore, the collapse of the pre-2023 status quo was the direct, predictable outcome of severe institutional asymmetry. The sustained policy of militarily and economically containing a densely populated, administratively fractured enclave proved structurally unviable. Federico Toth (2025), analyzing the attack through the lens of crisis management theory, further notes that the months preceding October 7 were marked by a series of concrete, politically specific provocations: Israeli police confrontations with Palestinian worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque in April 2023, increased settler violence in the West Bank, and Israeli blockage of exports from Gaza.

These are not civilizational triggers; they are the political and material conditions of an ongoing occupation, and they follow the logic of political grievance rather than cultural antagonism. The violence was, therefore, the physical manifestation of an unsustainable spatial hegemony and the systemic failure of an unequal administrative apparatus, rather than a theological dispute between macro-cultures.

The subsequent trajectory of the conflict, specifically its expansion into a sustained regional war involving the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel from 2024 through 2026, systematically dismantles the illusion of a unified Islamic civilizational bloc. If Huntington's paradigm held genuine predictive utility, the protracted humanitarian crisis in Gaza would have consolidated the broader Islamic world into a unified, material front against Israel and its Western allies. Instead, the regional geopolitical landscape fractured entirely along the lines of state-centric realpolitik. The unprecedented direct missile exchanges between Iran and Israel, alongside the activation of Iranian proxy networks across Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq, were dictated by a strategic deterrence equation and the pursuit of regional hegemony, rather than religious solidarity. This pattern of direct state-on-state confrontation culminated in June 2025 with what has been termed the Twelve-Day War, in which the United States joined Israeli military operations targeting Iranian nuclear facilities, military infrastructure, and senior leadership. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2025) described this as a strategic Rubicon, a transformation of a decades-long proxy struggle into direct interstate confrontation.

The geopolitical dynamics of this escalation sequence cannot be understood through a civilizational lens without immediate distortion. International relations scholars like Fawaz Gerges (1999) and Stephen Walt (1987) have consistently argued that the Middle Eastern security architectures, state survival, regime preservation, and the balance of power routinely supersede cultural or religious kinship. While the peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) initiated the trend of prioritizing national interest over pan-Arab or pan-Islamic solidarity, the recent Abraham Accords definitively shattered the illusion of an Islamic civilizational bloc. In direct contradiction to the Clash of Civilizations model, Sunni Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, have largely maintained their strategic alignments with the United States (Liu 2025). During the height of the Iranian-Israeli aerial exchanges, several of these Arab states implicitly cooperated with Western security architectures to intercept Iranian projectiles traversing their airspace.[6]

As a study published in the Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies observes, the 2024 Israel-Iran escalation has produced geopolitical reverberations whose logic is fundamentally economic and strategic rather than culturally determined (Liu 2025). These state actors prioritize domestic economic modernization, maritime security (e.g. in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz), and the containment of Iranian regional hegemony over civilizational allegiance to the Palestinian nationalist movement.

Finally, the ongoing Iran-US-Israel military confrontation highlights that the Western and Islamic civilizations are themselves deeply divided. Within the West, there is a profound internal cleavage between political elites supporting Israel and a younger generation of citizens, particularly in the US and Europe, who view the conflict through the lens of decolonization and human rights (Pew Research Center, 2024).[7] Within the Islamic world, the intense rivalry between the Shia-led Iranian axis and the Sunni-led Gulf states proves that religious kinship is secondary to state interest. Consequently, the contemporary Middle Eastern theatre is bifurcated not between the West and Islam, but between an authoritarian-revisionist axis led by Tehran and a status-quo normalization bloc reliant on Western security guarantees. This ongoing dynamic confirms the absolute primacy of realist geopolitics over civilizational identity, rendering Huntington's macro-framework empirically obsolete in the modern Levant.

[6] The Wall Street Journal reported that Israel repelled Iran's April 2024 attack only with assistance from the United States and Arab partners, with US and regional officials confirming Jordanian and Saudi airspace coordination.

[7] A 2024 Pew Research Center survey documented a statistically significant generational divergence across the United States, with respondents under thirty expressing substantially more critical views of Israeli military conduct than those over forty-five.

Conclusion

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has endured for well over a century, surviving the collapse of empires, the redrawing of borders, the rise and fall of ideological movements, and the repeated failure of internationally brokered peace processes. While Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations model has faced decades of scholarly criticism, it continues to exert a disproportionate influence on how policymakers and analysts interpret the Middle East. The enduring temptation in Western geopolitical discourse is to package the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the ultimate frontier war between a democratic West and a unified, antagonistic Islamic bloc. This reflex, however, does more than merely misread the region; it actively distorts the mechanics of the conflict. By elevating a localized territorial dispute to the level of cultural destiny, the civilizational paradigm treats systemic violence as an intractable symptom of inherent incompatibility, effectively absolving international actors of the responsibility to address concrete, material inequities.

This paper dismantles that ontological baseline, demonstrating that the conflict in the Levant is fiercely localized and functionally immune to macro-cultural generalizations. The intractability of the conflict is sustained by the collision of competing ethno-nationalist traumas, severe institutional asymmetries, and the calculated weaponization of sacred geography, not by a metaphysical clash of values. The events of October 7, 2023, and its subsequent escalation to direct Israel-Iran-United States military confrontation through 2026, have demonstrated in vivid and tragic terms that this conflict is capable of generating new catastrophes while remaining rooted in old grievances. The civilizational framework, far from illuminating these developments, obscures them. Furthermore, the contemporary strategic landscape, defined by Arab states prioritizing maritime security and the containment of Iranian revisionism over pan-Islamic solidarity, confirms that rigorous, state-centric realpolitik governs the Middle East.

Ultimately, the continued use of civilizational theory in academic and diplomatic circles represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the conflict's origins. Moving beyond this paradigm is more than just a theoretical shift; it is a practical necessity. By stripping away the label of "civilizational warfare" and addressing the Israeli-Palestinian struggle as a modern dispute over territory, institutional power, and national rights, scholars and policymakers may finally begin to identify a path toward realistic and lasting political solutions.

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Water disputes between Afghanistan and Iran: The new regime's (Taliban) perspective

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ABSTRACT

One of the current issues is water scarcity, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions of the world. According to projections, nearly half of the world's population would live in places with acute water shortages by 2030. The Helmand River (Hirmand river), which is an international river flowing southwest of Afghanistan and eastern Iran, once again water disputes emerged between Afghanistan and Iran after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. The current study uses a descriptive-analytical approach to answer the following question: what are the elements that have contributed to the current scenario - the Taliban's water policy - and the Taliban's perspective on Iran's water rights? The research findings show various factors such as ideological differences, infrastructure built on the river, low volume of river water, and insufficient Taliban literacy of water diplomacy between countries. Helmand (Hirmand) is the only source of water for the Nimroz areas in Afghanistan and Sistan in Iran. The low volume of the river has caused people to lose their jobs and income due to direct and indirect reliance on Helmand. It is therefore suggested to both countries, compromise on a common understanding of the issue, and agree to work on a comprehensive water management plan.

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I. Introduction

Currently, one of the major problems of countries is limited water resources. Since everyone needs fresh and clean water, it is not far-fetched to see the world's future wars over water resources. In the past 50 years, 37 conflicts between countries have been reported over water, 30 of which are related to the Middle East, as reported by the United Nations, water shortages are an acute problem throughout the Middle East. The water crisis of the past due to the low population was not as tangible as it is today, but today with the increasing population and the need for more food, this crisis is more obvious than ever before. Border rivers, as one of the water resources, play a decisive role in agricultural development, social, economic, and cultural development of countries whose dryness or dehydration endangers human beings and causes social, economic, and environmental losses. One of the border rivers between Afghanistan and Iran with great importance is the Helmand (Hirmand) Border River. Helmand River, as one of the important sources of water supply for both sides of the border, is the vital artery of these areas and this province has a great dependence on the flow of water.

The Helmand River, due to its geographical location, has been one of the factors affecting Iran-Afghanistan relations in the past decades, so at different times it has caused cross-sectional crises between the two countries and has affected bilateral relations between the two countries.

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Although the international border between Iran and Afghanistan has been accepted by the two neighboring countries in the middle of the main tribute of the Helmand (Hirmand) River in Sistan for many years, the dispute over how to divide the water of the Hirmand River and other rights related to this international river has not yet been resolved.

Afghanistan is facing a serious water crisis due to a lack of proper management of these natural resources. Due to its high hydrological position in Iran, it has gradually changed the provisions of water contracts in its favor and seeks to revive agriculture as its only major economic sector. Iran and Afghanistan share three catchments in Qaraqam, Petrgan-Khaf, and Hamoon Helmand, and the Harirud and Helmand rivers are the two main common rivers between the two countries. Afghanistan is facing a serious water crisis in the eastern regions of Iran, including Khorasan and Sistan, due to the construction of several dams up the Harirud and Helmand rivers and disregard for the rights of downstream countries of these common rivers. [1]

Afghanistan and Iran signed the treaty in 1972 under former Prime Minister Musa Shafiq, under which Afghanistan water must go to Iran annually for 817 million cubic meters in the Helmand River (Hirmand). But previous Afghan governments have always had controversy in implementing the agreement with Iran. They stressed that the river's water goes to Iran several times more annually than the amount mentioned in the agreement. [2]

A few months after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, the Taliban's Ministry of Energy and Water announced that they fully agreed to the implementation of the 1972 treaty between Kabul and Tehran on Iran's rights to the Helmand Sea and opened kamal khan dam to Iran. However, the opening of kamal khan's dam valves provoked harsh reactions. And because of the dam, there are disputes between Iran and Afghanistan arise.

This paper will examine the Helmand river disputes between the border of Iran and Afghanistan, and the final solutions will be presented to resolve the dispute between the two countries regarding the Issue of the Helmand river with the axis of Helmand treaty.

Review of Literature

In the article " Water conflict management and cooperation between Afghanistan and Iran"[3] authored by Safi Pamir Jan, The transformation of the water dispute between Afghanistan and Iran is examined in the essay at various phases. It starts by examining previous riparian conflicts between upstream and downstream riparians, which have been centered on conflicting rights assertions and have ended in zero-sum conflicts where one party's loss is perceived as another party's gain, potentially leading to conflict. The study goes on to create a decision-making tool Before providing useful methods for figuring out basin requirements and benefit sharing, we give a technique for turning disagreement into collaboration, allowing riparians to negotiate a win-win arrangement.

Fatima Aman in her article "Iran-Afghan Differences over Helmand River Threaten Both Countries" has discussed the origins of examining the causes of the water issue between Iran and Afghanistan. Even though Afghanistan has been unable to fully utilize the Helmand River's resources due to three decades of war, she contends that "the county urgently needs to renovate or build new water infrastructures on this river to increase storage capacity, improve irrigation efficiency, and generate electricity." [4] She also spoke about earlier agreements between nations, which is the focus of this essay and one that we will regularly refer to during our study.

[1] (Dehshiri and Hekmatara 2019)
[2] (Ebrahimkhel, n.d.)
[3] (Jan 2021)
[4] (Aman 2016a)

Methodology

This article is based on doctrinal research and has been done by the descriptive-analytical method. The data collection method has been carried out using archive library resources and internet databases.

Historical Background

Iran and Afghanistan have long ties to the larger Persian civilization. Geographical closeness, a shared past, and strong sociocultural connections united the two nations. Beyond the framework of national interest, the historical patterns of migration, market integration, the interdependence of local communities, their transnational networks, and regular population migrations are important. The social, historic, linguistic, religious, and cultural links between the two nations were so strong that several northern Afghan cities, including Herat, Farah, Ghor, Badghis, Balkh, Baghlan, and Parwan, still have Persian Dari[5] speakers.

Despite Afghanistan's strong linguistic, cultural, and socioreligious ties to Iran, there have sometimes been regional and political conflicts throughout history.

In Afghanistan's western regions, life has been supported for thousands of years by the rivers in the country's center. Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, while contemporary boundaries were being created, conflicts arose over the control of water. This connection is composed of five rivers:

· In the Sistan Basin, close to Zabol, Iran, the Helmand, Farah, and Adraskan (Harut) rivers flow southwest and converge to form the Hamun Lakes.

· The Harirud (Tejen) river originates in western Iran, runs into Afghanistan, and then turns north to form the boundary with Turkmenistan.

Water disputes between Iran and Afghanistan go back to the British rule of Afghanistan in the 1870s. The Iran-Afghanistan boundary was marked by a British officer at the Helmand River's major branch. Reza Shah Pahlavi's government in Iran and Mohammad Zahir Shah's government in Afghanistan agreed to a convention about the distribution of the river's waters in 1939, but the Afghans did not ratify it.

Another attempt to settle the conflict started in Washington in 1948. Iran and Afghanistan chose a three-person panel to look into the matter and make a recommendation based on an American idea. The Helmand River Delta Commission released their findings on February 28, 1951, and suggested that Iran's share of the Helmand waters be twenty-two cubic meters per second.

[5] Dari refers to the Persian court language of the Sassanids. In contemporary usage, the term refers to the dialects of modern Persian language spoken in Afghanistan. This term officially recognized in 1964 by the Constitution of Afghanistan as one of the two official languages of Afghanistan; the other is Pashto. Dari is the mother tongue of approximately 50% of the population, serving as the country’s lingua franca.

Iran, however, disapproved of the findings and demanded a bigger cut. [6] Renegotiations lasted for a protracted period. In his diaries from 1969, Asadollah Alam, the Shah's minister of the judiciary, noted that Afghanistan had promised to supply additional water in exchange for increased access to the Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas as well as economic aid from Iran.[7]

Amir Abbas Hoveida from Iran and Mohammad Musa Shafiq from Afghanistan signed an agreement accepting water flow into Iran of 22 cubic meters per second with an option for Iran to acquire an extra 4 cubic meters per second during "normal" water years four years later, in 1973. [8]

In exchange, Iran consented to provide Afghanistan unrestricted access to the ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar. However, owing to political developments in both nations, including an Afghan coup in 1973, the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan that same year, and eventually the establishment of the Taliban in 1995, this agreement was not approved nor completely executed.

In the Helmand Valley, irrigation canals and dams have been built by several Afghan governments to support agriculture. In the 1930s, Germany and Japan both sought to rebuild historic canals for Afghanistan, but their efforts came to a halt following their loss in World War II. In 1946, the Afghan government hired the American company Morrison-Knudsen to construct roads and irrigation systems in the southern Helmand-Arghandab regions.

US assistance was used to fund this endeavor. Morrison-Knudsen advised that a storage dam and reservoir be constructed to maximize the utilization of the water from the repaired canals halfway through their rehabilitation. The construction was completed without first completing surveys to keep costs down, which turned out to be a "fatal vulnerability" of the project, according to a later review by the US Agency for International Development. [9]

In 18 miles of northeast Kandahar, the 44.2-meter (145 feet) Arghandab Dam was built in 1952 and has a 388,000 acre-foot water storage capacity. The Kajaki Dam was completed 72 miles upstream from Lashkar Gah a few months later, in April 1953. It was constructed to produce energy, water for agriculture, and flood control, and it resulted in the creation of the most significant water reservoir in Afghanistan.

Similar to the Arghandab Dam, the project's economic viability was questioned in a 1950 United Nations assessment, which also anticipated detrimental environmental consequences, including waterlogging and salinization downstream from the dam, in the lower valley. [10]

The Kajaki Dam has had a mixed effect because it enhanced Iran's water flow during the dry season while decreasing the flood waters that pastoralists rely on for fertilizer.[11] However, the issue would have been far more problematic if the 1973 agreement hadn't been in place.

Rain and glacier melting provide Afghanistan's water supplies. Five major rivers flow in the country, three of them into its neighbors. One of two rivers that flow into Iran is the Helmand; the other is the Harirud River. Surface water makes up about two-thirds of Afghanistan's 75 billion cubic meter water storage capacity, and the nation can only utilize 25 to 30 percent of the river water flow.

The Helmand River, which makes up the majority of Afghanistan's surface water, is the country's -

[6] (Aman 2016b)
[7] (Alam and Alikhani 1993)
[8] (The Afghan-Iranian Helmand-River Water Treaty (with 2 Protocols) 1973)
[9] (Clapp-Wincek and Baldwin 1983)
[10] (Whitney 2006)
[11] (Weinthal et al. 2014)

longest river. The southern and southwestern districts of Afghanistan depend heavily on Helmand, which is located in Afghanistan to a degree of 95 percent. As a result, the Helmand conflict has been elevated to a national scale and appears to be getting harder for any Afghan administration to settle. Helmand water is also evolving into a national concern for Iran. In actuality, Iran's post-1979 governments have always upheld the same fundamental stance regarding the water conflict with Afghanistan. [12]

The Kamal Khan dam, which was finished after 47 years, is one of the primary and most recent causes of these problems. While such projects may aid Afghanistan's socioeconomic growth, Iran, which sees Afghanistan's ambitions in Helmand as a direct security threat, has expressed concern about them. Iran's water supply might be reduced if upstream water demand rises. Iran worries that the ensuing water shortages might further destabilize Sistan and Baluchistan in its eastern region. [13]

Agreements and treaties signed between Iran and Afghanistan so far

The importance of Hirmand River water in providing drinking water and its use in agriculture has caused controversy between the two countries since about 150 years ago. [14] Apart from what regime being based in Kabul, this dispute has always existed as the only serious controversial factor among the governing boroughs of the two countries but has been severe in proportion to the presence or lack of water in the region. That is when the region has faced the problem of drought and subsequent agreements have been proposed to solve the problem, but in the watery years the intensity and intensity of the dispute have decreased and the implementation of these treaties has been marginalized. [15]

Since 1872 there are water disputes between Iran and Afghanistan, until this time there are lots of agreements and treaties signed between both countries but not yet been settled. [16]

Table 1. Water treaties sigened between Iran and Afghanistan

No.	Date	Countries	River name	Treaty title	The purpose of treaty
1	August, 19, 1872	Iran and Afghanistan	Helmand	Treaty of 1857 Paris, Goldsmith's vote	Determining Helmand's right
2	April, 10, 1905	Iran and Afghanistan	Helmand	Treaty of 1857 Paris, McMahon's vote	Determining Helmand's right
3	January, 1, 1939	Iran and Afghanistan	Helmand	Hirmand Water Contract	Determining Helmand's right
4	Feb, 28, 1951	Iran and Afghanistan	Helmand	Commission of the Helmand River Delta	Determining Helmand's right
5	March, 13, 1973	Iran and Afghanistan	Helmand	The Treaty on the Water Division of Helmand River	Determining Helmand's right
6	1973	Iran and Afghanistan	Helmand	Treaties for the Division of River Water Hirmand, 1973.	26 cubic meters per second equivalent to 820 million cubic meters per year for Iran in normal years

[12] (Morad Veisi, “Journalist and Former Instructor of Military and Politics”)
[13] (Dehgan et al. 2014)
[14] (Alizadeh et al. 2021)
[15] (Aatari and Aawida 2017)
[16] (Nagheeby and Warner 2022, 150)

Resolving disputes is conducted through political means such as negotiation, mediation, compromises, and efforts, or legal methods such as arbitrating or referring to the court. The study of Iran and Afghanistan's water contracts with neighbors shows that the issue of dispute resolution has been predicted in various forms in most of these contracts.

In the 1973 Iran-Afghanistan Agreement on the Hirmand River, its 9th quarter referred to the issue of dispute resolution. According to this article, in the event of a dispute in the interpretation or implementation of the provisions of this agreement, the parties, firstly through diplomatic negotiation. [17] And secondly, through third-party efforts to resolve the dispute, they take action to resolve it. If these two stages are not effective, the prototyping of annex 2 of the contract directive for referring the mentioned difference to the ruling has been predicted. According to this procedure, if one of the parties to the treaty is mentioned after the dual procedures, and Calls for the referral of the dispute to the ruling, the party informs the other party of the ruling by remembering the diplomatic mission based on the formation of the governing body (fact-finding) and, if necessary, the formation of the divan. The representatives of the parties agree on the composition of the board of the ruling board and the instructions of the board within three months of the receipt of the diplomatic note while convening the meetings. If the parties accept it. The results and recommendations of the tribunal will not be agreed based, the dispute will be referred to an annulment divan consisting of three members. Each party designates one of its nationals as the arbitrator, and the third arbitrator, who is the head of the ruling divan, during the three months after the determination of the two arbitrators.

The Country is determined by the agreement of the Parties. If the third arbitrator is not elected within three months, the parties or one of the parties shall ask the Secretary-General of the United Nations to appoint a third arbitrator. The Head of the Court of Law will be among the nationals of a country that has had friendly relations with Afghanistan and Iran but does not share the same interests with either country. After performing the duties, the Divan of The Decree will provide the parties with a copy of their verdict confirmed for written reasons, which is a final and binding vote. [18]

The position of the current regime (Taliban) in Afghanistan about the water rights of Iran from the Helmand river

After the second Talibancoup in Afghanistan in 2021. Water factor again played a key role. Currently, due to several factors,the Islamic Republicof Iran continues to evade official recognition of the Taliban, putting forward some preconditions. However, at the same time, the Iranianauthorities are in active contact with the interim Talibangovernment, trying to resolve issues related to Afghan refugees, water problems, and border security.

Ashraf Ghani the former president of Afghanistan offered Iran a "water for oil" deal, the Taliban tried to use the "water for recognition" formula. In response, the Iranian side proposes the formula "water in exchange for supporting Afghan refugees living in Iran" and "water in exchange for providing a transit route to Afghanistan." [19]

After the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the interim Taliban government, Amir Khan Mutagi, to Tehran in January 2022. According to the decision of the Taliban, senior Iranian officials said that the necessary amount of water from the Kamal Khan reservoir will be sent to Iran. [20] While the official Iranian media regarded this event as a diplomatic victory for the government of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, the Taliban denied that the Kamal Khan water was flowing to Iran and claimed that the reservoir was opened at the request of the residents of the Afghan Nimruz region.

After the Taliban's denial, unrest in the Iranian province of Sistan quickly turned into protests. [21]

[17] (The Afghan-Iranian Helmand-River Water Treaty (with 2 Protocols) 1973)
[18] (Aatari and Aawida 2017)
[19] (Институт востоковедения НАН РА and Исраелян 2022)
[20] (FARAKHABAR, n.d.
[21] (“Protesters in Sistan and Baluchistan Demand Equitable Share of Water from the Helmand River,” n.d.)

In January 2022, residents of Hamun, Zabol, and Nimruz on the Iran-Afghan zero border in Milak, organized a protest demanding that Afghanistan ensure Iran's water rights from Helmand. The demonstrators demanded that the Iranian authorities begin serious negotiations with the Afghan authorities, threatening to close the import-transit route for the Taliban.

On January 31, 2022, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Said Khatibzade called on the Taliban to comply with their obligations, noting that Afghanistan supplied only 5% of water to Iran in 2021. [22] In this regard, according to the Iranian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Bahadur Aminian, almost all the governments of Afghanistan, including the Taliban, diverted the flow of millions of m3 of water to the desert, which was supposed to be supplied to Iran, so that it would not reach Iran.

Taliban officials at the Ministry of Energy and Water recently said that 70 percent of Afghanistan's water is wasted and that they are trying to resume the construction of large dams. The ministry said water will now be traded with oil. Although Taliban officials spoke of a water deal against oil, an Iranian Foreign Ministry official said early in the Taliban's dominance that the Taliban recognized Hilmand's right in secret talks with the Islamic Republic. [23]

In the near future, the challenge of nation-state-building is also facing Afghanistan's new rulers, and nation-building will sooner or later be of importance to the country's rulers. This will be inexhaustible with a degree of nationalism, necessarily reflecting an indigenous model of non-nationalization and social understanding based on the outsider self (or even friend-enemy). In the meantime, the Taliban specifically need to attract the attention of the international space for recognition, especially the Islamic Republic of Iran, so it will not express a blue nationalist slogan in its speeches, but on the other hand, the issue of water in Afghanistan has become nationalized, and whenever the right of the Islamic Republic of Iran is released, the Taliban will be pressured by the general public. Similarly, if water has been a tool for state-building in Karzai's government, and if water has been a tool for nation-building in Ashraf Ghani's government, during the Taliban era, water is a tool for both state-building and nation-building. Therefore, the Islamic Republic of Iran should take into account that the water issue between Iran and Afghanistan is not the only issue over water. The historical record of the first period of the Taliban's rule also indicates that the water issue will remain a major issue between Iran and Afghanistan. [24]

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that one of the main challenges, especially in the Hirmand Basin between Iran and Afghanistan, is the lack of a division that the two sides can equally benefit from the basin water. Therefore, both are facing a water crisis. Accordingly, water has become a hydro-political issue in this region. The present and future of settlements in the border town of Zabol depend on this precious resource. In general, the water resources in Hirmand may not be the main cause of the severe tensions between the two governments, but its crisis and the lack of a properly accessible

[22] (TOLOnews 2022)
[23] (Int. Afghan., n.d.)
[24] (Qureshi 2022)

and entitled division may be one of the causes of the conflict between them. Accordingly, in the near future, water-related problems will likely bring conflict and conflict to access water at different levels of "local, national, regional, and even global" levels. In sum, water is more a symbol of partnership and cooperation between states and nations than it is the epitome of competition and war. On this basis, with a realistic approach, replacing water diplomacy that underlies cooperation and interaction instead of hydropolitics, which is more indicative of competition among actors, may be a positive step in the transformation and change of views and works in the river basin of border houses, especially in the Hirmand basin (Zabol border city) so today the southeast of the country, especially the border city of Zabol, is one of the parts of the country that the issue of security is the issue of security. And insecurity is of outstanding importance. One of the basic dimensions that affect security and insecurity in this geographical space and has been discussed in this study is "lack of rainfall, drought and water shortage in Hirmand Basin". The results of library studies conducted in the present study show that these insecurities have increased in the border cities between Afghanistan and Iran due to the drying of the Hirmand River in recent years. Therefore, the border city of Zabol and Helmand, despite the significant deprivations in their biological and natural foundations, is almost at the lowest level in terms of development indicators compared to the national averages. In general, it can be said that water diplomacy on the part of Afghanistan and Iran, especially on the border of the two sides, is one of the requirements that must be taken seriously in recent years, using the positive and political capacities of Afghanistan and Iran, using the principles of international law. The international community should be followed to reduce the dependence of border cities on international waters with simpler and less expensive solutions before reaching the crisis stage or a way to settle the situation of the Hirmand watershed based on the use of water diplomacy and the formation of understanding and cooperation in This basin should be implemented to stabilize urban settlements.

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Saudi Arabia and Iran: A Realist Analysis of Power Competition, Proxy Conflicts, and the Struggle for Regional Leadership in the Middle East (1979–2026)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the long-standing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran through the framework of realist international relations theory. The conflict is understood as a competition for regional dominance in a Middle East where no single power holds authority. Using the theoretical approaches of scholars like Mearsheimer and Waltz, the study looks at how both countries have tried to increase their power relative to each other. Their methods include involvement in proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, military expansion, and forming strategic alliances, particularly as American influence in the region has decreased. The analysis shows that while sectarian differences between Sunni and Shia Islam are often cited, these religious divisions are better understood as tools for political mobilization rather than the underlying cause of conflict. Iran's revolutionary ideology since 1979 and Saudi Arabia's recent assertive foreign policy under Vision 2030 are both explained as strategies to ensure national security and survival. Recent events, such as the fragile diplomatic agreement brokered by China in 2023 and renewed hostilities in 2025, support the realist prediction that competition will continue. The findings indicate that the region will likely remain unstable unless one state becomes clearly dominant.

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1. Introduction

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one of the most important and long-lasting geopolitical conflicts in the contemporary international system. Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, this rivalry has influenced the political map of the Middle East, contributed to destructive civil wars in Yemen and Syria, encouraged the rise of proxy groups and other non-state actors, and attracted the involvement of major external powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. Although the conflict appears complex because it includes sectarian ideology, historical grievances, and religious competition, its core structure is better explained through the realist theory of international relations than through culture or religion alone.

Realist scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and John Mearsheimer argue that the anarchic nature of the international system forces states to give priority to survival, security, and the accumulation of power. In this view, states act rationally and treat the gains of rival states as potential

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threats to their own security, which often leads to continuing competition, military build-up, and alliance formation. The Saudi-Iran rivalry strongly reflects these features. Both states seek regional leadership, view the growing influence of the other as a serious threat, and have regularly used offensive strategies such as proxy warfare, ideological mobilization, and alliance-building to weaken each other's regional position. This study covers the period from 1979, when the Iranian Revolution changed Iran from a U.S.-aligned monarchy into a revolutionary theocratic state, to 2026, including both the origins of the rivalry and its recent phase of uneasy rapprochement.

2. Theoretical Framework: Realism Theory

2.1 Classical and Neorealist Foundations

Realism is based on three main assumptions: the international system is anarchic, the state is the main rational actor, and power is central to state behavior. Classical realism, especially in the work of Hans Morgenthau in Politics Among Nations (1948), emphasized the human desire for power and the constant struggle for domination in international relations. Neorealism, also called structural realism, modified this argument by explaining conflict mainly through the structure of the international system rather than human nature. Kenneth Waltz, in Theory of International Politics (1979), argued that international outcomes are shaped primarily by how power is distributed among states, not by their domestic systems or ideological beliefs. Within neorealism, an important distinction exists between defensive realism and offensive realism. Defensive realism, associated with Waltz, argues that states mainly seek enough power to ensure their survival and usually prefer to preserve the existing balance of power once they feel secure. Offensive realism, developed by John Mearsheimer in The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001), presents a more pessimistic view. According to Mearsheimer, states are not satisfied with limited power; instead, they continuously seek to increase their relative power and, if possible, achieve regional hegemony. From this perspective, the pursuit of power is not simply a sign of aggression but a rational response to a self-help system in which no higher authority can guarantee security.

2.2 Applying Realism to the Saudi-Iran

Offensive realism is highly useful for understanding the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Saudi Arabia and Iran are both regional powers in the Middle East. Although neither is a global power, both possess enough military, economic, and ideological capacity to compete for dominance in the region. From the perspective of offensive realism, both states are rational actors seeking regional hegemony in an anarchic system. Iran's actions in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, as well as Saudi Arabia's more assertive foreign policy under Vision 2030 can therefore be understood as efforts to increase power and prevent outside threats.

Importantly, offensive realism does not require states to openly seek conquest or territorial expansion. Instead, it suggests that states try to prevent the rise of rival hegemony, expand their influence, and shape the regional environment in ways that improve their own security and relative power. Saudi Arabia and Iran have both behaved in this way by using proxy groups, asymmetric strategies, and alliance politics as tools of power accumulation. Within this framework, sectarianism, especially the Sunni-Shia divide, is better understood as a strategic instrument than as the main cause of conflict. Both states use sectarian narratives to strengthen their claims to leadership in the Muslim world and to attract regional allies.

The idea of the security dilemma is also central to this case. A security dilemma arises when one state takes measures for its own defense, but the rival interprets those actions as offensive and threatening. This dynamic is clearly visible in Saudi-Iran relations. For example, Saudi Arabia's support for Sunni opposition groups in Syria and Iraq was intended to limit Iranian influence, but Tehran interpreted these actions as hostile encirclement. In response, Iran increased its own support for proxy actors, which then deepened Saudi concerns. This cycle of action and reaction has become one of the main structural drivers of the rivalry.

3. Historical Origins: From Twin Pillars to Rivals (1924–1979)

3.1 Pre-Revolution Relationship

Before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran were not natural enemies. Both were monarchies, both were aligned with the United States during the Cold War, and both were major oil-producing states with overlapping economic interests. Under the Nixon administration's "Twin Pillars" policy, Saudi Arabia and Iran functioned as the two main partners of U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf. In return for helping preserve regional order and counter Soviet influence, both received substantial military and economic support from the United States.

Under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran followed a secular, modernizing, and pro-Western foreign policy that was generally compatible with Saudi interests, even though some tensions existed over Gulf sovereignty and oil pricing. The two states did compete for regional influence, especially in relation to Iran's claim over Bahrain until 1971 and the Shah's wider ambition to make Iran the leading Gulf power. However, these tensions remained manageable because both states shared broad strategic interests and operated under U.S. mediation. In this period, the condition for intense rivalry had not yet fully emerged.

3.2 The 1979 Iranian Revolution

The Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in February 1979 marked a major turning point in regional politics. In realist terms, it was a structural shock. It changed Iran from a status quo state into a revolutionary and revisionist power that openly rejected the existing regional order, challenged the legitimacy of Gulf monarchies, and aimed to export its revolutionary ideology throughout the Muslim world. From a realist perspective, the key issue was not ideology alone, but the emergence of a powerful state that no longer accepted the previous balance of power.

Khomeini's government challenged Saudi Arabia in several ways at the same time. It questioned the religious legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy and its claim to guard Islam's holy sites. It also encouraged Shia communities across the Gulf, including in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq, thereby creating fears of regional destabilization. Saudi Arabia saw these developments as a direct threat to its survival and responded by expanding Sunni religious influence, supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, and cooperating with the United States to contain Iranian power.

The 1987 Mecca incident brought Saudi-Iran relations to a critical low point. During the Hajj, clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi security forces resulted in numerous deaths, after which Iran severed diplomatic relations. Khomeini declared that Mecca was under the control of "a band of heretics," while Saudi Arabia presented the Iranian leadership as unfit to claim any religious legitimacy. Although this confrontation was framed in religious language, it was driven by political and strategic concerns, and it shaped the future pattern of the rivalry.

4. The Iraq War and the Rise of the Shia (2003–2011)

4.1 Impact of the 2003 U.S. Invasion of Iraq

If the Iranian Revolution of 1979 began the Saudi-Iran rivalry, the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq greatly intensified it. The removal of Saddam Hussein destroyed the strongest Sunni Arab barrier to Iranian influence in the region. The rise of a Shia-led government in Baghdad, supported by Iranian-linked parties and militias, gave Iran direct strategic access to the Arab heartland. From an offensive realist perspective, Iran's response was rational because it used the power vacuum created by the invasion to expand its influence through Iraqi Shia actors and the IRGC's Quds Force.

Saudi Arabia viewed these developments with serious concern. The rise of what Jordan's King Abdullah

II called the “Shia Crescent,” stretching from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut and Hezbollah, appeared in Riyadh as a form of strategic encirclement. In response, Saudi Arabia increased its support for Sunni political actors in Iraq, including financial backing for Sunni tribes and, according to various accounts, assistance to Sunni insurgent groups. These competing interventions in Iraq became the model for later proxy struggles in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Bahrain.

4.2 Power Maximization through Proxy Warfare

Proxy warfare is essential to understanding the Saudi-Iran rivalry through realism. It allows states to expand influence, contain rivals, and protect regional interests without bearing the full cost and risk of direct military confrontation. Iran has built what many analysts call the “Axis of Resistance,” a network of non-state actors that includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, the Houthis in Yemen, and several Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Through the IRGC’s Quds Force, Iran provides these groups with money, training, weapons, and strategic direction, allowing Tehran to challenge Saudi and U.S. influence in multiple arenas at the same time.

Hezbollah is one of the clearest examples of this strategy. Iran is estimated to provide Hezbollah with around $700 million to $1 billion each year, making it one of the best-funded non-state military groups in the world. Iran began building ties with Lebanese Shia communities after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when it sent around 800 Revolutionary Guards through Syria to recruit and train Hezbollah fighters. Over time, Hezbollah developed from a local resistance group into a highly capable regional military organization involved in Syria and also in training allied militias in Iraq and Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has followed a different form of proxy strategy, but the underlying logic is similar. Rather than building a tightly organized transnational network like Iran, Saudi Arabia has mainly relied on state alliances, financial support for friendly governments, and backing for Sunni opposition groups. In Syria, for example, Saudi support for rebel groups was driven not only by sectarian concerns but also by the larger goal of limiting Iranian influence in the Levant. Much of the support for Syrian rebels moved through Jordan, while Saudi and other clerics issued fatwas that gave religious legitimacy to the struggle against the Assad regime.

5. Intensification of Proxy Conflicts and The Arab Spring (2011–2020)

5.1 The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 significantly changed the political order of the Middle East and reshaped the strategic setting in which the Saudi-Iran rivalry developed. The collapse of long-standing authoritarian governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, along with the outbreak of civil war in Syria, created major power vacuums that both Saudi Arabia and Iran moved quickly to exploit. After 2011, the region was also marked by a relative decline in U.S. influence, especially in Syria, and by Russia’s growing involvement in regional conflicts. These developments created new opportunities for both Riyadh and Tehran to expand their influence.

From the perspective of offensive realism, the Arab Spring can be understood as a classic case of states taking advantage of power vacuums. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia acted as rational states seeking regional dominance in an anarchic environment. The uprisings gave each of them an unusual opportunity to reshape the regional balance of power in its favor. Iran moved quickly to support the Assad regime in Syria, which was a central pillar of the Axis of Resistance, by sending Quds Force commanders, thousands of military advisers, and Shia fighters from across the region, including Afghan Hazaras of Liwa Fatimiyoun and Pakistani Shias of Liwa Zaynabiyoun. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, supported Sunni rebel groups with money, weapons, and ideological backing, seeing the Syrian war as a chance to weaken the Iran-Syria alliance and reduce Iranian influence in the Levant.

5.2 The Yemen War: Route to Proxy Conflict

The Yemen war, which escalated sharply in 2015 after the Houthis captured Sanaa, became the most

important and destructive example of the Saudi-Iran proxy rivalry. The Houthis, a Zaydi Shia movement that had been fighting the Yemeni government on and off since 2004, removed the internationally recognized government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi during the September 2014 uprising, with support from Iran. Saudi Arabia viewed the Houthis as an Iranian proxy located directly on its southern border and responded by launching Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015, leading a broad Arab coalition to restore the Hadi government and reverse Houthi gains.

The Yemen conflict clearly reflects the offensive realist idea of denying rivals strategic depth. For Iran, Houthi control of Yemen created an important strategic position near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a key maritime route through which about 4 million barrels of oil pass each day, and also gave Iran's allies the ability to threaten Saudi territory with missiles and drones. For Saudi Arabia, Iranian influence in Yemen represented a dangerous form of encirclement, with Iran already active to the north through Iraq and to the west through Syria and Lebanon, and now potentially to the south through Yemen. In this context, the Saudi intervention, although costly and ultimately inconclusive, can be seen as a rational attempt to counter a serious strategic threat.

The conflict then developed into a long proxy war in which both sides used indirect and asymmetric methods to pursue their strategic goals, worsening an already severe humanitarian crisis. The Houthis developed advanced drone and missile capabilities with Iranian technical support, enabling them to strike deep inside Saudi Arabia. This included the September 2019 attacks on the Aramco facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, which temporarily disrupted about 5 percent of global oil supply. These attacks showed Iran's ability to use proxy actors to target Saudi Arabia's core economic interests while still maintaining a degree of plausible deniability.

5.3 Syria

The Syrian civil war became the most complicated and multi-layered arena of the Saudi-Iran proxy conflict. It involved not only Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also Turkey, Russia, Israel, Qatar, the United States, and many non-state armed groups. Iran was fully committed to preserving the Assad regime because Syria was essential to the land corridor connecting Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Losing Syria would have seriously weakened the Axis of Resistance and reduced Iran's ability to project power toward Israel and across the wider region. For this reason, Iran sent General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC's) Quds Force, as well as thousands of Iranian personnel and allied Shia fighters into the Syrian conflict.

Saudi Arabia's position in Syria was also shaped primarily by strategic calculations. Its support for Syrian opposition groups was driven not only by sectarian concerns but also by the broader aim of limiting Iran's regional reach in the Levant. Saudi leaders understood that Iran's presence in Syria strengthened Tehran's regional position and reinforced its relationship with Hezbollah. As a result, both Saudi Arabia and Iran treated Syria less as a humanitarian tragedy or democratic uprising and more as a zero-sum geopolitical struggle over the regional balance of power.

In the end, the survival of the Assad regime with Russian and Iranian backing marked a major strategic success for Iran and a corresponding failure for Saudi Arabia. Iran's readiness to spend very large amounts of money, estimated in the tens of billions of dollars through direct military spending and economic assistance, reflected the offensive realist view that states will bear heavy costs to stop rivals from dominating strategically important areas.

5.4 Iraq: The Contested Area

Iraq may be the most structurally important arena in the Saudi-Iran rivalry. After 2003, Iraq's political system came to be dominated by Shia-led governments, powerful Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces, and deep Iranian political, economic, and cultural influence. This gave Iran an unprecedented level of access to the Arab heartland. Iranian influence in Iraq operates through many channels, includ-

-ing alliances with Shia political parties, investment in Iraqi markets, religious and cultural links with Shia shrines and seminaries, and the military role of the PMF, which became formally integrated into the Iraqi state after the ISIS crisis.

Saudi Arabia has found it difficult to offset Iran's influence in Iraq. After years of limited engagement, Riyadh reopened its embassy in Baghdad only in 2015 and has since tried to rebuild relations with Sunni and moderate Shia actors, invest in Iraqi development, and encourage Baghdad to move somewhat away from Tehran. However, these efforts have had only limited results. Iran's geographic closeness, sectarian ties, and long-term investment have given it a major structural advantage in Iraq. From an offensive realist perspective, Iraq remains the clearest case of Iran successfully turning a regional power vacuum into lasting influence.

5.5 Lebanon and role of Hezbollah

Hezbollah in Lebanon is perhaps the most advanced and effective component of Iran's proxy network. Created with Iranian assistance in 1982 after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah gradually developed from a local resistance movement into a regional military actor with capabilities that rival those of many states. Iran provides Hezbollah with major financial support, advanced weapons such as precision-guided missiles, and strategic direction through the IRGC. Hezbollah's military arsenal, estimated at more than 150,000 rockets and missiles before the 2024 conflict with Israel, has given Iran a strong deterrent against possible Israeli or U.S. attacks on Iranian territory.

For Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah represents a double challenge. It is both a tool of Iranian influence in Lebanon and the Levant, and a force that weakens the authority and sovereignty of Arab states. Saudi Arabia has responded by designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, encouraging Arab states and political actors in Lebanon to distance themselves from it, and using the Gulf Cooperation Council to limit its regional role. The 2017 incident in which Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation while in Riyadh, widely seen as the result of Saudi pressure, demonstrated how far Saudi Arabia was prepared to go in order to confront Iranian influence in Lebanon.

6. Alliance Formation and External Power Involvement

6.1 The U.S.-Saudi Axis

An important part of the Saudi-Iran rivalry is the role played by external major powers, especially the United States and, increasingly, China and Russia. Their interests, resources, and strategic commitments have strongly influenced the regional balance of power. Realist theory, especially Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat approach, suggests that states align with outside powers against those they consider most threatening, based on factors such as overall power, geographic proximity, offensive capability, and perceived aggressive intent. Saudi Arabia's partnership with the United States has been the foundation of its security system since the 1945 meeting between Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz aboard the USS Quincy. Under this arrangement, Saudi Arabia received security protection, including U.S. support against external threats, in return for stable oil access and cooperation on regional security matters.

However, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has become more complicated because of changes in both regional and global politics. The Obama administration's 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, the JCPOA, was viewed in Riyadh as indirectly legitimizing Iran's regional position and created serious tension between Saudi Arabia and the United States. By contrast, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and its maximum pressure policy toward Iran were much closer to Saudi preferences.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has pursued a strategy of hedging by expanding relations with China, now its largest oil customer, and by cooperating with Russia on energy matters through OPEC+.

This reflects offensive realist logic: Saudi Arabia is trying to increase its strategic flexibility and reduce overdependence on any single great power, thereby improving its autonomy and relative strength.

6.2 The China-Brokered 2023 Saudi-Iran Agreement

The March 2023 agreement brokered by China, under which Saudi Arabia and Iran restored diplomatic relations after a break since 2016, was a major diplomatic event that challenged many assumptions about the future of their rivalry. The agreement, negotiated in Beijing after direct talks between Saudi and Iranian officials, included commitments to reopen embassies, reduce hostile media activity, and cooperate in lowering tensions in Yemen and other areas. From the perspective of realist strategy, China's mediation served its own interests by protecting energy supplies from both countries, expanding its influence in the Middle East, and presenting itself as an alternative diplomatic power to the United States.

However, within a year, it became clear that the situation remained complicated. The agreement appears to have encouraged some early concessions, including Iran's apparent willingness to reduce Houthi attacks on Saudi territory, but the deeper causes of rivalry were not resolved. Iran continued advancing its nuclear program, its proxy networks remained active, and the Gaza war that began in October 2023 introduced fresh pressure into the regional system. Saudi Arabia was already involved in fragile negotiations with the Houthis to reduce violence in Yemen, and Houthi missile and drone attacks on Israel, as well as on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, threatened to weaken those efforts.

From an offensive realist perspective, the 2023 détente is better understood as a tactical adjustment than as a fundamental transformation of the rivalry. It reflected immediate pressures on both sides, including Saudi Arabia's desire to focus on Vision 2030 and Iran's need for economic relief under sanctions. Its durability depends on whether both states continue to see it as useful to their short-term interests. Yet neither side has made the core concessions on nuclear policy, proxy forces, or regional influence that would be necessary for a genuine strategic realignment.

7. The Nuclear Dimension

7.1 Iran's Nuclear Program as Perception of Existential Threat

No issue illustrates the realist logic of power maximization in the Saudi-Iran rivalry more clearly than Iran's nuclear program. In offensive realist terms, nuclear weapons are the strongest possible guarantee of survival because they provide the most reliable deterrent against external attack or regime change. Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability can therefore be understood as a rational strategy within a self-help system in which outside security guarantees are uncertain and adversaries are powerful. For Saudi Arabia, however, a nuclear-armed Iran would fundamentally alter the regional balance of power by creating an asymmetrical rivalry in which Iran possessed the ultimate deterrent.

This is why Saudi leaders have signaled that they may seek the same capability if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold. Mohammed bin Salman stated in a 2018 interview that Saudi Arabia would attempt to acquire a nuclear weapon if Iran developed one.

This possibility points to the danger of a wider regional proliferation chain. Saudi Arabia's nuclear position is not only rhetorical. The kingdom has been developing civilian nuclear infrastructure, studying the feasibility of uranium enrichment, and resisting U.S. demands for a strict commitment not to pursue weapons-related capabilities as part of civil nuclear cooperation.

Iran's nuclear program therefore remains one of the main reasons the rivalry continues. It creates a serious threat that Saudi Arabia cannot easily answer through conventional military means, pushing Riyadh toward both external balancing through ties with the United States and Israel and internal balancing through its own nuclear hedging. This dynamic shows how Iran's search for greater security can produce countermeasures that make the region even more unstable, which is exactly the kind of security dilemma described by offensive realism.

8. Foreign Policy and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

8.1 Saudi and Offensive Realism in Practice

The rise of Mohammed bin Salman as Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler from 2015 marked a new phase of assertiveness in Saudi foreign policy that closely fits offensive realist expectations. Under his leadership, Saudi Arabia launched the intervention in Yemen, imposed the blockade on Qatar between 2017 and 2021, pressured the Lebanese prime minister, and adopted a much more active regional security approach. This activism was not limited to balancing Iran. It also reflected a wider effort to shape the regional order in a way that would strengthen Saudi leadership.

Vision 2030, Mohammed bin Salman's broad program of economic and social reform, also has a major geopolitical dimension. By reducing dependence on oil, expanding military capabilities, and presenting Saudi Arabia as a central and responsible regional power, Vision 2030 aims to strengthen the kingdom's claim to leadership in the Arab world. In this sense, Saudi strategy has moved from a mainly defensive model, based on containing Iran through alliances and proxy competition, to a more offensive model of building national power and strategic autonomy.

This shift is consistent with Mearsheimer's argument that regional powers seek hegemony whenever conditions allow. Saudi Arabia is trying to use favorable strategic opportunities to increase its power and influence, even if that means accepting short-term costs in exchange for long-term regional advantage.

9. The 2023–2026 Phase: Contested Détente and the Persistence of Structural Rivalry

9.1 The Gaza War

The Gaza war that began in October 2023, after Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, became the first major test of the Saudi-Iran détente brokered by China. The war revealed both the usefulness and the fragility of the rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran. Saudi Arabia, which had been engaged in U.S.-backed discussions with Israel over possible normalization, including a U.S. security guarantee and civilian nuclear cooperation, suspended those talks after October 7. For Iran, the war created an opportunity to test the readiness and coordination of its proxy network, including Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and Iraqi militias, against Israel and U.S. interests.

Even so, the détente proved more resilient than many observers expected. Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers met several times after October 7 and reaffirmed their commitment to the 2023 agreement. Saudi Arabia also signaled that it would not permit its territory or airspace to be used for military action against Iran, while at the same time intercepting Houthi drones. This reflected a careful Saudi strategy that aimed to preserve the benefits of détente while maintaining independence and demonstrating military resolve.

9.2 Structural Determinants of the Persistence of Rivalry

By 2026, the main structural causes of the Saudi-Iran rivalry remained unresolved. Iran continued to advance its nuclear program, while reports from the IAEA indicated ongoing enrichment and more limited access for inspectors. Although the Axis of Resistance had been weakened by Israeli operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2024 and by the fall of the Assad regime in Syria later that year, it still retained important strength in Yemen and Iraq. The Houthis also continued to control significant parts of Yemeni territory. At the same time, the basic asymmetries between Saudi Arabia and Iran in military power, economic resources, and alliances had not disappeared. From a realist point of view, the present stage of the rivalry can be described as a contested détente. This means a period of limited de-escalation driven by short-term interests rather than a true reconciliation. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran appear to believe that direct conflict would be too costly for their current domestic priorities. Saudi Arabia needs regional calm to advance Vision 2030, while Iran needs to manage sanctions and preserve deterrence. However, these temporary shared interests do not resolve the deeper struggle for regional hegemony that has shaped the rivalry for decades.

Realism suggests that if structural conditions change, such as Iran nearing nuclear breakout, Saudi Arabia moving further toward normalization with Israel, a shift in U.S. regional commitments, or changes in China's strategic posture, the current balance could quickly collapse into renewed escalation. In that sense, the 2023 rapprochement should be understood as a pause in a continuing rivalry rather than its final settlement.

10. Sectarianism in Saudi-Iran Relations: A Realist Reassessment

One of the central debates in the study of the Saudi-Iran rivalry concerns the role of sectarianism, especially the Sunni-Shia divide. Constructivist scholars often argue that these identities are a basic cause of conflict and that the deep theological and historical divide between Sunni Wahhabism and Shia Twelver Islam makes confrontation almost inevitable. Realist scholars take a different view. They argue that sectarianism is mainly a political tool used by states to justify claims to authority, mobilize domestic support, and build regional alliances.

The available evidence supports the realist interpretation. Saudi Arabia sees Iran as promoting Shia influence in a largely Sunni regional environment, while Iran sees Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi orientation as an obstacle to broader Muslim unity. Yet both states use religious identity in ways that closely follow political interests rather than purely theological beliefs. Saudi Arabia has cooperated with non-Sunni actors, including Western Christian powers and, more recently, Israel, when strategic circumstances encouraged it to do so. Iran has also supported non-Shia groups, including Sunni Hamas and earlier the Sunni Taliban, when this advanced its regional goals.

For this reason, sectarianism should be understood as a force multiplier rather than the root cause of the rivalry. It intensifies the conflict, makes compromise more politically costly, and helps both states recruit allies and proxies. But even if the two states shared the same religious orientation, the rivalry would likely continue because its deeper cause lies in the structural struggle for regional power in an anarchic system.

11. Implications for India

11.1 India's Energy Security Dilemma

The Saudi-Iran rivalry has important consequences for India's energy security, especially given India's deep strategic and economic interests in the Gulf region. India depends heavily on oil imports from the Gulf, with Saudi Arabia and Iraq historically serving as major suppliers and Iran also playing an important role before U.S. sanctions restricted that relationship. The proxy conflict in Yemen, Iran's repeated threats to disrupt shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, and Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping since 2023 have all directly threatened the stability of India's energy supply lines and increased transport costs.

India has responded by following a policy of multi-alignment. It has tried to maintain strong relations

with both Riyadh and Tehran without openly siding with either one. This approach reflects realist logic at the state level because it allows India to preserve flexibility, protect its interests. Any reduction in Saudi-Iran tensions, including through the China-brokered détente, serves India's interests if it contributes to more stable energy markets. At the same time, the continuing structural instability of the Gulf remains a serious challenge for India's long-term energy planning.

Conclusion

When viewed through offensive realism, the Saudi-Iran rivalry appears to be a structurally driven struggle for regional hegemony that is likely to continue as long as the underlying conditions of the Middle Eastern regional system remain unchanged. Both states act as rational players seeking to maximize power in a self-help environment. Their use of proxy wars, alliances, sectarian narratives, and competition over strategic resources should therefore be seen not as unusual behavior but as expected outcomes of the structural pressures around them. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 created the foundation for this rivalry by introducing a powerful revisionist state into the regional order, and later developments, including the Iraq War, the Arab Spring, the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, and the Gaza war, deepened the rivalry without changing its essential nature.

The 2023 détente brokered by China is an important diplomatic development because it has temporarily lowered the risk of direct confrontation and reopened space for diplomatic engagement. However, from a realist perspective, it does not amount to a true settlement of the rivalry. The main structural drivers remain in place, including competing claims to regional leadership, Iran's nuclear ambitions, active proxy networks, and the absence of a credible regional security framework. The future of the détente depends on both states continuing to believe that cooperation serves their immediate interests, and that calculation may not last indefinitely.

The most important contribution of realism to this debate is that it shifts attention away from the ideological and sectarian surface of the conflict and toward the deeper structural forces that shape state behavior. States do not act primarily because of the identities they claim or the beliefs they express, but because of the material realities of power and security in an anarchic system. Unless the Middle East develops a regional security structure capable of managing the Saudi-Iran security dilemma, whether through a Gulf concert system, an outside security guarantee, or a negotiated power-sharing arrangement, this rivalry is likely to remain a defining feature of Middle Eastern politics. In that sense, the crisis in the region is likely to continue because both states remain engaged in a long-term competition for regional supremacy.

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Catalysts Of Inclusion: The Contribution Of CBID-Trained Workers To Disability Inclusion In Rural Karnataka

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ABSTRACT

Community-based inclusive development (CBID) is the rights-based strategy for persons with disabilities (PWDs) to promote inclusion and empowerment at the local level. The University of Melbourne and the Rehabilitation Council of India collaborated to design this curriculum. Notably, several people in India are persons with disabilities, particularly those living in rural regions, and face several obstacles and challenges. In rural Karnataka, the CBID program trains field-level staff, namely Village, Urban, and Municipality Rehabilitation Workers, to enhance inclusive practices in various fields like livelihood, health, and education. This study will evaluate the contribution of CBID workers advancing disability inclusion in rural Karnataka. The study used quantitative questionnaires to gather data on CBID workers' knowledge of the practical implementation of training efficiently, implementation strategies, encountering barriers, and tracking improvements. The study used a quantitative approach, a non-probability purposive sampling technique, and a descriptive Research design. 100 CBID workers from the rural part of Karnataka participated in this research.The result revealed that CBID workers have a solid understanding of disabilities, awareness, and promote community mobilisation and access. However, intersectoral coordination, accessibility, and ongoing community participation are still lacking. The study emphasizes that CBID implementations are potentially as well as difficult. Additionally, it ends with suggestions for improving infrastructure, expanding training support, and advancing monitoring mechanisms to strengthen the CBID interventions.

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I. Introduction

Community-based inclusive development (CBID) is a rights-based, community-driven approach that builds on the foundation of community-based rehabilitation (CBR) to promote the full inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in social, educational, health, and livelihood opportunities. Developed collaboratively by the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) and the University of Melbourne. CBID, which is based on Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations 2006) principles and the Sustainable Development Goals, emphasizes community engagement, self-advocacy, and strengthening disability organisations (World Health Organisation 2010) (Bachifischer, Escobar, and Cortes 2023). CBID workers are mostly volunteers and members of the disability communities who identify needs, facilitate referral, provide basic rehabilitation support, raise community awareness, and support advice and data collection to guide inclusive policies and practices. (Shakespeare et al. 2024).

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Social inclusion refers to the process of enabling all individuals to participate fully in social, economic, cultural, and political Life by addressing inequalities and removing barriers (Silver, 2015). In the context, persons with disabilities mean addressing physical, institutional, and attitudinal barriers that hinder access to education, healthcare, employment, and governance while performing dignity and active citizenship (Shakespeare 2018). Community-based inclusive development (CBID) is a structured framework to advance this goal by empowering persons with disabilities and their representative organisations, promoting community awareness, and making standard services and process decision-making more accessible (WHO 2010) (Bachifischer, Escobar, and Cortes 2023). Community-based inclusive development CBID plays an ideal role by supporting persons with disabilities to overcome the challenges in rural Karnataka. These challenges include poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted access to services like health, education, and employment opportunities. By directing persons with disabilities to services boosting inclusive behaviours and advocating for them in local government, trained CBID workers play a critical role as facilitators, improving social inclusion at the grassroots level of society.

This study argues that while CBID training significantly strengthens grassroots disability facilitation, structural and institutional barriers continue to limit its transformative impact in rural governance systems.

II. Literature Review

Community-based inclusive development CBID as a strategy

Community-based inclusive development as a tool. A widely recognised approach to localised disability inclusion is community-based inclusive development. According to the CBR matrix, the CBID program in India was created by the Rehabilitation Council of India and Melbourne University. It places a significant value on community capacity building, multisectoral integration, and rights-based service delivery (World Health Organisation 2010). According to Shakespeare, Ndagire, and Seketi (2024), CBID-trained field workers are essential in analysing needs, eliminating barriers, and connecting people with disabilities to services and benefits. Additionally, according to Bachifischer, Escobar, and Cortes (2023), CBID-trained staff members promote sustained inclusion and community ownership at the grassroots level.

Barriers to inclusion: Policy - Practice gap

Infrastructure constraints, attitude barriers, and a lack of disability sensitization remain obstacles to inclusion despite growing identification and strategy implementation. Praveen (2022) noted through an accessibility audit in Indian universities that these issues are increased in rural settings where CBID workers frequently serve as a primary support system for persons with disabilities. Hartley et al. (2009) additionally verify that inadequate resources and methodical oversight erode the viability of grassroots disability initiatives.

Impact of CBID-trained personnel

In order to guarantee empowerment, Bhavan and Varghese 2020 emphasize that disability inclusion must go beyond service delivery. According to their research, having trained CBID workers is associated with greater disability awareness, better community involvement, and more access to social and educational services. According to Grills et al. (2021), sensitivity to contexts and interactive training boost people's competency, and self-assurance empowers them to successfully handle challenging local problems. In the study of rural Karnataka, Rao (2019) also discovered that CBID workers greatly lower barriers to government programmes and help people with disability especially in poverty alleviation.

Persistent challenges in CBID implementation.

Procedural and social barriers continue to hamper the success of CBID. Punani et al. (2019) highlighted recurring challenges, including limited financial resources, limited assistive equipment, weak intersectoral coordination, and institutional opposition. Mitra (2018) reported a similar conclusion, noting that the resilience of local groups and the backing of external donors play a major role in the durability of the inclusion programme in rural areas. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the necessity of increasing institutional support, financial investment, and policy reinforcement for CBID's long-term effectiveness.

Related studies

Particularly in rural setting community based inclusive development is becoming more widely acknowledged as a crucial strategy for increasing inclusion of persons with disabilities. In Karnataka, Kadekodi (2018) shifted from the conventional growth-oriented framework for development to an inclusive development approach, emphasizing the significance of integrating social economics and policy activities to meet the needs of marginalised communities. This paper offers a theoretical framework for analysing the CBID programme in rural areas and a conceptual knowledge of how inclusive policies might be operationalised within particular regional and socio-economic situations.
The practical results of CBID intervention have been studied empirically. The CDM India trust's experimental competency-based training programmes showed quantifiable gains in CBID-trained workers' abilities and expertise, highlighting the vital role that organised capacity development programmes play in raising field-level efficacy. Similar studies on community-based rehabilitation for persons with various mental illnesses in rural Karnataka demonstrate the beneficial effects of locally driven programmes, especially when combined with already existing community-level organisations like Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs). These studies highlight how crucial it is to provide field-level staff with both technical and participatory skills in order to guarantee the durability and dependability of CBID interventions.

Additionally, the rise of Community-Based Rehabilitation programmes throughout India demonstrates how the CBID programme adjusts to two regional issues, including resource limitation, social stigma, and inadequate infrastructure. The effectiveness of inclusive initiatives in enhancing accessibility, encouraging a social environment, and empowering people with disabilities through community funding approaches is documented in reports by organisations such as CBM Global 2024 and Mobility India. These initiative reflects the combined focus of CBID on strengthening individual capacities while increasing systematic change at the community level. CBID is a key model for promoting disability inclusion and rural settings because the literature as a whole highlights that its efficacy depends on a mix of piping core strategy, participatory engagement, and contact sensitivity implementation techniques.

III. Methodology

The study took up a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach, non-probability purposive sampling technique, to examine the knowledge, strategy, and training efficiency, and the barriers of Community-Based Inclusive Development (CBID) in enhancing social inclusion for persons with disabilities in rural Karnataka. In order to capture the current practice and field-level reality among trained CBID-workers, the descriptive approach was appropriate. 100 CBID-trained workers who meet the inclusion criteria are engaged in this study. Voluntary participation and informed consent of participation were included in the study. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. The tool included closed-ended questions that focused on four main categories, which were aligned with the objectives of the study. The tool was verified by subject experts for the questions' conceptual clarity and content dependability. Descriptive statistics, particularly frequency and percentage distribution, were used to evaluate the data to find trends and patterns of the respondents.

Inclusion criteria:

1. The respondent must be a CBID-trained worker
2. Working primarily in rural settings within Karnataka
3. Willing to provide informed concerns and participate in the study.

Objectives:

- To assess the knowledge and understanding of social inclusion among CBID-trained workers.
- To examine the strategies employed by CBID-trained workers to promote inclusion in education, health, and livelihood sectors.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the CBID training in enhancing professional confidence and performance.
- To identify the challenges encountered by CBID-trained workers in implementing inclusive practices.
- To recommend improvements to the CBID training programme based on field insights and outcomes.

IV. Analytical Discussion

The demographic profile of the respondents (N = 100) is presented in Table 4.1, demonstrating the varied representation across each gender, designation, and work experience. 51% of them are between the ages of 36 and 45; 26.5% are between the ages of 26 and 35; 16.3% are between the ages of 46 and 55; 6.2% are between the ages of 18 and 25; none are older than 56. This suggests that the majority of the respondents are professionals in mid of their careers who are actively involved in inclusive services and rehabilitation. There was a significant gender disparity in the rehabilitation workforce, with 75.6% of the participants being men and 24.4% being women. Village rehabilitation workers make up the majority 71.6% followed by urban rehabilitation workers, 14.4%, municipality rehabilitation workers, 10%, and teachers and special educators, 2% each. In terms of experience, 45.8% had worked for 4 to 6 years, 25% have worked for one to two three years, and 4.2% have worked for one year. Overall, the finding shows that the sample is mostly made up of season rehabilitation specialists, emphasizing a workforce with significant hands-on expertise in Community-Based Disability Inclusion.

Table 4.1: Demographic details

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage
Age Group	18–25 years	6	6.20%
	26–35 years	27	26.50%
	36–45 years	51	51%
	46-55 years	16	16.30%
	56 + years	0	0%
Total		**100**	**100**

Gender	Male	76	75.60%
	Female	24	24.40%
Total		**100**	**100**
Designation	Village Rehabilitation Workers (VRW)	72	71.60%
	Urban Rehabilitation Workers (URW)	14	14.40%
	Municipality Rehabilitation Workers (MRW)	10	10%
	Teacher	2	2%
	Special Education	2	2%
Total		**100**	**100**
Years of Experience	one Year	4	4.20%
	one–3 Years	25	25%
	4–6 Years	46	45.80%
	6 years and above	25	25%
Total		**100**	**100**

Source: Field Data (2025)

Table 4.2: Awareness and understanding of social inclusion among CBID workers

S. No.	Variables	Response Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1	I can clearly define "social inclusion" in the context of disability.	Strongly Agree	71	71%
		Agree	20	20%
		Neutral	5	5%
		Disagree	3	3%

2	I am aware of inclusive education policies and provisions.	Strongly Agree	63	63%
		Agree	20	20%
		Neutral	7	7%
		Disagree	8	8%
		Strongly Disagree	2	2%
3	I know how to identify physical, attitudinal, and systemic barriers for Persons with Disabilities.	Strongly Agree	75	75%
		Agree	10	10%
		Neutral	5	5%
		Disagree	7	7%
		Strongly Disagree	3	3%
4	I am trained in rights-based approaches and advocacy for Persons with Disabilities.	Strongly Agree	74	74%
		Agree	15	15%
		Neutral	4	4%
		Disagree	5	5%
		Strongly Disagree	2	2%

Source: Field Data (2025)

The level of awareness and understanding of social intuitions among CBID-trained workers is displayed in Table 4.2. The result shows that a sizable majority of respondents 71% strongly agree that they can identify social inclusion in contexts with disabilities, demonstrating a solid conceptual understanding of inclusion. In a similar vein, 75% believe that they are able to recognise the systematic obstacles and physical attitude that people with disabilities encounter, demonstrating the successful application of knowledge gained from CBID training. Additionally, 74% of respondents strongly believed that they had received sufficient training in a rights-based approach and advocate for persons with disabilities, underscoring the programme's focus on legal awareness and empowerment. With 63% strongly agreeing, 20% agreeing, an understanding of inclusive education policies and provisions was somewhat lower, indicating that policy-specific sensitization has to be strengthened even further.

Overall. The result showed that although there are gaps in policy awareness and advertising implementation, CBID-trained workers have a high degree of awareness and comprehension of disability inclusion ideas. This suggests that in order to provide a thorough understanding and consistent field application, ongoing personal development and new training are necessary.

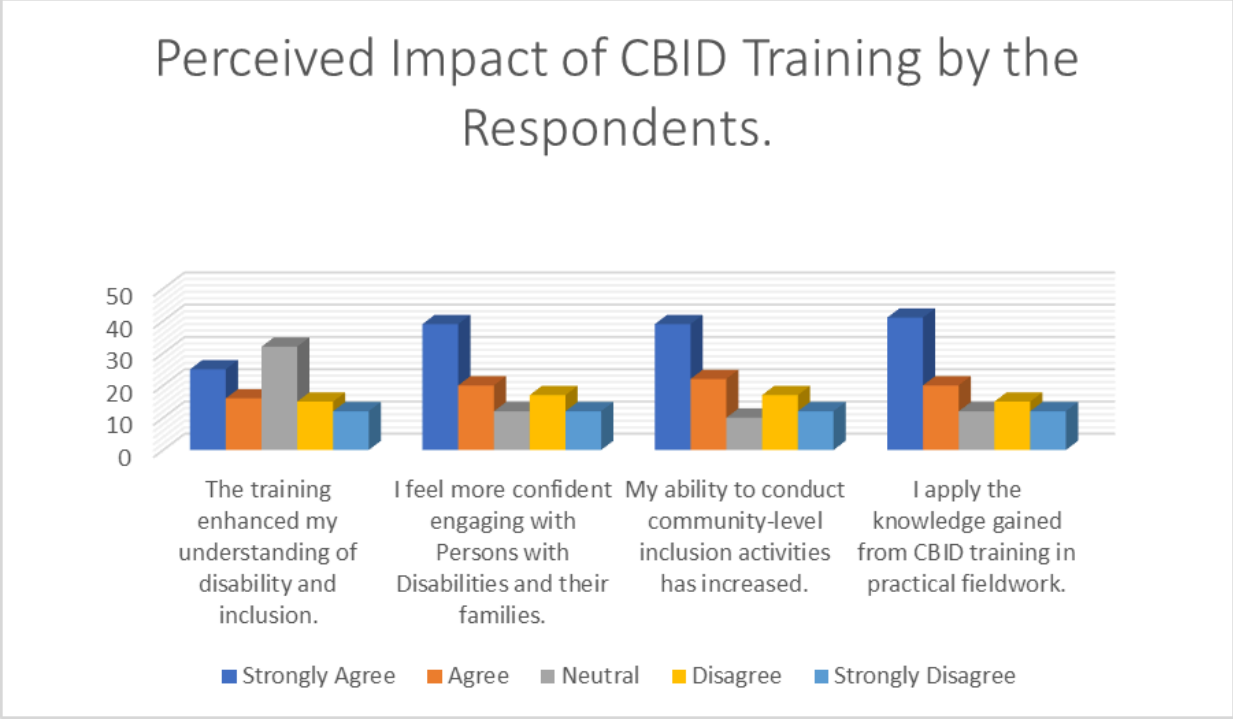
Table 4.3: Implementation of inclusive strategies.

S. No.	Statements / Variables	Response Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1	I have conducted awareness camps on disability rights.	Always	67	67%
		Often	15	15%
		Sometimes	10	10%
		Rarely	6	6%
		Never	2	2%
2	I have supported school enrolment and retention of children with disabilities.	Always	80	80%
		Often	10	10%
		Sometimes	6	6%
		Rarely	3	3%
		Never	1	1%
3	I have helped Persons with Disabilities access government schemes and ID cards.	Always	92	92%
		Often	5	5%
		Sometimes	2	2%
		Rarely	1	1%
		Never	0	0%

S. No.	Statements / Variables	Response Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
4	I have referred Persons with Disabilities for medical/rehabilitation services.	Always	71	71%
		Often	16	16%
		Sometimes	0	0%
		Rarely	0	0%
		Never	13	13%
5	I have facilitated inclusive livelihood training or employment linkage for Persons with Disabilities.	Strongly Agree	67	67%
		Agree	14	14%
		Neutral	6	6%
		Disagree	0	0%
		Strongly Disagree	13	13%

An examination of implementation strategies is presented in Table 4.3, which shows that CBID workers participate in promoting disability inclusion at the community level. 92% of respondents regularly help persons with disabilities with government programmes and ID cards, demonstrating their efficacy in enabling the delivery of entitlements. In a similar vein, 80% of respondents consistently support the enrolment and retention of children with disabilities in schools, indicating a strong commitment to inclusive education. Approximately 67% regularly plan disability rights awareness campaigns, demonstrating proactive communities and sensitization initiatives. Regular referrals of persons with disabilities to medical and Rehabilitation services, guarantee access to important health care support, were recorded by the majority, 71%. Only 67% of respondents correctly acknowledge that they have helped create inclusive livelihood or employment connections, indicating a relative lack of economic inclusion programmes. Overall, the findings show that workers with CBID training are successfully putting awareness, education, and service facilitation techniques into practice; nevertheless, livelihood inclusion still has to be strengthened through training, including mobilisation and intersectoral cooperation.

Figure 4.1



Source: Field Data (2025)

The perceived impact of CBID training across important domains is shown in Figure 4.1. 40.8% strongly agree or agree that the training has improved their comprehension of inclusion and disability. By contrast, 26.5% disagree or strongly disagree. In a similar vein, while 28.5% disagreed, 13.7% strongly agreed that they felt more comfortable interacting with persons with disabilities and their families. 38.7% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement on the capacity to carry out community-level inclusion efforts, while 28.5% once more expressed opposing views. In terms of using the knowledge obtained in real contexts, 40.8% firmly agreed, at 26.5% indicated dissatisfaction. Language challenges, educational background, or their capacity to internalize the material could all be contributing factors to this discrepancy. The absence of organised follow-up support to apply the training in real life might also be the reason for low impact.

V. Key Findings

1.Strong role in Accessing Schemes and documentation

Notably, 91.8 % of respondents said they had assisted people with disabilities in accessing social welfare programme government-issued certificates, and Unique Disability IDs (UDID). In rural areas, where access entitlement is sometimes limited by administrative barriers and technological limitations, the position was particularly crucial. CBID workers act as mediators, helping to obtain these advantages and privileges. This result is consistent with Punani et al. (2019), highlighting that CBID workers frequently act as a system navigator for underprivileged groups.

2. Inclusion in Gram Sabha and Social Participation

The social participation of persons with disabilities has significantly increased, according to about 69.4% of respondents, especially in local forums like Grama Sabha meetings and large community-based activities. This demonstrates the process made in promoting active citizenship and creating the visibility and voice of persons with disabilities on public decision-making platforms. According to Bhavan and Varghese (2020), anyone's intuition requires not analyzing people to actively participate in civic and political processes, rather than only receiving services. This demonstrated how inclusion in a process has been successfully operationalised, supporting the more general objectives of equal representation, self-advocacy, and empowerment within the rural governance system.

3. Strong Conceptual Understanding of Social Inclusion

The majority of respondents with CBID training 70.9% demonstrated a precise and comprehensive grasp of the idea of social inclusion, especially in relation to disability. These responses clearly demonstrate the influence of successful training. This result is in line with Grills et al. (2021), highlighting the importance of interactive training in boosting confidence and competency.

4.Engagement and disability rights advocate seat through awareness camps

Around 67.3% of respondents with CBID training status reported that their communities actively post disability awareness campaigns. This reflex is a positive trend towards public sensitization, and vacancy at grassroot level, both of which are essential for destroying stigma, advancing rights-based viewpoints, and cultivating an inclusive attitude in society. Furthermore, Bhavan and Varghese (2020) stress that genuine inclusion necessitates not only service access but also active engagement and civic life and policy discourse.

5.High referral to medical and rehabilitation services

A higher proportion of respondents with CBID training 87.7% state that they have referred persons with disabilities to proper medical or rehabilitation services. Such involvement demonstrates the trainee's understanding of the availability of the service structure as well as the ability to serve as a successful liaison between the formal healthcare system and the community. The health component of the WHO Community Based Rehabilitation Matrix, which identifies important categories of inclusive development - health education, livelihood, social, environment, and empowerment -is supported by this finding (WHO, 2010). The finding also supports the findings of Grills et al. (2017) and Mitra et al. (2013), who highlighted the importance of community-based workers in promoting health access and decreasing systematic exclusion.

6. Persistent barriers to implementation

CBID-trained respondents reported many barriers that limit the effective implementation of inclusive development practices.

- Lack of community awareness 61.2 percent
- Insufficient funding and financial support mechanism 59.2%
- Inaccessible public infrastructure is 55.1%
- Shortage of assistive devices and Technology 44.9%
- Limited accessible transport facility 42.9%

These results are in line with Punani et al. (2019), who claim that CBID intervention runs the danger of becoming unsustainable if basic conceptual constraints are not addressed, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas. As noted by Mitra et al. (2013), inadequate finance further restricts the community's intervention's scalability and continuity. Budget resources for localised disability initiatives are inconsistent or insufficient.

7.Active environment in school enrolment of students with disability

One of the encouraging outcomes is the active involvement of CBID-trained field workers in promoting inclusive education. Two-thirds of them responded that they have taken steps to support the enrolment and retention of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

VI. Scope Of The Study

The scope of this research income passes the assessment of community-based inclusive development CBID interventions, which aim at enhancing the social inclusion of a person with disabilities in rural Karnataka. It covers the practical application of inclusive development principles of village, urban, and municipality rehabilitation workers across key sectors including education, health, livelihood, and community participation. It extends to evaluate the capacity of field-level personnel to identify and address structural, social, and attitudinal issues and promote accessibility and implement the rights-based approach at the community level. The study also examines the operational effectiveness of CBID models, interesting intersectoral coordination, ensuring problem sustainability, and achieving measurable outcomes for persons with disabilities. By focusing on these aspects of the study, it is a framework for analysing the effectiveness gap and scale-up ability of CBID interventions, offering insights relevant to policymakers, practitioners, and training institutions. It also emphasizes the enhancement of inclusion, equity, and empowerment of persons with disabilities through evidence informed community level initiative by contributing to the broader objectives of sustainable and participatory development.

VII. Limitations of the Study

Even though research alone offers valuable insights into the operation and effects of community-based inclusive development projects in rural Karnataka, it has major drawbacks. Its narrow focus on rural areas restricts applicability to other areas with diverse infrastructure or socio-cultural conditions. Second, the accuracy of stated practices and results may be impacted by subjective and possible responses by us if self-reported data from CBIB workers is relied upon. Third, additional aspects of disability inclusion, such as political engagement or cutting-edge treatment techniques, are not included because the scope is limited to particular sectors such as education, health, livelihood, and community participation. For the sample size and coverage potential were constrained by logistical and resource issues, which impacted the thoroughness of findings across all rural communities.

Variation and referred maybe introduced by training quality, individual experience, and local administrative support at the field levels of CBID workers, which limits the capacity to evaluate sustainability over a lengthy time frame. Despite these drawbacks, the study offers insightful information for programme enhancement and policy development about operational difficulties and field-level procedures. and conceptual obstacles in rural CBID implementations.

VIII. Suggestions

The government can enhance the execution process of welfare schemes by creating local nodal officials for CBID workers and expediting entitlement access. Further, research into structures should include a blueprint that requires an accessibility audit in public institutions such as schools, Panchayat buildings, and Health Care centres. Integrated inclusive education must be built into the policy framework by requiring disability inclusion training for all government school teachers, assuring the availability of special educators, and providing accessible reading materials in regional languages. In addition to these initiatives, NGOs and civil society organisations can play an important role by developing rights-based community awareness campaigns using the local media, such as community radios, street banners, and posters, to reach the illiterate and rural people. On the other hand, these organisations can assist CBID employees by providing technical support, refresher training, and guidance in areas such as capacity building, policy advocacy, inclusive education approaches, and reference systems.

IX. Conclusion

The study emphasizes the importance of CBID-trained workers in promoting the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities by improving access to programmes, enhancing civic involvement, and supporting inclusive education and health activities. However, structural barriers such as a lack of awareness and financial constraints in service delivery continue to impair long-term success, particularly in rural communities. To solve the issues, coordinated efforts by the government, non-government organisations (NGOs), civil society, and DPOs are required, with a focus on disability inclusive planning, accessibility, infrastructure, and intersectoral collaboration. CBID, which is based on rights-based and participatory structure, has the potential to significantly increase the social, economic, and civic engagement of persons with disabilities, thereby contributing to a more equitable society.

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AI and Digital Evidence in Indian Sexual Assault Cases: A Legal-Ethical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the use of artificial intelligence in India's digital forensic system, particularly in sexual assault investigations. As cybercrime grows, agencies are adopting AI tools like facial recognition, automated analysis, and rapid DNA matching to handle complex digital evidence more efficiently. The study highlights how these technologies can reduce delays caused by backlogs and manual processes, enabling faster chargesheet filing.

It also considers integration with platforms like the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal and the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C). Further, it examines legal and ethical concerns under the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, and the IT Act. The research concludes by proposing an ethical framework to balance efficiency with transparency and data protection, ensuring timely justice delivery.

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AI forensic tools, Sexual assault investigations, Ethical considerations, Fundamental Rights, DPDP Act, Bhartiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023

I. Introduction

The notion of AI is not new or recent; it is rather embedded into our lives far more than we have admitted. The upcoming generations are dependent on these AI tools for their normal day-to-day life activities. Though the idea of AI doesn't revolve around only science fiction, but has soon become a reality through the use of AI support personal attendants like SIRI or Google Talk, the use of maps or motorized drivingvehicles, or phones suggesting websites, songs, or videos reflecting our inclination.[1] Globally, the world is witnessing the fourth industrial revolution, with artificial intelligence becoming a foundation for all technological transformation initiatives.[2] AI is seen as a detachment of computer science and how machines can impersonate human intelligence (being human-like rather than becoming human beings). The "English Oxford Living Dictionary" noted: "The theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages".[3]Kaplan and Haenlein define AI as "the ability of a system to correctly interpret external data, learn from such data, and use it to achieve specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation."[4]

[1] Christopher Kuner, Fred H. Cate, et.al., "Expanding the Artificial Intelligence-Data Protection Debate, 8(4) International Data Privacy Law 289 (2018).
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[3] Oxford Learner's Dictionaries 2022.
[4] Michael Haenlein and others, "Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Management Analytics" (2019) 6 Journal of Management Analytics 341.

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The wave of technology in the face of AI and Generative AI has permeated diverse aspects of our lives, knowingly or unknowingly, and has raised the aspect of multidisciplinary research. Artificial Intelligence is a system's capability to analyse external data, comprehend it, and apply and adapt to distinct tasks. Even after so much deliberation around the term 'Artificial Intelligence, there is no infallible definition of the said term. However, the term has an umbrella effect to it and includes all of the computerized techniques and methods used for eclectichuman work like pattern forming,calculations, computer vision, language processing, etc. In general, the work done by the tools of Artificial Intelligence, which was to be done by the human mind, is being done by the use of machines, and then it is 'Artificial Intelligence'.

The use of scientific concepts, procedures, and methodologies for the sake of justice is known as forensic science. In order to investigate the crime and provide justice to the people concerned, it entails the application of efficient scientific tools and methodologies. When someone was accused of a crime, they were required to present their case before a group of people in the forensic, or forum, era, which is where the term "forensic science" originated in ancient Rome. Recent trends in AI have brought drastic transformations in forensic science and pathology. Technology introduced us to new terminologies as 'datasets', 'algorithms', 'data analysis', 'pattern recognition', 'anomaly identification', which are building these big data-driven decision-making systems. In forensic medicine, AI/ML aids in crime scene analysis, DNA analysis, ballistic identifications, analysis of traumatic injuries, toxicology reports, and many more. More quickly and accurately than traditional human-centric methods alone, these sophisticated algorithms can evaluate enormous amounts of data, identify complex patterns, and glean insightful information from the evidence.[5]

AI has emerged as a disruptive force in the field of digital forensics, altering traditional investigative techniques. From ballistics comparisons to facial recognition and fingerprint analysis, AI systems have shown a great deal of promise in improving forensic procedures. It may speed up the evidence collection techniques, storing evidence, and even facial recognition technologies and biometrics, which can help solve crimes faster, speeding up the dispensation of justice. The increasing usage of digital devices is accompanied by an increase in the sophistication of cybercrimes.[6] However, extremely successful machine learning techniques that use the insights gained from huge data analysis, artificial intelligence have advanced.[7] Digital forensics (DF) faces growing challenges in terms of precision and timeliness in the analysis of a rising amount of data from increasingly diverse sources.[8]

To assist law enforcement, a variety of intelligence techniques were available. For instance, in crime analysis, the following techniques emerged: geographic analysis, crime pattern analysis, investigative techniques like network analysis, telephone record analysis, and bank record analysis, and in strategic analysis, threat assessments, target profiles, and strategic targeting. These technologies are excellent in quickly processing enormous datasets, finding subtle patterns that human analysts would miss, and possibly minimizing procedural errors. But integrating them into forensic operations necessitates carefully weighing their advantages and disadvantages.[9] Nevertheless, the challenges that come with the deployment of AI in sectors are still being discussed globally, and the risks of privacy, bias, and data security need to be addressed to ensure responsible and ethical use of AI to its fullest potential in various sectors.[10]

[5] Shai Farber, “AI as a Decision Support Tool in Forensic Image Analysis: A Pilot Study on Integrating Large Language Models into Crime Scene Investigation Workflows” (2025) 70 Journal of Forensic Sciences 932.
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These technologies are excellent in quickly processing enormous datasets, finding subtle patterns that human analysts would miss, and possibly minimizing procedural errors. But integrating them into forensic operations necessitates carefully weighing their advantages and disadvantages.[11]

Nevertheless, an extensive examination of AI's definition would exceed the scope of this study. Throughout AI's development, various methodologies have been explored that have alternatively focused on cognitive processes and human logic or behavioral patterns, seeking to create systems that replicate human task performance and develop either optimally intelligent systems or systems that utilize logical decision-making processes to function effectively. For the context of this research, AI can be understood as a tool that can perform and support human activities. This functional perspective allows us to examine AI's applications without delving into the broader theoretical debates about artificial intelligence itself. This approach enables a more focused analysis of how AI technologies can be practically implemented and utilized, rather than getting absorbed in the complex philosophical and technical discussions surrounding the nature of artificial intelligence.[12]

The integration of AI in gathering and analysing digital evidence forensically represents a potential game-changing advancement that could enable the judicial system to optimize processes, especially by reducing investigation duration. In today's environment, AI has infiltrated multiple domains of forensic examination, transforming conventional approaches. The analysis of images and videos has undergone a particularly significant transformation, with AI systems now demonstrating capabilities in identifying faces, detecting objects, and improving the quality of poor visual evidence obtained from crime scenes. These technological advances offer the possibility of processing evidence more efficiently and extracting valuable information that might otherwise be difficult to obtain through traditional methods. This technological evolution in forensic analysis represents a shift toward more automated and potentially more accurate evidence processing, which could substantially impact how criminal investigations are conducted and how quickly cases can be resolved. [13]

FORENSIC EVIDENCE

Edmound Locard, a pioneer in forensic science, opiend that a criminal will always leave an aspect of his in the crime and to explain this gave the concept of exchange, which asserts that "when two entities come in contact with each other, they leave a trace on each other," is one of the fundamental tenets of forensic science. In the sense that even a pattern will be sufficient to identify the suspect and assist us in carrying out our procedures from crime scenes to courtrooms, this principle is essentially in charge of the foundation of forensic science and investigation, as well as artificial intelligence.[14]

AI[15] can be a helpful tool in many ways, including:

i.Data analysis and availability to support the inquiry.
ii.Dealing with issues that have a clear scope and case technique.
iii.Identification of patterns.
iv.Giving a thorough explanation of the thinking process.
v.In forensic science, lowering the number of false-positive or false-negative results during analysis is a standard practice.

[11] Shai Farber, “AI as a Decision Support Tool in Forensic Image Analysis: A Pilot Study on Integrating Large Language Models into Crime Scene Investigation Workflows” (2025) 70 Journal of Forensic Sciences 932.
[12] Raffaella Brighi, Michele Ferrazzano and Leonardo Summa, “Legal Issues in AI Forensics: Understanding the Importance of Humanware” [2020] Journal of Legal Sciences, Cognitive Sciences and Artificial Intelligence.
[13] Shai Farber, “AI as a Decision Support Tool in Forensic Image Analysis: A Pilot Study on Integrating Large Language Models into Crime Scene Investigation Workflows” (2025) 70 Journal of Forensic Sciences 932.
[14] Siddhant Gupta, Vinny Sharma and Prashant Johri, “Artificial Intelligence in Forensic Science” (2020) 7 International Research Journal of Engineering and Technology (IRJET) 7181.
[15] Swapnil R. Kamdar and Astha Pandey, “The Scope of Artificial Intelligence in Forensic Science” 58 The Indian Police Journal 48.

vi.The legal community will also benefit from formalizing the representation of knowledge to provide prompt and precise solutions.
vii.Knowledge discovery and data mining.
viii.Constructing statistical proof.
ix.Connecting with existing applications, tools, and architecture.

Pattern recognition plays a vital role in the criminal justice system. Humans possess a natural ability to identify patterns and have developed skills to differentiate between various elements, including objects, individuals, information, complex emotional states, and situations. AI technology seeks to replicate this human capability through computer hardware and software systems. AI utilises datasets to develop the ability to identify individuals from photographs, execute sophisticated robotic and computational operations, analyse online consumer behavior and purchasing trends, diagnose medical conditions from complex imaging studies, and forecast financial market trends. These self-improving algorithms demonstrate AI's potential to mirror human pattern recognition abilities across diverse applications. This technological capacity to identify and interpret patterns has significant implications for criminal justice applications, where the ability to recognize connections and anomalies can be crucial for investigative success.[16]

APPLICATION FOR AI TOOLS

Although forensic science provides information from the crime scene to help clear the air and convict those responsible, the majority of the work is still done by humans, who take their time and make mistakes. Therefore, using artificial intelligence will make things much faster, more efficient, and error-free. By providing such analyses on object-based data analysis, AI removes this. For instance, by using AI-based technologies that provide rapid analysis of large digital evidence or DNA samples, the backlog of cases awaiting forensic scientists' analysis can be reduced.[17] Artificial algorithms are being used in treatment to infer radiological images that could play a major role in the administration of and collection of evidence, which can expedite the justice delivery system, which could have important implications for the criminal justice and medical examiner communities when establishing cause and manner of death.[18]

Facial Recognition Technology

In order to help criminal investigations, the criminal justice and law enforcement communities use video and image analysis to gather information about individuals, items, and activities. Conventional human-assistance software algorithms are restricted to preset features like eye color, shape, and distance between eyes for facial recognition or demographic data for pattern analysis. Beyond what humans could think, AI video and image algorithms can learn and do difficult jobs by developing and determining their own unique complex facial recognition features and parameters. These algorithms can detect complicated events like accidents and crimes in progress or after the fact, match faces, and recognize guns and other things. With National Institute of Justice(USA) funding and in collaboration with the FBI and the National Institute of Standards and Technology, researchers at the University of Texas at Dallas are evaluating human facial recognition and exploring ways to compare AI algorithms and skilled visual examiners. According to preliminary findings, AI-based facial recognition algorithms created in 2017 perform similarly to human face examiners when the researchers set a recognition time constraint of 30 seconds. A team of researchers at the University of Central Florida is working with the Orlando Police Department to create algorithms that can recognize things in videos, including people, vehicles, weapons, and buildings, without the need for human assistance. Additionally, they are creating algorithms to recognize behaviors like violent crimes and traffic accidents.[19]

[16] https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/using-artificial-intelligence-address-criminal-justice-needs
[17] Muhammad Arjamand and others, “The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Forensic Science: Transforming Investigations through Technology” 7 International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Publications (IJMRAP) 67.
[18] Christopher Rigano, “Using Artificial Intelligence to Address Criminal Justice Needs” (National Institute of Justice, October 8, 2018) <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/using-artificial-intelligence-address-criminal-justice-needs> accessed July 6, 2025.
[19] Christopher Rigano, “Using Artificial Intelligence to Address Criminal Justice Needs” (National Institute of Justice, October 8, 2018) <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/using-artificial-intelligence-address-criminal-justice-needs> accessed July 6, 2025.

DNA Analysis

The majority of the cells in our bodies contain DNA, which is specific to each person and leaves a trace of ourselves wherever we go. Forensic investigators who utilize DNA to identify victims and suspects at crime scenes now have an advantage because of this.[20] To perform a forensic DNA analysis, DNA is first extracted from a sample. Just one nanogram of DNA is usually a sufficient quantity to provide good data.[21] According to delicate processes developed in recent years, police would now be able to detect even the smallest traces of DNA and "touch DNA" on evidence or at the scene of a crime. During the conduct of a crime, contact with persons and items can spread biological material, including blood, saliva, semen, and skin cells. The sensitivity of DNA analysis has increased along with DNA technology, enabling forensic investigators to find and handle low-level, deteriorated, or otherwise unusable DNA evidence that was previously unusable. Large volumes of complicated data are produced in electronic format by DNA analysis; these data contain patterns that may be beyond the scope of human interpretation but could be helpful when system sensitivity rises.[22] The implementation of hybrid analytical systems has demonstrated significant improvements in DNA sample processing capabilities, enabling forensic laboratories to handle increased caseloads while maintaining rigorous quality standards.

STRmix, GEDmatch, and Parabon NanoLabs are examples of tools that employ AI to evaluate DNA evidence and identify suspects.[23] The Golden State Killer case (2018)[24] in the United States was a significant forensic genealogy case in which detectives matched DNA from murder scenes with genetic profiles found in public databases using GEDmatch. However, these procedures have brought up moral concerns around consent and genetic privacy.

In Ranjitsing Brahmajeetsing Sharma v. State of Maharashtra[25], the Apex Court recognized the relevance of DNA evidence in criminal trials. An important step toward the official acceptance of DNA testing in the Indian court system was taken with the passage of the DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill, 2019[26]. In order to set guidelines for the use and preservation of DNA profiles, this law was filed to control the use of DNA technology for establishing people's identities in criminal and civil proceedings.[27] The Nirbhaya case (2012) in India, in which forensic specialists employed DNA profiling to identify and convict the offenders, was a significant case for DNA analysis.[28]

AI-Powered Crime Scene Analysis and Data Integration

Machine learning algorithms possess the capability to analyse and identify connections within this information that might escape human investigators' attention. Additionally, AI can synthesise various types of accessible data to create comprehensive crime scene reconstructions, offering investigators a more complete understanding of events. DNA evidence analysis represents a cornerstone of modern investigative techniques. AI has the potential to significantly enhance this process by automating the analysis of complex DNA mixtures, which traditionally present considerable challenges for human analysts to interpret accurately. Through automated systems, AI can handle these intricate biological -

[20] Jaya Lakshmi Bukyya and others, “DNA Profiling in Forensic Science: A Review” (2021) 08 Global Medical Genetics 135.
[21] Norrgard, K. (2008) Forensics, DNA fingerprinting, and CODIS. Nature Education 1(1):35.
[22] Eman Ahmed Alaa El-Din, “Artificial Intelligence in Forensic Science: Invasion or Revolution?” (2022) 10 Egyptian Society of Clinical Toxicology Journal 20.
[23] Abhishek Sharma Padmanabhan and S Sapna, “Forensic Investigation Approaches of DNA Analysis and Criminal Investigation” (2023) 13 International Journal of Safety and Security Engineering 129.
[24] Ray A Wickenheiser, “Forensic Genealogy, Bioethics and the Golden State Killer Case” (2019) 1 Forensic Science International: Synergy 114.
[25] (2005) 5 SCC 294 : 2005 SCC (Cri) 1057 : 2005 SCC OnLine SC 696 at page 329.
[26] The DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill, 2019 was introduced in Lok Sabha by the Minister for Science and Technology, Mr. Harsh Vardhan, on July 8, 2019. The Bill provides for the regulation of use of DNA technology for establishing the identity of certain persons.
[27] Aditya Nuna and Tejas Gupta, “The Role of Forensic Evidence, DNA Tests, and Narco-Analysis in the Indian Legal System” (Elsevier BV 2025) <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5069346> accessed July 7, 2025.
[28] Muhammad Arjamand and others, “The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Forensic Science: Transforming Investigations through Technology” 7 International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Publications (IJMRAP) 67.

samples more efficiently and potentially with greater precision than conventional manual methods. This technological advancement allows forensic teams to process evidence more rapidly while potentially uncovering insights that might otherwise remain undetected through traditional investigative approaches.

AI algorithms are constantly getting better at recognizing contributors to a mixture and combining each in one profile, improving the accuracy and speed of DNA profiling.[29] Traditional forensic examination methodologies, including visual inspection, microscopic analysis, infrared spectroscopy, and conventional chemical testing protocols, are characterized by inherent temporal and accuracy limitations. These conventional approaches often require extensive processing time and may yield inconclusive or erroneous analytical results, particularly when confronted with insufficient sample quantities or degraded evidence materials.[30]

In contrast, artificial intelligence-driven analytical systems demonstrate superior precision and efficiency in trace evidence detection and characterization. Machine learning algorithms can identify and analyse microscopic evidence with enhanced accuracy while significantly reducing processing timeframes. This technological advancement is particularly valuable in forensic cases involving sexual offenses, where the detection of biological evidence such as spermatozoa may be compromised by minimal sample volumes or challenging preservation conditions.[31]

Pattern Recognition

Among the various artificial intelligence architectures employed in forensic applications, convolutional neural networks (CNNs) represent one of the most promising and effective computational frameworks. In forensic odontology, CNN architectures have proven particularly effective in automated dental identification procedures, demonstrating superior performance in tooth detection and systematic numbering on periapical radiographic images. Furthermore, convolutional neural networks have shown significant promise in sex determination analyses based on dental morphological characteristics.[32] These AI systems can systematically analyze dental features and morphometric measurements to provide reliable sex estimation, contributing valuable information to forensic identification processes in cases involving skeletal remains or incomplete biological evidence. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ), has demonstrated sufficient efficacy to warrant integration into the Chicago Police Department's comprehensive Violence Reduction Strategy.

The incorporation of predictive analytics into operational law enforcement protocols represents a significant advancement in proactive crime prevention methodologies. A notable implementation of predictive analytics in law enforcement was developed through collaborative efforts between the Chicago Police Department and the Illinois Institute of Technology. This partnership resulted in the creation of advanced algorithmic frameworks designed to systematically collect and analyse comprehensive datasets, enabling the formation of strategic analytical groupings for enhanced crime prevention initiatives. Moreover, these digital technologies can help in analysing the fingerprints, handwritten notes, including other types of biometric data, once the database is created, matching gets easier, faster, and accurate; in turn reducing human error.[33]

[29] Muhammad Arjamand and others, “The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Forensic Science: Transforming Investigations through Technology” 7 International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Publications (IJMRAP) 67.
[30] Suresh Kumar and others, “Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Field of Forensic Medicine & Criminal Investigation: A Way Forward - IJFMTS” (2024) 9 IP International Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicological Sciences 73.
[31] Ray A Wickenheiser, “Forensic Genealogy, Bioethics and the Golden State Killer Case” (2019) 1 Forensic Science International: Synergy 114.
[32] Madzida Hundur Hiyari, Mirza Pasic and Selma Zukic, “Application of Convolutional Neural Networks for Determining Gender and Age in Forensic Dentistry” [2024] Cureus.
[33] Christopher Rigano, “Using Artificial Intelligence to Address Criminal Justice Needs” (National Institute of Justice, October 8, 2018) <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/using-artificial-intelligence-address-criminal-justice-needs> accessed July 6, 2025.

3D Crime Scene Modeling and Virtual Reconstruction

The investigative value of AI-powered 3D reconstruction extends beyond courtroom presentation to include critical analytical capabilities that have contributed to significant breakthroughs in complex criminal investigations. These sophisticated three-dimensional visualizations serve as powerful demonstrative evidence, enabling courtroom audiences to develop a comprehensive understanding of crime scene dynamics and the sequence of events that transpired during criminal incidents. These systems excel in trajectory analysis, particularly in cases involving projectile evidence, enabling forensic investigators to accurately determine bullet paths, impact angles, and points of origin with remarkable precision.

Additionally, the technology facilitates detailed positional analysis, allowing investigators to reconstruct the spatial relationships between suspects, victims, and physical evidence at critical moments during criminal events, thereby providing crucial insights into the mechanics and chronology of criminal activities.[34] In State v. Peterson (2003)[35] forensic rebuilding played a crucial role in determining whether Kathleen Peterson's death was a coincidence or homicide. AI-driven 3D reconstructions can offer courts more precise visual representations of crime scenes, refining judicial decision-making.

A particularly significant development in this domain is the emergence of virtopsy, also referred to as virtual autopsy, which represents a revolutionary non-invasive approach to postmortem examination. This advanced technological framework employs sophisticated imaging modalities, including computed tomography (CT) scanning, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and three-dimensional surface scanning techniques, to conduct comprehensive examinations of deceased individuals without requiring traditional invasive dissection procedures.[36]

Artificial intelligence technologies have assumed a pivotal role in the advancement of bloodstain pattern analysis (BPA), representing a substantial enhancement in forensic blood evidence interpretation capabilities. The implementation of AI-driven BPA technologies has proven particularly valuable in determining the precise spatial positioning of victims and perpetrators during the commission of violent crimes. Through systematic analysis of bloodstain distribution patterns, impact angles, and spatter characteristics, these intelligent systems can generate highly accurate reconstructions of the physical dynamics present at crime scenes.[37]

The implementation of AI-enhanced forensic reporting systems provides substantial analytical support to judicial officers, enabling more comprehensive evaluation of complex forensic evidence and facilitating more informed judicial determinations. These intelligent systems ensure that judges have access to thorough analytical frameworks and comprehensive evidentiary assessments that support equitable and scientifically sound legal judgments.

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

We must make sure to pursue the strategy that maximises the benefits of artificial intelligence's profits while minimising its risks, since, on the whole, its advantages outweigh its threats. A person-centric approach to AI is desired in order to keep us on the right track. This means that we must remember that the development and application of AI should not be viewed as a path in and of itself, but rather as

[34] Saurav Yadav and others, “Artificial Intelligence: An Advanced Evolution In Forensic and Criminal Investigation” (2022) 1 Current Forensic Science.
[35] 634 S.E.2d 594
[36] Saurav Yadav and others, “Artificial Intelligence: An Advanced Evolution In Forensic and Criminal Investigation” (2022) 1 Current Forensic Science.
[37] Niketha Ravivarma, “Development of an Artificial Intelligence Method for the Analysis of Bloodstain Patterns” <https://hdl.handle.net/11244/330997> accessed July 7, 2025.

a means to increase personal security. Since people can only assertively and fully reap the benefits of AI if they can trust the technology, trustworthy AI will serve as our compass. Evaluating the legal and human rights ramifications of excessive use of ICT or artificial intelligence tools is no longer about the future; rather, it is about the present. Concerns about jurisdiction, data leaks, privacy, copyright, and other human rights issues are emerging as a result of the battle for human and fundamental rights in this age of overuse of AI-driven tools.[38]

The interpretation of information, also known as the interpretation of information in Artificial Intelligence and ontologies, is the most important principle in the majority of AI programs. This refers to how we interpret the facts that we wish to debate and how we methodically organise the knowledge representation so that we can debate it. It is crucial to keep in mind that our understanding of knowledge may involve the characteristics of AI and how we process the data, and how it is implemented.

The ethical framework governing AI applications in forensic science encompasses four fundamental challenge categories that demand rigorous attention from practitioners and policymakers.

(1) Informed consent to use

The primary ethical concern relates to informed consent protocols, which require establishing comprehensive procedures for obtaining appropriate authorization before implementing AI analytical tools on individual cases or personal data. The use of artificial intelligence in criminal investigations, particularly facial recognition technology and widespread surveillance systems, has sparked significant privacy issues. India's Supreme Court established privacy as a constitutional right under Article 21 in the landmark K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India[39] case from 2017. Despite this ruling, government agencies continue implementing AI-driven monitoring systems without adequate data protection legislation in place. The UK provides a relevant precedent through the R (on the application of Bridges) v. South Wales Police case from 2020, where the Court of Appeal ruled that law enforcement's deployment of real-time facial recognition technology breached privacy rights. This decision represents a significant legal milestone in limiting AI surveillance overreach.

(2) Safety and transparency

Safety and transparency considerations represent the second critical ethical dimension, necessitating the development of robust protocols that ensure AI systems operate with appropriate levels of reliability while maintaining transparency in their analytical processes and decision-making algorithms. This transparency requirement is essential for maintaining public trust and ensuring that forensic AI applications remain accountable to judicial and scientific scrutiny.

(3) Algorithmic fairness and biases

The third major ethical challenge concerns algorithmic fairness and bias mitigation, which requires systematic evaluation and correction of potential discriminatory patterns that may emerge in AI analytical systems. These concerns are particularly significant in forensic applications where biased algorithms could disproportionately impact certain demographic groups or communities. These AI-driven predictive systems have been documented to systematically direct increased law enforcement attention toward certain neighbourhoods and populations, often reflecting historical patterns of -

[38] Karen Yeung, Council of Europe, “A study of the implications of advanced digital technologies (including AI systems) for the concept of responsibility within a human rights framework” DGI(2019)05.
[39] WP (C) 494/2012.

discriminatory policing practices rather than objective risk assessment. A particularly well-documented manifestation of AI bias in criminal justice applications involves the Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS) system, which has been extensively analysed for its discriminatory impact on racial and ethnic minorities. A comprehensive analysis of COMPAS algorithms revealed systematic disparities in risk assessment outcomes, with the system demonstrating a pronounced tendency to classify Black defendants as high-risk offenders at significantly higher rates compared to white defendants with similar criminal histories and circumstances.[40] In State v. Loomis (2016)[41] the Wisconsin SC ruled that the defendant's sentencing could not be solely based on AI predictions due to concerns about bias and lack of transparency.[42]

(1)Data Privacy Protection

This constitutes the fourth fundamental ethical challenge, requiring the implementation of comprehensive safeguards to protect sensitive personal information processed by AI systems while ensuring compliance with privacy regulations and maintaining individual confidentiality rights. In the United States, forensic applications involving health information must comply with HIPAA regulations[43], which establish stringent requirements for protecting personally identifiable health information (PHI). The GDPR's[44] automated decision-making provisions create additional regulatory complexity for AI-enhanced forensic systems. The automated decision-making framework (Article 22 GDPR) serves as a form of indirect control over the use of AI systems, on the basis that AI systems are frequently used to take automated decisions that impact individuals. The "Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) 2023" is India's first inclusive data privacy framework of India aiming to regulate private information and protect and process personal information of citizens.

(2)Privacy Issues and Surveillance

The deployment of AI technologies in criminal investigations across India raises significant privacy concerns regarding data collection and surveillance practices. While AI capabilities such as facial recognition systems, predictive policing algorithms, and social media monitoring can enhance law enforcement's ability to identify and prevent criminal activities, these same technologies pose risks of creating extensive surveillance networks that may infringe upon citizens' privacy rights. In India, individual liberties are fundamental principles, and the widespread implementation of AI surveillance systems creates potential for invasive monitoring of ordinary citizens. Facial recognition technology exemplifies this concern, as it can operate continuously in public areas, capturing and processing images of people without their awareness or permission. This capability enables real-time tracking of individual movements and activities. Although such surveillance tools may prove effective in criminal detection and crime prevention, they raise critical questions about the appropriate boundaries of government surveillance power and the protection of citizens' privacy rights. The challenge lies in balancing law enforcement effectiveness with the preservation of civil liberties in a democratic society. [45]

(3)Admissibility of AI-Generated Evidence

Since legal systems consider it difficult to establish specific regulations for AI-driven investigations, the admissibility of forensic evidence generated through AI remains a serious concern globally. In India,

[40] Tim Brennan and William Dieterich, "Correctional Offender Management Profiles for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS)" [2017] Handbook of Recidivism Risk/Needs Assessment Tools 49.
[41] 881 N.W.2d 749 (Wis. 2016)
[42] Hlr, "State v. Loomis" (2017) 130 Harvard Law Review.
[43] Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act,1996.
[44]The General Data Protection Regulation, 2016.
[45]Navin Kumar, "From Surveillance to Sentencing: Evaluating AI's Role in Indian Criminal Justice" (2025) 30 Scientific Bulletin 68.

courts have been cautious in accepting AI-based evidence due to concerns about accuracy, bias, and dependability. In Anvar P.V. v. P.K. Basheer[46](2014) it was ruled that on the admissibility of electronic evidence, requiring compliance with Section 65B of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, which outlines the conditions under which digital evidence can be considered valid.

The case of United States v. D'Angelo (2018) represents a significant international example of judicial scrutiny regarding AI-assisted digital evidence analysis. This case demonstrated the substantial evidentiary value of AI technologies in processing complex digital evidence while simultaneously highlighting critical concerns about the reliability and transparency of AI-generated analytical conclusions. However, the defense counsel in D'Angelo raised fundamental challenges to the admissibility of AI-generated evidence, arguing that the absence of adequate human oversight and the opaque nature of AI decision-making processes created substantial reliability concerns. The defense contended that AI-generated evidence should be excluded from judicial consideration due to the inherent "black box" characteristics of machine learning algorithms, which prevent meaningful examination of the reasoning processes underlying AI analytical conclusions.[47]

FORENSIC EVIDENCE IN SEXUAL ASSAULT CASES

Sexual assault investigations conducted by forensic laboratories in India encompass a broad spectrum of criminal cases involving diverse biological and non-biological evidentiary materials. The effectiveness of these forensic investigations is influenced by several critical factors, including the nature of evidence being examined, the quantity and quality of available samples, and the analytical capabilities of the investigating laboratory. The probative value of physical evidence is inherently dependent on the specific circumstances surrounding each case, where evidence that may prove pivotal in one prosecution could hold minimal significance in another. For instance, fingerprint evidence, hair samples, and touch DNA may establish a suspect's presence at a crime scene, but such evidence could have been deposited under innocent circumstances hours or days before the actual crime occurred. However, when circumstances indicate that the suspect had no legitimate reason to be at the location, such scientific evidence assumes highly incriminating significance.

Under the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, expert opinion evidence is admissible under Section 45, which allows courts to consider scientific evidence presented by qualified forensic experts. The Indian Penal Code, originally under Sections 375-376 and now under Sections 63-64 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, provides the legal framework for prosecuting sexual assault cases, while the Criminal Procedure Code mandates specific procedures for evidence collection, including medical examination of victims under Section 164A.

Unlike the extensive CODIS[48] system in the United States, India's DNA database system is still developing but includes crime scene DNA profiles, convicted offender profiles, and missing persons databases. The Supreme Court of India, in State of Punjab v. Gurmit Singh (1996)[49], established that DNA evidence is admissible under Section 45 of the Evidence Act, emphasizing the reliability of DNA profiling in sexual assault cases.

[46] (2014 10 SCC 473)
[47] Nasa Zata Dina, Sri Devi Ravana and Norisma Idris, “Legal Judgment Prediction Using Natural Language Processing and Machine Learning Methods: A Systematic Literature Review” (2025) 15 SAGE Open.
[48] The Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS, blends forensic science and computer technology into a tool that enables federal, state, and local forensic laboratories to exchange and compare DNA profiles electronically, thereby linking serial violent crimes to each other and to known offenders. Using the National DNA Index System of CODIS, the National Missing Persons DNA Database also helps identify missing and unidentified individuals.
[49] AIR 1393, 1996

The landmark Nirbhaya case, decided by the Supreme Court in Mukesh & Anr v. State for NCT of Delhi (2017)[50], highlighted the critical importance of comprehensive forensic evidence collection in sexual assault cases. This case led to significant legal reforms through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, which introduced mandatory medical examination protocols, standardized evidence collection procedures, and time-bound investigation requirements. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, further strengthened the legal framework by establishing special provisions for child victims, including mandatory reporting requirements and child-friendly evidence collection procedures.[51]

Forensic toxicological investigations play a crucial role in cases involving drug-facilitated sexual assault, providing corroborative evidence through the identification of substances such as benzodiazepines, ketamine, and other sedatives in blood, urine, and hair samples. The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, governs the investigation of cases involving date-rape drugs and provides the legal framework for toxicological analysis. These investigations are particularly time-critical, as the detection window for many substances is limited, although improved sensitivity of toxicological methods has extended detection periods for certain drugs.[52]

The Central Forensic Science Laboratory (CFSL) and state forensic science laboratories operate under standardized guidelines established by the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D), which outline standard operating procedures for DNA evidence collection, chain of custody requirements, quality assurance protocols, and laboratory accreditation standards. These laboratories must maintain accreditation from the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL) and comply with ISO/IEC 17025 standards to ensure reliability and admissibility of forensic evidence.[53]

Research and case studies consistently demonstrate that the most commonly collected and examined physical evidence in sexual assault cases includes fingerprints, bodily fluids, and hair samples. Sperm detection is a police investigation is very relevant aspect in rape or sexual assault cases. Sometimes, the samples are not sufficient for analysis and therefore require a lot of manual work to scan the sperm under an optimal microscope. “Convolutional Neural Networks[54] trained by the VGG19 network and a variation of VGG19 with 1942[55]” can achieve this tedious work, by reducing the sperm scanning time by hours, thus expediting the whole investigation process.

However, the Indian forensic landscape has expanded to include advanced DNA analysis techniques such as Low Copy Number (LCN) DNA, mitochondrial DNA analysis, Y-chromosome analysis, and rapid DNA testing. Digital forensics has also become increasingly important, encompassing mobile phone evidence, social media investigations, CCTV footage analysis, and GPS tracking data.[56]

[50] (2017) 6 SCC 1.
[51] Aditya Nuna and Tejas Gupta, “The Role of Forensic Evidence, DNA Tests, and Narco-Analysis in the Indian Legal System” (Elsevier BV 2025) <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5069346> accessed July 7, 2025.
[52] UNODC, “Guidelines for the Forensic Analysis of Drugs Facilitating Sexual Assault and Other Criminal Acts” [2011] United Nations.
[53] Donald Johnson and others, “Use of Forensic Science in Investigating Crimes of Sexual Violence” (2012) 18 Violence Against Women 193.
[54]A Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) is a type of artificial neural network (ANN) majorly used for image and video recognition to detect patterns and features.
[55] A deep convolutional neural network known for its 19 layers (16 convolutional and 3 fully connected) and its ability to classify images into 1000 different categories.
[56] Bruce Budowle, Arthur J Eisenberg and Angela van Daal, “Validity of Low Copy Number Typing and Applications to Forensic Science” (2009) 50 Croatian Medical Journal 207.

Articles 51A (h) and (j) of the Constitution of India prescribe fundamental duties of citizens to develop a scientific temper and the spirit of inquiry and reform and to strive towards excellence. In the landmark case of Narayan Dutt Tiwari[57], the Delhi HC reiterated the same and explained that: "...What we wonder is that when modern tools of adjudication are at hand, must the courts refuse to step out of their dogmas and insist upon the long route to be followed at the cost of misery to the litigants. The answer obviously has to be no. The courts are for doing justice, by adjudicating rival claims and unearthing the truth and not for following age-old practices and procedures when new, better methods are available."

The admissibility and probative value of forensic evidence in Indian courts depends on proper evidence collection, maintenance of chain of custody, and expert testimony that meets judicial standards. The Supreme Court's decision in Arjun Panditrao Khotkar v. Kailash Kushanrao Gorantyal (2020)[58] clarified admissibility standards for DNA evidence and established comprehensive guidelines for DNA sample collection and analysis. Legal challenges often arise regarding contamination of samples, degraded DNA evidence, mixed DNA profiles, and statistical interpretation issues, requiring expert witnesses to meet stringent qualification standards and withstand rigorous cross-examination.[59]

Maharashtra Police pioneered AI integration in crime prevention by acquiring "Predictive Policing Software" and Universal Forensic Extraction Devices (UFEDs) from international manufacturers.[60] In December 2018, DGP Om Prakash Singh of Uttar Pradesh introduced "Trinetra," an AI-powered mobile application containing a database of 50,000 criminals with photographs, addresses, and criminal records. This system proved effective in capturing a notorious criminal in Lucknow, demonstrating its practical value in law enforcement operations.[61] Delhi Police extensively utilized AI and forensic technologies to investigate 755 cases related to the 2020 North East Delhi violence. The investigation involved analyzing 945 CCTV recordings and smartphone videos using facial recognition and other AI tools, leading to successful arrests.[62]

The recent enactment of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, and the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, has further strengthened the legal framework for sexual assault investigations by enhancing punishment provisions and streamlining investigation procedures. These legislative developments, combined with advancing forensic technologies and standardized protocols, ensure that forensic evidence continues to serve justice while maintaining the highest standards of scientific integrity and legal admissibility in Indian courts.

[57](2012) 12 SCC 554.
[58] (2020) 7 SCC 1.
[59] Varun Chhachhar and others, "Exploring the Role of DNA Technology in Administration of Justice in India: A Comparative Analysis with USA" (2023) 11 Journal of Law and Sustainable Development 1841.
[60] Ankita Deshkar, "To Fight Crime Using AI, Maharashtra Police Create MARVEL" The Indian Express (July 18, 2024) <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/to-fight-crime-using-ai-maharashtra-police-create-marvel-9460472/> accessed July 7, 2025.
[61] "AI Is Being Used by the UP Police to Catch Criminals" (IndiaAI) <https://indiaai.gov.in/case-study/ai-is-being-used-by-the-up-police-to-catch-criminals> accessed July 7, 2025.
[62] Rahul Jaywant Bhise, "Delhi Police Used AI Technology to Probe 755 Cases in February 2020" Zee News (March 12, 2021) <https://zeenews.india.com/technology/delhi-police-used-ai-technology-to-probe-755-cases-in-february-2020-2347266.html> accessed July 7, 2025.

CONCLUSION

The integration of artificial intelligence in forensic medicine, pathology, and justice systems represents a transformative advancement that promises enhanced societal safety and well-being. While countries like India are developing sector-specific regulatory frameworks rather than comprehensive AI legislation, the global challenge remains to create adaptive legal structures that can keep pace with rapidly evolving AI technologies. The key to successful AI implementation lies in recognizing that these technologies should augment, not replace, human expertise with AI serving as a powerful tool for accelerating evidence analysis and data interpretation while human judgment remains essential for contextual understanding and critical decision-making. Through this balanced collaboration between technological innovation and human knowledge, coupled with robust data quality standards and thoughtful regulatory oversight, we can harness AI's full potential to create more efficient, precise, and ethical justice systems that serve the greater good of society.

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Indian Ocean Diplomacy: Comprehending the Indian Vision Ahead

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has been a vital juncture in the connectivity for trade, commerce, and shipping. The waters of this region have served as shipping lanes for economic development, as well as a hub for disputes, conflict, and activity in the larger African and Asian plateways. India's approach towards the region can be largely attributed to its geostrategic location, which also further dictates the foundations for its maritime security. This research paper focuses on India's ambitions in the IOR and its geopolitical manoeuvres around the region, including an analysis of US and Chinese activities in the region pre- Trump 2.0 presidency. The argument of the paper lies in the notion that the IOR should not be viewed through the lens of a single economy but rather, the voice and vote of all. This intends to place India, not as a messiah, unlike China, developing focal points in maritime security, domain awareness, littoral state engagement, economic interests, etc., but rather one of their own whose interests in the regions are as significant as their people and their economy. It also showcases facets of India's toolkit, approaches towards the region, and shapes the discourse for India's future ambitions in and around the region.

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KEYWORDS
Indian Ocean, Security, IOR, Global South, Maritime Security, China

I. Research Methodology

The Research method used in this paper is primarily qualitative in nature. The paper has been divided into halves, the first half providing a description of the region and challenges to its security architecture. The second half of the paper talks about Indian Ocean diplomacy, increasing US- China competition, and an analysis of their activities and interests in the region till 2024. The third part analyses India's perspective in its approach to the region. A limitation of this study has been the inconsistency in picking common timelines. The historical analysis of bilateral relations with India often picks at the former's timeline of independence. Similarly, US and Chinese influence in the region has only been studied till 2024, the end of Joe Biden's presidency.

II. The Indian Ocean Region: Definition and Importance

1.Definition and Composition

The Indian Ocean Region is an estimated 1/5th of the world's oceanic area, situated between the African continent and the western Indian Ocean. It encompasses the central Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, adjacent to Myanmar, and also covers the eastern Indian Ocean. The waters shoal the Indian subcontinent and move eastwards to Southeast Asia and the Australian Pacific Rim. The region situated at the crossroads of global trade, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, is also a vital geostrategic location, where almost 90,000 vessels pass per year transporting 9.84 billion tonnes[1]. Additionally, 36 million barrels, corresponding to 40 % of the world's oil supply, also witnesses 64 % of

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the oil trade crossing through the Indian Ocean Region.[2] The Indian Ocean, composed of the eastern and the western Indian Ocean, also includes the Bay of Bengal, the Malacca Strait, and the southern and western waters of Australia and Indonesia. The latter stretches from latitude 60°S, i.e., Cape Agulhas (the southernmost point on the African continent), covering the straits of Hormuz and Bab El Mandeb, to longitude 88°E, running roughly through the Bay of Bengal, down to latitude 60°S.

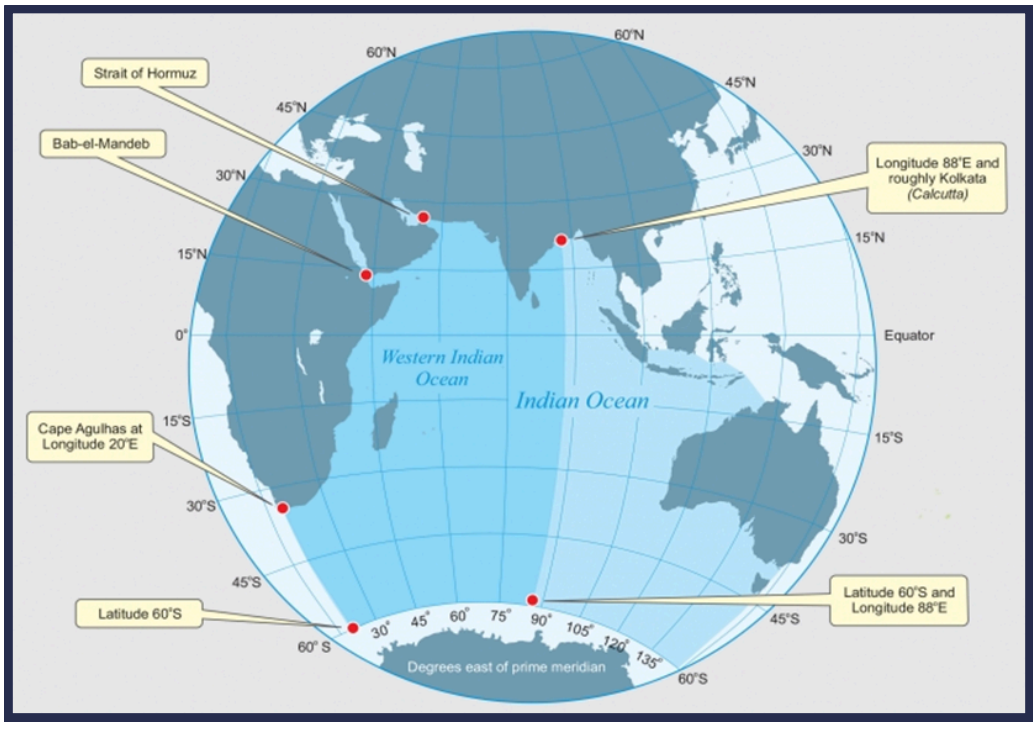


Image depicting the composition of the Eastern and Western Indian Ocean
(Picture taken from: *India and Africa: Maritime Security and India's Strategic Interests in the Western Indian Ocean; Denis Venter*).

2.Importance of the Region

The importance of this region is underscored not only by the percentage of global trade that passes through it but also by the abundance of resources it fosters, including fisheries, ocean energy, seabed mining, minerals, and marine tourism. Fishing in the Indian Ocean is also responsible for almost 15 percent of the world's total fishing activity.[3] An interesting feature of this region is the ability of the Littoral Islands to manoeuvre and command the larger land masses to influence trade over the region. These islands significantly shape the security architecture of the region by playing a crucial role along the SLOCs, ensuring access to navies along the waters and the regulation of trade and commerce. The region is thus securitised, including the presence of information channels, and thorough patrolling of these regions is done in order to ensure livelihood and passage of trade from major non - traditional security threats.

Furthermore, the region is viewed as a theatre by peripheral countries, including a nexus of economies that, as of today, encompasses around 1/5th of the international political economy. In addition, shipping lanes and chokepoints are major hubs for non-conventional security threats. Furthermore, marine and ecological tourism that employs a large share of the oceanic population contributes to the littoral GDP of the island nations. Numbers reveal that 2/3rd of global oil shipments and 1/3rd of Bulk

Cargo Transit passing through the region[4], further indicating that the IOR is rich in hydrocarbon resources like oil and natural gas, fertile fishing grounds along the coastlines, and rare earth materials like polymetallic nodules along its seabed. In addition, the Indian Ocean region is found to contain rare and critical minerals, including nodules of nickel, cobalt, iron, and massive sulphide deposits of manganese, copper, zinc, iron, silver, and gold on the seabed.[5] The Security Architecture in the Indian Ocean Region is currently centred around countries that govern the region, mostly through their naval presence.

III. Maritime Security Architecture in the Indian Ocean

The Maritime security architecture can be analysed through conventional security challenges and non-conventional threats. The security architecture of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is increasingly influenced by countries situated in the core and periphery of the Indian Ocean, patrolling vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), mostly through their navies, to cater to non - traditional and traditional security challenges. Maritime security being analogous can be defined as it is both multi-dimensional, multi - faceted and involves military and nonmilitary issues[6] Conventional security challenges deal with military security issues involving naval threats and challenges, military competition between major powers, i.e., USA, China, Japan, India, Russia, and competitive claims between China and Southeast Asian countries in the South China Sea. This military competition translates into either expansion or aggression in the foreign policies of nations while conducting it in their best interests. Non-conventional threats are major concerns of narcotics, human trafficking, smuggling syndicates, money laundering networks, piracy, and terrorism at sea that endanger the shipping industry, safe passage of trade, proper extraction of minerals, offshore oil, and, at large, endanger the people employed in the region. Ransoms paid to Somali pirates have been linked to terrorist financing, with proceeds laundered through formal financial channels and Hawala networks.[7] In the past, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam insurgency in Sri Lanka made good on the elaborate smuggling networks that its associates had established regionally and globally.[7]

Military use in dealing with non-conventional maritime threats includes providing energy security, safeguarding port and ship-building facilities, delimiting extended maritime spaces (EEZs), enforcing legal and regulatory mechanisms in maritime zones (maritime management), protecting the maritime environment, preventing pollution, dumping of toxic waste, and securing dual-purpose oceanographic data.[9] The security threats channel a vast array of concerns, also transcending from locally based challenges to global mitigation. The challenges posed need political stability and economic development on the transnational front. Informal arrangements, bilateral efforts, and sub-regional initiatives partly open the door for crucial diplomatic efforts to be at the forefront.

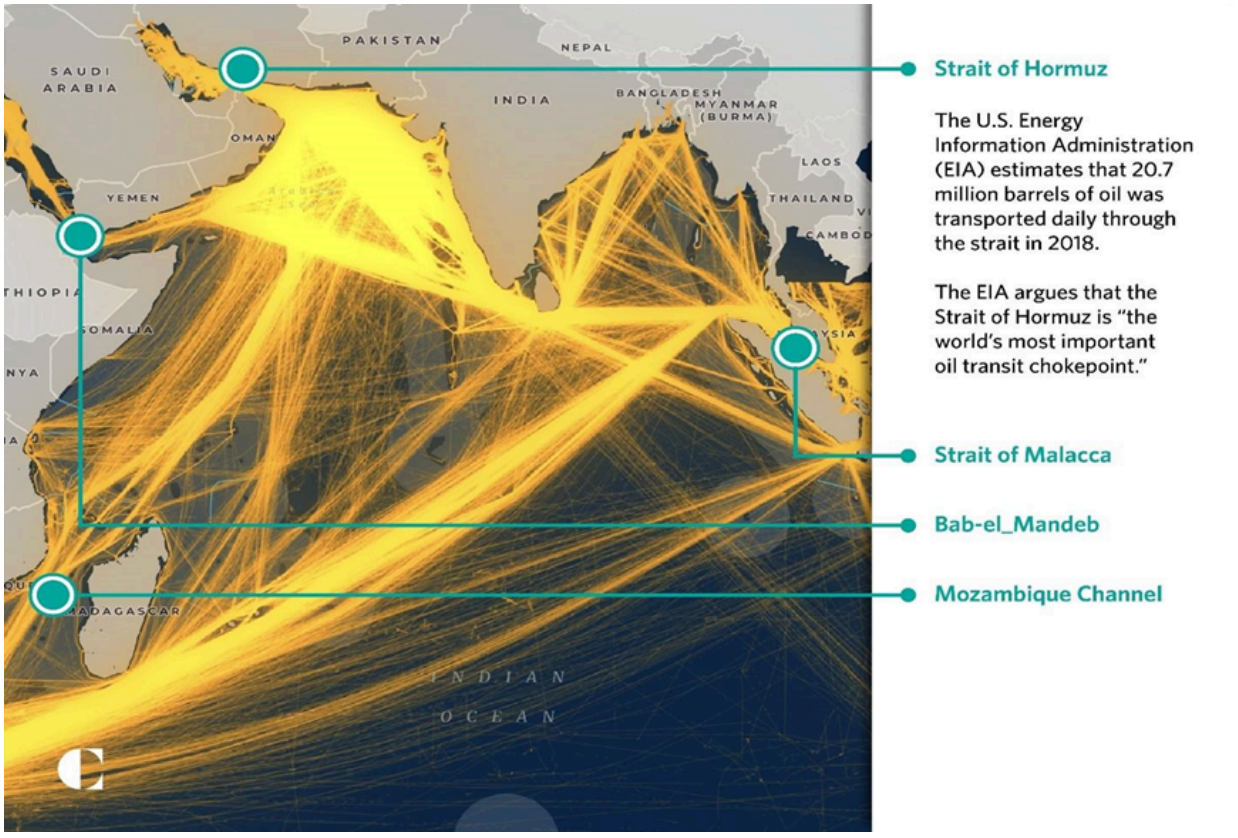
IV. Challenges to the Marine Security Architecture

The Maritime Security Architecture in the region has been perturbed with repeated piracy attempts since the last 50 years, but over time, new threats and challenges have emerged, including illicit fishing, drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, and maritime attacks by terrorist organisations. In the last few years, Houthi forces in Yemen have escalated attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, using drones, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and missiles to strike vessels, creating a critical threat to maritime security.

These threats, largely centred around choke points in the IOR, seem to place a large emphasis on these points as fault points. The Choke Points in the IOR are the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Mozambique Channel. All these chokepoints are located towards the rim of the region and can be best conceptualised as exit gateways for this theatre. Countries bordering the Strait of Hormuz, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, and Iran are all amongst the World's largest oil exporters, making trade supply chains more susceptible to large losses of capital and human strength as well. The Strait of Malacca, on the other hand, witnesses 30 percent of the world's GDP concentrated in South-east Asia. The Bab El Mandeb is the exit point for trade passing through the largely contested Suez Canal

through the coast of Ethiopia onto the Horn of Africa, which also happens to be one of the World's largest piracy-laden regions.

Today, Maritime Security faces challenges from large aspects of pressing environmental issues in land degradation, access to fresh water resources, exploitation of fishing stocks, climate change, illegal disposal of nuclear waste, environmental refugees, and urban expansion and deterioration.[10] In addition, an estimated 25,000 tonnes of washed-out crude oil per day are being dumped into the sea between the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Mozambique Channel, impacting local communities and traditional fishing villages.[11] The greatest security challenge in the Indian Ocean is thus largely ensuring member nations adhere equally and responsibly to all threats. There are numerous regional organisations, and most of the time, they overlap in their efforts. Some of these are also centred on maritime capacity building and technical coordination, such as the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) and the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) mechanism.[12] The two other institutions established by the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)—the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar and the Regional Centre for Operational Coordination (RCOC) in Seychelles—jointly constitute the executive arm of the maritime security architecture in the Western Indian Ocean.



Choke points in the Indian Ocean Region
(Source: *Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean, Darshana M.Baruah, Carnegie India*)

V. Indian Ocean Diplomacy: Highlighting Indian Ambition

India has been at the helm of the IOR, occupying 40 % of its strategic waters and a key influence in the major littoral islands.[13] India shares a centralised location, provides access to key infrastructural pillars, and its deep-rooted civilizational ties further create a strong diaspora community with many countries in the IOR. It is this cooperation that New Delhi intends to solidify amidst the geopolitical competition within the region. At the Indian Ocean conference on 01 September 2016 at Singapore,

Shri Nitin Gadkari, the then Minister of Road Transport, Highways & Shipping, India, highlighted India's ambition, exclaiming,

"My government believes that our neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean littoral can be partners in India's growth story to fuel their own economic growth and bring sustainability to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Therefore, beyond the Sagarmala, we are also committed to building infrastructure in another littoral country to create onward connectivity from India. We have established a Special Purpose Vehicle to take up maritime projects overseas. We have also signed a coastal shipping agreement with Bangladesh, and are developing the Chabahar port in Iran, which would act as the gateway to the world, not only for Afghanistan but also for the Central Asian Republics"[14]

Through this conference, the Minister highlighted New Delhi's aim to sustainably develop the Indian Ocean Region. The Sagarmala Project, launched in 2015, was a strategic initiative launched for port-led development by extensive IT for port modernisation, also promoting coastal economic development. New Delhi regards the IOR as a key strategic region necessary for its diplomatic and military engagements within its strategic proximity and being central to its security interests. India's approach had been fairly limited since the end of the Cold War due to a lack of competition in the region. This can be attributed to the fact that while the region was a front for competition in the Cold War era between the Soviet Union and the USA, the conversations disappeared with the US placing its resources in the Middle East towards the latter part of the 21st Century. This created a vacuum of Power in the region, which was then beginning to be absorbed by India and other powers in the region. Initially, it became a transit route between East Asia and the Middle East and a staging ground for the United States conducting its larger military operations in Afghanistan. Washington further led New Delhi to anchor its defences to emerge as a 'Net Security Provider' in the region, while the latter also grew cautious over increasing eyesight from Beijing.[16] Thereafter, the Indian Navy has prioritised the region and acted as the primary guarantor to anchor major communications alongside tackling non-conventional threats and keeping an eye on warding off any interest from China. China's steep rise in its presence in the region can be understood by its offering capital to small island nations, other aid, and grants for infrastructure projects, as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This further led to China securing major access to key maritime routes and strong ties with regional governments in the region.[17] This strategy demands a greater engagement from India to cooperate with these island states in major challenges, including climate change mitigation, climate finance, renewable energy transition, etc., if they're to lead the voice within the region.

India has historically placed greater attention on Sri Lanka and the Maldives, being its closest maritime neighbours, and Mauritius, Seychelles, all of which host a large Indian Diaspora. Indian Ocean Diplomacy, in this regard, seeks to magnify New Delhi's greatest strength in its basket, i.e., increasing its diplomatic footprint by leveraging civilizational connections. This is done through high-level visits and initiatives launched at regular intervals. This mechanism also involves frequent, high-level visits by Indian leaders, including at a ministerial-level engagement, creation of more diplomatic missions, including embassies, consuls, etc., to littoral states and island nations, and strengthening bilateral ties. These inroads aim to enhance cooperation amongst regional partners, valuing input through grouping mechanisms. Initiatives like the Security and Growth for all in the Region (SAGAR) saw the Indian Navy provide medical assistance teams and food relief during the COVID - 19 pandemic and were an attestation of India's continued humanitarian outreach. Later in 2025, at the ten-year anniversary of the SAGAR initiative, PM Modi announced the MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) vision that expands the scope of its predecessor. This now includes referring to the wider Global South in addressing traditional and non-traditional security threats, trade and connectivity for development, capacity-building for maritime states, and thereby locating India as a global South leader.[18] India's role in this region thus extends beyond just increasing its diplomatic footprint to envisaging a greater military might, capacity building, securing SLOCs, etc., that would showcase more responsibility amidst the global south nations. That is perhaps the might for

New Delhi's Olympus trail.

VI. Ideals of Indian Ocean Diplomacy: A History of the Geography

India has undertaken numerous initiatives to foster enhanced cooperation amongst littoral and territorial superpowers, engaging through diplomatic channels over the last decade. These initiatives include high-level visits leading to mutually signed trade agreements, extending lines of credit for infrastructural and economic development, deploying humanitarian aid during times of crisis, etc.

Amongst the earliest diplomatic efforts taken by India lies a 1974 defence agreement where India and Mauritius established efforts of cooperation with India transferring patrol boats, helicopters, and seeking training to the Mauritian Navy and Air Force.[19] Since 2003, the Indian Navy has undertaken periodic patrolling of Mauritian waters, including anti-piracy patrols in 2010.[20] India also finally inaugurated the new Airstrip and St. James Jetty, along with six community development projects at the Agalega Island in Mauritius, enhancing manned and unmanned surveillance activities for India.[21] Seychelles, initially categorised as a pawn between major powers during the Cold War era, asked for assurances from the then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi.[22] While India didn't provide any assurances in writing, it contributed two helicopters and training to the Seychelles security forces under the leftist former President Albert René's government.[23] In addition, a 2003 defence cooperation agreement signed between the two countries saw the Indian navy providing anti-piracy patrols, thereby bolstering maritime security in the Seychelles EEZ.[24]

Strong diplomatic ties between India and the Maldives date back as early as 1988, when India sent naval forces to support former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom against an attempted coup by Sri Lankan mercenaries. The Maldives currently dominates the Central Indian Ocean as a powerhouse amongst the rest of the littoral islands, with the other being the British Administered Indian Ocean Territory (housing the US air and naval base at Diego Garcia). Later in 2009, India was granted use of the former British naval base at Gan Island (part of the southernmost group of islands in the Maldives lying around 1,000 km south of India and around 700 km north of Diego Garcia)[25] This transfer was also sought with the help of a security agreement that allowed India to station, aircraft and naval vessels at Male in central and at Haa Dhaalu atoll in north Maldives.[26] In return, India built a system of 26 electronic monitoring stations across their archipelago to protect their large EEZ from illegal fishing activities.[27]

Besides, the navy has played a leading role in ensuring that regional security is maintained. In 2007, India set up the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC–IOR), a regional framework aimed to ensure a structural flow of information on white shipping, illegal fishing, drug smuggling, and human trafficking.[28]The Indian Navy has since then acted as a maritime security provider for many East African and Indo-Pacific nations, including Mozambique, by taking responsibility for security during the 2003 African Union (AU) and 2004 World Economic Forum (WEF) summits held in Maputo.[29] The two countries also entered into a defence cooperation agreement that included joint maritime patrols, supply of military equipment, transfer of technology for assembly and repair, supply of aircraft and ships in 2006.[30] The Navy also opened up an electronic monitoring facility in Northern Madagascar. [31]

VII. US – China activity analysis in the Indian Ocean till 2024

New Delhi has generally adopted a pro-Arab foreign policy since the 1980s, yet its ties with the region were regularly strained due to hedging between India and Pakistan. Pakistan had led the combined task force 150 (CTF-150), a multinational coalition naval task force to monitor and top suspect shipping to pursue the "War on Terror" in the Horn of Africa region, a record 12 times.[32] India, being a part of this 34-nation coalition of Combined Maritime Forces, was never given a command of this task force, thereby making its presence in the Gulf largely overshadowed by Pakistan. Over the years, Chinese foreign policy has emphasized increasing its reach across the Indian Ocean after already establishing itself at the epicentre of the competition in the South Pacific Region. In 2017, China -

opened its first overseas military base in the Indian Ocean, in Djibouti, and became the only country with an embassy in each of the six island nations in the region.[33.] Beijing has further intended to establish commercial and infrastructural projects in India's backyard, investing in several projects in the Horn of Africa. It has also focused on the revival of the Chinese Maritime Silk Route, through investments in the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, thereby gaining control of it through debt-trap lending. China has also financed the China - Maldives friendship bridge linking its capital, Malé, to the island of Hulhumale, which was the first sea-crossing bridge for the islands of the Maldives.[34]

Besides, China has also made inroads in the Western Indian Ocean and in African countries, including Nigeria and Angola, and financed two major rail projects - Lagos to Kano and Lagos to Calabar.[35] These infrastructural projects have emerged as a financial burden to these economies, and by provisionally allowing Beijing to gain sovereignty over its interests in these countries, it has enabled further Chinese influence in the region.

India has viewed the Chinese deployment of submarines for its anti-piracy missions in the Horn of Africa and submarine dockings in Sri Lanka as cautious.[36] China, on its part, on further analysis can be said, has however been welcomed in the region as these engagements ensure more quantifiable trade accompanied by additional investment development. While India has been consistently working to extend infrastructural projects, the real deal is not competing with the Chinese in quantifiable credit terms, but rather in its ability to accept the Chinese as a partner in the region. This acceptance ensures cooperation from other nations, such as the US, on other agreements, directly like the LEMOA, to gain logistical support from the many US facilities located throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Washington, on the other hand, supports New Delhi's objective in keeping the IOR safe and secure from Chinese interests. Post the fall of Kabul, Washington has strategically shifted its interests to the epicentre of South-East Asia to counter Beijing's aggression. To ensure that their interests are safe, it becomes imperative for them to look upon India as the most secure partner in establishing a stable dynamic in the region. Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy has not clearly defined its cooperation strategy with India or any other superpower; its purpose is to mitigate any Chinese threat.[37] The United States Navy also currently transits the Indian Ocean and has additional deployments to Japan and the Middle East.[38] Washington today enjoys a more friendly and favourable partnership with New Delhi, and it is only through direct communication that they plan to defend against this Chinese aggression.

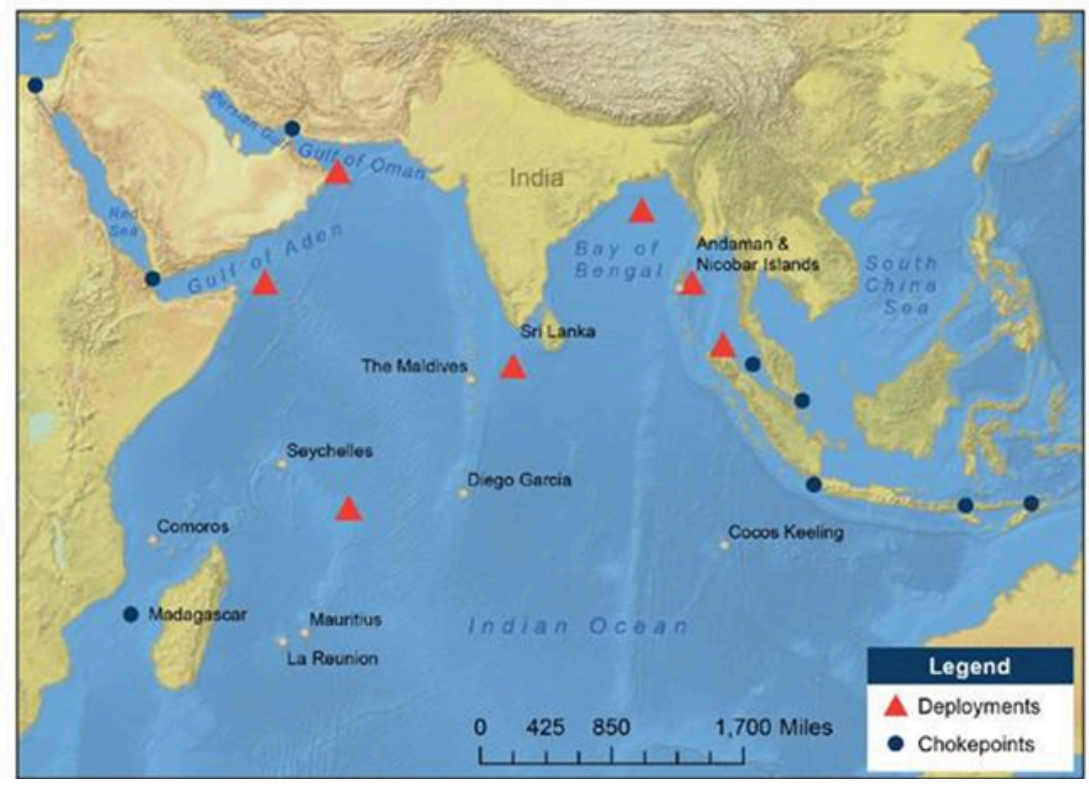
VIII. Increasing Competition in the Indian Ocean Region: India – China investments in defence and trade

Over the last decade, there has been increasing competition brewing in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), in a quest to gain strategic influence, primarily driven by the rising rivalry between India and China, with the United States and other powers also playing significant roles.[39] This geopolitical, economic, and military contest has led regional states, navigating relationships between India, China, and the US, to maximize their development opportunities. Examples could be seen in the case of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Indonesia. Sri Lanka, as a central node in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), received massive infrastructure investment, including the Hambantota Port; however, when faced with high-interest debt and the potential for losing control of strategic assets, it sought to diversify by balancing Chinese investments with projects and economic ties from India. Following the suspension of a tripartite agreement (India-Japan-Sri Lanka) for the East Container Terminal in 2021, Sri Lanka approved an Indian-backed proposal to develop the West Container Terminal at the Port of Colombo.[40] In 2022, Sri Lanka signed a deal with India's Lanka IOC (Indian Oil Corporation) to develop oil storage tanks in Trincomalee.[41] Bangladesh has consistently maintained strong ties in connectivity and trade facilitation with India, and with its recent elections in 2026, it will strive to maintain them. The Maldives has often pivoted between allowing Chinese port access and turning to India for financial assistance with successive governments, indicating they look to secure their interests in the region first.[42] Indonesia, using its Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) policy, has attracted financial support for

infrastructure from China (through BRI) while simultaneously engaging with U.S., Japanese, and Indian investment to maintain a "dynamic equilibrium"[43] It had pivoted to Japan for major projects like the Patimban deep-sea port in West Java, to US and India to provide maritime assistance in the Natuna islands.[44]

Chinese pursuits in the Indian Ocean, including military facilities in Djibouti, Gwadar, or the construction of Hambantota Port was carefully studied by India, which responded on its own with the construction of Chabahar Port in Iran and the constant deployment of Navy Patrols around the circumference of the region. In 2021, the Indian Ministry of Defence announced plans to construct 42 new coastal radar stations to strengthen coastal surveillance.[45] Later in 2022, it also announced a National Maritime Domain Awareness (NMDA) project to bolster an integrated intelligence grid that can detect and respond to sea-based threats.[46] India also increased its naval defence budget, with the navy's capital expenditure for purchasing equipment reaching ₹62,545.98 crore, forming roughly 13.75% of the total defence capital outlay.[47] This also influenced India's MoD to integrate new technology, equipment, and advance their navy in an aim to constantly challenge any Chinese advancements in the same timeframe. Meanwhile, India's comparatively better defence relations with the US meant the Ministry of Defence's agreements to procure U.S.-made, armed MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones aim to further enhance India's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.[48] The advancement of technological Prowess augmented with integrated cooperation, exhibited by multi-member military exercises, aims to project a shadow of Indian confidence among these actors involved, if the latter are to consider their strategic interests in the region.

MAP 2
Indian Navy's Mission-Based Deployment



Indian Navy's Mission-Based Deployment
(Picture taken from: *Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean, Darshana M.Baruah*)

VIII. The Dawn of a New Decade: Post 2010 Indian activities in the IOR

Since the dawn of the new decade, India has regularly conducted annual exercises with the French navy operating out of Reunion and Djibouti. India has also sponsored the 'IBSA Trilateral Security Dialogue' between India, Brazil, and South Africa, and trilateral naval exercises (IBSAMAR) have been held in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 off the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. Post 2010, New Delhi carved new inroads into this highly competitive region. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in 2015 to three of the six Indian Ocean islands- Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles signalled renewed interest in the islands. Thein to Sri Lanka came after a gap of 28 years from an Indian Prime Minister.[50] Colombo warmly accepted a customs pact, a credit line for $300 million, visa-on-arrival for Sri Lankan passport holders, and a $1.5 billion currency swap agreement, thereby re- announcing New Delhi as a great friend and one of its largest trade partners.[51] The visit to Seychelles was even more iconic as India gifted a Dornier aircraft and signed 4 agreements on cooperation in geography, renewable energy, infrastructure development, and the sale of navigation and electronic navigational charts.[52] PM Modi was also greatly welcomed in Mauritius, and he further signed 5 bilateral agreements extending a $500 million line of credit, covering areas of ocean economy, cultural cooperation, the import of fresh mangoes from India, sea air transportation in the Agalega Islands, medicine, and homoeopathy.[53] and homoeopathy.[53]

Taking a page out of the Chinese playbook, in 2016, the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, established a new division, the Indian Ocean Division, to organically strengthen its outreach, viewing the entire region as one.[54] India has signed prominent FTA"s like the CECPA in 2021 with Mauritius, CECA with Singapore, and Malaysia. Under India's Neighbourhood First policy, India has signed coastal radar systems and stations in collaboration with the Maldives, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Seychelles. India has also constantly extended humanitarian aid and international assistance, with notable instances seen in 2017 when India sent 3 Navy ships with supplies to Sri Lanka. Using Multilateral organisations, India has sought to clearly showcase its vision for the Indian Ocean by leading innovation, investment, and cross-cooperation. The Indian Ocean Rim Association has engaged with like-minded countries in the region by establishing a working group on maritime safety and security and holding an annual Indian Ocean Dialogue. India has also spearheaded other initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, and International Solar Alliance. India's recent successes at the G-20 in 2023, Voice of Global South Summit in the same year has illustrated confidence among the region of its close ties and civilisational bonds, drawing more collective good than Beijing's debt agenda. The SAGAR and MAHSAGAR initiatives have described a "clear, high-level articulation of India's vision for the Indian Ocean". The Sagarmala Project, launched by the Ministry of Shipping, has furthered the strategy for port-led development through the use of IT-enabled services in ports. Through participation in other initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative launched in 2019 (A non-treaty-based initiative to manage and, secure the maritime domain based on seven pillars), Colombo Security Conclave, launched in 2020 (A revived regional trilateral security dialogue including India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, Mauritius, and Seychelles), India has initiated major discourses around the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The two major regional groupings in the region, the IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) and the IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium), are aimed at strengthening maritime safety and economic cooperation amongst member states and maritime cooperation and technical exchange among regional navies, respectively. India has also assumed chairmanship of both these organisations in 2026 and would look to strengthen maritime security and promote economic and technical cooperation around the region.

IX. Comprehending the Indian vision Ahead

The Indian Ocean Diplomacy largely places the IOR amongst India's epicentre of power dynamic rather than only viewing it as a theatre of action. Placing the region at the epicentre signifies that the IOR brings multiple focal points for New Delhi, exhibiting different interests in different situations. Focal points include maritime domain awareness, placing India's IFC – IOR centre at the hub of constant monitoring of maritime trafficking, piracy, and criminal activities. Littoral state engagement,

development of key infrastructure to secure energy interests, boosting connectivity, and increased trade are other key focal points. The aggregate of threats distorting these focal points draws upon an epicentre in the IOR, depending upon the focal point, and then demands immediate attention of these epicentres, finally leading to diminishing assets and interests for peripheral actors, which would call for more collective action towards the centre. A clarity in India's defensive engagements becomes important to understand as while India has enhanced its presence in the region, it remains committed to self-reliance. India's military might be also getting acquainted with a greater sense of technological heft, that would help solve to tackle issues of cyber warfare and illicit trade New Delhi also aims to extend engagements with small island nations that may include providing patrol vessels in search and rescue efforts and also extending latest technology enabled devices and equipment to assist in any humanitarian effort that is required.

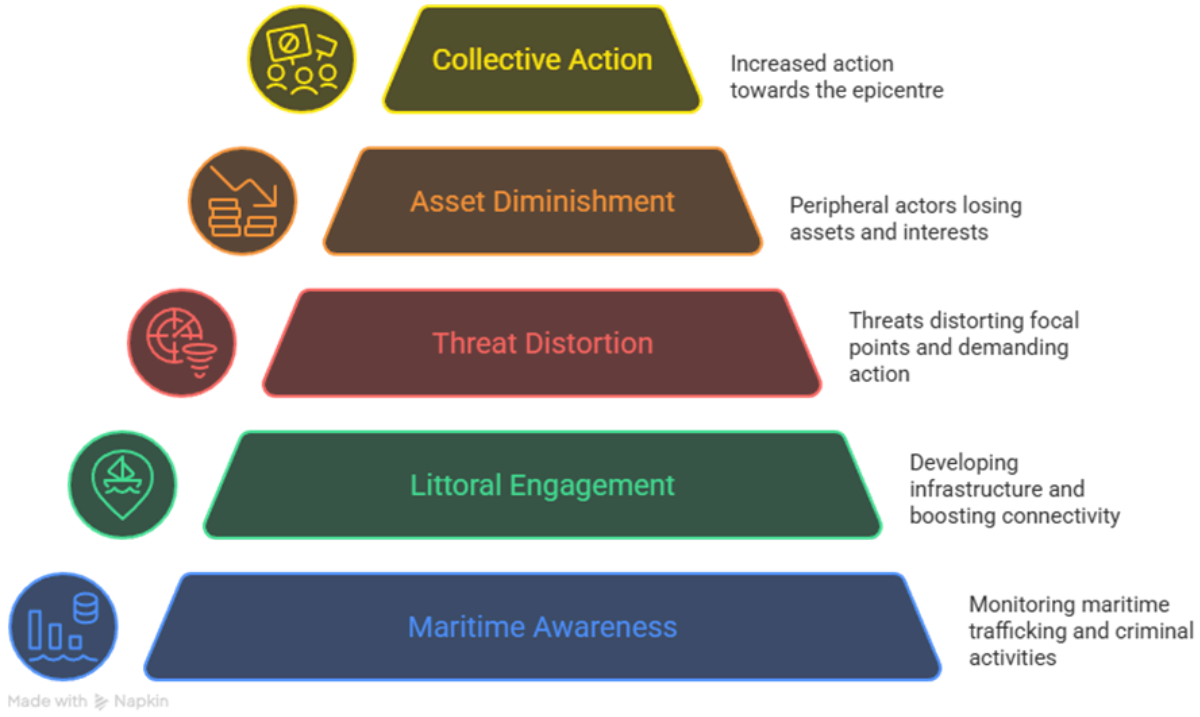


Image: Visualising the above conceptualization
(Source: *Made by the author using Napkin AI*)

These would ensure that India maintains a strategic autonomy in the region while also limiting any Chinese inroads in the region. India's diplomatic cooperation in the region extends largely through agreements and trade indices. New Delhi should seek to assist more in providing foreign assistance on tackling issues such as low ranking on key global indices like poverty and hunger, bureaucratic incompetencies in ensuring projects on the ground, and, above all cater to shrinking budgetary allocations.

India should further aim to advance approaches to ecological, environmental, and cultural cooperation between nations within the IOR. There have been efforts like Project Mausam, an initiative of the Ministry of Culture that aimed to explore the multi-faceted Indian Ocean, covering historical and archaeological research in order to visualise the diversity of cultural, commercial, and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean. Shared knowledge systems and ideas spread along these routes further improve India's diplomatic footprint in the region. The current situation in the Indian Ocean remains volatile with numerous security challenges; the key imperative remains to tackle challenges together. A key aspect of the growing Indian influence in the region is also rooted in India's leadership

within organisations and conferences. With India chairing the IORA and IONS, it is a good opportunity to delve into discussions on technology sharing, increasing shared access to climate finance, tackling key challenges on climate change, and increasing defence-based cooperation to tackle other non-traditional security threats. The challenge will, however, remain to actually utilise these discussions to provide meaningful solutions, as member states within this region aren't usually on a common footing due to different perceived interests. India, while presenting itself as a net security provider and first responder, should actively use its voice in advancing the further interests of the littoral states in key multilateral forums. However, India should be cautious in promoting its foreign policy and not exercise a taken-for-granted posture towards the member states, as competition for influence with China in the region intensifies. The 2024 Maldivian spat over Twitter that involved Indian and Chinese diplomats constrained relations between Male and New Delhi.[55] While these relations improved over time, New Delhi must be careful in choosing such situations. An insurgent India faces a largely cautious China at its hindwings, ready to hedge on moments of instability in the region.

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Patriarchy, Scandal, and Gendered Victimhood: A Critical Reading of the Epstein Files

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ABSTRACT

The public circulation of the Epstein files and related disclosures marked a significant moment in contemporary discussions of sexual exploitation, elite power, and gendered violence. Yet, despite the scale of the revelations, the aftermath of the scandal reveals the resilience of patriarchal structures that absorb, deflect, and ultimately survive exposure. This paper examines how the Epstein case functions as a cultural text through which patriarchy negotiates scandal, redistributes blame, and reasserts power, particularly through the gendered framing of victims and accountability. Drawing on feminist theory, trauma studies, and scholarship on power, consent, and institutional complicity, the study analyses media narratives, legal discourse, and public responses surrounding the Epstein files. The paper argues that while the scandal ostensibly centres on systemic sexual abuse, dominant narratives frequently individualise harm, sensationalise female victimhood, and obscure networks of male power and institutional protection. The gender of the victims, predominantly young women and girls, plays a crucial role in how credibility, sympathy, and moral judgment are unevenly distributed, reinforcing long-standing patterns of victim-blaming and silencing. The study further explores how patriarchal systems endure scandal by shifting focus from structural exploitation to exceptional deviance, allowing elite masculinities, and enabling institutions to remain largely intact. By situating the Epstein files within broader contemporary debates on gendered violence and accountability, this paper argues that scandal alone does not dismantle patriarchy; instead, it often becomes a mechanism through which patriarchal power adapts and survives. Ultimately, the paper positions the Epstein case as a critical lens for understanding how gendered injustice persists even in moments of public revelation and outrage.

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I. Introduction

In January 2024, the unsealing of court documents in Giuffre v. Maxwell placed before the public a record that many had long suspected existed: a detailed, institutional account of Jeffrey Epstein's decades-long network of sexual exploitation. The documents named financiers, politicians, academics, and other public figures whose connections to sustained, systemic abuse had been alleged for years but rarely formally documented (Giuffre v. Maxwell 2015). For a moment, the scale of what had been concealed seemed impossible to contain. Yet within months, the networks implicated in the files were largely undisturbed. Investigations stalled. Institutions issued statements. Life continued.

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That gap, between the enormity of what was revealed and the meagreness of what followed, is what this paper tries to explain. The Epstein case is not, at its core, a story about one man's crimes, or even about a prosecution that went wrong. It is, we argue, a political and cultural event that made visible something usually kept out of sight: the adaptability of patriarchal power under conditions of public pressure. Walby (1990, 20) argues that patriarchy is not a static edifice but a system that reorganises in response to challenge. The Epstein scandal did not rupture that system. It showed how the system works.

This is not a new observation in the abstract — scholars of elite power have long noted that high-profile scandals rarely produce the structural change that public outrage seems to demand (Lull and Hinerman 1997; Thompson 2000). What makes the Epstein case worth sustained feminist analysis is precisely its specificity: the sheer volume of documentation, the duration of the abuse, the breadth of named associations, and the visibility of the institutional failures that protected it. Thompson (2000, 245) describes scandal as a 'mediated event', shaped as much by narrative convention as by the facts it discloses. In the Epstein case, narrative management was as consequential as any legal process.

The gendered dimensions of that management are the paper's central concern. The victims were overwhelmingly young women and girls, many of them economically precarious, and what happened to their testimony, how it was received, framed, challenged, and eventually managed, was not incidental to the scandal's outcome. It was constitutive of it. Herman (1992, 8) makes clear that the social and political context in which trauma is recognised determines whether survivors are believed or silenced. Meyers (1997) has shown that media narratives about female victims of sexual violence consistently reproduce patterns of scrutiny and blame. Both observations apply, with depressing precision, to what the Epstein record reveals.

This paper analyses the Epstein files as a juridical corpus rather than a factual archive — as a body of texts shaped by redaction, adversarial interest, and institutional self-protection. The approach draws on FCDA, which treats language, genre, and institutional convention as sites of gendered power rather than neutral vehicles for information (Lazar 2005; Wodak 1997). Legal documents, as Ehrlich (2001) demonstrated, do not simply record what happened; they construct accounts of agency, consent, and responsibility that frequently work against women. The Epstein files, we argue, do exactly this. The paper identifies three interlocking mechanisms through which patriarchal structures managed and survived the scandal: the individualisation of deviance, the gendered framing of victims, and the institutional insulation of elite masculinity. Each is examined through close analysis of documents, legal discourse, and the media narratives that shaped public understanding of the case. The Epstein case is not an anomaly; it is a lens.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical architecture of this paper is built to answer a specific question: how does patriarchal power survive scandal? That question requires tools that work at three different levels simultaneously- the epistemological, asking how women's testimony comes to be refused; the ontological, asking how certain lives are made structurally invisible; and the structural, asking how patriarchal systems absorb pressure without transforming. The following section maps those three levels and situates them in relation to each other, as well as to two comparative cases that test the analysis against different outcomes.

1.The Epistemological Dimension: Why Women's Testimony Is Refused

Before patriarchal institutions can individualise harm, or insulate their networks, or survive exposure, they must first manage the testimony of those who have been harmed. The question is not really whether individual women are telling the truth. Whether the conditions exist for their truth to be received is worth exploring. Leigh Gilmore's Tainted Witness (2017) is the most precise account we have of why those conditions so often do not exist. Gilmore argues that women are not simply -

disbelieved; they are simply made to disbelieve, through what she calls the testimonial network: a social apparatus that brings historically accumulated scepticism about female speech to bear on any woman who attempts to give an account of harm. In the Epstein case, the FBI memo describing Virginia Giuffre's testimony as 'sensationalized' is not an isolated assessment; it is the testimonial network activating its 'history of bad faith' (Gilmore 2017, 3). Gilmore's The #MeToo Effect (2023) extends this analysis to ask what has to change for women to be believed, and that question provides the comparative foundation for the paper's reading of the Polycot case.

Miranda Fricker's Epistemic Injustice (2007) gives sharper philosophical precision to what Gilmore describes sociologically. Fricker distinguishes two forms. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is discounted because of who she is rather than what she says: a gendered, classed, aged prejudice masquerading as evidential assessment. Hermeneutical injustice runs deeper: it names the condition in which someone lacks the very conceptual vocabulary to make sense of what is being done to her. Grooming is, among other things, a systematic dismantling of that vocabulary. Annie Farmer's description of carrying the prison bars in her own mind is not a metaphor; it is a precise account of hermeneutical injustice lived from the inside.

Judith Lewis Herman's Trauma and Recovery (1992) adds a dimension that Fricker's philosophical account cannot supply: a political and clinical explanation for why institutions fail survivors so consistently and so predictably. Herman's core observation, that 'the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness' (1992, 1), is not a claim about individual psychology. It is a claim about whose interests are served by not knowing. The decade-long inaction following Maria Farmer's 1996 FBI complaint, the terms of the 2008 non-prosecution agreement (NPA), and the persistent media centring of elite associations over survivor testimony have resulted in none of these making any sense as isolated failures. They make sense as expressions of a collective interest in not confronting what systematic accountability would require. Gilmore, Fricker, and Herman together produce a layered account: Gilmore at the level of the social apparatus, Fricker at the level of specific discursive acts, Herman at the level of institutional and political interest.

2.The Ontological Dimension: Precarity, Performativity, and Ungrievable Lives

Butler's concept of precarity (2004, 2009) insists on a distinction that matters enormously here. Precariousness is defined as the vulnerability of bodily life, its exposure to injury and loss, and its universality. While precarity is not. Precarity is the politically induced condition of populations who are 'differentially exposed to injury, violence and death' (Butler 2009, 25) through the withdrawal of institutional protection. The Epstein victims were not simply vulnerable young women. They were made vulnerable through traceable acts of institutional decision-making: the FBI's choice not to act on Maria Farmer's complaint; the prosecutorial decision to immunise co-conspirators in secret; the 2026 redaction failures that exposed survivors while shielding named male associates. These are not unfortunate accidents. They are the administration of precarity, a deliberate allocation of exposure to harm. Butler's related concept of grievability extends the argument: lives positioned as less than fully grievable are also lives whose harms do not fully demand accountability. To call a child a prostitute in a legal document, and to lead with her marginality in a news report, is to say the same thing twice: her life does not fully count, and therefore neither does what was done to it.

Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990, 1993) functions in a different but complementary direction. Gender, Butler argues, is not a fixed identity but something constituted through repeated, institutional acts. Following this definition of gender, the language of the Epstein juridical corpus does not merely describe identities; it produces them. The word 'massage' where 'rape' should appear, the bilateral framing of encounters involving profound power asymmetry, and the designation of minors as commercial participants are all performative acts. They construct the girls as agents in a transaction, and Epstein as a consumer of services. The documents do not neutrally record what happened, but they constitute the meaning of what happened in ways that serve power.

3.The Structural Dimension: Patriarchy Survives

The epistemological and ontological dimensions explain how harm is made invisible and testimony refused. The structural dimension explains why the system that produces these effects persists after the scandal has passed.

Sylvia Walby's Theorizing Patriarchy (1990) is the foundational text here. Walby insists that patriarchy is adaptive, that it responds to challenges by reorganising rather than collapsing. This paper follows the same organising assumption. Her identification of six interlocking structures through which patriarchy operates (paid work, household production, sexuality, culture, violence, and the state) is directly applicable to a case that implicates all six simultaneously. The state's prosecutorial deference, the cultural apparatus of the celebrity-scandal frame, the violence normalised through legal euphemism, and the co-optation of a female procurer, these are not independent failures. They are a system doing what systems do.

Raewyn Connell's work on hegemonic and complicit masculinity (1995) explains a feature of the Epstein case that might otherwise seem puzzling: how a network of powerful men, many of whom possessed incriminating information about Epstein's conduct for years, maintained their positions without any visible coordination. According to Conell, masculinity does not require conspiracy. It operates through the ordinary habits of elite networks in which protecting the conditions of privilege is the default behaviour. The asymmetry at the heart of the scandal's legal outcomes, one woman convicted, no male co-conspirators charged, is not a paradox. It is Connell's framework validated in reality. Angela McRobbie's concept of the double entanglement (2009) names the ideological mechanism that makes this legible as justice: feminist language is deployed in the service of an outcome that leaves patriarchal structures intact, performing accountability through a female body whilst the male network walks away. Liz Kelly's continuum of sexual violence (1988) anchors the analysis of institutional failure by insisting that no instance of sexual violence can be understood without the structural conditions that make it possible. Institutional tolerance is not an aberration from normal functioning. For Kelly, it is an expression of it.

Taken together, these frameworks make it difficult to read the scandal as a rupture. The appearance of accountability, rather than signalling transformation, becomes part of the mechanism through which patriarchy secures its persistence. The scandal, then, does not mark the breakdown of structure but its successful adaptation.

4.Comparative Cases and the Scholarly Gap

Two contemporary cases bookend the Epstein analysis, offering instructive points of comparison. In 2024, Gisèle Pelicot declined anonymity protections and insisted on a public trial in France, resulting in the conviction of all 51 defendants. Read alongside Leigh Gilmore on the conditions required for adequate testimonial reception, the Pelicot case becomes analytically indispensable: it demonstrates that testimonial injustice is contingent on particular configurations of evidence, legal standards, and credibility frameworks rather than being a fixed or inevitable feature of sexual violence adjudication. Where video evidence curtailed the usual mechanisms of credibility denial, where legal proceedings could not easily displace testimony, and where the survivor refused the position of the discredited witness, conviction became possible. Yet its limitations are equally significant. Sentences drew criticism for their leniency, and France's legal definition of rape continued to prioritise force over the absence of consent. Structural accountability, even here, remained incomplete. The Pelicot case, then, does not signal resolution; it reveals a fissure within an otherwise resilient structure.

The 2025 Sean Combs prosecution offers a different kind of comparison. Despite extensive victim testimony and video evidence, Combs was acquitted of racketeering and sex trafficking, the charges that would have named the systemic character of the abuse, and convicted only on counts related to transportation for the purposes of prostitution, receiving four years and two months. The echo of -

Epstein's 2008 plea is unmistakable: in both cases, transactional legal categories that spread agency ontovictims produced the conviction, whilst the charges requiring the court to see the abuse as networked and structural did not. The Combs case also introduces race as a dimension that the Epstein analysis cannot supply. Arguments circulating in public discourse framed the prosecution as racially motivated, which is a move that mobilised solidarity with a powerful Black male defendant in ways that directly competed with the credibility of predominantly female accusers. This complicates the picture without undermining it: the mechanisms of complicit masculinity and testimonial injustice operate across racial lines wherever sufficient wealth and institutional access are present.

Existing scholarship on the Epstein case has been largely journalistic or legal-descriptive (Patterson and Connolly 2016; Araoz and Farmer Araoz 2022). Where feminist analysis has appeared, it tends to address media coverage in general terms or legal failures in isolation. No existing study reads the files themselves as a juridical corpus constituted by discursive practices that reproduce gendered power, nor brings the full range of frameworks identified here into sustained, integrated dialogue with the primary corpus and the comparative cases. That is what this paper attempts.

III. Methodology

The methodological approach is FCDA, as theorised by Lazar (2005, 5), who defines it as concerned with how 'gender power relations are discursively reproduced, negotiated, and contested in texts and talk in specific social and institutional contexts. FCDA sits within the broader Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) tradition of Fairclough (1992), van Dijk (1993), and Wodak (1997), which proceeds from the premise that language is a site of social production: discourse constitutes identities, naturalises ideology, and reproduces relations of domination. FCDA insists that gender is not incidental to these effects but structurally constitutive of them.

Three analytical procedures run through the analysis consistently. Close lexical and grammatical analysis treats word choice and syntactic structure as ideologically significant rather than stylistically incidental. For example, the preference for 'massage' over 'abuse', passive constructions that dissolve perpetrator agency, and bilateral framings of grossly unequal encounters are each read as discursive acts with real consequences for how harm is distributed and understood. Narrative framing analysis attends to what is foregrounded and what is pushed to the margins, whose perspective organises events, and what narrative choices serve which interests. Institutional genre analysis treats the legal document, the prosecutorial memo, and the media report as genre formations with specific conventions that actively shape what can and cannot be said within them. The theoretical tools developed in Section 2, Gilmore's testimonial network, Butler's precarity and performativity, Fricker's epistemic injustice, Herman's politics of disbelief, Walby's adaptive patriarchy, Connell's complicit masculinity, McRobbie's double entanglement, Kelly's continuum, are the analytical instruments applied throughout.

The primary corpus spans five categories: court documents unsealed in January 2024 and released under the Epstein Files Transparency Act (EFTA, 2025) in January 2026; legal and prosecutorial documents including the 2008 NPA and the 2020 Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Professional Responsibility report; victim testimony including impact statements from the June 2022 Maxwell sentencing and grand jury transcripts released in 2024–2025; a selection of mainstream Anglophone media coverage from 2019 to 2026; and institutional statements from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and survivor advocacy organisations. None of these materials is treated as a transparent archive. They are discursive productions shaped by redaction, adversarial strategy, and institutional interest, and they are as significant for what they withhold and how they frame as for what they state directly. The Pelicot and Combs cases are incorporated as what van Dijk (1993, 252) calls 'critical exemplification'; they are employed not to test hypotheses across populations but to make features of the primary case visible through contrast and parallel.

This paper takes an explicitly feminist critical position. Following Haraway's (1988, 581) argument for situated knowledge, we treat that position not as a source of bias but as a condition of the analytical commitments that make certain patterns in the corpus visible. Survivor testimony is included as political speech, cited to illuminate structural conditions rather than to adjudicate individual truth claims or subject speakers to further scrutiny. The study is confined to the publicly available Anglophone record, and the uneven availability of testimony in that record is itself an analytically significant feature of the case rather than a neutral limitation.

IV. Analysis

1.How the Files Speak: Language, Erasure, and Juridical Framing

The question to ask of the Epstein files is not only what they say but how they say it. The language across the juridical corpus, police reports, grand jury transcripts, depositions, prosecutorial memoranda, and the NPA itself, is structuring the narrative. It is constituting identities, distributing agency, and determining what counts as harm. Reading that language carefully reveals a coherent and consistent pattern of discursive violence that predates, and exceeds, any individual document or decision.

When the Palm Beach County grand jury indicted Epstein in July 2006, it returned a single count of solicitation of prostitution, a designation that did not acknowledge that the victims were minors (DOJ OPR 2020). When Epstein pleaded guilty in 2008 under the NPA, he did so to 'soliciting and procuring a minor for prostitution'. As legal scholar Blanche Bong Cook has pointed out, this formulation is 'an oxymoron, referring to a child as a "prostitute"' (Cook 2022, 311). The charge does not merely minimise the offence. It repositions the child as a participant in a commercial transaction, shifting her from an unambiguous victim to a figure carrying the moral and legal stigma of prostitution. Advocacy organisations have long noted that the phrase 'child prostitution' historically implied agency and consent that children cannot legally or developmentally possess, and in practice often resulted in the criminalisation of the very survivors the law claimed to protect (Ethical Storytelling 2019). This is not unfortunate phrasing. It is Butler's (1990) performative apparatus in operation: the legal text constituting the identity of the victim in ways that serve the interests of those with power.

The same logic runs through the word 'massage'. The Palm Beach Police Department opened its investigation in 2005 after the parents of a fourteen-year-old girl reported that Epstein had paid her for a massage (DOJ OPR 2020). A subsequent FBI investigation identified at least 35 girls recruited under a similar pattern between 2002 and 2005. In Detective Joseph Recarey's deposition, released in the unsealed Giuffre v. Maxwell (2015) documents, he described how Epstein and Maxwell recruited girls for massages that 'led to sexual activity' (CNN 2024). The phrase 'led to' is doing significant grammatical work. It frames the escalation from massage to rape as a sequential process rather than a deliberate act, it becomes something that happened, rather than something that was done. Epstein's agency dissolves; the assault becomes an outcome rather than a choice.

The grand jury transcripts reinforce this pattern. FBI interview notes recording one victim, approximately fourteen years old at the time, describe her giving Epstein 'uncomfortable' massages on occasions where 'they were both naked' (CNN 2026). The bilateral phrasing places the adult perpetrator and the minor in symmetrical grammatical positions, obscuring the profound asymmetry of age, authority, and coercion structuring the encounter. The same notes record that she 'felt degraded when she went to Epstein's home' and 'felt taken advantage of', but also that she 'felt happy because she had a bunch of money' (ibid.). These fragments of ambivalence, presented without contextual framing, function as textual hedges in the institutional record, introducing interpretive uncertainty that complicates her status as a straightforward victim. This is hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007) at the level of documentation: the absence of an adequate conceptual framework for naming grooming and coercion produces a record that appears to inculcate the witness rather than the perpetrator.

Document EFTA00011433, a contact and masseuse list compiled for Epstein's use, makes the commodification of women explicit. Women are described almost entirely through brief evaluative fragments combining age with physical or sexualised attributes: 'Sexy and lots of fun;' 'Huge breasts Very wild;' 'wants to leave Sweden.' The document concludes: 'Please advise if you want me to pre-set up any apts with these girls, time and place' (EFTA00011433, cited in DOJ 2026). Subjectivity is absent throughout. As Ehrlich (2001) argues, this is precisely how institutional language constructs women within systems of male consumption: as catalogued attributes to be selected, circulated, and scheduled. Economic vulnerability, 'wants to leave Sweden,' appears alongside youth and sexual availability as a recruitment criterion.

Document EFTA02575464, an email chain forwarded by Mark L. Epstein to Jeffrey Epstein in September 2013, five years after Epstein's conviction as a registered sex offender, circulated a draft letter in which the author writes that he 'took her under my wing and proceeded to sexually abuse her', framed as dark humour (DOJ 2026). The woman exists only as the object of narration. The mock-formal register aestheticizes the description of abuse as wit, and the forwarding of the email to Epstein as entertainment demonstrates that conviction had produced no rupture in the social world through which the network operated. In Connell's (1995) terms, this is hegemonic masculinity at the level of everyday interaction, complicity performed through shared humour, the degradation of women serving as a bonding mechanism.

The January 2026 file release added a final and particularly painful dimension. Flawed redaction practices left the names of 43 out of 47 victims visible in the initial release, whilst numerous alleged male associates remained unidentified (Wall Street Journal 2026). A DOJ official initially told CNN that 'we did not redact any names of men, only female victims', a statement that later proved inaccurate (CNN 2026). A group of survivors issued a statement noting: 'As survivors, we should never be the ones named, scrutinised, and retraumatised while Epstein's enablers continue to benefit from secrecy' (ibid.). The inversion is structurally revealing: at the level of document management, institutional procedure reproduced exactly the asymmetry of protection that had characterised the case from the beginning. OHCHR's February 2026 statement characterised the conduct documented in the files as reflecting 'the commodification and dehumanisation of women and girls from different parts of the world' within a broader context of 'extreme misogyny' (OHCHR 2026). That characterisation comes from a United Nations body, not from feminist scholarship. The files made it unavoidable.

2.The Monster and the Network: Individualisation as Ideological Strategy

Jeffrey Epstein was routinely described, in coverage following his 2019 indictment and after his death, as a monster, a predator, an evil financier. These words communicate moral condemnation. They also do something less visible but more consequential: they locate the source of the abuse in one man's deviance rather than in the structural conditions that enabled and protected it. This is not an incidental feature of media coverage. It is the ideological work of what Thompson (2000, 245) calls the individualisation of scandal.

Thompson argues that scandals rarely function as sustained critiques of social structure. They work through narrative concentration: focusing public attention on the transgression of a particular individual, whilst the networks of complicity, institutional failure, and structural inequality that enabled the transgression recede into the background. The adjective 'lone,' as in 'lone predator,' performs this function lexically, marking Epstein as isolated from wider social structures even as the documents reveal he was embedded within them. The narrative simplification is not accidental; the scandal must reach what Thompson calls resolution. Once the individual is removed, by conviction, by death, by disgrace, the story has somewhere to end. The system that produced him has no such convenient endpoint.

The 2008 NPA makes this dynamic institutional as well as narrative. By immunising unnamed co -

conspirators and conducting the entire process in secret, in violation of what a federal court would later find to be the Crime Victims' Rights Act (Doe v. United States 2020), the agreement ensured that the legal record would centre on Epstein alone. The network was not simply overlooked; it was legally protected. Documents released under EFTA in 2026 illustrate what that protection covered. EFTA02575464 shows the social world continuing around Epstein's conduct five years after his conviction without apparent disruption (DOJ 2026). Relationships with powerful figures persisted, private correspondence circulated, and elite networks operated as before. Kelly's (1988) continuum insists that this continuity is the point: institutional tolerance is not a failure of the system but an expression of it.

The pattern becomes particularly clear in what the released documents do not explain. Over the course of the investigations, connections between Epstein and a wide range of individuals across finance, politics, and academia were documented. These connections frequently appeared in coverage as background details rather than as the central elements of a systemic analysis. The story stayed focused on the figure of Epstein. The structural question, how had this been possible for so long, and who had made it possible, was persistently displaced by the more dramatic question of what Epstein had done. Scandal discourse, as this paper argues, is one of the means by which patriarchal systems discharge the pressure of public outrage without undergoing substantive change. It produces the appearance of moral closure. The perpetrator is condemned. The system that produced him is not.

3.Credibility, Class, and the Distribution of Blame

The Epstein victims did not enter public discourse as a group accorded uniform sympathy. The reception of their testimony was shaped by deeply gendered assessments in which age, class, appearance, and behaviour all functioned as criteria for the uneven distribution of credibility. These assessments reproduced, in the specific context of this scandal, patterns that feminist scholars have documented across sexual violence cases for decades (Meyers 1997; Bohner, Siebler, and Schmelcher 2013).

Virginia Giuffre is the most instructive example. Maxwell's lawyers, in the unsealed 2015 deposition materials, worked systematically to undermine her credibility, accusing a reporter of helping her construct false accounts (Giuffre v. Maxwell 2015, cited in ABC News 2024). When Giuffre withdrew claims against one named individual in 2022, stating she 'may have made a mistake' in identifying him, noting she 'was very young at the time' and that 'it was a very stressful and traumatic environment' (Fox Baltimore 2022), the withdrawal circulated widely as evidence of her unreliability rather than as a survivor's description of the cognitive and psychological effects of sustained trauma. This is precisely the credibility asymmetry Herman (1992) identifies: trauma memory is non-linear and episodic by neurological design, and treating its apparent inconsistencies as fabrication is a socially motivated choice rather than a neutral evidential assessment.

Grand jury testimony released in 2024 and 2025 shows how the legal record itself participated in victim framing. Detective Recarey's testimony recounts that one teenage victim likened herself to Hollywood Madame Heidi Fleiss and told detectives that the girls she recruited 'understood what they were getting into' (PBS 2025). The inclusion of these self-characterisations in the official record functions to redistribute moral responsibility onto the victims. That they emerged under police questioning, in a context of profound power imbalance between a minor and law enforcement, is rarely foregrounded in the public discussion of what the transcripts contain. Fricker's (2007) account of hermeneutical injustice helps explain why: without an adequate framework for naming grooming and coercion, neither the victim nor her questioners have the conceptual resources to make the dynamic legible, and the resulting record reflects that deficit rather than the truth of what occurred.

The masseuse list EFTA00011433 adds a structural dimension. The entry noting that one woman 'wants to leave Sweden' positions geographic and financial precarity as an attribute of appeal (DOJ

2026). As Rights4Girls and other advocacy organisations have argued, framing these encounters through the language of financial exchange individualises the apparent 'choice' to participate whilst erasing the structural conditions of poverty and precarity that made girls vulnerable in the first place. This is Butler's (2009) precarity in operation: the administration of vulnerability as a feature of the recruitment infrastructure, rendering the resulting 'transactions' legible as choices rather than as the exploitation of manufactured exposure to harm.

The contrast with the treatment of men in the same documents is sharp. EFTA02575464 contains a joking admission of sexual abuse forwarded between men as entertainment (DOJ 2026). Had an equivalent admission appeared in a victim's testimony, it would almost certainly have been subjected to intense scrutiny and challenged as exaggeration. Circulating casually among men, it passed without legal consequence. The asymmetry could not be more precisely drawn: women's carefully articulated accounts of abuse were contested, minimised, and weaponised against them, whilst men's own casual acknowledgements of abusive conduct moved unremarked through their social networks.

4.The Network That Survived: Elite Masculinity and Institutional Protection

The most consequential demonstration of patriarchal resilience in the Epstein case is structural: the near-total survival of the networks and institutional arrangements that enabled and protected the abuse. OHCHR warned in February 2026 that accountability remained 'limited, with only one close associate under investigation' and that 'resignations of implicated individuals alone are not an adequate substitute for criminal accountability' (OHCHR 2026). The gap between the volume of what was released and the thinness of what followed demands an explanation beyond procedural failure.

The NPA is the primary legal mechanism of that survival. As the DOJ OPR confirmed (2020), the agreement allowed Epstein to serve a thirteen-month sentence at a minimum-security county facility with work-release privileges, whilst extending immunity to unnamed co-conspirators and conducting the entire process without the knowledge or input of victims. The Palm Beach Police Department's chief and lead detective had specifically noted that the original charge did not reflect 'the totality of Epstein's conduct' (NPR 2019). The subsequent federal process produced a result more protective of Epstein and his network than of anyone who had been harmed. The federal court's later finding that this violated the Crime Victims' Rights Act (Doe v. United States, 2020) confirmed what was already apparent: those with the greatest interest in accountability had been deliberately excluded from the process that determined it.

The social and institutional capital Epstein had accumulated did not dissolve upon conviction. Document EFTA02575464 records that elite social relationships continued to function around him five years after his plea, with correspondence circulating as before (DOJ 2026). Connell's (1995) framework of hegemonic masculinity is analytically useful here: elite men's social standing is secured not merely by individual power but by mutual recognition and protection within networks of privileged masculinity. The longevity of those networks, their capacity to outlast both Epstein's conviction and his death, reflects precisely this dynamic. Complicit masculinity does not require active conspiracy. It operates through the ordinary habits of mutual protection that constitute elite masculine identity.

The asymmetry in the DOJ's 2026 redaction procedure reproduces, at the level of bureaucratic process, the same structural imbalance. Victim-identifying information was technically prioritised for protection, but in practice frequently exposed; information implicating male associates was more consistently shielded (DOJ 2026). Survivors told CNN the DOJ had 'protected the Epstein class with blanket redactions' (CNN 2026). A DOJ official's initial claim that no male names were redacted, subsequently proved inaccurate, made visible an institutional logic that had been operating throughout: the interests of powerful men were treated as a default worth protecting, whilst the identities and safety of survivors were a secondary consideration. McRobbie's (2009) double entanglement is precisely the right frame for Maxwell's conviction as the singular institutional -

outcome: feminist accountability was performed through a female body, and the male network survived intact.

V. Discussion

What the four analytical movements above reveal, taken together, is not a series of independent institutional failures but a coherent system doing what adaptive systems do. The discursive violence of the juridical language, the individualising narrative logic of scandal, the gendered management of credibility, and the structural insulation of elite networks are mutually reinforcing. Each mechanism makes the others more effective. Linguistic violence in the legal record creates the hermeneutical conditions in which testimonial injustice can operate. The individualising narrative of scandal redirects accountability away from the networks that testimonial injustice is protecting. Institutional insulation ensures that the legal architecture cannot name what it has itself helped to produce. This is Walby's (1990) adaptive patriarchy in its most consequential form: not a monolith resisting change, but a dynamic system reorganising under pressure.

The comparative cases show that the analysis still works across different outcomes, though with some important limitations. The Pelicot case shows that the apparatus of testimonial discrediting is contingent: when its conditions were disrupted, when video evidence removed the standard tools of credibility denial, when a survivor publicly refused the position of tainted witness, and when public and institutional conditions created sufficient political pressure, conviction followed. But even there, sentences were inadequate, structural barriers persisted, and the outcome remained exceptional. Gilmore's (2023) account of adequate testimonial reception describes a structural possibility, not a new norm. The Combs case confirms that the pattern identified in the Epstein analysis holds across different social contexts and racial registers: the charges requiring the court to name the systemic character of the abuse failed; the transactional charges that spread agency onto victims succeeded. The echo is exact.

What distinguishes the Epstein case, in the end, is not the structure but the scale of its visibility. The breadth of the documentation, the duration of the abuse, and the number of named associations all created conditions for exposure that were, in theory, extraordinary. That the structural consequences were so limited is not a failure of the scandal. It is the scandal's achievement. The purpose of the mechanisms this paper has traced is not to prevent exposure: it is to ensure that exposure does not lead to transformation. Epstein's death provided narrative closure. Maxwell's conviction provided moral closure. The conditions that made the abuse possible, he administered precarity, the uneven grievability, the social capital of complicit masculinity, the institutional tolerance that Kelly (1988) identifies as ordinary rather than exceptional, were left entirely intact.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Epstein scandal did not reveal a system that failed. It revealed a system that functioned. The three mechanisms traced across the analysis, the individualisation of deviance, the gendered management of victim credibility, and the institutional insulation of elite networks, are not aberrations of patriarchal power. They are its characteristic expressions under conditions of scrutiny. The juridical corpus of the Epstein files does not merely record what happened. It participates in constituting the meaning of what happened, and does so in ways that systematically protect the powerful and expose the vulnerable.

The two comparative cases suggest that different outcomes are possible, and that understanding the conditions under which they occur is essential for feminist politics. Gisèle Pelicot's decision to waive anonymity and insist on a public trial was, among other things, a refusal of the position the testimonial network assigns to survivors. That refusal had structural effects. It did not resolve the underlying conditions, but it disrupted them. The Combs case shows that where those conditions are not disrupted, the same legal patterns reproduce themselves across different social contexts. The problem

is not particular institutions or particular men. The problem is a system. What genuine accountability would require, the analysis suggests, is transformation at the structural level: legal language that does not designate children as prostitutes; institutional design that does not administer precarity; epistemic conditions in which trauma testimony receives what Gilmore (2023) calls adequate reception; and a cultural politics capable of distinguishing accountability from its performance. Scandal, by itself, cannot produce any of these things. What it can do, and what the Epstein case has done, despite everything, is make the structure temporarily visible. The task of feminist scholarship is to hold that visibility steady, and to insist that what has been seen cannot be unseen. The Epstein case is not an anomaly. It is a lens. What matters now is what we do with the view.

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The International Political Economy of Disinvestment in the Semi-Periphery: A Comparative Longitudinal Analysis Of Power and Policy Evolution in India and Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving process of disinvestment in two semi-peripheral economies, namely India and Brazil. It critically challenges the neoliberal assumption that asset monetisation represents a straightforward laissez-faire retreat of the state. Adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates quantitative data on fiscal performance and trade flows with a qualitative comparative case analysis of Air India and Brazil's Embraer. Drawing on a comparative political economy framework, the analysis investigates how managerial sovereignty is reconfigured through the reciprocal pressures exerted by political elites, economic elites, and labour unions. The findings suggest that successful industrial transformation depends less on fiscal mandates and more on the state's capacity to negotiate domestic institutional frictions and labour resistance.The study's original contribution lies in conceptualising the triadic power dynamics among these actors and demonstrating how their interaction reshapes the state's strategic position within the global economy. By contrasting the divergent trajectories of the Indian and Brazilian aviation sectors, alongside developments in the energy sector and bilateral economicrelations, the studyargues that economicpolicy evolution is fundamentally driven by power relations rather than merely technical reform processes.

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I. Introduction

Since the economic reforms of 1991, the restructuring of India's public sector has unfolded as a gradual and negotiated process. Unlikethe "shock therapy"model of privatisation adopted in post-Soviet states or the rapid liberalisation associated with Thatcherite reforms in the United Kingdom, India followed an incremental trajectory shaped by democratic constraints, federal bargaining, and sustained labour mobilisation. Within the framework of International Political Economy (IPE), such trajectories are understood as hybrid responses to the dual pressures of global market integration and entrenched domestic institutional legacies (Wade 2003; Kohli 2007). In this context, disinvestment in India extends beyond a mere fiscal instrument and reflects a broader reconfiguration of state–market relations in the Global South.

While existing scholarship has extensively examined the fiscal implications and governance transformations associated with India's economic reforms (Gupta et al. 2011; Singh 2018), significant analytical gaps remain. In particular, there is limited application of International Political Economy perspectives—especially those concerning labour market restructuring and integration into global value chains—to the study of disinvestment. Furthermore, comparative analyses with other emerging economies, such as Brazil, remain underexplored, despite both countries facing similar tensions betw-

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-een state ownership and the imperatives of globalisation. This study seeks to address these gaps by undertaking a comparative analysis of India and Brazil, both large federal democracies characterised by substantial state-owned enterprise sectors and active labour movements (Schneider 2013).

A central focus of this comparison lies in the divergence in reform outcomes. Brazil's privatisation of Embraer was closely aligned with a broader developmental strategy aimed at technological upgrading and industrial competitiveness. In contrast, India's disinvestment of Air India was marked by intermittent political commitment and fragmented regulatory coordination. To examine these dynamics, this study draws upon three principal theoretical frameworks: developmental state theory, dependency theory, and neo-liberal institutionalism, alongside other relevant perspectives.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How has the architecture of disinvestment evolved to mediate the tensions between state survival and labour mobilisation?
2. How do the cases of Air India and Embraer illustrate the divergent influenceof economic elites on national disinvestment strategies?
3. In what ways do the structural power of economic elites and the veto power of labour unions constrain or shape the economic decisions of the polity?
4. How does a multi-theoretical International Political Economy (IPE) framework—integrating systems theory, strategic realism, and dependency theory—account for the convergence and divergence of disinvestment pathways in semi-peripheral economies?

1.2 Significance and Contribution

The contribution of this study is threefold.
First, reconceptualising disinvestment through an International Political Economy (IPE) lens.
The study situates disinvestment within the domain of International Political Economy, moving beyond a narrow focus on fiscal accounting to emphasise power-based outcomes. It highlights how the triangular relationship between the polity, economic actors, and labour unions shapes the trajectory of asset monetisation and restructuring processes.

Second, comparative institutional analysis.
The study contributes to comparative political economy by juxtaposing India and Brazil. It demonstrates how semi-peripheral states navigate similar global constraints through distinct domestic pathways. In particular, it contrasts India's approach of portfolio management with Brazil's strategy of institutionalised concessions, thereby revealing divergent responses to global economic pressures.

Third, theoretical synthesis of hybrid reform.
The study offers a synthesis of developmental state theory, dependency theory, and neo-liberal institutionalist perspectives. This theoretical triangulation enables the conceptualisation of disinvestment as a hybrid reform modality, wherein the state simultaneously pursues developmental objectives while adopting neo-liberal mechanisms to manage structural elite influence and pressures arising from global dependency.

1.3 Organization of the Study

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section1 presents the introduction. Section2 reviews the literature on International Political Economy and public sector reform. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework. Section 4 discusses the research methodology. Section5 presents the data analysis and empirical findings. Section 6 provides a comparative analysis of India and Brazil. Section7 offers the conclusion, while Section 8 outlines directions for future research. Section 9 contains the references.

Table 1: Timeline of key Liberalization and Disinvestment Policy Milestones (1991- 2025)

Year/period	Government	Policy Milestone	Impact
1991	P.V Narasimha Rao	LPG Reforms & industrial policy statement	Initiated liberalization; Opened disinvestment window
1991	P.V Narasimha Rao	Disinvestment committee setup	First formal mechanism for PSU stake sale
1996-1997	United Front	Expansion of Disinvestment program	Continuing PSU stake sales,they also established the first **Disinvestment Commission**
1998	Atal Bihari Vajpayee NDA	Department of Disinvestment created	Institutional arrangement for Privatization
1999-2001	Atal Bihari Vajpayee	Strategic sale introduced	BALCO,VSNL,Hindustan Zinc,IPCL
2004	UPA-I (INC)	Strategic sale paused	Focus shifted to minority stake sale
2005	UPA-I	National investment fund created	To manage disinvestment receipts
2009-2014	UPA-II	Minority stake sales & PPP	ONGC,NTPC,NMDC listing
2014	BJP- led NDA	Disinvestment Rebranding	Reintroduced strategic disinvestment
2016	BJP- led NDA	DIPAM Formed	Replaced DoD under Ministry Of Finance
2017-2019	BJP led NDA	Buyback Driven receipts	PSU executed share buybacks
2020	BJP-led NDA	New Public Sector Policy	Classified Strategic Vs Non-strategic,This was part of the Atmanirbhar Bharat package.
2021	BJP led NDA	Air India Privatized	Sold to Tata group
2022-2024	BJP-led NDA	Monetization Pipeline	LIC IPO,BPCL attempt,asset

Source: Department Of Disinvestment, DIPAM reports

II.Literature Review

The evolution of disinvestment policies in emerging economies, particularly within the civil aviation sector, has been widely examined through the lens of International Political Economy.This discourse has traditionally centred on state–market relations, wherein the state'sdual role as both operatorand regulator significantly shapes the trajectory of economic reform (Bajpai and Sachs 2000). In both Indiaand Brazil, the civil aviation sector was historically shaped by state-led industrialisation, as reflected in the prominence of Air India and the emergence of Embraer as a national champion (Schneider 2013). Early perspectives suggest that disinvestment was initially conceptualised not as a complete withdrawal of the state, but rather as a technical fiscal instrument aimed at addressing budgetary constraints whileretaining strategic control.

However, this state-centric perspective has been increasingly challenged by scholars who emphasise the institutional constraints and labour dynamics that influence reform processes. In the Indian context, the transition from minority stake sales to the contemporary “asset monetisation” approach under the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM) has not followed a linear trajectory. Instead, it has been mediated by coalition politics and sustained labour union resistance (Singh 2018). While the introduction of public–private partnerships (PPPs) in airportinfrastructure—led by entitiessuch as GMR and the AdaniGroup—has facilitated the inflow of global capitaland managerial expertise, it has also generated tensions between economic efficiency and social sustainability (Banerjee 2012).

This line of argument highlights that market-oriented reforms are often constrained by “veto players”, leading to labour precarity and the erosion of permanent employment structures, which in turn slows the pace of strategic disinvestment (Gupta, Mohan, and Chhibber2011). A more integrated perspective seeks to reconcile these divergent views by situating domestic reform processes within the broadermulti-scalar context of global markets.

Brazil’s experience offers an importantpoint of comparison. Its use of concession agreements and state-backed financing through institutions such as the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES) demonstrates how a neo-developmental state can achieve global competitiveness while maintaining institutionalised labour consultations (Ban and Blyth 2013). This integrated approach reveals that disinvestment is not merely a domestic policy choice,but is deeply embedded withinglobal value chains, aircraft leasing markets, and international regulatory frameworks such as “open skies” agreements (Gereffi 2018; Armijo 2007).

The comparative logic between India and Brazil is rooted in their shared transition from state-led developmentalism to market-oriented neo-liberalism (Sirohi 2019). This transition is rarely a straightforward economic decision; rather, as Armijo (1999) argues, it reflects a persistent tension between the “balance sheet”—the state’s need for fiscal solvency—and the “ballot box,” or the electoral imperative of maintaining public support. Consequently, the disinvestment trajectories in both countries are characterised by “alternative pathways,” where the degree of institutional maturity influences the pace and nature of reform (Sirohi 2017).

Overall, the literature suggests that the success of public sector restructuring depends less on purely economic metrics and more on the state’s capacity to negotiate a “middle path” between global market pressures and domestic socio-political constraints. Despite these insights, a significant gap remains: few studies provide a cross-national comparison of India and Brazil using a unified International Political Economy framework that integrates labour dynamics, infrastructure, and state capacity. By synthesising these dimensions, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how large federal democracies navigate the complexities of privatisation in the twenty-first century.

III.Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multi-paradigmatic framework to analyse the disinvestment trajectories of India and Brazil by synthesising perspectives from International Relations, comparative politics, and political development theory. The approach moves beyond a purely fiscal interpretation of disinvestment to conceptualise it as a strategic recalibration of state power within a globalised political economy.

3.1 International Relations and Systemic Drivers

The impetus for disinvestment is interpreted through the lenses of state survival and global economic integration. Within strategic realism, as articulated by Schelling (1960), state actors are understood as rational and strategic bargainers. From this perspective, disinvestment may be viewed as a bargaining strategy through which states reduce legacy liabilities—such as the substantial debt burden associated with Air India—to enhance their diplomatic and financial flexibility within the international system.

Rosecrance's (1986) concept of the "trading state" further illuminates this dynamic. He distinguishes between military-territorial states and trading states, with the latter prioritising economicinterdependence over territorial expansion. This study argues that both India and Brazil are gradually transitioning towards trading state orientations, wherein economic integration—particularly through aviation and related infrastructure—takes precedence over traditional models of state-led production.

Liberal institutionalism, as developed by Keohane and Nye (1977), highlights the role of international institutions and regimes in reducing uncertainty and fostering cooperation between sovereign states and global capital. Institutions such as BRICS, the United Nations, and UNCTAD contribute to disinvestment processes by promoting transparency, standardisation, and legitimacy in asset valuation and concession frameworks.

Constructivist theory, as proposed by Wendt (1999), emphasises that state interests are socially constructed rather than fixed. In this context, India's shift towards "wealth management" under the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM) reflects a normative redefinition of the state—from a socialist protector to a globally oriented managerial entity. Similarly, initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance signal an evolving identity, positioning the state as a "green sovereign" engaged in global climate governance.

3.2 Political Economy and Dependency Structures

The South–South comparison between India and Brazil necessitates an analytical framework that accounts for structural inequalities within the global hierarchy. World-systems theory, as articulated by Wallerstein (1974), situates both countries as semi-peripheral actors embedded within a stratified global system. Cardoso (1979) further argues that development in such contexts is often dependent in nature, with disinvestment functioning as a mechanism to integrate into global value chains while remaining constrained by external capital flows.

The Singer–Prebisch hypothesis provides additional insight into structural vulnerabilities, particularly the declining terms of trade faced by commodity-exporting economies such as Brazil, in contrast to service-oriented economies like India. In response, disinvestment strategies are often employed to modernise critical sectors such as transport and energy, thereby enhancing global competitiveness.
From a Marxist political economy perspective, disinvestment can be understood as a form of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2003), wherein state assets are transferred to private or global actors. In this context, tensions between the state and labour unions—such as the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)—reflect broader class struggles over the encroachment of global capital into public assets and institutions.

3.3 Comparative Politics: Systems,Culture, and Elites

Domestic political institutions function as a "black box" through which systemic pressures are translated into policy outcomes. The systems theory proposed by Easton (1953) conceptualises policy-making as an input–output process, wherein the political system processes societal demands (inputs) into authoritative decisions (outputs), including those related to disinvestment.

Political culture, as developed by Almond and Verba (1963), further mediates the legitimacy and acceptance of reform. Civic orientations—cognitive, affective, and evaluative—shape public responses to disinvestment. In India, a subject–participatory hybrid political culture often generates resistance to the marketisation of public enterprises, whereas Brazil's more participatory political culture facilitates negotiation and concession-based reform processes.

Elite theory provides an additional explanatory dimension. The works of Pareto (1960), Mosca (1939),

and Mills (1956) highlight how power is concentrated within elite groups that shape policy outcomes. According to Michels' (1911) "iron law of oligarchy," even democratic systems tend to concentrate decision-making authority within a limited ruling class. Consequently, disinvestment processes are often influenced by technocratic and economic elites who drive the privatisation agenda, reinforcing the central role of elite agency in shaping reform trajectories.

3.4 Political Development and Modernization

This study evaluates the resilience of the political system during periods of structural transition. Huntington's (1968) theory of political decay provides a useful framework in this regard. Heargues that when political mobilisation—such as labour strikes—outpaces the development of political institutions, the result is political decay. Viewed through this lens, India's reform process can be interpreted as exhibiting elements of institutional lag, wherein rapid socio-economic mobilisation is not fully matched by corresponding institutional adaptation.

Similarly, Pye's (1966) concept of the crisis of political development highlights the challenges associated with transitions from state-led to market-oriented systems. Such transitions often generate

crises of identity, legitimacy, and participation. These tensions are evident in the societal debates surrounding the disinvestment of Air India in India and Infraero in Brazil, where questions of national identity and public accountability intersect with economic restructuring.

Furthermore, Shils' (1975) typology of political systems offers an additional analytical perspective.This study draws upon his framework to assess whether India and Brazil function as tutelary democracies or evolving oligarchies, particularly in terms of how economicpower is centralised following disinvestment. The analysis focuses on the extent to which political and economic elites influence the restructuring process and the implications this has for democratic governance and institutional

Period	Government / Coalition Type	Prime Minister	Economic Orientation	Disinvestment Approach
1991-1996	INC Minority Government	P.V Narasimha Rao	liberalization global market integration	Initiated disinvestment ;minority stake sales begin
1996 - 1998	United front coalition	H.D Deve Gowda/I.K Gujral	liberal Developmental State Blend	Continued incremental disinvestment
1998 -2004	BJP led NDA coalition	Atal Bihari Vajpayee	liberalization + strategic privatization	Major strategic sales , BALCO ,VSNL HZL,IPCL;DoD created
2004 -2009	UPA I (INC Led coalition)	Manmohan Singh	Social democratic + market reforms	Strategic sales paused; NIF set up; minorities stakes sold
2009- 2014	UPA 2 II (INC Led coalition)	Manmohan Singh	Moderate market liberalism	Stake sales in ONGC, NTPC, NMDC; PPP expansion
2014- 2019	BJP-led NDA Majority	Narendra Modi	Market-driven developmental and state	Rebranded disinvestment DIPAM formed; buybacks
2019- 2024	BJP led NDA majority	Narendra Modi	Strategy privatization + asset monetization	Air India privatization; LIC IPO; National monetization pipeline

Source: compiled from Government of India parliamentary archives (1991- 2024), Ministry Of Finance budget documents, DIPAM annual reports

An analysis of Table 2 indicates that the quality and trajectory of India's economic decisions are deeply embedded within the prevailing political–economic context. During the period of minority governments and multi-party coalitions (1991–2014), policy-making often relied on gradualist minority stake sales to maintain consensus among diverse politicalstakeholders. In contrast,the emergence of majority mandates since 2014 has facilitated a shift towardsmore decisive and market-oriented strategicdisinvestment, including larger-scale privatisation initiatives (Department of Disinvestment and DIPAM 2024). This historical progression suggests that political stability—particularly the transition from fragmented coalitions to dominant parliamentary majorities—serves as a key determinant of the state's capacity to implement complex reforms such as asset monetisation and full-scale privatisation.

Key Insights from the Political Economy Analysis

Political structure versus reform speed: Coalition governments tend to prioritise incremental reform in order to manage political friction, whereas majority governments are better positioned to emphasise efficiency and accelerate the pace of implementation.

Ideological convergence: Despite differences in political affiliation, there is a discernible long-term convergence towards market-oriented liberalism. However, the nature and quality of reform—particularly whether it takes the form of strategic or minority stake sales—vary depending on the strength of the governing majority.

IV.Research Methodology

The study employs a convergent mixed method design to examine civil aviation disinvestment in India and Brazil from 1991 to 2025.Combining quantitative financial and operation data with qualitative policy and institutional analysis, the research captures the interactions between state-market relations, labour dynamics, and global economic pressures through the lens of international political economy. The period encompasses India's post liberalization reforms,the creation of DIPAM, and the contemporary wealth-management approach,alongside Brazil's airport privatization and neo-developmentalist industrial policies,providing a comparative framework for emerging economies. Quantitative data includes disinvestment receipts,dividend flows, airport concession revenues,and labour statistics such as workforce size, union density, and post disinvestment employment trends. sources include DIPAM reports,union budget, Brazilian Ministry of economy records, airport operator reports ,and international databases such as the World Bank ICAO, and UNCTAD. Qualitative data consist of policy documents, parliamentary debates, union reports INTUC, AIAEF in India:Sindicato Nacional dos Aeronautas in Brazil), and peer reviewed literature, contextualizing quantitative findings within institutional and political frameworks.

The study identify threetemporal phases: (1) transition phase(1991-1999), coveringinitial monitory take stake sales in India and early airport concessions in Brazil (2) strategic sale phase (1999-2014), market buy selective privatization and industrial policy consolidation; and (3) institutional wealth management phase (2014-2025), reflecting DIPAM's operationalization and Brazil matured PPP models emphasizing labour engagement, dividend optimisation, and regulatory oversight. This privateisation enables systematic comparison of state strategies, market participation, and label response across both countries.

The analytical framework combines IPE theory with a comparative cross-national approach, examining how development models, institutional capacities, and labour relation influence Disinvestment outcomes. Quantitative data are analysed using Trend and cross sectional analysiswhile qualitative data are assessed through thematic content analysis to identify governance patterns, coalition dynamics, and labour resistance. Key case studies includeAir India, major CPSE airports (Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore), Embraer, and Brazilian airports under concession (Sao Paulo–Guarulhos, Rio–Galeao),, with attention to labour union negotiations, strikes, and policy influence while this methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of fiscal, institutional, and social dimensions, limitations include incomplete Brazilian labour data and Reliance on publicly reported figures, which

may underrepresent informal employment arrangement. Nevertheless, the approach provides a robust, replicable framework for evaluating comparative disinvestment strategies and labour impacts in the civil aviation sector of two major emerging economies.

V.Data Analysis and Empirical Findings

The analysis examines longitudinal trends in civil aviation disinvestment in India and Brazil, categorised into three distinct phases: the transition phase (1991–1999), the strategic sale phase (1999–2014), and the institutional wealth management phase (2014–2025).

5.1. Fiscal Performance and Disinvestment Receipts

In India, fiscal receipts from disinvestment have evolved from modest minority stake sales to a more complex framework of asset monetisation. In the initial phases, the primary objective was to address immediate fiscal deficits. However, the post-2014 period, under the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM), reflects a strategic shift towards dividend optimisation. By the financial year 2024–25, dividend receipts reached approximately ₹74,000 crore, indicating that the state is increasingly leveraging its retained equity holdings to generate sustainable non-tax revenues.

In contrast, Brazil adopted a different approach through the Concession Law of 1995, which facilitatedthe creation of a predictable revenue stream. Unlike India's emphasis on equity dilution, Brazil's model transfers operational risk to private entities—such as in the case of São Paulo–Guarulhos—while the state retains ownership of the underlying infrastructure. This approach reduces exposure to political volatility associated with full privatisation.

Figure 1. India's Approx Average annualreceipts

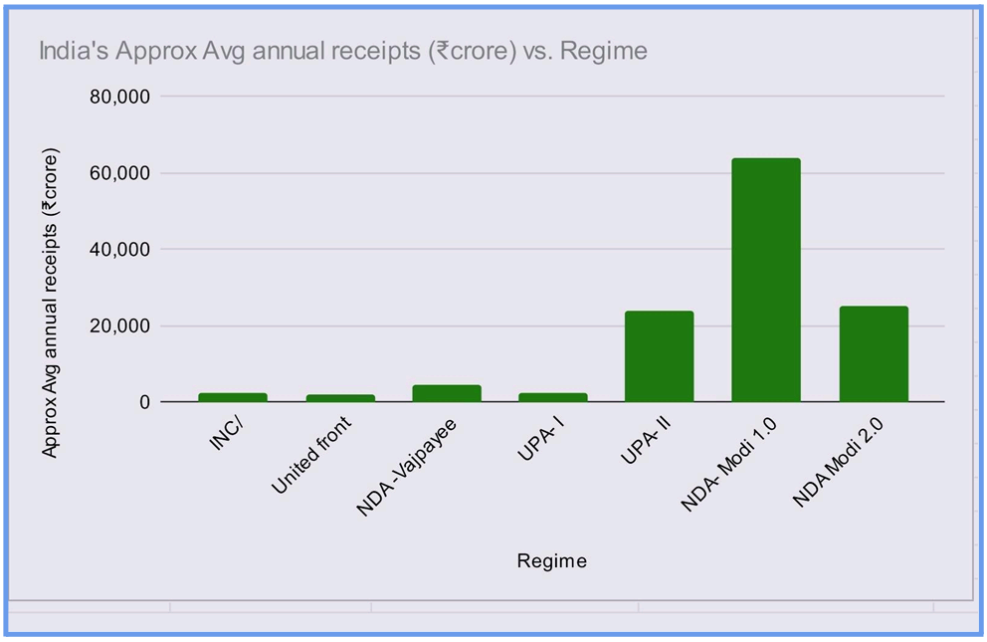


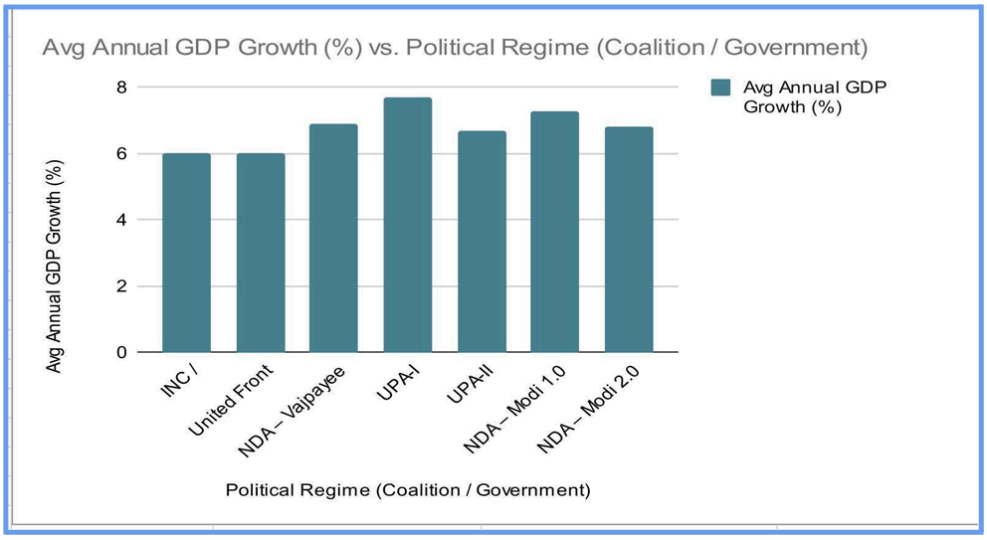
Figure 1. illustrates average disinvestment receipts (₹ crore) across different government regimes in India (1991–2024), based on compileddata from DIPAM and secondarysources (The Print 2021; Factly 2020).

5.2. Operational Efficiency and Market Performance

The findings suggest a correlation between political stability and the effective execution of reforms. Growth trend data from 1991 to 2024 (Figure 2) indicate that although the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) period (2004–2009) recorded relatively high economic growth, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) under the Modi सरकार (2014–2025) institutionalised the reform process by transforming it from ad hoc transactions into a structured "monetisation pipeline".

From an efficiency perspective, Brazil's concession model has resultedin a consistent increase in revenue per passenger, reflecting improved operational efficiency. In contrast, India's public–private partnership (PPP) model has supported high passenger growth;however, it has also encountered regulatory challenges related to aeronautical charges and labour costs.

Figure 2: Average annualGDP growth across political regimesin India (1991–2024)



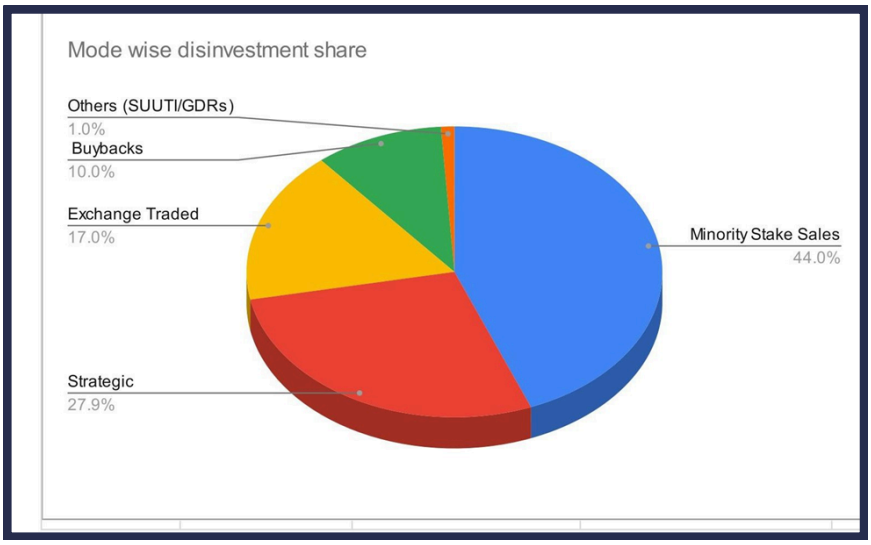
Source:Data adaptedfrom the WorldBank "GDP Growth(Annual %)" dataset(2024) based on World Bank data (WorldBank 2024). The data indicatethat the highestaverage growth occurred during the UPA I period (2004–2009), followed by moderated growth during UPA II (2009–2014). Growth remained relatively stable during the early NDA period (2014–2019), while post-2019 trends reflect volatility associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the combined influenceof global shocks and domestic policy environments.

5.3. Labour Union Impacts and Resistance

Labour outcomes represent a key point of divergence between India and Brazil. In India, fragmented resistance from trade unions—such as the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the Airport Authority Employees Federation (AIAEF)—has demonstrated veto power in delaying strategic disinvestment processes, particularly in the case of Air India and regional airports. The findings suggest that in states such as Tamil Nadu, labour mobilisation has acted as a significant barrier to reform,whereas in Telangana, negotiated social safeguards have facilitated smoother transitions.

In contrast, Brazil has adopted a more institutionalised and coordinated approach to labour engagement. Through organisations such as the Sindicato Nacional dos Aeronautas, labour consultation has been integrated into concession frameworks. This approach has reduced the likelihood of prolonged resistance, as workers negotiate employment conditions within concession agreements rather than opposing privatisation outright.

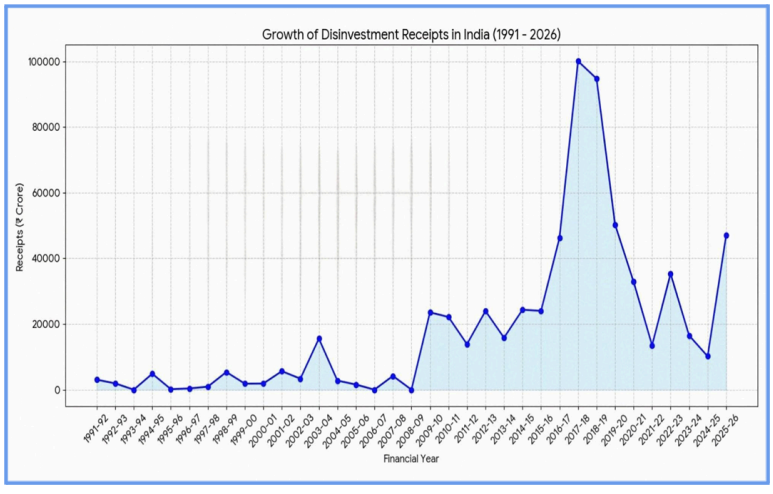
Figure 3: Mode-Wise Disinvestment Receipts in India (1991–2025)



Source: Data adapted from DIPAM (2025) and Union Budget documents (1991–2025). Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding of miscellaneous receipts.

Figure 3 illustrates the mode-wise distribution of disinvestment receipts in India over the period 1991–2025. The data, adapted from DIPAM and Union Budget documents, indicate that while minority stake sales remain the dominant mode of disinvestment, strategicdisinvestment accounts for a significant proportion of total proceeds, reflecting a gradual shift towards deeper privatisation (Department of Investment and Public Asset Management 2025).
The cumulative analysis suggests that the Government of India has mobilised approximately ₹6.5 lakh crore through disinvestment over a span of 35 years. While minority stake sales constitute the largest share, strategic disinvestment—defined as the transfer of ownership and management control—accounts for approximately 28 per cent of total value, indicating a growing emphasis on complete privatisation in selected non-strategic sectors.

Figure 4: Growth of Disinvestment receipts in India 1991 to 2026



Source: Data compiled from DIPAM Annual Reports (1991–2025), Union Budget documents (1991–2025), and the EconomicSurvey (various years). Values presented in ₹ crore. (Ministry of Finance, Government of India, 2025).

Figure 4 presents the growth of disinvestment receipts in India from 1991 to 2026, based on data compiled from DIPAM annual reports, Union Budget documents, and the Economic Survey (Ministry of Finance, Government of India 2025). The figure indicates a marked increase in receipts following 2014, with a peak observed in the financial year 2017–18.

A comparative analysis of the data presented in Figures 4 and 5 reveals that, while India's disinvestment receipts peaked in the post-2014 period, Brazil's trajectory has been characterised by cyclical waves of privatisation closely tied to shifts in presidential regimes.

The Indian Surge

Following the institutional rebranding associated with the establishment of the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM), disinvestment receipts in India reached an all-time high in 2017–18. This surge reflects a broader shift towards "strategic disinvestment", wherein the state moves beyond minority stake sales to withdraw entirely from non-essential sectors. This transition indicates not merely a fiscal adjustment but a structural reorientation of the state towardsa market-mediated governance framework, in which public assets are leveraged for long-term revenue optimisation (Department of Investment and Public Asset Management 2025).

Brazil's Multi-Regime Strategy

In contrast, Brazil has followed a more politically contingent and regime-dependent model of privatisation. Over the past three decades, the country has mobilised over USD 150 billion through privatisation and concession arrangements (see Table 3). The data indicate that during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) administration (1995–2002), privatisation efforts were concentrated in utilities and telecommunications, reflecting a broader neoliberal restructuring agenda.

Subsequently, during the 2016–2022 period, Brazil shifted its focus towards transport infrastructure and airport concessions. This phase of privatisation was strategically employed to address economic stagnation and fiscal constraints, while maintaining public ownership of critical infrastructure assets. Unlike India's emphasis on ownership transfer, Brazil's concession-based model has enabled the state to retain long-term control while outsourcing operational responsibilities to private actors.

Interpretive Insight

From an International Political Economy perspective, the comparison highlights two distinct trajectories of state-market restructuring. India demonstrates a gradual but decisive shift towards strategic disinvestment and partial withdrawal from ownership, whereas Brazil exemplifies a concession-driven model that balances market efficiency with continued state oversight. These divergent approaches reflect differing institutional capacities, political incentives, and development strategies within the broader context of emerging economies.

Note: It is important to note that Brazildoes not publishconsolidated annual disinvestment receipts in the same manner as India's Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM). As a result, the figures presented here are cumulative approximations, disaggregated by political regime. These estimates are derived from official privatisation reports issued by the Government of Brazil (Gov.br), alongside sector-specific concession data and international datasets, including the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Investment Policy Monitor. Additional estimatesare informed by country-specific studies on privatisation trends.

5.4.International Political Economy Insights

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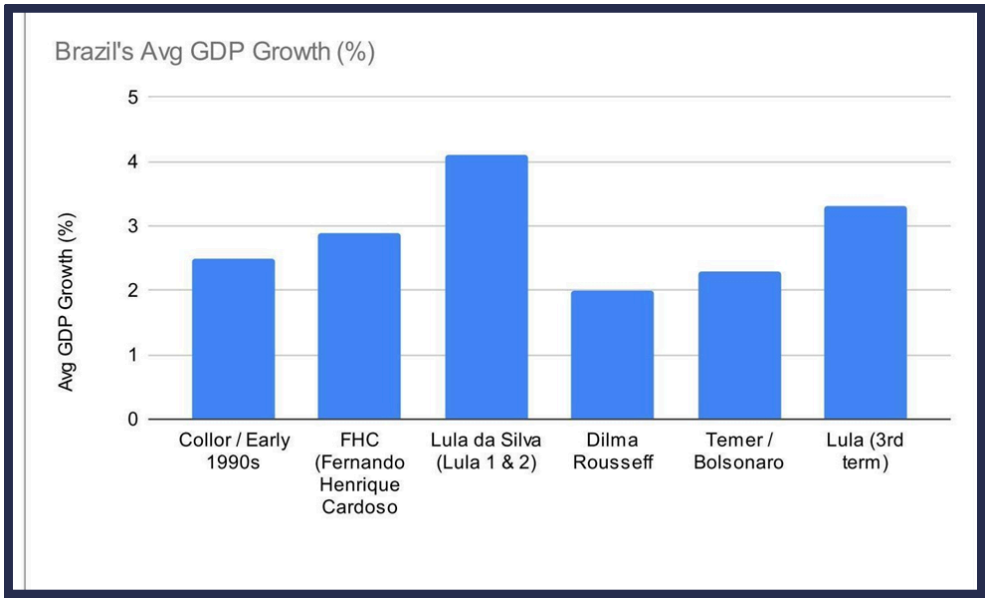
Table 3: Brazil— Regime, Privatization/Concession Receipts& Political Context

Political Regime	Period	Mode of Privatization/Concession	Approx. Receipts (US$ billion)	Impact
Collor / Franco / Early 1990s	1990–1994	Early SOE privatizations	8.5	Brazil began privatization under PND; dozens of SOEs were sold; receipts modest in early years from sales such as Usiminas and Embraer
FHC (Fernando Henrique Cardoso)	1995–2002	Telecom, energy, infrastructure privatization	78.6	Major privatization wave; Program Nacional de Desestatização expanded privatisations to raise funds and attract investment.

Lula da Silva (1st & 2nd terms)	2003–2010	Airport concessions, utilities, minority SOE sales	30–35	Concession auctions expanded; macro growth supported privatization. (Sector-level estimates)
Dilma Rousseff	2011–2016	Continued transport concessions, limited privatizations	15–20	Concessions such as airport blocks; political constraints slowed pace.
Temer / Bolsonaro	2016–2022	Airport/transport/energy concessions; Eletrobras privatization	77.2+	Government reported record privatizations and concession receipts
Lula (3rd term)	2023–2024	Ongoing concession/privatization proposals	data not finalized	New regime with mixed approach toward privatization; policy debates continue

Note: It is important to note that Brazil does not publish consolidated annual disinvestment receipts in the same manner as India's Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM). As a result, the figures presented here are cumulative approximations, disaggregated by political regime. These estimates are derived from official privatisation reports issued by the Government of Brazil (Gov.br), alongside sector-specific concession data and international datasets, including the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Investment Policy Monitor. Additional estimates are informed by country-specific studies on privatisation trends.

Figure 5: Brazil's averageGDP growth rate



Source: World Bank (2024). GDP growth (annual %): Brazil [Data set]. World Development Indicators. The bar chart illustrates significant variation in Brazil'sannual GDP growth rates across presidential regimes from the early 1990s to 2024. Economic performance improved substantially during Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's firsttwo terms (2003–2010), coinciding with a global commodity boom and an expansionary social policy framework under a heterodox macroeconomic approach.

In contrast, growth decelerated during the presidency of Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), reflecting a combination of fiscal tightening, declining commodity prices, and political instability, which ultimately culminated in her impeachment. The subsequent Temer–Bolsonaro period (2016–2022) is characterised by structural stagnation, compounded by political crises and the economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Preliminary estimates for Lula's current term indicate a partial recovery, suggesting that Brazil's growth trajectory is shaped by an interplay of political regime type, external economic conditions, and the strategic role of the state in industrial and social policy.

5.5 India — Civil Aviation Disinvestment Trends

The Air India transaction serves asthe primary empiricalillustration of India's"strategic exit" model and its fiscal implications. The transaction, with an enterprise value of approximately ₹18,000 crore, was structured to maximise fiscal space. By transferring approximately ₹15,300 crore of legacy debt to the acquiring entity, the state significantly reduced its contingent liabilities. This aspect of the transaction proved more consequential in the long term than the immediate cash inflow.

Fiscal performance

The Air India disinvestment provided a meaningful infusion into the exchequer while simultaneously reducing the fiscal burden associated with sustaining a loss-making public enterprise. Although the upfront cash inflow was relatively modestin comparison to the overall debt burden, the assumption of ₹15,300 crore in liabilities by the buyer substantially improvedfiscal space and reduced the government's exposure to contingent financial risks.

Labour and operational dynamics

In contrast to Brazil's structured concession model—where workforce protections are often maintained through state-linked entities such as Infraero—the Air India transaction involved a full transfer of ownership to the private sector. This necessitated complex negotiations concerning workforce restructuring, employment contracts, and union representation, leading to ongoing discussions regarding post-PSU labour arrangements.

Operational efficiency

Following disinvestment, Air India transitioned to private management, with expectations of improvements in operational efficiency, including fleet modernisation, network optimisation, and enhanced revenue management. However, comprehensive post-privatisation performance metrics remain limited in publicly available aviation reports, and thus, the full extent of efficiency gains is yet to be systematically evaluated.

Labour outcomes

Privatisation has raised significant concerns regarding workforce restructuring, employee retention, and changes in contractual terms. Giventhat Air Indiahistorically operated with a highlyunionised workforce under public sector protections, negotiations over employment conditions formed a criticalcomponent of the transition. The outcomes vary across employee categories and continue to evolve through ongoing institutional and labour negotiations.

5.6 Brazil — Airport Privatization and Concession Trends

Unlike India's single-entity privatisation model centred on Air India, Brazil's approachis characterised by airport privatisation through long-term concession frameworks.

Airport concessions and privatisation

Beginning in the early 2010s, the Brazilian federal government initiated the concession of multiple major airports previously operated by Infraero, the state-owned airport authority. In March 2017, concessions were awarded for four major airports, with consortium investors committing -

approximately R$6.61 billion in investment alongside long-term operating rights. Subsequently, in April 2021, auctions for 22 airport concessions generated approximately R$3.3 billion (around USD 593 million), demonstrating an active and sustained privatisation pipeline.

By late 2023, approximately 90 per cent of Brazil's airports were under private management, with major domestic and international firms—such as Aena, CCR (Motiva), and Socicam—operating these facilities under long-term concession agreements.
Fiscal performance

Brazil's concession model generates multiple revenue streams, including upfront concession payments, recurring concession fees, and mandatory investment commitments for infrastructure development. Although Brazil does not consolidate total privatisation receipts in a centralised dataset, these individual concession revenues collectively contribute to both federal and subnational government finances.

Operational efficiency
Privatised airports in Brazil are widely associated with improvements in service quality, capacity, and connectivity. Concession operators invest in terminal expansion, ground handling systems, and technological upgrades, leading to increased passenger throughput and broader infrastructure development following privatisation.

Labour outcomes
Labour implications of airport privatisation in Brazil include changes in workforce composition, particularly through the transfer of employees from state-owned entities such as Infraero to private concession operators. While regulatory frameworks generally protect existing employeerights during the transition, concession arrangements often introduce new operational structures aimed at improving efficiency. These changes may affect job security, working conditions, and labour flexibility within the sector.

Table 4 : Comparative summary India vs Brazil

Aspect	India (Air India)	Brazil airport concessions
Mode of Disinvestment	Strategic sale of national airline	concessions/ privatisation of airport operation
Fiscal receipts	2,700 crore cash + dept transfer 2022	R$3.3B from 22 airports 2021 + earlier commitment(e.g R$6.61B 2017)
Operational focus	Airline management route efficiency	Airport infrastructure upgrades service equality
Labour	Workforce restructuring with union implications	Work forces reallocation regulatory protection amid managerial change

From a longitudinal perspective, India's principal reference point for aviation privatisation is the disinvestment of Air India, whichreflects a strategic withdrawal of the state from direct airlineownership with the objective of enhancing fiscaldiscipline and operational efficiency. This case represents a decisive shift towards full or partial privatisation as a means of restructuring legacy liabilities and improving the financial sustainability of public enterprises.

In contrast, Brazil's aviation privatisation trajectory is characterised by a series of airport concession programmes implemented over an extended period. These concessions have progressively increased private sector participation in airport operations, contributing to improvements in service quality while also ensuring sustained long-term investment commitments in infrastructure.

From a contextual standpoint, India's model is best understood as a strategicsale framework centredon a single large public enterprise, reflecting centralised fiscal considerations and the need to address accumulated financial and operational inefficiencies. Brazil's approach, by comparison, is rooted in a concession-based model of privatisation, which combines market mechanisms with regulatory oversight. While private operators manage airport operations, the state retains strategic control through regulatory institutions such as the National Civil Aviation Agency (ANAC), thereby balancing efficiency gains with public accountability.

Table 5: Airport privatization via concession in Brazil 2011 -2023

Round/ Year	Asset concessioned	Operator type	Fiscal receipts/ investment commitments
Round 1 (2011 -12)	sao paulo,Brasilia compinas	Private consortia + infraero	Multi billion R$ concession commitments
Round 2 (2013)	Rip Galeao,Belo Horizon	Private consortia	Up front concession fees+ multi year CAPEX
Round 3 (2017)	4 Airports	Global and local operators	R$ 6.61 Billion Commitment
Round 4 (2021)	22 Airports	Multiple private operators	R$3.3 Billion Raised At Auction
Round 5 (2022-23)	Additional regional airports	Mixed	Progressive infraero disinvestment during completion

Empirical evidence from the aviation sector confirms that privatisation is often motivated by technical efficiency and global connectivity (Ohri 2009). Econometric studies of the Brazilian airport model indicate that while privatisation can stabilise airfares, it simultaneously generates a regulatory dependency on private concessionaires (Brito et al. 2021). Similar patterns are observable in the telecommunications sector in both India and Brazil, where the success of disinvestment is contingent upon pre-existing regulatory frameworks and the state's capacity to manage private-sector entry effectively (Sood and Jain 2011).

5.7 Comparative International Political Economy: India and Brazil in the 2026 Global Order

Structural Economic Dichotomies: Services vs. Commodities

The divergence in disinvestment strategies between India and Brazil is not mainly a fiscal choice but a reflection of their distinct structural roles in the global economy.

Structural Economic Dichotomies: Services vs. Commodities

The divergence in disinvestment strategies between India and Brazil reflects their distinct structural positions within the global economy rather than solely fiscal considerations. India's "leapfrogging" model emphasises the strategic sale of key public enterprises such as Air India, driven by central fiscal imperatives and the necessity to restructure legacy liabilities. Conversely, Brazil follows an "urban-industrial" profile, prioritising airport concessions with strong regulatory oversight while retaining policy control through institutions such as the National Civil Aviation Agency (ANAC).

Labour dynamics further shape these models. By 2025–26, Brazil's service sector employed approximately 71 per cent of the workforce, reflecting high structural integration. India, by contrast,

exhibits a “missing middle” in its labour distribution: the service sector accounts for over 55 per cent of GDP but employs only around 34 per cent of the population. This labour mismatch explains the heightened politicalsensitivity of India’sairline privatisation initiatives relative to Brazil’s concession-based airport model.

Avoiding the Middle-Income Trap

Brazil provides a cautionary example of premature deindustrialisation, whereas India, maintaining projected growth rates of 6.5–7.3 per cent in 2026, has strategically channelled disinvestment proceeds into digital public infrastructure. This investment aims to facilitate a transition of labour into formalised digital and service-sector roles, thereby mitigating risks associated with the middle-income trap.

The Geoeconomic Pivot: China vs. United States

In 2026, both nations navigate a fragmented global trade environment shaped by the “Donroe Doctrine”, characterised by transnational diplomacy and reciprocal tariffs (Vajiram and Ravi 2026). Brazil maintains significant economic dependence on China, which accounts for approximately 28–30 per cent of its exports. This resource-oriented relationship offers fiscal stability but constrains Brazil’s strategic manoeuvrability within BRICS+, often aligning the country ideologically with Beijing on issues such as de-dollarisation (Belfer Center 2025; ResearchGate 2021).

India, in contrast, has pursuedstrategic hedging, diversifying trade through free trade agreements with the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the European Free Trade Association, while retaining sovereign energy choices, including continuedimports from Russia despite Westernpressure (ISAS 2026; Stimson Center 2026). The Air Indiasale to Boeingand Airbus exemplifies India’s use of privatisation as a tool to cement strategic ties with multiple global partners simultaneously.

Energy Sovereignty and Renewable Development

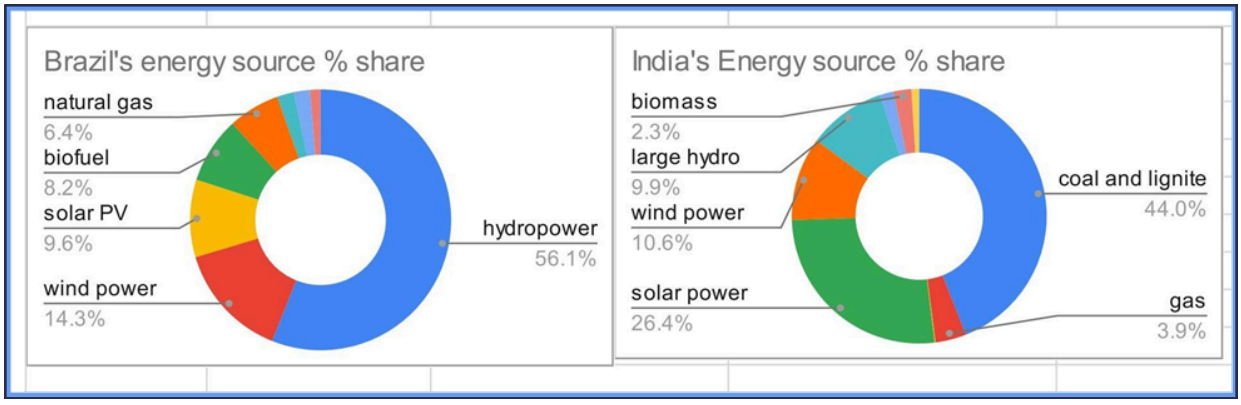
Both India and Brazil have emerged as “renewable superpowers”, although their energy strategies differ according to resource endowment. Brazil maintains one of the world’s cleanest energy matrices, with renewables comprising nearly 88 per cent of electricity generation, primarily led by hydropower and a globally competitive biofuelssector (IEA 2025; EPE 2025). India has focused on a solar energy surge, achieving 262.74 GW of non-fossil fuel capacity by late 2025—approximately 51.5 per cent of total installed capacity—with a target of 500 GW by 2030 (PIB 2025).

Institutional leadership further differentiates the two countries. India co-founded the International Solar Alliance (ISA) to promote south–south cooperation and export its solar technologies, such as solar pumps and rooftop systems, as instruments of soft power. Brazil leverages the ISA primarily to enhance grid resilience and diversify beyond hydropower dependency, aligning climate goals with private-sector investment through green airport terminal initiatives (GNPW Group 2026; PIB 2025).

Socio-Economic WelfareModels: Digital vs. Institutional

India and Brazil exemplify two distinct models of social redistribution in the context of disinvestment. India employs a digital public infrastructure framework (Digital Verification Infrastructure and the JAM Trinity) to channel DIPAM-managed resources efficiently into direct benefittransfers (DBT), minimising leakage. Brazil, by contrast, maintains a rights-based universalism model, wherein concession revenues—particularly from airportssuch as Congonhas—support constitutional welfare pillars,including healthcare and social assistance programmes such as Bolsa Família.

Figure 6 & 7: Brazil's energy source share and India's energy source share



Source: Ministry of Power, Year-End Review 2025 (PIB Release ID: 2215187) and Central Electricity Authority (CEA) Monthly Report (Dec 2025).Balanço Energético Nacional (BEN) 2025 - Summary Report, Empresa de Pesquisa Energética (EPE).

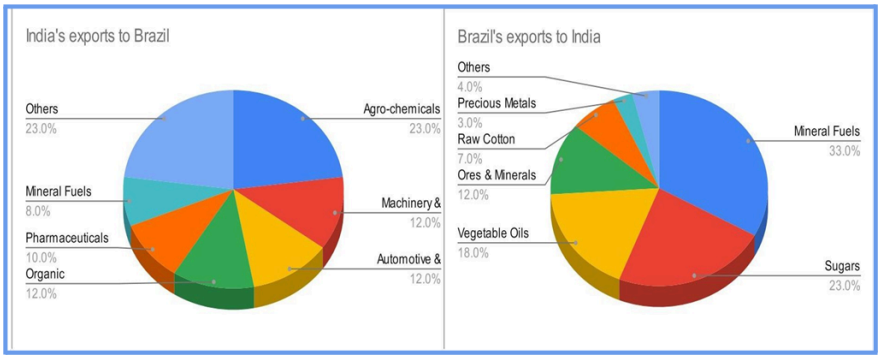
By the close of 2025, India achieved a historic milestone, with non-fossil fuel capacity reaching approximately 264.14 GW, thereby surpassing fossil fuel capacity of 245.60 GW. This transition reflects a 51.8 per cent share of non-fossil energy, driven primarily by a significant solar expansion of approximately 135.8 GW. In contrast, Brazil remains a global leader in the Global South in terms of generation purity, with approximately 88.2 per cent of its electricity derived from clean energy sources. These trajectories illustrate two distinct yet effective pathways towards energy sovereignty and decarbonisation, shaped by differing resource endowments and policy frameworks.

Socio-Economic Welfare: Digitalversus Institutional Best Practices

A comparative analysis of welfare architectures reveals a broader shift from traditional bureaucratic intervention towards digitally enabled and rights-based models of social protection. In India, the Digit al Public Infrastructure (DPI) framework—anchored by the JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan–Aadhaar–Mobile)—has enabled a highly efficient and leakage-free system of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). This system has facilitated the rapid scaling of welfare programmes such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), thereby enhancing targeting efficiency and administrative transparency (World Bank 2026).

In contrast, Brazil’swelfare model is grounded in rights-based universalism. The Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS) provides universal healthcare as a constitutional right, representing a long-standing institutional commitment to social protection. India, through schemes such as Ayushman Bharat, is attempting to emulate aspects of this model through insurance-based coverage mechanisms (SciELO 2026). Additionally, Brazil’s Bolsa Família programme remains a global benchmark for conditional cash transfers, prioritising human capital development through conditionalities related to educationand health (ResearchGate 2017).

Figure 8 & 9 : India's exports to Brazil and Brazil exportsto India



Source: Compiled from Ministry of External Affairs, India (2025) and MDIC (ComexStat) Brazil.

The bilateral trade architecture between India and Brazil remains structurally complementary and vertically integrated. Data compiled from the Ministry of External Affairs (India) and Brazil's MDIC (ComexStat) for 2025 indicate a clear divergence in trade composition. India's exports to Brazil are concentrated in value-added technical products, particularly agrochemicals (23 per cent) and engineering and machinery (24 per cent combined).

Conversely, Brazil's exports to India are heavily concentrated in primary commodities, including crude oil (33 per cent) and agribusiness products such as sugar and soybeans (41 per cent combined).
This complementarity reflects a mutually beneficial but asymmetrical trade relationship. As noted in official data, India serves as a high-technology supplier to Brazil's agricultural sector, exporting agrochemicals valued at over USD 1 billion annually. In return, Brazil functions as a strategic supplier of energy and food security inputs for India, with crude oil and vegetable oils accounting for imports exceeding USD 2.3 billion.

While this interdependence strengthens bilateral economic ties, it also underscores a continued reliance on primary commodities. Both nations are therefore pursuing diversification strategies, including proposed joint production initiatives in sectors such as defence and aerospace, to reduce structural vulnerabilities and enhance value-chain integration.

5.8 Concentration of Corporate Power and Structural Influence

To fully understand the structural dimensions of the disinvestment process, it is essential to examine the concentration of economic power within domestic markets. Table 6 presents a comparative profile of leading business groups in India and Brazil, highlighting their net worth, work-force size, global presence, and sectoral contributions. These entities represent key nodes of national capital accumulation and exert significant influence over economic restructuring processes. Note for Table 6

Table 6: Comparative Profile of Dominant Economic Elites (FY 2024–25)

Country	Business group	Global net worth in USD	Global workforce	Presence(in countries)	Key sector contribution
India	Tata Group	$310B (M-Cap)	1,000,000+	100	Civil Aviation & IT
India	Reliance industries	$115B+	390,000+	20	Energy & Telecom
India	Adani groups	$85B+	45,000+	15	Ports & Infrastructure
Brazil	JBS.SA	$73B+	280,000+	20	Agribusiness & Food
Brazil	Vale S.A	$36B+	120,000+	30	Mining & Infrastructure
Brazil	Itaú Unibanco	$27B+	100,000+	18+	Financial

Source: Compiled by the author based on Forbes Global 2000 (2025), BNDES reports, and corporate filings, including annual reports from Tata, Reliance, and JBS (2024–25), as well as Bloomberg Billionaires Index data.

The quantitative profile presented in Table 6 underscores the structural concentration of economic -

power within the Indian and Brazilian economies. The combined market capitalisation, global revenues, and transnational reach of these dominant conglomerates represent a significant proportion of national economic output, thereby positioning them as central actors in the political economy of both countries.

These “national champions” exert influence not only through direct lobbying but also by shaping the broader political and economic landscape. Their contribution extends to capital formation, technological development, and foreign exchange remittances—exceeding USD 135 billion in the case of India in 2025. Such financial and structural contributions render these conglomerates indispensable to macroeconomic stability.

As a consequence, the state is structurally incentivised to design disinvestment frameworks—such as asset concessions and strategic sales—that align with the operational capacities and long-term interests of these elite business groups. This symbiotic relationship ensures that disinvestment functions not merely as a fiscal or efficiency-driven reform, but also as a mechanism of elite consolidation. In this process, state-led sectors are progressively transformed into private oligopolies with enhanced capacity to compete in global markets.

Table 7: Major labor associations.

Country	Key labour association	Membership (Approx.)	Political Alignment	Influence on disinvestment
India	BMS (Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh)	10 million+	Linked to ruling party (BJP/RSS)	Forces "Gradualism"; prevents total privatization to protect jobs.
India	AITUC / CITU	6 million+	Left-leaning / Opposition	Leads strikes in Coal, Banking, and Steel sectors.
Brazil	CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores)	7.4 million	Linked to Workers' Party (PT/Lula)	Uses legal challenges and mass protests to stop asset sales.
Brazil	Força Sindical	2 million	Centrist	Negotiates for "Profit Sharing" during privatization.

Labour associations constitute a critical mediating force in the disinvestment process, shaping both the pace and nature of privatisation in India and Brazil. In India, labour organisations such as the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), along with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), play a significant role in influencing policy outcomes.

The BMS, with its affiliation to the ruling political establishment, often advocates for a gradualist approach to disinvestment, prioritising employment protection and incremental reform. In contrast, left-leaning organisations such as AITUC and CITU actively resist privatisation through strikes and collective mobilisation, particularly in strategically important sectors such as coal, banking, and steel.

In Brazil, labour dynamics exhibit a more institutionalised form of engagement. The Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), which is closely associated with the Workers’ Party, frequently employs both -

legal mechanisms and large-scale mobilisation to challenge asset sales. Meanwhile, Força Sindical adopts a more centrist and negotiation-oriented approach, often securing concessions such as profit-sharing arrangements within privatisation frameworks.

Collectively, these labour institutions highlight the extent to which disinvestment is not solely a technocratic or fiscal exercise, but rather a deeply political process shaped by competing social forces, institutional structures, and ideological alignments within each country.

VI.Discussion

The comparative analysis of civil aviation disinvestment in India and Brazil reveals a complex interaction between systemic global pressures and domestic institutional constraints. While both nations seek to modernise infrastructure and integrate into the global economy, their policy trajectories are shaped by what David Easton (1953) conceptualises as the "authoritative allocation of values" within distinct political systems.

6.1 Systemic Logic: Strategic Realism and the Trading State

The global impetus for disinvestment reflects a broader transformation towards what Richard Rosecrance (1986) terms the "trading state", wherein economic integration supersedes territorial control as the primary objective of state policy. In this context, both India and Brazil have pursued aviation privatisation as a mechanism for embedding themselves within global production and mobility networks.

From the perspective of strategic realism, as articulated by Thomas Schelling (1960), the Indian state's decision to transfer approximately ₹15,300 crore of Air India's legacy debt can be interpreted as a rational bargaining strategy. By shedding fiscal liabilities, the state enhances its "sovereign agility" in global financial markets.

Furthermore, institutional trust plays a critical role in facilitating disinvestment. As argued by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977), international regimes help reduce uncertainty and build credibility between states and global capital. Brazil's reliance on regulatory institutions such as ANAC and its standardised concession framework exemplifies this dynamic, enabling the attraction of global operators such as Aena and Fraport.

6.2 The "Black Box" of Domestic Friction: Systems and Cultures

While global economic pressures provide consistent inputs, policy outcomes diverge due to domestic institutional and cultural dynamics. In India, the "subject–participatory" political culture identified by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) generates resistance to market-oriented reforms. Labour organisations, including INTUC, often interpret public enterprises as instruments of social protection rather than commercial entities.

This has resulted in what Banerjee (2012) describes as "negotiated reform", compelling the state to adopt a more gradualist approach, exemplified by the shift towards dividend optimisation (₹74,000 crore in FY 2024–25) rather than wholesale privatisation.

Applying Samuel P. Huntington's (1968) concept of political decay, India's reform trajectory may be interpreted as a case where political mobilisation—particularly labour resistance—outpaces institutional capacity. In contrast, Brazil's Lei nº 8.987/1995 demonstrates a higher level of institutionalisation, enabling more effective processing of policy inputs into outputs with reduced systemic friction.

6.3 Structural Realities: Dependency and Class Dynamics

A combined Marxist and dependency perspective provides a critical lens through which to interpret -

disinvestment outcomes. From the standpoint of "accumulation by dispossession" (David Harvey 2003), the transfer of public assets to private actors represents a restructuring of ownership that may exacerbate inequalities.

Elite theory further reinforces this interpretation. The concentration of decision-making power within a limited group of economic actors reflects the "power elite" framework proposed by C. Wright Mills (1956) and the "iron law of oligarchy" articulated by Robert Michels (1911). In both India and Brazil, disinvestment decisions are increasingly concentrated within technocratic and economic elites.

From a dependency perspective, as outlined by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1979), both countries remain situated within the semi-periphery of the global system. Brazil's continued reliance on commodity exports reflects the structural constraints identified in the Singer–Prebisch thesis, wherein peripheral economies remain dependent on the core for technological advancement.

6.4 Identity and Justice: Constructing the Modern State

Beyond material considerations, disinvestment reflects a transformation in state identity. According to Alexander Wendt (1999), state interests are socially constructed. The shift from "disinvestment" to "wealth management" in India represents a normative rebranding of the state—from a provider of goods to a sovereign manager of assets.

Both India and Brazil seek to legitimise disinvestment through redistributive mechanisms aligned with theories of justice. Drawing on John Rawls (1971), the recycling of disinvestment proceeds into welfare programmes reflects an attempt to ensure fairness in distribution. India's investment in digital public infrastructure and Brazil's allocation of concession revenues to public healthcare (SUS) demonstrate efforts to enhance societal welfare.

Similarly, Amartya Sen (1999) emphasises the importance of expanding human capabilities. In this regard, both states utilise disinvestment proceeds to strengthen social and economic capacities, thereby mitigating the distributive consequences of market-oriented reforms.

Synthesis: The analysis confirms that systemic drivers—such as strategic bargaining and global market norms—are mediated by domestic variables, including political culture and labour mobilisation. This interaction produces a hybrid state–market model characteristic of contemporary emerging economies.

6.5 The Political Economy of Elite Capture and Structural Power

The empirical evidence necessitates a critical reassessment of the relationship between the state and the market. Contrary to classical liberal assumptions of neutral market formation, the data reveal the structural power of capital, wherein economic elites actively shape policy outcomes.

The scale and influence of major conglomerates—such as the Tata, Reliance, and Adani groups in India, and JBS and Vale in Brazil—grant them what Charles Lindblom (1977) describes as a "structural veto". Their control over employment generation and foreign exchange flows creates a form of state dependency, whereby political leadership is incentivised to align policy frameworks with elite interests. This "reverse influence" dynamic implies that the state does not merely regulate capital; rather, its own stability becomes contingent upon the continued investment of these economic actors. Consequently, disinvestment initiatives—such as India's National Monetisation Pipeline and Brazil's concession frameworks—are designed to accommodate the capital-intensive capacities of domestic elites.

The outcome is a transition from public monopolies to private oligopolies. By establishing high entry

barriers—such as substantial capital requirements and technical qualifications—the state effectively selects a limited set of actors capable of acquiring public assets. This creates a mutually reinforcing relationship: political actors gain legitimacy through claims of fiscal efficiency and infrastructure development, while economic elites acquire de-risked assets that generate long-term returns.

Importantly, this dynamic persists across political regimes, indicating that the logic of disinvestment has become structurally embedded within the political economy. As conceptualised by Easton (1953), elite interests have been internalised within the “black box” of the state, rendering disinvestment an enduring feature of economic governance.

At the global level, the transnational presence of these conglomerates enhances state power. Firms such as the Tata Group and JBS function as extensions of national economic strategy, enabling India and Brazil to project influence internationally. In this sense, dependency theory is partially inverted: semi-peripheral states utilise domestic elites to strengthen their position within the global system, even as wealth concentration intensifies.

6.6 The Triadic Conflict: Negotiating between "Street Power" and "Suite Power"

The disinvestment trajectory in India and Brazil is not a linear economic process but the outcome of a triadic tension among the state, economic elites, and organised labour. This interaction generates a “pressure-cooker” dynamic that fundamentally shapes both the pace and character of reform.

Elite ‘SuitePower’ (Structural Necessity):

As established in earlier sections, dominant business groups—such as Tata, Adani, JBS, and Vale—exercise what may be termed “suite power”. Their influence is structural rather than merely instrumental: they provide capital, technological capabilities, and global networks that the state itself does not possess. Consequently, the polity is compelled to design disinvestment frameworks that attract these actors, as they are often the only entities capable of managing large-scale assets such as civil aviation infrastructure and extractive industries. This generates a top-down pressure to accelerate privatisation and, in certain cases, to liberalise labour markets in order to enhance global competitiveness.

Union ‘StreetPower’ (Political Friction):

In contrast, organised labour exercises “street power”, grounded in its capacity for electoral mobilisation and collective action. Trade unions act as a democratic constraint on the ambitions of economic elites. In India, organisations such as the BMS have contributed to a policy of gradualism, compelling the state to adopt incremental disinvestment strategies rather than full-scale privatisation. Even where economic elites advocate complete asset transfer, the state frequently opts for strategic or partial disinvestment to mitigate the risk of industrial unrest and electoral backlash.

In Brazil, labour unions employ a more institutionalised strategy, often utilising judicial mechanisms to challenge or delay disinvestment initiatives. This litigation-based approach produces a “stop-and-go” reform trajectory, which, while frustrating for investors, ensures that labour protections remain embedded within the process.

As argued by Candland (2007), labour associations in India are not merely reactive but are deeply embedded within democratic processes, compelling the state to pursue gradualist reforms to avoid social disruption. Similarly, Riethof (2017) demonstrates that, in Brazil, even labour-aligned governments must navigate complex union dynamics to maintain industrial stability during privatisation.

The State as Mediator of Contested Liberalisation:

The analysis reveals that the state functions as a mediator within a continuously negotiated political

economy. It must simultaneously satisfy economic elites—to sustain investment, growth, and external credibility—while accommodating labour demands to preserve social order and electoral legitimacy.

This mediation gives rise to a hybrid model of disinvestment characterised by:
Voluntary Retirement Schemes (VRS) and social safety nets, funded through disinvestment proceeds, to mitigate labour displacement; Retention of strategic or minority stakes, allowing the state to maintain oversight while transferring operational control to private actors.

Thus, disinvestment in India and Brazil is best understood as a process of "contested liberalisation". The so-called "invisible hand" of the market operates within a visibly political arena—shaped by elite negotiations and labour resistance. The resulting trajectory is not a pure market outcome, but a fragile and evolving compromise that sustains the state–business nexus while preventing large-scale social disruption.

VI.Conclusion

6.1 Synthesis of Research Findings

This study demonstrates that disinvestment in the civil aviation sectors of India and Brazil constitutes a significant recalibration of the "trading state" (Rosecrance 1986) within the contemporary global order. By analysing fiscal, institutional, and labour dynamics from 1991 to 2025, the research finds that the "authoritative allocation of values" (Easton 1953) has shifted from a state-centric production model to a form of sovereign portfolio management.

The empirical evidence indicates that while global systemic pressures—interpreted through strategic realism—drive the necessity for disinvestment, the specific policy outcomes are determined by domestic institutional configurations. India's transition towards a dividend-oriented approach and Brazil's reliance on standardised concession frameworks both represent "rational bargaining acts" (Schelling 1960), tailored to manage internal labour dynamics and federal constraints.

Importantly, the findings suggest that disinvestment does not signify a retreat of the state, but rather a transformation towards managerial sovereignty. The growing economic weight of domestic conglomerates grants them a "structural veto" (Lindblom 1977), compelling the state to align policy frameworks with their operational interests. Consequently, disinvestment increasingly functions as a mechanism of elite consolidation, facilitating the transition from public monopolies to private oligopolies while preserving national strategic autonomy.

At the same time, the trajectory of reform is shaped by a persistent triadic struggle between economic elites and organised labour. While elites provide the capital and global integration necessary for reform, labour unions act as a democratic counterweight, enforcing gradualism and protecting social stability. The resulting system is therefore not a pure free market, but a form of contested liberalisation in which the state continuously negotiates between 'suite power' and 'street power'.

7.2 Research Implications and Scholarly Significance

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary contribution to the international political economy of the Global South.

Theoretical contribution:
By applying Huntington's (1968) concept of political decay to contemporary fiscal and institutional data, the study offers a novel framework for understanding reform trajectories in emerging economies. It demonstrates that institutional capacity—enhanced in India through mechanisms such as cooperative federalism—plays a critical role in mitigating crises of participation (Pye 1966).

Empirical contribution:

The research advances a cross-sectoral analytical approach by linking aviation disinvestment with broader structural transformations, including energy transitions and South–South trade patterns. This provides renewed empirical grounding for dependency theory (Wallerstein 1974), illustrating how semi-peripheral states utilise infrastructure reform to navigate the constraints identified in the Singer–Prebisch framework. Normative and identity-based contribution:

From a constructivist perspective (Wendt 1999), the study identifies a shift in state identity. The findings suggest that “green sovereignty” and “digital stewardship” are emerging as key markers of modern statehood, replacing traditional models of state-led industrial ownership in the post-2025 global order.

7.3 Strategic Recommendations

Building on the comparative analysis and the identified fiscal and institutional trajectories (1991–2025), the following recommendations aim to enhance both domestic legitimacy and international bargaining capacity in India and Brazil. These recommendations focus on strengthening institutional frameworks, balancing labour–capital relations, and aligning disinvestment strategies with long-term developmental objectives.

- Standardization of Transparent Valuation Mechanisms: to reduce the” implementation gap” caused by market uncertainty, India should develop independent, standardised asset valuation frameworks. moving beyond ad hoc assessments towards a statutory institutional process reduces political distrust and ensures that the “authoritative allocation of values" (Easton, 1953)is perceived as socially legitimate.
- Harnessing NITI Aayog’s Cooperative Federalism: the central government should utilise NITI aayog's decentralised framework to incentivesStates. By linking disinvestment proceeds to state-level performance grants, the political culture (Almond & Verba) of resistance as regional hubs can be transferred into one of “ competitive federalism”.
- Labor Transition and Skill Support Frameworks: to mitigate the marxist friction of class struggle, states must establish structured labour transition mechanisms- including re-skilling,redeployment,and social safety nets, integrating labour into the pre-bidding strategic bargaining phase (Schelling, 1960) reduces the “political decay” caused by the industrial disruptions.
- Institutional Strengthening of CPSEs: before pursuing an exit, the state should enhance the operation autonomy and governance of Central public sector enterprises(CPSEs . Reducing bureaucratic interference while retaining strategic ownership allows the state to function as an efficient “managerial sovereign" rather than just a “seller”.
- Selective Monetization Strategy: following the logic of Strategic Realism state should prioritize the monetization of revenue-generating “brownfield” assets.preserving “Greenfield” project and national security-linked sectors under state control ensures that the transition to a “trading state” Trading State" (Rosecrance, 1986) does not compromise essential strategic autonomy.
- Adopting Brazil’s Concession Logic: India should specifically study Brazil concession frameworks and regulatory coordination(ANAC). Brazil's model of institutionalization labour dialogue platforms serves as a vital template for making asset reforms more socially legitimate and administratively efficient.
- Economic Diplomacy and Global Integration: India and Brazil should align sectoral liberalization with their broader economic diplomacy in BRICS,G20 and QUAD. Integrating disinvestment strategies with regional trade forums allows these “semi -peripheral” States to leverage foreign investment as a tool for technology transfer, helping them escape the Singer-Prebisch dependency trap.
- Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) Recycling: India should formalise the recycling of disinvestment dividends into DPI. This provides a Rawlsian “difference principle” justification, where the monetization of elite aviation assets directly funds the digital empowerment of the marginalized, maintaining the social contract.

VIII.Future Research Directions

Longitudinal Institutional Analysis:Future research should undertake longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term operational efficiency and service quality of privatised assets in India and Brazil.Such analysis would provide empirical validation for the propositions of New Institutional Economics in the contextof disinvestment.

- The Role of Technocratic Elites and Algorithmic Governance:As disinvestment processesbecome increasingly data-driven, further research is required to examine the role of technocratic elites in shaping policy outcomes. In particular, the integration of algorithmic valuation and artificial intelligence may transform the "circulation of elites" (Pareto) and alter feedback mechanisms within Easton's systems model.
- Climate-Oriented International Political Economy (Climate IPE):Building upon the energy transition data presented in earlier sections, future studies should investigate whether "green disinvestment" strategies can effectively reduce the dependence of semi-peripheral economies on volatile fossil fuel markets. This line of inquiry would contribute to an emerging Climate IPE framework linking sustainability, sovereignty, and global economic restructuring.

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Modern Medical Science and Christian Missionaries: A Study of the role of St.Joseph Hospital Baramulla, Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

From the beginning of human civilization, dhawa (medicine) and dua (prayer) have interacted to influence healing across religions and cultures. Interdependence is profoundly ingrained in Kashmiri culture, shaping therapeutic ideas and practices. Christian missionaries disrupted this long-standing medical culture in the second part of the nineteenth century. Missionaries promoted allopathic medicine as a moral and civilizational endeavor out of religious duty and evangelistic ambition. Western medical expertise was institutionalized through hospitals and dispensaries in Baramulla, North Kashmir, to change healing landscapes. This shift is symbolized by St. Joseph's Hospital's growth from a small dispensary in 1931 to a maternity clinic in 1932 and a major hospital by 1937. Missionary medicine negotiated with local faith- based healing rather than replacing it. This study claims that missionary influence on dhawa and dua created a hybrid medical culture in Kashmir where modern medicine, religious belief, and indigenous healing coexisted in tension and accommodation, reshaping colonial notions of illness, care, and authority.

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Introduction

The Church of England was established during the early sixteenth century after the English monarch Henry VIII decided to dissociate England from Papal authority in Rome and become the Head of the English Church. That allowed him to divorce Catherine of Aragon and have Anne Boleyn as his second wife. Desperate to have a male heir to his throne, coupled with his sexual temptations and indiscretions, resulted in Henry's struggles with the Roman Pope Clements VII, which finally led to the establishment of the Church of England separated from the Roman Catholic Church. In addition to a number of mistresses he ended up having six wives, executing two of them along the way.

The first person who played the role of missionary in India was Francis Xavier (1506-1552), which later on led to the commencement of many institutions in the different parts of the British India. Viz. press, hospitals, schools etc. with the establishment of Princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846, Dogra's became the rulers of the state. After the foundation of the state for about four decades there was no such vibrant development in the medical system. The reason being that the rulers viewed the Christian missionaries with suspicion. Maharaja Ranbir Singh, viewed them as insidious ploys to win converts to Christianity.[1] Due to the attitude of the Maharaja, Christian missionaries failed to make way towards Kashmir on large scale, only after the first decade of 20th century.

[1] Rai, Mridu. Hindu Rulers Muslim Subjects: Islam, Rights and the History of Kashmir, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004, p.84.

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One of the main instruments the British employed to change society was medicine. The Kashmiri people had no idea that modern medicine even existed. The Kashmiris approach of treatment was nothing more than giving gasoline to the flames. When a sickness spreads, it is frequently attributed to God's will. Instead of taking any resource or medical aid, the people decided to employ traditional techniques. The traditional methods were usually based on superstitious beliefs which debarred them from making use of modern medical facilities. However with the advent of modern medicine and education the people began to leave superstition. People began to understand that diseases were caused by germs or infections and could be cured or treated with correct treatment. English medical men who arrived in Kashmir in the second part of the nineteenth century brought about this mental and social shift. This period saw a significant growth of modern medical knowledge in Kashmir. Many medical missionaries came to Kashmir during the second half of the nineteenth century and first half of twentieth century. They treated and healed thousands of our ancestors. For that Kashmiri nation should feel lucky and grateful. However, Dr Elmslie, known to locals as the Padr Doctor Sahib was the founder of modern Medicine in Kashmir. Mr. and Mrs. Clark introduced modern medicine to Kashmir, although the firm basis was created by William Jackson Elmslie, a Scottish doctor.[2] Dr. Elmslie landed in the valley and reached Srinagar on May 4, 1865.[3] His life was hard and difficult, for he had no hospital, his operations being performed under the trees; also orders were issued by the Jammu and Kashmir Govt. that the people should not visit the doctor and sepoys were stationed around to keep them away, as the sick persisted in coming for relief.

St. Joseph's Hospital Baramulla

This Hospital was opened under the Franciscan Sisters[4] of Mary, which was a Roman Catholic congregation of religion sisters which founded Hospitals for service of mankind.[5]Since the British ruled India and governed Kashmir, it was inevitable that in both territories the missionary activity was directed and administered from Britain principally by the Church of England through various missionary organizations. But the Roman Catholic Church did get involved with missionary work in British India, first in Madras where five priests and a medical missionary journeyed in 1875, and later in northwest India.[6]

[2]William Jackson Elmslie who laid the solid foundation of western Medicine William Jackson Elmslie was born on 29th of June 1832 in Aberdeen Scotland. Elmslie began learning boot closing, his father's trade, at the age of nine, and continued throughout his university years of a Scottish Between trips to India, Elmslie married Margaret Duncan, the daughter of a reverend, on February 1872. Following his sudden death a few months after their marriage, Margaret Duncan. Elmslie worked in various institutions in Amritsar, until 1878. Elmslie was recruited by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1864 through the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society, which had funded his medical education at the University of Edinburgh. In 1866 unable to obtain adequate accommodation for the clinic in valley, Dr. Elmslie pitched the outer covering of a large tent for patients, and the inner part of the same tent was all the accommodation for patients which he could provide. Elmslie was offered a post at CMS with a 5-year term and given the responsibility of working in Srinagar, Kashmir. His correspondence with William Thomson resulted in a piece in the Medical Missionary Journal that contributed in the creation and funding of the Kashmir Medical Mission. Emslie's work in Kashmir was limited to the summers due to visa restrictions imposed by Kashmir's ruler Maharaja Ranbir Singh, which prohibited foreigners from staying in Kashmir during the winter. Elmslie first arrived in Srinagar on 4 May 1865.

[3]Khan, Mohammad Ishaq. History of Srinagar 1846-1947: A Study in Socio Cultural Change. New Delhi: Cosmos Publication, 1999, p. 129.

[4]Yasin, Mohammad and Yasin, Madhvi Mysteries and Glimpses of Kashmir, Raj Publication, Delhi, 1996, p.168.

[5]Dr. Anita D. Rana, Unpublished thesis, State Policy and Development of Health Services in Jammu and Kashmir, 1856-1947, p. 253.

[6]Report of the Administration of Jammu and Kashmir state Sambat era 1990-91 (1933-34 A.D)

The Mill Hill Fathers, who had previously founded a school at Baramulla in northern Kashmir, invited the Franciscan Roman Catholic nuns of Mary to visit Kashmir on September 21, 1921. The Jhelum valley road, by then a well-established conduit connecting the valley to the rest of the Indian subcontinent, was used by the first four sisters as they made a trip from Rawalpindi via mountain slopes. According to Sister Elizabeth Kurien, the administrator in the charge of St. Joseph Hospital, at - the beginning the lady missionaries saw patients under a huge chinar tree.[7] A small dispensary was started in 1921 and the sisters began visiting near the distant villages, travelling on foot, on horseback or by boats through the river. In 1930 the foundation stone was laid for a maternity hospital and a dispensary opposite it. It was the first and only Catholic Christian hospital in Jammu and Kashmir. Everything from finance, administration to all medical and academic work was managed by the female staff. The inpatient facilities at the hospital proved inadequate; during 1931 the building was extended and adjoining private rooms were added to the complex. Changing [8]clinical demand necessitated further extension in 1937 to four general wards and more private rooms, and commissioning of an X-ray plants and a clinical laboratory. The hospital was started primarily to serve women and child of the area, but in due course it transformed into a centre of treatment for patients coming from different corners of the Baramulla. From 1941 to 1950 the hospital went through a very difficult period. A bad epidemic of typhus swept through the area in 1941; the victims of the disease included one of the lady missionary doctors and two nurses working at the hospital.[9]

In 1947, the Hospital was ransacked in tribal raids and seven lives in the Hospital were brought to their

[7]Mufti Gulzar. Kashmir in Sickness and Health. Srinagar: Ali Mohammad and Sons, 2013, p.103. See also G. M. Rabbani, Kashmir Social and Cultural History, (Delhi: Anmol Publication, 1986), 91. In Kashmiri tradition, the Chinar tree is affectionately known as Booin, a term believed to have evolved from the Sanskrit word Bhawani, which denotes the goddess or “blessing mother.” This linguistic and symbolic connection reflects the tree’s deep-rooted cultural significance in the Kashmir Valley. The Chinar is not merely a botanical entity but is regarded as a maternal guardian—providing comfort, protection, and spiritual presence.Botanically identified as Platanus orientalis (Oriental Plane), the Chinar is renowned for its broad leaves and wide canopy, which offer cool shade during the intense summer months. Its radiant foliage and sturdy branches enhance the landscape’s aesthetic appeal and serve as natural shelter during torrential rains. It typically grows at elevations ranging from 4,000 to 6,000 feet above sea level, flourishing in the region's temperate climate. Historically and culturally esteemed, the Chinar is designated a “royal tree,” and its felling is strictly prohibited by state regulations. This legal protection underscores its environmental importance and its revered status in the collective memory and identity of the Kashmiri people. As both a cultural symbol and ecological asset, the Chinar continues to embody the intertwined relationship between nature, heritage, and sacred tradition in Kashmir.

[8] Administrative report of Jammu and Kashmir 1939 A.D. Civil Medical Department. Department of Archives Archaeology and Museums, Srinagar, Kashmir.

[9]Talbot, Ian, Safety First: The Security of Britons in India 1946-47, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series, Vol. xxiii, Cambridge University Press, 19 Nov.2013, p. 209.



Picture: St. Joseph's Hospital - Baramulla/Credit: Portal

ends and many more were injured.[10] British India and Kashmir were partitioned in 1947, which resulted in anarchy, tit-for-tat killing and horrific slaughter of men, women and childrens with no boundaries of religion or colour. Twenty-nine year old mother Teresalina, a Spanish nun who had joined the hospital a few weeks before, Mother Aldertrude, Mother superior of the convent; Miss Philomena, a nurse from south India, and Jose Barretto whose wife great Barretto was the hospital doctor, were brutally murdered when St Joseph's convent and mission hospital Baramulla was ransacked by tribal ragbag militiamen. Some of the staff members were held captive for day. Despite the horrific experience the hospital carried on with its work. In 1965 a new operating theatre complex was build and a dispensary was also set up in the neighbouring town of Sopore. Auxiliary nurse Midwifery [ANM] course and female multi-purpose health worker [FMHW] courses were started at the hospital in 1967. [11] The décor and cleanliness, the discipline and dedication, and the personal attention to patient care were noteworthy, which left a lasting impression on me. The hospital and its associated school continue to be a beacon of healthcare and education to the inhabitants of Baramulla and its suburbs even today.

Contribution of St. Joseph Hospital Baramulla

The role played by the Christian missionaries through the St. Joseph Hospital Baramulla is dynamic in nature. This hospital became the blessing in disguise for the common people of Baramulla. Because the real motive of the Christian missionaries behind the medical mission was to attract more people towards the Christianity, in which they did not got much success. This hospital helped in the betterment of the health of the women and children, which resulted in the fewer death rates during the pregnancy. Children were given the inoculation of different diseases from time to time, the result of which was fewer death rates of the infant babies. From the medical point of view this Hospital bloomed in full blossom till the first decade of the 21st century. After that due the development of the Govt. Hospitals and the Private clinics the flow of patient towards the St. Joseph Hospital has declined to some extent. But even today it still provides all the basic facilities to the women and children.

[10]Administrative report of Jammu and Kashmir 1945-46 A.D. Department of Archives, Archaeology and Museums, Srinagar, Kashmir. The profession of a midwife has ancient roots, dating back to the history of the human species. Hippocrates, often regarded as the father of scientific medicine, played a pivotal role in organizing, training, and supervising midwives.He held the belief that the fetus had to actively navigate its way out of the womb. Aristotle (384-322 BC), the father of embryology, described the uterus and the female pelvic organs. Midwifery stands as the world's first holistic profession, consistently centered around women's care. It is a socially constructed practice that has undergone numerous historical transitions, many of which have sparked social controversies regarding the definition of care, the extent of its practices, and the standardization of its skills. The term 'midwife' originates from the concept of being 'with women,' emphasizing the fundamental quality of companionship in caring for women throughout history. The philosophy of midwifery involves perceiving pregnancy and birth as ordinary life events, and the primary role of midwives is to provide support during this naturally occurring phase in women's lives. Even within the realm of midwifery, a high degree of perfection has been achieved. Ancient Greek civilization regarded midwifery as a significant social factor, shaping it into both an art and a scientific profession.In contrast, in ancient India, the care of women and the practice of midwifery were exclusively carried out by village dais. The occupation of being a dai was hereditary, and all dais belonged to lower castes, reflecting the belief that the period of childbirth was considered a time of impurity. Midwives possess expert knowledge and skills for providing care to women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. The midwife's role is to provide care that acknowledges the goals and choices of each individual woman and her family. A midwife assists a woman in making decisions about how to cope with labour, explains pain relief options, helps women develop a personalized birth plan that aligns with their needs and desires, discusses realistic expectations about labour and delivery, and suggests position changes and movements that facilitate the birthing process. Kashmir exhibited a highly conservative society during the early. Dogra rule. Elderly females discreetly manage gynaecological diseases and ailments within an exclusively female environment. These knowledgeable women attended to minor ailments within families, villages, and communities. However, the obstetrics aspect of healthcare was the expertise of a skilled female attendant known as the warden, or midwife.The waren would diagnose pregnancies and oversee antenatal care. When labor pains commenced, the nearby waren was summoned for assistance. In this speciality, the hakim played no role. Unlike Western societies of that era, Kashmiri barber-surgeons were not involved in obstetric or gynaecological care. In 1895, there were 75 warens in the Valley. Similar to hakims, these women inherited their skills from their predecessors, with daughters following in their mother's footsteps.

This Hospital became the hub of patients, especially for women and children coming from different corners of the Baramulla. This hospital laid the foundation of the path on which the modern medical system in the district developed, which resulted in the better health care facilities to the peoples. As this Hospital provided better facilities, the traditional method of Ayurveda gradually declined. We can't say that there was an altogether end of the use of traditional Ayurvedic medicines. Ayurveda has continued from the antiquities. Even today after the 100 years of functioning of this Hospital in Baramulla, the traditional methods are still used by the peoples belonging to the far flung areas.

In the Kashmir Valley, the Catholic Church started a boys school at Baramulla, a town situated in the northwest of the Valley, about 35 miles away from Srinagar. Initially it was a boarding school. It was subsequently taken over from Mill Hill Fathers by the Society of Jesus and then handed over to the Diocese of Jammu-Srinagar established in 1901, the school provided education to the people of the area for all these years.[12] It was later upgraded to the status of a higher secondary school. Recently the school has started online education, the first in the Kashmir Valley, and has a plan to upgrade to a professional college in the near future. Its alumni include the slain Afghan President Mohammad Najib-ullah and a number of senior bureaucrats and politicians of present day Kashmir.

Father Ignatius Brower and Rev. Father Simmons created the Boys Degree College in Baramulla in 1905 as a primary school with an English medium of instruction for the Catholic Missionaries at the Baramulla settlement. In 1913, it was upgraded to become a high school. The institution received the designation of Intermediate College in 1938. In 1943, it became a Degree college, linked with the Punjab University in Lahore. After becoming a Degree College, it was taken over by the state government on 1st April 1963. It is now associated with the University of Kashmir and approved under the provisions of the 1956 University Grants Commission Act. Government Degree College Baramulla was the first institute of Jammu and Kashmir State to start undergraduate course in Mass Communication in 2002. Recently in June 2022, this college was given the autonomous status by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) for its outstanding performance.

Modern education started by the Christian missionaries initiated certain cultural changes which have been both intensive and extensive. The influence extended to domestic institutions such as wedding customs. The influence of the new ideas was mostly displayed at weddings, which otherwise were celebrated in the traditional manner, indicates an assimilation of a new type of behavior rather than a displacement of old by a new patterns of behavior. In 2005 the earthquake hit the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which resulted in loss of thousands of lives, live stock and buildings. The health center extended immediate relief to the earthquake affected families in the far flung areas of Baramulla. The hospital was also the base came for many NGO's involved in the rehabilitation work.

Conclusion:

While concluding we may say that the St. Joseph Hospital Baramulla acted as a torch bearer in the development of the different aspects of the society. Society was more or less static until the advent of the Christian missionaries in Kashmir in general and in Baramulla in particular in the second half of the 20th century, when a significant change came about. Besides the educational development which resulted from the activities of the missionaries in Baramulla, the different administrative methods of the British affected the social structure and the social institutions of the district. The impact of the social services rendered by the missionaries during famine, flood and cholera is judged by the fact that the govt. also evinced a great interest in the welfare of its subject.

[12] Biscoe C.E Tyndale, Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade, London: Seeley, Service and Co. Limited, 1922. p. 234.

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The Arctic's Ghost Signals: GNSS Interference, Hybrid Pressure, and the Security Politics of Critical Infrastructure in the European High North

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ABSTRACT

Since 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and renewed uncertainty over NATO cohesion and Greenland's strategic politics, Arctic states have hardened critical infrastructure: ports, radar systems, undersea cables, and energy sites—to reduce vulnerability. Yet the region's vast distances, limited redundancy, and civil-military overlap mean such measures can be perceived as coercive, increasing the risk of countermeasures. This paper examines when infrastructure hardening triggers a security-dilemma spiral and how design choices can limit that risk. It finds spirals are more likely when measures are dual-use, publicly signalled, militarily led, and near sensitive areas, and less likely when states invest in redundancy, maintain civilian governance, and communicate intentions clearly. It concludes with mitigation options, including shared protocols, clearer rules for protection missions, and resilience investments.

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Artic; security dilemma; critical infrastructure; dual use; escalation

I. Introduction

Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) interference in the European Arctic should be read now because it no longer looks like a small technical irregularity in the frigid, polar region. It has come to appear, rather, as a repeated feature of an increasingly security-sensitive region.[90] In northern Norway and across the wider High North, repeated jamming and spoofing incidents have disrupted aviation and have also raised wider worries about the dependability of navigation systems on which remote northern societies heavily rely.[90] These incidents become crucial in a region where infrastructure is thin, alternatives are few, repairs when broken are slow and ordinary movement is closely tied to communication systems, surveillance arrangements, and visible state presence. They are also unfolding in an Arctic that can no longer be described very convincingly as insulated from wider geopolitical rivalry. The region is being shaped more and more by increasing military presence, alliance consolidation, and sharper forms of mistrust after Russia's war against Ukraine.[91] Something that might once have been treated as a local or operational disturbance now carries a wider resonance. GNSS disruption is interesting and important to look at because of where it is happening and the way it is now being read.

The puzzle of this essay comes directly out of that shift. Jamming and spoofing often remain ambiguous. Jamming is blocking or disrupting a GPS/GNSS signal so it cannot be received properly, while spoofing is sending a fake signal to mislead a receiver into showing the wrong position or time. They can disrupt civilian and state functions without producing visible destruction, and they often stay below the threshold at which an incident can be classified easily as an open armed attack.[92]

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Yet in the Arctic, they still produce serious political and security concerns. Why does that happen? Why do acts that are often deniable, technically complicated, and difficult to attribute still provoke rising anxiety, new protective measures, and a wider language of threat? The answer cannot rest on technical disruption alone. If that were the case, GNSS interference would remain mostly a matter for engineers and regulators. But that is not how these incidents are being read. They are increasingly treated as politically meaningful. They are interpreted against a regional setting in which ambiguity itself has strategic value, and where even limited interference may be understood as coercive pressure, probing, or a test of response thresholds. The puzzle, then, is not only why GNSS disruption occurs, but why it comes to carry such a large security meaning in the contemporary Arctic.

This essay argues that, in the post-exceptionalist Arctic, GNSS disruption is being interpreted less as a mere technical anomaly and more as a form of hybrid interference or threat, to be more precise, directed at critical infrastructures and vital systems in a tense geopolitical setting.[93,94] Once interference is read that way, governments are pushed towards securitisation and hardening their policies to respond: they widen monitoring, restore backup systems, and fold infrastructure protection into broader security politics.[95] The core argument that follows, then, is that the politics of GNSS disruption lies not only in the initiating act but also in the responses it generates and the insecurity those responses can further produce.

The essay develops this argument in five steps. It starts by establishing the empirical problem and showing that repeated GNSS disruption in the European Arctic is real, recurring, and already serious enough to have altered operational expectations. It then turns to the literature on hybrid warfare to explain why ambiguous, deniable, and below-threshold methods have become strategically attractive. From there, it shows why jamming and spoofing fit hybrid warfare logic especially well and why they should be understood as interference with critical infrastructure rather than as isolated technical faults. The essay then places that problem within the wider geopolitics of the Arctic, with attention to the decline of Arctic exceptionalism, the consequences of 2014 and especially 2022, the consolidation of NATO's northern flank, and the sensitivity of the European High North and Svalbard. It ends by examining how repeated interference encourages securitisation and hardening, and why those defensive responses may themselves contribute to a security dilemma. The larger purpose is to show that Arctic critical infrastructure protection has become more than a matter of resilience; it has become a field of political and strategic interaction.

II. Establishing the empirical problem: GNSS disruption in the European Arctic

Across the European Arctic, interference with satellite navigation is now harder to dismiss as occasional technical noise. In northern Norway, above all in the airspace around Kirkenes and across eastern Finnmark, pilots and authorities have been dealing with repeated GPS disruption for several years. In Norway's border region with Russia, warnings to pilots about GPS jamming were already being issued before the present phase of Arctic tension had fully taken shape.10 In January 2025, the problem appeared in a sharper form when pilots reported spoofing during the approach to Kirkenes.3 By July 2025, interference had also been reported in Svalbard airspace.[4] Norway is not the only case here. Finland has had to strengthen alternative radio navigation at three eastern airports because GPS interference kept recurring, and Finnish authorities have also recorded jamming and spoofing affecting vessels at sea. [6,8]

These disruptions recur often enough to have changed how northern authorities deal with them. Reporting on Norwegian aviation disruption shows that jamming in Finnmark was recorded on 18 days in 2021, 122 days in 2022, and 294 days in 2023; by late February 2024, disturbances had already been logged on 44 days that year.[1] That looks like a case of escalation rather than a random chain of mishaps. The problem became so routine that Norway's communications authority stopped asking for ordinary interference reports from Finnmark, which was, really, an acknowledgement that the disturbance had become a chronic operating condition in that part of the country.[2] Airlines serving the region likewise described GPS loss as something repeated in northern flying, not some rare technical -

anomaly.[1] When spoofing started appearing alongside jamming, the operational picture became harder, not easier, to read.[3]

The effects are wide because GNSS sits underneath many of the systems on which remote northern societies rely. The clearest and most visible effects have appeared in civilian aviation, especially at smaller northern airports where satellite-assisted navigation matters a great deal in poor weather and difficult terrain.[6] In September 2025, GPS interference contributed to a Widerøe aircraft aborting its landing at Vardø in low visibility.[5] Still, the reach of these disruptions goes well beyond scheduled passenger flights. Finnish research and preparedness authorities have warned that interruptions in satellite positioning can produce extensive social and operational consequences, above all where redundancy is limited, and emergency response depends on reliable navigation and timing.[13] Maritime users are drawn in as well: Finnish authorities have linked jamming and spoofing to navigational disruption in nearby waters.[7,8]

Attribution, though, remains politically sensitive and analytically incomplete. In November 2018, Norway's Defence Ministry stated that jamming affecting civilian aircraft had come from Russian forces on the Kola Peninsula.[11] Later reporting continued to connect much of the interference affecting Finnmark to Russian activity across the border.[1] Even so, when the likely source appears strong, the meaning of a given episode is still not straightforward. It is often difficult to know whether a disruption reflects deliberate coercion, spillover from military training, defensive electronic activity, or some other operational logic.[3] In Svalbard, for instance, the source of the 2025 interference was still described as unknown. Finland has also publicly suspected Russia in cases of jamming and spoofing, while Moscow has denied involvement.[8]

This uncertainty is not a weakness in the case. It is part of why the issue is read politically. GNSS interference usually appears first as signal loss, false positioning, route instability, or cockpit alerts, rather than as dramatic physical destruction.[3,4] Because of that, authorities have to decide what kind of event they are facing before they can fully explain it. That burden of interpretation has already shaped state behaviour. Norway has strengthened monitoring of GPS interference in the High North because the problem has persisted.[12] Finnish preparedness authorities have, in much the same vein, argued that disruption to satellite positioning should be treated as a serious societal vulnerability, not a narrow technical inconvenience.[13] Seen this way, ambiguity does not lessen the weight of these incidents. It raises it, since states must decide under uncertainty whether they are facing a nuisance, hazard, or hostile action.[14]

The empirical conclusion seems fairly plain. The European Arctic is not dealing with a merely hypothetical vulnerability in navigation infrastructure. Northern Norway has already experienced repeated jamming serious enough to alter reporting practices,[1,2] and the problem has spread into newer forms too, including spoofing in Kirkenes and interference in Svalbard airspace.[3,4] Finland's response at eastern airports shows that neighbouring states are now adjusting their infrastructure to live with this pressure,[6] and these incidents have already started to reshape monitoring practices, mitigation efforts, and preparedness thinking in the wider region.[12,13] Before turning to the literature on hybrid warfare, the available evidence already shows that Arctic navigation disruption is a recurring operational problem with regional consequences.[1]

III. Hybrid warfare and why it is attractive

The term hybrid warfare is widely used, though it remains contested, and that makes conceptual precision necessary while dealing with it.[15] At its strongest, the concept refers not to a single tactic but to the coordinated use of different instruments of coercion, including conventional force, irregular methods, information operations, coercive signalling, and other disruptive practices, used in ways meant to reinforce one another politically and operationally.[16] What makes such warfare "hybrid" is not mere variety on its own. It is the deliberate combination of military and non-military means within the same design.[17] More recent scholarship sharpens this point by arguing that hybrid warfare is best -

understood not simply as a doctrinal category, but as a mode of organised coercion that exploits the blurred line between peace and war.[18] Read that way, hybrid warfare is less a departure from politics than a means of pursuing political goals through calibrated, multi-domain pressure without immediately crossing into open conventional conflict.[19]

Hybrid methods have become attractive because they offer a way to compete with stronger adversaries without fighting on terms that would favour them.[20] For actors facing the conventional military superiority of NATO or other advanced powers, hybrid approaches create room to offset weakness through dispersion, deniability, and the selective use of pressure below the threshold that would trigger a decisive response.[21] They leave room for calibration as well. Since the tools involved are often reversible, hard to attribute at once, or ambiguous in legal and political terms, they allow states to impose costs while keeping some freedom to de-escalate, deny, or redefine what they are doing.[22] That makes hybrid methods useful for limited political purposes: probing defences, unsettling civilian confidence, complicating command decisions, and testing the adversary's appetite for retaliation.[23] The attraction of hybrid warfare, then, lies not in battlefield victory alone. It lies in the ability to shape an opponent's choices while avoiding the risks of full-scale war.[24]

Ambiguity is not some accidental by-product of hybrid warfare; it is one of its, if not the most central, advantages.[25] As Mumford and Carlucci argue, ambiguity creates a cognitive impasse in which the target struggles to determine what is happening, who is responsible, and what political objective lies behind the action.[26] That uncertainty slows consensus, complicates attribution, and makes it harder for governments and alliances to decide whether a particular act is criminal, coercive, military, or merely accidental.[27] This is even more true for democratic governments because of transparency and checks and balances in place. The effect becomes stronger when states operate through intermediaries, proxies, auxiliaries, or affiliated actors, because the link between the visible event and the actor ultimately directing it becomes harder to prove quickly or conclusively.[28] Legal ambiguity matters as well. Hybrid methods often make use of the fact that international law and public doctrine draw their clearest lines around overt armed force, leaving more room for manoeuvre in actions that remain deniable, indirect, or difficult to classify.[29] For the attacker, ambiguity buys time, space, and political flexibility. For the defender, it creates hesitation at the very point where clarity is most needed.[30]

Hybrid warfare becomes especially relevant when geopolitical rivalry is intense but open war still appears too costly, dangerous, or escalatory for the actors involved.[31] This situation can very closely define the Arctic geopolitics, divided between the NATO camp and Russia. In those settings, states look for ways to pressure and weaken one another without presenting a single, unmistakable casus belli.[32] The point is not always to win a decisive military encounter. It may instead be to alter the strategic environment bit by bit: to probe red lines, create doubt, erode confidence, and push the adversary into a reactive posture.[33] Here, Kilcullen's idea of liminal manoeuvre is very useful for the paper. He claims that Russia and similar actors have become adept at operating in the threshold space between war and peace, detectability and deniability, where action can be forceful enough to matter but still ambiguous enough to complicate response.[34] Liminal manoeuvre is attractive precisely because it lets the initiator "ride the edge" of escalation, gaining political or operational advantage without fully committing to open war.[35] In periods of sharpened confrontation short of direct conflict, hybrid warfare is not peripheral to strategy. It becomes one of its more practical instruments.[36]

The Arctic is especially open to this sort of pressure because many of the conditions favouring hybrid tactics are already built into the region's physical and political landscape.[37] Critical infrastructure is sparse, distances are long, weather conditions are severe, and redundancy is often limited, so even fairly modest disruption can have outsized effects on mobility, communications, and governance.[38] Arctic security is also marked by a persistent tension between cooperation and rivalry: the region cannot be reduced either to pure exceptionalism or to open confrontation, and that ambiguity itself makes sub-threshold pressure more potent.[39] Recent scholarship on Svalbard and the waters around northern Norway helps show why. The Arctic is a setting in which actors, means, and intentions are not

always immediately apparent, while legal disputes, jurisdictional sensitivities, and dual-use infrastructures open space that hybrid tactics can exploit.[40] In that light, the repeated GNSS jamming and spoofing traced in the previous section fits the literature quite closely: it occurs in a region where ambiguity, infrastructural vulnerability, and geopolitical sensitivity converge.[41]

IV. Why jamming and spoofing fit hybrid warfare logic

Jamming and spoofing should not be treated as ordinary technical breakdowns because they do something rather different from routine malfunctions. A malfunction interrupts a system from within: equipment fails, software glitches, weather distorts reception, or some component simply stops working. Jamming and spoofing, by contrast, are forms of intentional interference aimed at the integrity of navigation itself.[42] Jamming tries to overwhelm or suppress legitimate signals so that the receiver cannot function normally, whereas spoofing works in a more deceptive way: it feeds the receiver false signals that appear authentic and can, as a result, produce incorrect position, navigation, or timing outputs without immediately showing that anything is wrong.[42,43] That distinction matters analytically. A broken system creates a problem of repair. A manipulated system creates a problem of trust. Once navigation can be distorted from outside, the issue is no longer only one of technical reliability. It becomes a matter of adversarial control over the informational environment on which mobility and coordination depend.

These tactics fit hybrid warfare especially well because they combine low visibility with meaningful operational effect. They are comparatively inexpensive, difficult to attribute immediately, scalable in intensity, and often reversible once the signal environment changes.[42,45] Most importantly, they generate disruption without producing the kind of dramatic physical destruction that would make classification easy. An airport approach becomes unstable, a vessel loses confidence in its position, a timing-dependent system behaves unpredictably, or an operator is forced to abort or reroute. The insecurity produced is real, but it does not arrive in a form that automatically triggers the political clarity associated with missile strikes or kinetic sabotage. That is exactly why these methods sit so easily within hybrid logic. They allow an actor to interfere, unsettle, and impose costs while still keeping room for denial, reinterpretation, and diplomatic evasion. Jamming and spoofing are useful, then, not because they destroy infrastructure outright, but because they make infrastructure unreliable at politically sensitive moments.

In contested spaces, that kind of interference becomes strategically useful for reasons that go beyond simple disruption. It can expose where a target depends most heavily on fragile systems, reveal how quickly authorities can detect anomalies, and show whether civilian operators, regulators, and military actors respond in coordinated or fragmented ways.[44] Jamming and spoofing can also work as tests of threshold: they pressure the adversary to decide what counts as nuisance, what counts as coercion, and what counts as a hostile act worth answering. Kilcullen's idea of liminal manoeuvre is helpful here because it sharpens the point. The value of operating in the threshold space between peace and war lies in being forceful enough to shape behaviour while still remaining ambiguous enough to complicate response.[44] GNSS interference does exactly this. It can probe, signal, and unsettle without giving up deniability. Over time, repeated interference can also wear away confidence in the ordinary systems that make everyday movement possible. That matters because, once daily navigation becomes uncertain, the target is pushed to devote more resources to monitoring, redundancy, and protection, even where the attacker never crosses into open confrontation.

Taken together, these features show why GNSS interference matters politically in the European Arctic. In a remote but strategically sensitive region, interference with navigation systems affects access, surveillance, emergency response, logistics, and state presence rather than being a stand-alone technical function.[46,47] What begins as a disturbance in positioning or timing, therefore, becomes part of a wider struggle over confidence, vulnerability, and the interpretation of intent.[46] The next section develops that point by treating navigation systems as critical and geopolitical infrastructure.

V. Critical infrastructure and why it is political in the Arctic

Critical infrastructure is usually understood as the set of systems and assets whose disruption would seriously impair the basic functioning of society, the continuity of government, economic life, and national security.[48] But that definition needs to be read more broadly than as a simple checklist of sectors. As Collier and Lakoff suggest, modern societies rely on interconnected "vital systems" whose failure can quickly spill across domains that are normally treated as separate, such as transport, energy, communication, finance, and emergency response.[49] Critical infrastructure matters, then, not only because it keeps daily life going, but because it underpins the state's capacity to govern crisis, maintain order, and sustain collective life under strain. In that sense, critical infrastructure is not merely important equipment. It is the material basis on which social and political order rests.

Once the infrastructure is understood that way, its political character comes into view more clearly. Infrastructure is never just inert background support. As Brian Larkin argues, infrastructures organise circulation: they shape how goods, people, information, power, and authority move across space.[50] They privilege some routes, actors, and forms of dependence over others. To build infrastructure is to make choices about connection, vulnerability, access, and control; to secure it is to decide what forms of life and authority are to be protected first. This is why infrastructure protection cannot be reduced to engineering alone. It is also a matter of governing interdependence. Decisions about redundancy, backup systems, ownership, surveillance, and protection all distribute power. Put a bit differently, infrastructure is political not only when it fails, but already in the way it structures everyday order and marks out what counts as a tolerable risk.

Seen from that angle, navigation and positioning systems plainly belong within the category of critical infrastructure. GNSS does not simply help users find where they are. It supports aviation approaches, maritime movement, logistics, search and rescue, timing-dependent communications, and a wide range of civilian and state functions that rely on accurate position and time.[51] In the Arctic, that role is even more pronounced because space-based navigation, communication, and observation are often prerequisites for movement, coordination, and connectivity across remote environments.[52] That means interference with GNSS is not only a technical inconvenience for pilots or vessels. It affects a foundational layer of how movement is organised and trusted. When positioning becomes unreliable, the problem reaches into the operational routines through which authorities, firms, and communities hold space together.

Critical infrastructure matters more sharply in the Arctic because the region intensifies both dependence and vulnerability. Distances are long, settlements are dispersed, weather conditions are severe, and redundancy is often limited. When infrastructure fails in a dense metropolitan setting, alternatives may exist nearby. In the Arctic, those alternatives are often fewer, slower, and more expensive to mobilise. Research on circumpolar infrastructure shows that Arctic systems are already under pressure from environmental exposure, permafrost change, and high replacement costs.[53] At the same time, scholarship on Arctic connectivity stresses that infrastructure in the region cannot be treated as a generic technical issue, because remote communities depend on connective systems that are tailored, and often somewhat fragile, to sustain ordinary life and wider economic links.[54] This makes infrastructure failure more consequential and infrastructure protection more politically charged. The Arctic does not simply contain infrastructure; much of Arctic social and political life is made possible only through infrastructure that is unusually exposed and difficult to replace.

In the Arctic, moreover, infrastructure is never only civilian. Ports, airports, undersea cables, satellite links, radar systems, navigation networks, and energy installations are also tied to sovereignty, monitoring, strategic access, and military mobility. As Østhagen argues, Arctic security dynamics are driven less by a single self-contained "Arctic region" than by the way broader strategic competition, especially involving Russia and NATO, is refracted through northern spaces and infrastructures.[55] This is especially visible around Svalbard and the European High North, where ordinary governance arrangements intersect with disputes over jurisdiction, access, and security significance.[56] Svalbard is

useful here because its infrastructure does more than serve residents or tourists. They also express Norwegian presence, make administration possible in a legally sensitive territory, and shape how other actors read sovereignty in practice.[57] Infrastructure in the Arctic is therefore geopolitical: it helps states occupy, govern, monitor, and signal in places where physical presence and logistical reach are themselves politically meaningful.

Once navigation systems are understood as critical and geopolitical infrastructure, repeated GNSS interference is best read as a challenge to the reliability of the systems through which authority and presence are exercised in the High North.[52,56] The disruption happens at the level of signal, but its effects travel upward into governance, preparedness, and threat perception. This is why GNSS interference fits so closely into a hybrid framework: it targets the material conditions of order without necessarily crossing the threshold of overt physical attack.

For that reason, protecting critical infrastructure in the Arctic is not simply a matter of resilience in the narrow sense of recovery and adaptation. It is also a question of power. To harden infrastructure is to decide who monitors it, who owns it, who may access it, what risks justify exceptional coordination, and how civilian systems should be linked to security institutions. In contested northern spaces, those choices take on additional meaning because they can be read as efforts not only to protect daily life but also to consolidate strategic position. Protection, then, is never politically innocent. That is what makes critical infrastructure such an important bridge in the essay between hybrid disruption and the politics of response.

VI. Situating the problem in Arctic geopolitics

For much of the post-Cold War period, the Arctic was often described in the language of exceptionalism: a region where practical cooperation, scientific exchange, and institutional restraint could continue even when relations between Russia and the West were tense elsewhere.[58] That description was never fully apolitical, but it did capture something real about the regional order that emerged around the Arctic Council, the Barents framework, and a broader norm of keeping Arctic cooperation apart from wider confrontation.[59] That order has narrowed quite sharply now. The Arctic can no longer really be treated as insulated from global rivalry. Cooperation has not disappeared altogether, no, but it has become thinner, more selective, and more fragile, while strategic competition has become more openly visible in military planning, alliance thinking, and public threat perception.[59,60]

The turning point did not begin in 2022. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the worsening of Russia-West relations that followed, began reshaping the Arctic security environment much earlier.[60] After 2014, it became harder to sustain the idea that the High North could remain politically detached from the wider European security order. Western states had increasingly to think about Russian military modernisation, Arctic force posture, and the possibility that Moscow was using the language of "low tension" while steadily improving its relative position in the region.[60] In that sense, 2014 mattered because it weakened trust before institutions had formally broken down. It altered the background assumptions through which Arctic developments were being interpreted, even while many cooperative arrangements remained formally in place.[60,65]

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed the Arctic more deeply because it broke not only trust but also the institutional habits that had sustained Arctic governance. On 3 March 2022, the seven Western Arctic states announced that they were temporarily pausing participation in Arctic Council meetings under Russia's chairship.[61] On 8 June 2022, those same states announced only a limited resumption of work in projects that did not involve Russian participation.[62] The Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation framework was also suspended in March 2022.63 What followed was not the complete disappearance of Arctic cooperation, but its fragmentation. What had once been treated as a fairly durable regional exception now had to operate under the shadow of war, sanctions, and an openly divided political order.[61,62,63]

The allied side of the regional balance changed as well. Finland became a NATO member on 4 April 2023, and Sweden followed on 7 March 2024.[64] Those two accessions did more than add new members. They consolidated NATO's northern flank, changed the strategic geography of the Nordic-Baltic space, and gave the alliance a much more integrated position in the European Arctic.[64] This matters for the argument because incidents in the High North are no longer read against the older background of Nordic military non-alignment. They are, more and more, interpreted within a more explicitly allied frame. For NATO states, this raises the salience of deterrence and infrastructure protection. For Russia, it sharpens the sense that the northern theatre forms part of a broader confrontation with the alliance.[64,65]

Russia is central to this discussion not because every Arctic incident can be mechanically attributed to Moscow, but because Russia possesses both the capability and the strategic incentive to use ambiguous tools in contested northern spaces.[60] The problem is not simply one of military inventory, though that matters. It is also a strategic logic. As Finnish analysts have argued, Russia benefited from Western attachment to Arctic exceptionalism while systematically improving its own military and hybrid position in the region.[60] Pavel Baev makes a similar point from a strategic angle: in the Arctic theatre, the level of direct threat to Russian core interests is relatively low, while Russia's capacity to threaten NATO interests from a position of relative regional strength is high.[66] Under those conditions, below-threshold and deniable methods become especially attractive, because they allow Moscow to signal, probe, deter, and unsettle without openly escalating to war.[60,66]

The European High North is especially sensitive because it lies at the intersection of Russia's strategic nuclear posture, NATO's northern access routes, and the everyday governance of a sparsely connected Arctic frontier. The Kola Peninsula remains the core of Russia's Northern Fleet and hosts submarines, strategic bombers, cruise-missile capabilities, and other assets central to Russian deterrence.[65,66] The Barents Sea is not just another maritime space. It forms part of the protective "bastion" around sea-based nuclear forces and a zone through which questions of surveillance, anti-access, and allied reinforcement are filtered.[66] Northern Norway and Finnmark matter here because they face that military complex directly, while also serving as spaces through which NATO presence, monitoring, and political signalling become visible. This is why the European Arctic is so difficult to stabilise rhetorically: local infrastructure, regional mobility, and great-power deterrence are layered on top of one another.[65,66]

Svalbard sharpens these tensions further because it is not merely a remote Arctic locality; it is a legally unusual and politically symbolic space. Norway has sovereignty over the archipelago, but that sovereignty is exercised under the constraints of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, which combines Norwegian authority with non-discrimination obligations and restrictions related to military use.[67,68] As Østhagen shows, Svalbard's sensitivity lies less in a single "dispute" than in a cluster of overlapping issues: challenges to Norwegian policies on land, disagreement over the treaty's application to maritime zones, and the possibility that the archipelago could acquire military significance in a broader confrontation with Russia.[67] That combination makes Svalbard unusually vulnerable to symbolic contestation. Acts are rarely read only in local terms; they are quickly folded into larger arguments about sovereignty, access, and strategic intent.[67,68]

Under these conditions, ambiguous GNSS interference is much more likely to be interpreted through the language of competition, probing, and grey-zone pressure than it would be in a lower-tension regional order. The same disruption that might once have been bracketed as a technical nuisance or military spillover now appears inside a much more suspicious interpretive environment. The reason is not hard to see: the Arctic is no longer read as a sheltered arena of cooperation, and the European High North is already saturated with concerns about deterrence, infrastructure vulnerability, and hybrid tactics.[60,65] This does not mean that every episode proves a coordinated coercive campaign. What it means is that the geopolitical setting has changed the burden of interpretation. Ambiguous interference now resonates politically much faster because it occurs where trust is weak, signalling matters, and even modest disruptions can be read as strategic tests.[60,65,67]

The geopolitical conclusion, then, is that GNSS disruption in the European Arctic now unfolds in a regional order shaped by NATO-Russia rivalry, institutional rupture, and shrinking trust.[59,61,64] In that setting, even modest interference is read against wider concerns about sovereignty, deterrence, and strategic access.[59,65,67] This altered interpretive environment is what makes the politics of response so important in the next section.

VII. Securitisation, hardening, and the politics of response

To securitise GNSS disruption is not simply to say that it matters. It is to recast it as a threat serious enough to justify heightened attention, quicker coordination, and measures that go beyond routine technical management.[69] In practical terms, securitisation takes place when officials stop treating interference as an isolated operational inconvenience and start presenting it as part of a wider problem of national preparedness, critical infrastructure vulnerability, and hostile pressure.[70] With that shift, the issue moves out of the register of maintenance and troubleshooting and into the register of security governance. The technical dimension does not disappear, exactly. It is absorbed into a broader claim: signal interference threatens functions in which the state cannot afford to lose confidence. Once that happens, the response is no longer left only to engineers, air traffic personnel, or telecom regulators. It becomes a matter for ministries, security agencies, alliance consultation, and exceptional protective planning.

States are pushed in that direction here because purely technocratic management is no longer adequate to the scale and meaning of the problem. Repeated disturbances in Finnmark became so routine that the Norwegian Communications Authority stopped asking for ordinary reports from that region, which is itself a sign that the issue had grown beyond normal incident handling.[71] In Finland, officials have linked GPS interference to a wider pattern of hostile activity associated with Russia, alongside sabotage, cyber pressure, and other disruptive acts.[72] At the same time, Finnish preparedness authorities have warned that large-scale disruption to satellite positioning would produce broad societal, economic, and security consequences, especially because critical functions depend more and more on GNSS.[73] Together, repeated disruption, infrastructural dependence, and geopolitical suspicion push governments to treat the issue as part of a wider threat environment rather than as a series of disconnected malfunctions.

Once GNSS interference is interpreted as a security issue, the range of response widens quickly. One response is redundancy: in eastern Finland, airports have reintroduced and upgraded radio-navigation equipment so that aircraft can land without relying exclusively on satellite guidance.[76] Another is monitoring and detection: Norway has expanded its measurement and analysis capacity in the High North and decided to open a Norwegian Communications Authority office in Tromsø to shorten response times to Finnmark and Svalbard.[74] The same authority has also tested an AI model designed to distinguish deliberate jamming from other kinds of signal error, which suggests that detection itself is becoming part of preparedness.[75] A third response is institutional coordination. At the allied level, NATO has created a Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell and later expanded civilian-military cooperation, information sharing, and preparedness around vulnerable infrastructure more generally.[77,78] Even if not all these measures focus only on GNSS, they show the same hardening logic: build backup, improve sensing, thicken coordination, and reduce the space in which ambiguous disruption can succeed cheaply.

These measures are not purely technical because they redistribute authority and alter the governing architecture around infrastructure. When monitoring is intensified, telecom regulators do not simply gather better data; they become more closely tied to security policy. When fallback systems are restored, infrastructure operators are deciding which vulnerabilities are politically intolerable and worth funding against.[73,76] When NATO builds coordination mechanisms around critical infrastructure, the issue is inserted into a wider framework of allied deterrence, military awareness, and strategic response.[77,78] The Norwegian case makes this especially plain. The planned Tromsø presence is justified not only in terms of convenience, but in terms of the changed security-policy situation in Northern Norway and the need for faster reaction in strategically important areas such as Eastern Finnmark and Svalbard.[74] Hardening, therefore, changes who is authorised to watch, classify, coordinate, and respond.

How does infrastructure protection become part of broader deterrence signalling?

Protection measures function as signals too. They tell adversaries, allies, and domestic audiences that the state is alert to below-threshold pressure, capable of adaptation, and willing to treat ambiguous

interference as strategically relevant.[79] Reintroducing fallback systems, improving sensing, widening information sharing, and visibly strengthening the state's presence in the High North communicates that interference will be monitored and politically noticed.[74,77,78] Once protection becomes legible in that way, the question is no longer only whether systems are safer, but how other actors read the measures. That takes the essay directly to the security dilemma.

VIII. The security dilemma: when defensive protection produces further insecurity

The central dilemma in this essay is that measures adopted for protection do not carry one fixed meaning only. In classical security-dilemma terms, states often take steps to increase their own security that are defensive in intention but threatening in effect, because others cannot be sure how those measures will be used or where they might lead.[80] Jervis's original point remains directly relevant here: even actors motivated mainly by security can still generate fear in others when the means of defence are difficult to distinguish from the means of coercion.[80] That insight matters for infrastructure protection because many of the measures associated with resilience, such as tighter monitoring, expanded surveillance, more integrated civil-military coordination, hardened access control, or closer alliance involvement, may also be read as preparation for denial, control, and strategic consolidation.[81] Defensive protection, then, is not politically transparent. Once infrastructure becomes entangled with competition, protection itself can start to look like posture.

This logic applies especially sharply in the European Arctic because the region is already saturated with mistrust, military sensitivity, and symbolic over-reading. As Friis shows, the European Arctic now has to be understood as a space of mutual deterrence signalling in which both Russia and NATO watch each other's moves closely, even when day-to-day activity remains more measured than alarmist rhetoric sometimes suggests.[82] That means relatively modest steps can acquire strategic meaning out of proportion to their immediate technical purpose. A new monitoring node in Northern Norway, a more integrated allied role in infrastructure security, or a more visible pattern of resilience exercises may be read in Moscow not simply as prudent protection but as part of a broader tightening of NATO's northern posture.[82,83] The same dynamic works in reverse, too. Russian activity that may be explained domestically as defensive or routine is likely to be interpreted on the allied side through the lens of coercion and probing. In a theatre shaped by proximity to the Kola complex, alliance boundaries, and strategic maritime access, the political meaning of protective acts does not really stay local.

Ambiguity, moreover, does not disappear when states move from diagnosis to response. It shifts to another level. One side may see backup systems, expanded sensing, and closer coordination as clearly defensive steps meant to stabilise vulnerable infrastructure. The other may see those same measures as evidence of a more ambitious effort to consolidate presence or deepen alliance integration.[81,82] The response phase is therefore analytically as important as the disruption phase. In the Arctic, where legal complexity, symbolic signalling, and strategic geography overlap, countermeasures can become part of the same interpretive struggle as the incidents they were supposed to address.[84,85]

Once that happens, hardening can begin to reproduce the very insecurity it is meant to manage. If one side interprets recurring GNSS interference as a sign that it must thicken surveillance, widen coordination, and protect critical systems more visibly, the other side may respond not with reassurance but with counter-monitoring, rhetorical escalation, or added pressure designed to test whether the new posture has changed anything important.[80,81] In the Arctic, this process seems more likely to be incremental than dramatic: repeated rounds of disruption and hardening can gradually make the region more tense, more heavily monitored, and more politically brittle even when neither side publicly declares expansionist intent.[82.83]

That does not mean the dilemma is unmanageable. Classical security-dilemma theory has long suggested that spirals can be softened when states make their defensive intentions more legible and when postures are designed in ways less easily mistaken for offensive preparation.[80,81] In the Arctic context, that suggests several practical lessons. First, communication channels still matter, especially

in the European High North, where misunderstandings can spread quickly from local incidents into wider strategic interpretation. Second, some defensive measures may need clearer public framing so that they are seen as resilience-oriented rather than as a concealed extension of military posture. Third, legal and institutional clarity matters because ambiguity over jurisdiction, infrastructure status, and permissible activity can intensify suspicion unnecessarily.[84,85] None of these steps will eliminate rivalry. They may, though, reduce the likelihood that every protective response is automatically folded into a more dangerous story of encroachment and escalation.

The broader theoretical implication, then, is that Arctic critical infrastructure protection should not be analysed only as a resilience policy. It should be understood as a field of strategic interaction shaped by signalling, interpretation, and the security dilemma.[82,83] In this setting, even backup systems and monitoring upgrades acquire political meaning beyond their immediate function.[80,81] That is why the paper's central claim matters beyond GNSS too: in the contemporary Arctic, the protection of critical infrastructure is itself part of the region's security politics.

IX. Conclusion

This essay has shown that GNSS disruption in the European Arctic is a recurring problem with clear political significance.[86] Because navigation systems underpin mobility, emergency response, surveillance, and state presence in a sparse and strategically sensitive region, repeated jamming and spoofing fit the logic of hybrid warfare: they are ambiguous, deniable, and disruptive without necessarily crossing into open attack.[87,88] In the contemporary Arctic, those incidents are interpreted within a geopolitical environment marked by the erosion of Arctic exceptionalism, intensified NATO-Russia rivalry, and declining institutional trust, which in turn encourages securitisation and hardening.[89]

The importance of this argument goes beyond GNSS interference alone. Low-visibility acts can reshape regional security not only through the immediate disruption they cause, but through the precautionary responses and interpretive struggles they set in motion.[88,89] Managing Arctic hybrid threats, therefore, requires not resilience alone, but also careful signalling and institutional clarity so that efforts to reduce vulnerability do not deepen suspicion more than they must.

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The Function, Role, and Challenge of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in Maintaining Research Ethics in Indian Universities

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ABSTRACT

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), also called Ethics Committees in India, are institutional regulatory bodies formally established in academic and research institutions to ensure compliance with accepted ethical standards for all research involving human participants. These committees are responsible for scrutinizing research proposals to evaluate the harm and benefits of studies, validate the sufficiency of informed consent, and safeguard the rights and welfare of research subjects. This paper gives a comprehensive analysis of the role, framework, efficacy, and problems encountered by IRBs at Indian universities. Further, the paper seeks to explore imperative role of ethical stewardship in university research through analysing regulatory models, university practice, and actual case studies. The paper points towards the immediate necessity of capacity development, standardization, and policy overhaul to enhance ethical oversight in Indian academia.

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Institutional Review Boards, Ethical Committees, Ethical Standards, Human Participant, Informed Consent.

I. INTRODUCTION

With academic research advancing along various fields, from biomedicine to sociology and education; the need to carry out ethnically healthy investigations has never been so paramount. Human research is inherently risky to cause harm, exploitation, or violation of rights, and therefore requires institutional oversight and containment of these risks. This mandate has been placed on Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), or Ethics Committees, to review research protocols for ethical acceptability. These bodies have become especially significant in the Indian academic context, where research output is expanding, and diverse populations are increasingly being engaged as study participants.

In India, ethical review is an emerging concern not just for medical and pharma research but also for social sciences, education, psychology, and e-research streams. Although some institutions have well-established IRBs, others are struggling with procedural inefficiencies, non-awareness, and poor training. This paper intends to discover the way IRBs in Indian universities work, the problems that they encounter, and how their functioning can be improved.

II.LITERATURE REVIEW

The early literature on research ethics had its roots in international guidelines like the Nuremberg Code (1947), the Declaration of Helsinki (1964), and the Belmont Report (1979), which laid emphasis on auotnomy , beneficence, and justice. These international declarations formed the basis for Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) across the world. In the Indian context, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has played the lead role in formulating ethical guidelines, and this reached its culmination in the

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National Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical and Health Research Involving Human Participants (2017). Authors like Beauchamp and Childress (2013) have contended that ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice should regulate human subject research all over the world. Though these principles are increasingly being acknowledged in India, literature points out that their application to Indian universities, particularly beyond the medical space, is inconsistent and in fragmented forms.

Rashmi Kadam and Shashikant Karandikar (2012) highlighted in their research that ethics committees play an important role in the regulation of clinical research at the local level. However, it is seen that many ECs are oblivious to their roles and responsibilities. It is reported that ECs lack standard operating procedures, do not have a proper composition or adequate representation, thus affecting their functions in regulating clinical research. Moreover, ECs seem to function in isolation, as self-sufficient bodies, having no communication with the regulatory agency or other ECs. This brings forth the need for ECs to come together and share their experiences and observations, with the aim of updating themselves and refining their functions. Efforts also need to be focused on capacity building, centralized registration of ECs, and bringing an oversight mechanism in place. The Ethics Committees in India need to work in close association with forums such as the Forum for Ethics Review Committees in India and the Forum for Ethical Review Committees in Asia Pacific, in an effort towards empowering themselves.

Mukta S Kuyare, Santosh R Taur, And Urmila M Thatte (2014) research highlights the extensive variation in the operation of Ethics Committees among Indian institutions. Their research, conducted through interviews with researchers and members of IRBs, suggests that though IRBs may be on paper in most institutions, their practices are underdeveloped in response to a lack of training, infrastructural resources, and administrative will. Likewise, Ravindra B. Ghooi (2014) draws attention to the fact that the function of IRBs is critically reliant on institutional culture, the competence of its members, and the backing of university administration. Some universities have developed effective online systems and templates for ethics submissions, but others still process applications manually, leading to delays and lack of transparency. These studies call for capacity-building initiatives and standardization of review protocols to ensure fairness and quality.

Though a great deal of the IRB literature has been directed towards biomedical research, emerging research obligations draws attention towards ethical concerns in qualitative, participatory, and fieldwork in the social sciences. These call to mind how IRBs do not necessarily recognize the complexities of non-clinical studies, especially where these include ethnography, oral history, or community-based participatory research. In those situations, the inflexible biomedical model of informed consent can be unsuitable or even detrimental. Scholars promote ethics review processes that are attuned to social, cultural, and contextual realities. In India, where researchers frequently engage with marginalized and linguistically varied groups, the literature emphasizes the need for culturally appropriate consent processes and locally grounded ethical reflexivity.

Various studies identify the absence of formal training in research ethics as the key inhibitive factor to ethical adherence among Indian universities. Studies revealed that the majority of doctoral students in Indian universities had no access to formal courses or workshops on research ethics. This shortage translates into low-quality IRB submissions and, at worst, unethical activities like fabrication or omission of data or failure to obtain informed consent. The literature in the US, UK, and Australia indicates that incorporating ethics teaching into coursework makes a significant difference in improving ethical sensitivity and adherence. Indian researchers advocated for incorporating research ethics into postgraduate and undergraduate courses to promote ethical thinking at early stages of academic education.

The function of regulatory agencies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and ICMR in influencing institutional ethics practices has been discussed in many policy and scholarly articles. A UGC (2023) report emphasizes the importance of research integrity and recommends compulsory setting up of Ethics Committees in every higher education institution. But studies indicate that compliance is low in non-medical institutions, partly because of the absence of enforcement mechanisms and partly because of institutional lethargy. Researchers are critical of tokenistic implementation of IRBs across numerous universities, observing that unless accountability, monitoring, and unequivocal policy mandates are enforced, IRBs risk being symbolic instead of being functional. There is a growing consensus in the literature that Indian ethics governance needs more robust policy alignment, funding, and national systems of oversight.

III.THE EVOLUTION AND LEGAL STRUCTURE OF IRBs IN INDIA

The idea of institutional ethical review originated from the experiences in the post-World War II and World War II era where unethical research activities were exposed. Historic pronouncements like the Nuremberg Code and Declaration of Helsinki put significant weight on informed consent and the ethical handling of human subjects during research. These international norms later percolated to influence the establishment of ethics review processes in nations such as India.

In India, the research ethics regulatory system has developed mainly through efforts on the part of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). The ICMR's National Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical and Health Research Involving Human Participants (2017) offers the most detailed and best-accepted norms for ethics review in biomedical and health-related research. These guidelines aim to be broadly applicable to studies in addition to clinical trials, such as psychological, epidemiologic, and behavioral research. For drug and clinical research, the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules (1945) revised in 2013 mandate that all such Ethics Committees used to review such research are registered with the Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO). For social sciences or non-clinical academics, there is no such centralized enforcement system, though the University Grants Commission (UGC) and universities are increasingly acknowledging the need for ethics committees across subjects.

IV.STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

The basic function of an IRB is to perform rigorous ethical reviews of all research proposals for studies involving human participants. The process of reviewing such research proposals involves the close scrutiny of the research design, methods of recruitment of participants, data collection protocols, consent mechanisms, and mechanisms for maintaining confidentiality and protecting data.

One of the most important components reviewed by IRBs is informed consent procurement. Ethics committees have to ensure that researchers give participants transparent, detailed, and clear information regarding the reason for the study, processes, risks, advantages, and their ability to withdraw at any moment. For multilingual cultures such as India, where local languages may differ from English, it is essential to translate consent forms into local languages and clarify them to participants, especially those belonging to marginalized or vulnerable groups. IRBs also have the duty to evaluate the risk-benefit ratio of the research. If a study presents more than minimal risk to subjects but no direct or societal benefit, the study can be rejected or returned for revision. Research involving vulnerable populations—children, elderly, disabled persons, pregnant women, or economically underprivileged individuals—needs increased ethical scrutiny and extra controls.

Aside from the initial review of proposals, IRBs are supposed to check on ongoing research activities. This involves reviewing regular progress reports, confirming that deviations from the protocol are reported, and conducting an audit if required. This function of the IRB, however, is inadequately accomplished as a rule because of logistical difficulties and manpower shortages.

V.INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND CASE EXAMPLES FROM INDIAN UNIVERSITIES

Some Indian universities have made considerable progress in establishing good and transparent IRB systems. Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, for example, has a single central ethics committee that requires ethics review of all doctoral and sponsored research that involves human subjects. The process is clearly documented, and the university makes available guidance documents and templates to help researchers comply with ethical requirements.

Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, has a very socially and participatory research-oriented ethics committee. With its commitment to working with marginalized groups, the committee is chaired by community members and ensures that there is respect for social justice and equity principles in research practices. There is encouragement to take a participatory style of research, and there is strong contextual sensitivity.

The University of Hyderabad has a centralized ethics committee that monitors ethical compliance on a departmental basis. Interviews with doctoral candidates indicate, however, that there is still uncertainty regarding ethical review processes, especially in non-medical departments. Although guidelines are available, their circulation and compliance are reported to vary from faculty to faculty.
These instances identify that although ethical monitoring is being institutionalized more and more, the extent of implementation and effectiveness differs quite noticeably among universities.

VI.EFFECTIVENESS OF IRBS IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

The increasing presence of IRBs in Indian universities is a welcome trend and a sign of growing compliance with ethical standards. Yet their efficacy is still patchy. In institutions where there are established guidelines, trained personnel, and administrative backup, IRBs have been found to work effectively in protecting the participants and enhancing the quality of research. In such a setting, researchers are more likely to see the ethics review as a useful step and not as a bureaucratic obstacle. However, most universities do not possess the materials, infrastructure, and training to operate a fully operational ethics committee. Ethics review is relegated to a procedural exercise in some institutions, and proposals are approved without proper scrutiny. In other institutions, delays in review timelines because of understaffing or the absence of digital infrastructure discourage researchers from taking the process seriously.

Second, effective monitoring after approval is seldom of high quality or even exists. Interim reviews, follow-up audits, and exit reports are not often submitted or read, which devalues the concept of ethical oversight as a long-term obligation.

VII.CHALLENGES FACED BY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS

IRBs in India encounter a number of systemic and functional challenges. The most typical challenge is the inadequacy of administrative support. Most IRBs have inadequate staff, and hence it is challenging to handle a huge number of proposals or follow-up review. Consequently, review cycles can take longer than necessary, which becomes frustrating for the researchers.

A related but broader challenge is the lack of uniform procedures at institutions. Although ICMR guidelines are made available, universities may interpret and apply the guidelines in their own ways. The absence of a uniform approach creates inconsistency in review quality and makes it confusing for researchers, especially those working on collaborative, multi-institutional research.

Student and early-career researcher awareness and knowledge of research ethics are also low. In most universities, courses on research methodology cover ethical considerations if at all, and students are left to figure out how to go through the process on their own. This means subpar submissions to IRBs and occasionally results in unethical research being done without review.

Conflicts of interest also threaten the impartiality of IRBs. Where committee members have close ties to principal investigators or funding agencies, the integrity of the process may be undermined. Mechanisms for transparency and accountability are required to deal with this.

Digital research creates new complexities. Internet surveys, cellphone-based data collection, and the employment of artificial intelligence and big data in research create new ethical issues involving privacy of data, digital consent, and cybersecurity. IRBs are not ready to examine these aspects in detail.

VIII.RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING IRBS IN INDIA

In order to meet these challenges, a number of steps are needed. First, regular training programs should be put in place for members of IRBs and researchers. These should include not just classical research ethics but also future-looking concerns such as digital ethics and data protection.
Second, the design of an online, centralized platform for ethics review can automate the application and tracking process. This would also make it easy to achieve consistency and transparency across institutions. The platform may come preloaded with templates, guidelines, tracking tools, and audit logs.

Third, ethics committees must be mandated in all academic fields, not only the health sciences. Universities must be incentivized to include ethical review of all research, and funding agencies must require demonstration of IRB approval before grant disbursement.

Fourth, increased community participation is necessary, particularly where research affects particular social or cultural groups. This would increase relevance and ethical strength of the research.
Lastly, there should be ethics education incorporated into the curricula of universities at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. If researches are trained early enough to be ethical in their thinking, the value and integrity of their research will be improved immensely.

CONCLUSION

Institutional Review Boards are the backbone of ethical research that help prevent human subjects from suffering and maintain the integrity of academic work. In India, the growing establishment of IRBs in universities is a welcome trend but has miles to go. The functioning of these committees ranges enormously, and they tend to be plagued by severe operational, administrative, and ethical issues. By meeting these through training, policy changes, infrastructure for digitalization, and increased public participation, India can establish a stronger, more accountable, and ethically responsive research environment commensurate with national as well as international standards.

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The Mind as Revolution: Psychological Reform Towards a Democratic Society

Oishee Bhattacharjee

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The Mind as Revolution: Psychological Reform Towards a Democratic Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex relationship between caste, gender, and democracy in India through the writings of B. R. Ambedkar and feminist scholars such as Uma Chakravarti. It argues that Brahminical patriarchy, deeply embedded in religious practices and legitimised through scriptures, continues to structure social relations and political life in contemporary India. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and repeated political reforms, caste-based hierarchies and gendered domination remain firmly entrenched, limiting the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Drawing on Ambedkar's critique of social reform and Chakravarti's analysis of caste gender relations, the paper highlights how caste operates not only as a political or economic system but also as a deeply internalised social consciousness. Engaging with Frantz Fanon's theorisation of colonial consciousness and Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and with Gopal Guru's analysis of Dalit humiliation, it introduces the concept of psychological reform to emphasise the need for an inner transformation that involves unlearning inherited hierarchies, moral prejudices, and social instincts. The paper argues that without such psychological reform, democratic transformation in India remains incomplete and largely symbolic.

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I. Introduction

Caste in India is not merely a question of political representation or electoral arithmetic; it is a question of lived humiliation and inherited hierarchy. To study caste exclusively through the lens of parties, elections, or reservations is to overlook its deeper moral and psychological violence. B. R. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste (1936) tears through this superficial understanding, exposing caste as a system that cripples both individual freedom and collective ethics. Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahminical patriarchy further complicates this critique by demonstrating how caste sustains itself through gendered control, claims of ritual purity, and religious sanction. The subordination of women and the subjugation of lower castes, as this paper argues, are not parallel phenomena but two sides of the same social order.

Together, Ambedkar and Chakravarti help us recognise caste as the most profound challenge to Indian democracy, a structure that cannot be dismantled by policy alone, but demands a radical rethinking of morality, religion, and social relationships. This paper advances that argument further by proposing that political reform and social reform, while necessary, are insufficient without a prior, more fundamental transformation: psychological reform. Drawing on Fanon's analysis of internalised colonial

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consciousness and Gramsci's theorisation of hegemony as a system that naturalises domination, this paper argues that Brahminical hierarchy operates not merely as an external structure but as a form of internalised common sense. It is only when inherited hierarchies are unlearned at the level of individual consciousness that the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity can cease to be merely constitutional promises and become social realities.

II. Caste Embedded in Daily Life: Social and Psychological Dimensions

"The path of social reform, like the path to heaven, at any rate in India, is strewn with many difficulties." — Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste, 1936

Ambedkar held, with considerable conviction, that political reform cannot guarantee social transformation and that social reform must therefore precede political change. The validity of this position is starkly evident even after seventy-nine years of Indian independence. Caste-based violence and suppression continue to exist within a constitutional republic that explicitly enshrines fraternity and equality as its animating principles. The gap between constitutional promise and social reality is itself a testament to the limits of political reform alone. Ambedkar further noted that caste animosity does not only cut across inter-caste lines; even sub-castes within Brahmin identity, Golak, Deorukha, and Chitpavan, maintain mutual hostility, revealing that the system fractures social solidarity at every level.

What makes the caste system particularly resistant to reform is that it has seeped beyond the boundaries of public life into the most intimate dimensions of daily existence. Anthropologist McKim Marriott (1968) demonstrated that the flow of food functions as a primary determinant of caste rank: givers of food are structurally positioned as superior to their receivers. The concept of joothan food rendered impure through contact with the saliva of an upper-caste person, yet designated for Dalit consumption, illustrates this with disturbing clarity. The downward flow of food from the 'pure' to the 'polluted' constitutes what this paper terms a gastronomic panopticon: a system of surveillance and hierarchy so thoroughly internalised that it governs even the most private act of eating.

It is at this point that Frantz Fanon's analysis becomes indispensable. In Black Skin, White Masks (1952), Fanon argued that the colonial subject does not merely suffer external domination; they internalise the coloniser's conception of their own inferiority, coming to see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor. The psychological violence of colonialism, Fanon demonstrated, lies precisely in this internalisation: the colonised begin to reproduce the hierarchies that subordinate them. The Dalit experience of caste maps with uncomfortable precision onto this Fanonian framework. The person who accepts joothan as their natural portion, who internalises the logic of pollution and purity as self-evident, has absorbed the Brahminical gaze into their own consciousness. A reform that operates only at the level of law or social custom cannot reach this depth. What is required is what Fanon would recognise as a rupture in consciousness, a deliberate, willed refusal of the inherited self-conception that the dominant order has imposed.

It is precisely this depth of penetration into food, touch, domestic space, and bodily practice that leads this paper to argue for the primacy of psychological reform. By psychological reform, this paper refers to the process of unlearning caste-based hierarchies, moral prejudices, and inherited social attitudes that shape everyday behaviour and sustain inequality. Unlike legal or political reform, which operates at the level of institutional structure, psychological reform works at the level of individual consciousness, transforming how people understand dignity, purity, authority, and social worth. Drawing from Ambedkar's emphasis on the necessity of social reform, this paper argues that democratic transformation in India cannot be fully realised unless such internal changes in mindset take place. Social reform should precede political reform, but psychological reform must precede social reform.

III. Religion as a Pillar of Caste Hierarchy

"Each nation has a main current in life; in India, it is religion." — Swami Vivekananda

Ambedkar's analysis converges, in a critical sense, with Vivekananda's observation, though where Vivekananda celebrated religion as the organising energy of Indian civilisation, Ambedkar viewed that same religious centrality as the very mechanism through which the Chaturvarna system, the four-tiered caste hierarchy, was legitimised and preserved. Because political power in India has historically been dominated by upper-caste elites, Ambedkar held little hope that political institutions would spontaneously dismantle caste. Such elites might, at most, abolish practices like Sati when they affected their own women, but they had neither the incentive nor the will to challenge the broader hierarchical order from which they benefited.

Ambedkar was equally sceptical of the Socialist model as a remedy for caste oppression. In India, he argued, power is concentrated not only in capital but in religious capital. Millionaires donate vast sums to temples and religious institutions, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than subverting them. Even those Brahmins who were secular and broad-minded, who privately acknowledged the injustice of caste, were disinclined to relinquish their structural advantages, remaining, in practice, indistinguishable from their more conservative kin.

This is where Gramsci's concept of hegemony offers a powerful analytical lens. For Gramsci, dominant groups maintain power not primarily through coercion but through consent by making their worldview appear as natural, inevitable common sense that the dominated themselves accept and reproduce. Writing from an Italian fascist prison, Gramsci observed that the most durable form of domination is one that requires no enforcement because it has been internalised by those it subordinates. Brahminical caste ideology operates in precisely this way. The religious legitimation of Varna hierarchy through scripture, ritual, and the authority of priestly interpretation has produced a social common sense so pervasive that it governs conduct even without the presence of an enforcer. The lower-caste person who avoids the upper-caste well, the woman who voluntarily confines herself to domestic space, the voter who supports the candidate of their own caste: each is reproducing Brahminical hegemony through their own choices, without experiencing those choices as constrained. Psychological reform, in Gramscian terms, is the work of building a counter-hegemony, an alternative common sense grounded in the democratic values of dignity, rationality, and equality.

This religious entrenchment of caste also foreclosed the possibility of the horizontal solidarity that enables democratic politics elsewhere. The kind of religious cohesion visible among Sikhs or Muslims, solidarity that crosses class lines within a faith community was, Ambedkar argued, structurally impossible within Hinduism, a religion that enshrined hierarchy even within its own caste groups. For Ambedkar, only intercaste dining and intercaste marriage could break the social rigidity that religion had produced. The deep entanglement of religion and caste in India continues, therefore, to challenge not merely social equality but the democratic ideals of fraternity themselves.

It is from this analysis of religious rootedness that Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahminical patriarchy draws its analytical force. Archaeological evidence from the pre-Vedic period suggests that women participated more or less equally in hunting and gathering activities. The subordination of women, Chakravarti (1993) argues, began with the Aryan settlements and the consolidation of Vedic religion, which marked the beginning of systematic social and religious subjugation. Scriptural texts reference 'dasi' (female slaves) far more frequently than 'dasa' (male slaves), revealing that the control of women's sexuality and, through it, the management of caste purity was a central rather than incidental preoccupation of Brahminical ideology. Concepts such as Patibrata Dharma and Stree Dharma codified female conduct in ways that served unmistakably casteist purposes.

Ambedkar, in The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman (1951), locates this dynamic within a specific historical context: Shudras and women were, he argues, the two groups most drawn to Buddhism, a

religion that rejected the Varna system, and it was precisely this mass movement toward a more egalitarian faith that prompted Brahminical texts to intensify the restriction of women's freedoms. The sole aim of such control was to retain Brahminical dominance within and beyond the household, ensuring the sustained privileges of male Brahmins and the continued suppression of both women and lower-caste populations.

IV. Caste and Patriarchy: Persistent Challenges to Indian Democracy

"Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life." — B. R. Ambedkar, Constituent Assembly, November 25, 1949

The Indian state has made formal, and at times sincere, attempts to address gender inequality through legislation and institutional design. The reservation of 33% of seats for women in local self-governing bodies, the Panchayati Raj institutions, stands as one of the most ambitious of these efforts. It intended to bring women, particularly in rural areas where the grip of Brahminical patriarchy is most entrenched, into the formal exercise of political power. On paper, the results appear encouraging: the Press Information Bureau (2025) reports female participation in rural local governance at approximately 46%.

Yet the reality behind this figure is considerably more ambivalent. The reservation scheme gave rise to the widespread phenomenon of the Sarpanch Pati or Pradhan Pati, the husband, or another male relative, who exercises the decision-making authority nominally held by the elected woman. The female representative is present; the female voice is not. This is not a peripheral anomaly but a structural response to the reform, one rooted in precisely the internalised Brahminical patriarchy that Chakravarti theorised. In Gramscian terms, this is hegemony operating at its most intimate level: the norms of male authority are so thoroughly naturalised that even a legal intervention designed to redistribute power is absorbed and neutralised by the existing social common sense. When a policy designed to redistribute political agency is subverted through a domestic proxy system, it reveals the inadequacy of institutional reform alone. Democratic representation becomes a formal shell when psychological and social norms remain unchanged. The question is not simply how many women are elected, but whose will is being exercised through their presence.

V. Entrenched Hierarchies: How Caste Undermines Political Equality

India's political institutions have made consistent efforts to dismantle social inequality through constitutional provisions and judicial interpretation. Article 15 of the Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of caste, religion, or gender. Nevertheless, the Brahminical hierarchy that the Constitution sought to abolish has, in important respects, been reproduced and in some ways deepened through the politicisation of caste identity itself.

Perhaps no indicator makes this more vivid than the persistent caste-marking of those who have risen to the highest constitutional offices. President Draupadi Murmu is routinely described in public discourse as the 'Scheduled Tribe President'; her predecessor Ram Nath Kovind was similarly labelled the 'Dalit President.' Their caste identities, far from being irrelevant to their elevation, become the defining frame through which their authority is understood and, implicitly, limited. The individual is subsumed by the category. A more overtly hostile instance occurred when a shoe was hurled at Justice B. R. Gavai, a sitting Dalit judge of the Supreme Court, following his remarks on a Hindu deity (Poddar & Lukiv, 2024). The act made visible the resentment that formal inclusion does not dissolve but merely drives underground.

These incidents reinforce, with uncomfortable clarity, Ambedkar's central contention: no degree of political or legislative reform can produce genuine equality unless the hierarchies embedded in social consciousness are confronted and transformed. Legal frameworks change what people may do; they

do not, by themselves, change what people believe, feel, or instinctively enact. Gopal Guru's (2009) analysis of humiliation as the defining experience of Dalit subjectivity is relevant here. For Guru, humiliation is not merely an emotional response to injustice; it is a structuring force that shapes Dalit consciousness and self-understanding. The persistence of caste-based humiliation, even in contexts of formal political inclusion, reveals the gap between institutional recognition and genuine social transformation. That transformation requires the psychological reform this paper has been arguing for: an active, willed process of unlearning that must accompany, and in some respects precede, institutional change. Crucially, the primary burden of this unlearning falls not on those who suffer under the hierarchy but on those who benefit from it, the upper-caste consciousness that must interrogate and dismantle its own inherited advantages.

VI. Caste-Based Politics: A Necessary Evil and Democratic Challenge

Political scientists have long grappled with the ambivalent consequences of caste entering the democratic arena. Rajni Kothari, in Caste in Indian Politics (1970), pioneered the concept of the 'politicisation of caste,' recognising it as both an enabling and a distorting force within Indian democracy.

The enabling dimension is historically significant. In the early post-independence decades, the most influential legislative positions were secured almost exclusively by upper-caste elites, who were largely indifferent to the material and social struggles of lower-caste populations. Kothari's 'Congress System' or the dominance of the Indian National Congress across the first three decades of Indian democracy was, despite its secular self-presentation, an upper-caste-led formation that routinely marginalised Dalit and OBC interests. In this context, the emergence of caste-based regional parties such as the BSP in Uttar Pradesh, the RJD and JD(U) in Bihar, and the DMK in Tamil Nadu represented a genuine redistribution of political voice. To that extent, the politicisation of caste was a necessary corrective.

Yet its costs are high. Caste-based politics heightens chauvinistic caste consciousness and transforms elections into zero-sum contests between communities rather than deliberations over policy. Caste parties frequently serve the interests of their own constituency at the expense of broader democratic goods, pursuing opportunistic alliances to secure seats rather than to advance coherent programmes of social transformation. More troublingly, lower-caste voters often find themselves structurally trapped, their electoral choices constrained by caste loyalty rather than expanded by political agency. The democratic ideal of the rational, free citizen exercising genuine political choice is significantly undermined when caste determines the horizon of political possibility. This too is a form of Brahminical hegemony: the internalisation of caste identity as the primary political identity forecloses the kind of cross-caste solidarity that a genuinely democratic politics would require.

VII. Conclusion: The Necessity of Psychological Reform

The evidence examined in this paper points consistently to a single, structurally significant conclusion: political reform does not guarantee social reform, and social reform cannot be realised without a prior transformation of the psychological and moral inheritance that sustains caste. Even seventy-nine years after independence, the minds of citizens across caste positions remain shaped by Brahminical codes, hierarchies, and norms whose hold is so pervasive as to seem natural. What is striking, however, is that the degree of dependence on these social norms varies from person to person. That variation is itself psychological.

It is worth remembering that it was a modest but real degree of psychological reform and an inner refusal to accept inherited hierarchy as inevitable that produced figures like Kadambini Ganguly, India's first female graduate, and Anandi Gopal Joshi, its first female doctor. Both overcame the weight of Brahminical social norms through a combination of individual courage and rational self-determination. Savitribai Phule's entire pedagogical project can be read as an institutionalisation of this impulse: her schools for lower-caste and female students were not merely sites of literacy but of

reconstructed self-understanding, places where those whom Brahminical society had taught to see themselves as lesser could begin to see themselves differently. Pandita Ramabai, in The High-Caste Hindu Woman (1888), documented with painful precision how even upper-caste women were systematically denied education, a reminder that the problem of psychological reform extends across caste positions, even if its costs fall most heavily on those at the bottom.

Psychological reform, as this paper has used the term, is not a therapeutic or purely individual process. It is a social and ethical one: the active, reasoned dismantling of inherited prejudice through commitment to rationality and human dignity. Ambedkar understood this when he located the source of caste's resilience not in law or economics alone, but in the internalised social consciousness of those who both enforced and submitted to it. Fanon understood it when he insisted that genuine liberation required a rupture not just in political structures but in the colonised subject's self-understanding. Gramsci understood it when he argued that transformative politics must begin with the construction of a counter-hegemony, an alternative common sense. Gopal Guru (2009) understood it when he insisted that the experience of humiliation must be theorised from within Dalit subjectivity rather than managed from outside it. Together, these frameworks converge on a single insight: the mind is not merely the site of oppression's effects, it is one of the primary sites of its reproduction, and therefore one of the primary sites of its undoing.

To reform that consciousness requires, first, the willingness to interrogate it to refuse the emotional bait of caste loyalty, religious sanction, and communal solidarity in favour of the harder and more democratic work of treating persons as persons. The same logic extends to electoral politics: the manipulation of caste sentiment, the disinformation, and the false promises that characterise so much of Indian electoral competition are themselves expressions of Brahminical hegemony in action, binding voters to inherited identities and foreclosing rational deliberation. Making genuinely free electoral choices requires precisely the psychological reform this paper has described: the capacity to see through communal appeals and ground political judgment in reasoned evaluation of democratic goods.

The mechanisms through which such psychological reform might be cultivated through pedagogy, counter-narrative, inter-caste intimacy, deliberate rational practice, or the kind of symbolic rupture that Ambedkar himself enacted through his conversion to Buddhism constitute the analytical agenda this paper sets in motion and that subsequent work must develop. Until the deep-seated hierarchies of the mind are actively questioned and transformed, the ideals of Indian democracy will remain what they have largely been: constitutional promises unfulfilled. This is, ultimately, what Ambedkar understood when he insisted that political democracy cannot survive without social democracy at its foundation. What this paper has argued is that the foundation beneath that foundation, the ground on which social democracy must be built is psychological.

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Deception as an Institutional Discourse Practice: A Linguistic–Computational Model from Indian Courtrooms

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ABSTRACT

Conventional research on phoney speech in legal circumstances typically views deception as a moral or cognitive defect at the individual level that can be recognised by consistent linguistic indicators. By suggesting that deception is an institutionally created discourse practice that results from the interplay of cognitive load, procedural limitations, and power imbalances in courtroom communication, this research proposes a theoretical reorientation. The study uses a mixed-methods strategy that combines qualitative forensic analysis with natural language processing techniques applied to specific Indian criminal court rulings, drawing on forensic linguistics, discourse analysis, and computational language modelling. Patterns of strategic ambiguity, evasive coherence, emotional modulation, and pragmatic indeterminacy are found in the testimonies of witnesses and accused individuals. To track how institutional forces influence communication behaviour, computational methods such as sentiment trajectory mapping, stance identification, and lexical dispersion metrics are combined with careful language reading. The analysis shows that deceitful discourse in legal contexts functions more as an adaptive, situationally sensible tactic conditioned by juridical norms and interpretive authority than as a sign of personal dishonesty. This study offers a reusable analytical framework for forensic linguistics and legal discourse studies by modelling deception as a situated, procedural, and culturally mediated phenomenon. This framework has implications for judicial interpretation, evidentiary evaluation, and the moral use of computational tools in legal contexts.

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I. Introduction

One of the most organised institutional settings is the courtroom, where language serves as a strategic tool for building credibility, persuasion, and justification, in addition to being a means of communication. Participants in legal proceedings, including witnesses, defendants, attorneys, and judges, participate in intricate language exchanges where assertions are continuously assessed for veracity and accuracy. As a result, identifying fraudulent communication has become increasingly important in the study of forensic linguistics.

An explicit lie is rarely the only way that deception is represented in legal discourse. Rather, it frequently takes the form of subtle verbal cues, such as discourse markers, hesitation markers, expressions of doubt, negation, and lexical repetition. When speakers try to control their cognitive load, handle psychological pressure, or purposefully alter their comments during cross-examination and

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examination, these patterns may show themselves. Therefore, it is possible to think of lying in courtroom speech as both an individual behaviour and an institutionally conditioned communicative practice that is influenced by legal processes, adversarial questioning, and the judiciary's evaluation of credibility.

Recent developments in natural language processing (NLP) and computational linguistics have made it possible for scholars to analyse vast amounts of legal documents and find systematic linguistic patterns linked to dishonesty, uncertainty, and cognitive stress. Scholars can investigate courtroom language in a data-driven way by using automated textual analysis techniques like sentiment analysis, lexical frequency measurement, stance identification, and discourse pattern discovery. When analysing lengthy court records, these methods are especially helpful because hand interpretation could miss tiny but recurrent linguistic cues.

However, there is a direct connection between lying in institutional discourse and cognitive functions like executive control, stress management, and cognitive load management. According to a psychological and behavioural study, people who communicate dishonestly frequently put forth more mental effort, which may affect their language choices and discourse organisation. Therefore, a more thorough knowledge of how misleading communication functions in formal legal systems can be obtained by combining viewpoints from linguistics, computational analysis, and cognitive research.

Relatively little research has examined Indian courtroom conversation, especially using publicly accessible judicial rulings as language corpora, despite the growing interest in computer techniques for fraud detection. Indian court rulings are useful tools for analysing institutional discourse patterns because they provide in-depth narrative reconstructions of witness testimony, cross-examinations, and judicial assessments of trustworthiness. Nevertheless, there are still a few comprehensive computational evaluations of these writings.

By creating a linguistic–computational model to analyse discourse patterns associated with fraud in Indian criminal court rulings, this study fills this gap. The study uses automated natural language processing techniques to find linguistic indications in courtroom narratives related to ambiguity, denial, emotional tone, and cognitive stress using a corpus of chosen criminal cases from Indian courts. The methodology also looks at high-risk discourse segments that exhibit higher linguistic markers related to deceit and investigates how these patterns interact with institutional context and speaker roles.
This study attempts to add to the expanding field of digital forensic linguistics by integrating techniques from computational text analysis, cognitive discourse studies, and forensic linguistics. The results may give a fresh viewpoint on the examination of dishonesty and credibility in institutional discourse by illuminating how linguistic patterns in judicial texts reflect the cognitive and communicative processes of courtroom actors.

II. Literature Review

2.1-Deception in Forensic Linguistics: Forensic linguistics and discourse analysis have traditionally placed a high value on the investigation of language deception. One of the earliest systematic discussions of linguistic deception was presented by Paul Ekman in *"Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage"* (1985), where the author looked at verbal and behavioural signs of dishonesty, such as emotional leaking, reluctance, and speech irregularities. Even while Ekman's research was mainly concerned with psychological behaviour, it set the stage for later language studies of deceptive communication.

Researchers in the field of forensic linguistics have looked at how subtle language patterns, as opposed to overt lies, might be used in deceptive speech. Malcolm Coulthard and Alison Johnson in *"An Introduction to Forensic Linguistics: Language in Evidence"* (2007) emphasised the significance of examining conversation patterns, linguistic structures, and practical decisions in legal contexts. Their

research highlighted how courtroom language is a highly structured type of institutional discourse where linguistic performance is used to negotiate legitimacy.

Similarly, Lawrence M. Solan and Peter M. Tiersma explored linguistic interpretation within legal systems in their book *"Speaking of Crime: The Language of Criminal Justice"* (2005). They contended that institutional norms that affect how judges and legal professionals frame, analyse, and assess testimony impact legal communication. This viewpoint emphasises how speech structure shapes judicial contexts' views of truth and dishonesty.

2.2-Computational Approaches to Deception Detection: As computational linguistics and Natural Language Processing (NLP) have grown in popularity, automated textual analysis has been used to study deception detection. One of the most influential studies in this area was conducted by Mihalcea Rada and Carlo Strapparava in *"The Lie Detector: Explorations in the Automatic Recognition of Deceptive Language"* (2009). To find misleading assertions, the authors created computational models that examined linguistic characteristics like lexical choice, sentiment polarity, and syntactic complexity.

Another significant contribution was made by Jeff Hancock and colleagues in *"On Lying and Being Lied To: A Linguistic Analysis of Deception in Computer-Mediated Communication"* (2007). It showed that false communications frequently have changed emotional tone, decreased self-references, and increased cognitive complexity. These results showed that patterns linked to dishonest speech might be successfully identified using computational linguistic techniques.

James Pennebaker and others conducted an additional study by analysing psychological signals in language using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) methodology. In *"The Development and Psychometric Properties of LIWC2007"* (2007), Pennebaker and his associates demonstrated how linguistic markers, such as the use of pronouns, the frequency of negation, and emotive expressions, can reveal underlying psychological states, such as dishonesty and cognitive stress.

Together, these findings show that computational linguistic analysis, especially when applied methodically to huge textual datasets, can detect subtle language patterns linked to dishonesty.

2.3-Courtroom Discourse and Institutional Language: Courtroom communication has been extensively studied as a type of institutional discourse with procedural restrictions and hierarchical interaction. John M. Conley and William M. O'Barr analysed courtroom language in *"Just Words: Law, Language, and Power"* (1998), claiming that power dynamics that influence the presentation and interpretation of testimony are reflected in legal discourse. Their study showed that speakers' perceived credibility may be influenced by their linguistic approaches in legal circumstances.

In a similar vein, Diana Eades investigated linguistic dynamics within legal proceedings in *"Courtroom Talk and Neocolonial Control"* (2008). Eades emphasised how the narrative structure of courtroom language and witness answers can be shaped by institutional questioning techniques. Her research highlighted how crucial it is to examine discourse interactions rather than discrete utterances when researching legal communication.

Computational methods have started investigating judicial writings as language corpora in more recent times. Josh Blackman, Michael Bommarito, and Daniel Martin Katz showed how machine learning methods may be used to analyse legal texts in *"A General Approach for Predicting the Behaviour of the Supreme Court of the United States"* (2017). Their research demonstrated how systematic patterns in legal discourse and reasoning can be found in extensive judicial data.

However, rather than examining the language structure of testimony narratives, the majority of computational studies have concentrated on predicting judicial decisions. This suggests that more research on discourse-level elements in courtroom writings is necessary.

2.4-Cognitive Load and Linguistic Behaviour: According to a psychological study, lying puts a heavy cognitive load on people. Speakers must concurrently manage memory recall, narrative coherence, and behavioural control when they try to invent or manipulate information. Linguistic abnormalities are a common manifestation of this elevated cognitive burden.

Aldert Vrij investigated the connection between deceit and mental effort in *"Detecting Lies and Deceit: Pitfalls and Opportunities"* (2008). According to Vrij, because maintaining false narratives requires mental effort, deceitful communication frequently entails greater hesitancy, linguistic confusion, and simpler sentence patterns.

Similarly, Bella M. DePaulo and associates carried out an extensive meta-analysis in *"Cues to Deception"* (2003). According to their findings, language indications including ambiguity, a lack of information, and discrepancies between repeated tales are often found in false statements.

According to these cognitive viewpoints, linguistic indicators of dishonesty may result from psychological stress and executive control mechanisms in addition to deliberate manipulation. Therefore, the interpretation of conversation patterns related to deceit can be improved by combining linguistic research with cognitive insights.

2.5-Research Gap: While deceit detection, computational language analysis, and courtroom discourse have all been extensively studied separately, comparatively few works have integrated these viewpoints within the framework of **Indian judicial texts**. The majority of current studies on computational deception detection concentrate on social media interactions, online communication, or controlled experimental datasets.

Indian court rulings, which include in-depth accounts of witness testimony, cross-examinations, and judicial assessments of trustworthiness, provide a rich but underutilised language resource. Examining how misleading discourse patterns appear in institutional legal narratives is made possible by these texts.

Nevertheless, there are still a few comprehensive computational assessments of Indian courtroom talk. Studies that combine computational text processing, cognitive discourse indicators, and forensic language analysis to analyse deception-related patterns in court documents are particularly lacking.

In order to close this gap, the current study creates a **linguistic–computational framework for analysing deception in Indian criminal court judgements,** integrating discourse-based interpretation of trial tales with automated natural language processing tools.

III. Methodology

3.1-Research Design: This study analyses deception-related discourse patterns in criminal courtroom narratives using a computational forensic linguistic approach. The study combines techniques from discourse analysis, natural language processing (NLP), and forensic linguistics to look at linguistic markers of cognitive stress, uncertainty, and denial in legal texts.

The methodological framework integrates qualitative discourse interpretation with quantitative computational analysis. The Python programming language was used to create automated scripts that processed and analysed courtroom texts. These scripts locate high-risk conversation segments in the dataset, extract linguistic features, and compute deception-related indicators.

The overall analytical workflow consists of the following stages:

1. Corpus preparation and structuring
2. Extraction of linguistic and psychological markers
3. Deception score computation
4. High-risk segment detection
5. Stance identification
6. Lexical dispersion analysis

The study is able to methodically discover language patterns linked to dishonest communication in courtroom discourse through this multi-stage computer workflow.

3.2-Data Collection: Criminal court judgements from Indian judicial records make up the dataset used in this study. In-depth narrative reconstructions of courtroom events, including witness statements, cross-examinations, and judicial interpretations of testimony, are included in these rulings.

The gathered texts were processed as a corpus for computational analysis after being transformed into a machine-readable format. To enable automated linguistic processing, each text fragment was extracted and arranged into structured datasets in CSV format.

The corpus was divided into more manageable text units representing individual statements or discourse segments during the preparation phase. When feasible, these segments were further annotated with speaker roles, such as:

- Judge
- Witness
- Accused
- Defence counsel
- Prosecutor

The investigation of linguistic behaviour at the speaker and discourse levels was made possible by this segmentation.

3.3-Data Preprocessing and Corpus Structuring: To guarantee consistency and analytical dependability, the textual data was subjected to a number of preprocessing steps before to linguistic analysis.

The preprocessing steps included:

- Text normalisation (conversion to lowercase and removal of irregular spacing)
- Segmentation of courtroom narratives into text units
- Creation of structured datasets using Python scripts
- Cleaning and standardisation of CSV outputs
- Speaker column identification and correction

After processing, the dataset was arranged in a structured way with several variables, such as:

- Speaker role
- Text segment
- Sentiment score
- Negation markers
- Uncertainty markers
- Cognitive load indicators
- Emotional tone

This structured dataset served as the master dataset for further computational analysis.

3.4-Extraction of Linguistic Indicators: Several discourse variables were retrieved from the text corpus using automated NLP scripts in order to find linguistic patterns linked to deceit and cognitive stress.

The following are the main linguistic indicators examined in this study:

1. **Negation markers:** In testimony narratives, negative phrases like "not", "never", and "no" were found to be possible markers of denial tactics.
2.
3. **Uncertainty markers:** Words like "maybe", "perhaps", "I think", and "possibly" that convey hesitancy or uncertainty were examined as markers of cognitive reluctance.
4. **Emotional tone:** To determine whether conversational segments exhibited positive, negative, or neutral emotional orientation, sentiment analysis techniques were employed.
5. **Cognitive load indicators:** Repetition, lexical simplification, and discourse fragmentation are examples of language patterns that were once thought to indicate greater cognitive strain during speech production.

Python-based Natural Language Processing tools were used to automatically extract these linguistic traits.

3.5-Deception Score Calculation: Based on the retrieved linguistic markers, the study developed a composite deception score to measure the probability of deception within conversation segments. Several language factors were combined to determine the deception score, including:

- Negation frequency
- Uncertainty markers
- Emotional tone
- Cognitive load indicators

A numerical score representing the relative occurrence of these indicators was given to each text fragment. Greater levels of communicative stress or strategic linguistic manipulation were thought to be present in segments with higher scores, respectively.

The major dataset for further analysis was the Deception Score dataset, which contained the computed scores.

3.6-High-Risk Segment Detection: Segments with noticeably higher scores were extracted into a different dataset called High-Risk Segments once the deception score was calculated.

These sections show discourse units where several indicators of deceit are present at the same time. Researchers can concentrate on sections of testimony that may require increased cognitive effort, denial behaviour, or narrative inconsistencies by identifying such parts.

To find recurrent linguistic patterns in potentially misleading statements, the high-risk sample was further analysed.

3.7-Stance Identification: A rule-based stance categorisation model was used to analyse the communicative stance speakers took during courtroom conversation.

Every text passage was categorised into one of the following standpoint groups:

- **Assertion –** direct and confident statements without uncertainty markers
- **Denial –** statements containing negation markers
- **Uncertain stance –** statements containing uncertainty expressions

This categorisation made it possible for the study to investigate the linguistic placement of speakers inside trial narratives, especially with regard to accusations and claims of evidence.

3.8-Lexical Dispersion Analysis: The high-risk segments dataset was subjected to a lexical dispersion analysis in order to further explore linguistic patterns within potentially misleading discourse.

The analysis involved:
- Aggregating all high-risk text segments
- Tokenising the text into individual words
- Calculating frequency distributions of lexical items

A frequency distribution model implemented in Python was used to determine which terms appeared most frequently in high-risk speech parts. This technique aids in determining whether specific vocabulary choices are frequently used in statements linked to elevated deception signs.

3.9-Analytical Tools: Python-based scripts created especially for the research workflow were used for all computational analyses in this study. The principal instruments utilised consist of:
- Python programming language
- Pandas library for dataset management
- Natural Language Processing techniques for feature extraction
- Frequency distribution analysis for lexical patterns

Large textual datasets could be processed effectively thanks to these technologies, which also guaranteed the analytical process's repeatability.

3.10-Ethical Considerations: Publicly available judicial documents, which are a component of official legal records, are the only sources for the study. The research process did not involve any private data, experimental procedures, or in-person interviews. As a result, there are no direct ethical issues with participant confidentiality in the study.

IV. Results and Analysis

4.1-Overview of the Analytical Output: Several structured datasets and graphic outputs from the computer analysis show linguistic patterns connected to speech related to deceit in courtroom narratives. The outcomes consist of:
- Speaker-level statistics
- Cognitive load scores
- Correlation analysis between linguistic indicators
- Stance identification results
- High-risk discourse segments
- Lexical dispersion patterns

Together, these findings show how discourse structure in legal texts interacts with linguistic signals like negation, uncertainty, and emotional tone.

4.2-Speaker-Level Linguistic Patterns: The first phase of the analysis looked at language use in courtroom speech across various speaker roles. The speaker types—judges, witnesses, accused people, and legal representatives—were utilised to categorise the dataset.

Linguistic patterns differ considerably based on the speaker's institutional role, according to the speaker-level analysis. For instance, witness statements frequently feature higher amounts of uncertainty expressions and narrative elaboration, whereas judicial discourse is typically more ordered and authoritative. Additionally, witness testimony exhibits more variation in linguistic complexity and emotional tone. The psychological strain of cross-examination and questioning in court may be

reflected in this heterogeneity.

It is common for accused people to use defensive language structures and negation signs more frequently. These tendencies align with denial tactics frequently seen in confrontational judicial settings.

speaker_analysis

Speaker	segments	avg_deception_score	avg_uncertainty	avg_negation	avg_stress
Accused	960	4.271875	0.014583333333333300	1.2729166666666700	2.252083333333330
Judge	40	3.625	0.15	0.85	1.95
Lawyer	92	4.793478260869570	0.021739130434782600	1.5	2.4347826086956500
Unknown	4062	2.9197439684884300	0.022156573116691300	0.8636139832594780	1.5214180206794700
Witness	594	2.983164983164980	0.0	0.7878787878787880	1.7845117845117800

Table 1

4.3-Cognitive Load Indicators in Testimony: Additionally, the study looked at indications of cognitive strain that were obtained from language patterns in discourse segments. The mental work needed to create and sustain a cohesive story during speech production is referred to as cognitive load.

The following were frequently found in segments with high cognitive load scores:

- repeated lexical structures
- fragmented sentence patterns
- increased hesitation markers
- higher frequencies of uncertainty expressions

These language traits imply that while making specific declarations in trial narratives, speakers might feel more cognitive pressure.

Higher cognitive load signs are often seen in speech segments related to defence answers and contested testimony. The difficulty of maintaining narrative consistency during legal questioning may be reflected in this pattern.

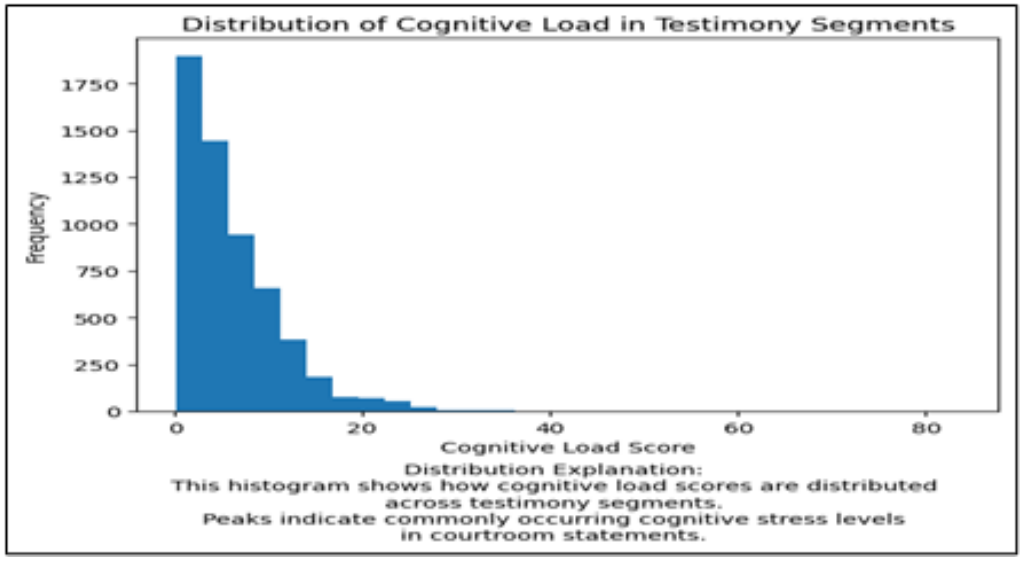


Figure 1

4.4-Correlation Between Linguistic Indicators: A correlation analysis between important variables recovered during the NLP processing stage was carried out to further investigate the relationship between various linguistic aspects.

The variables analysed include:

- sentiment score
- negation markers
- uncertainty markers
- cognitive load score
- deception score

Numerous significant associations are revealed by the correlation data. For example, negation markers frequently coexist with greater cognitive load scores, indicating that language related to denial may demand more mental effort. Similarly, there is a moderate correlation between emotional tone indicators and uncertainty markers.

These results show that deception-related language behaviour arises through interacting linguistic signals rather than depending on a single indicator.

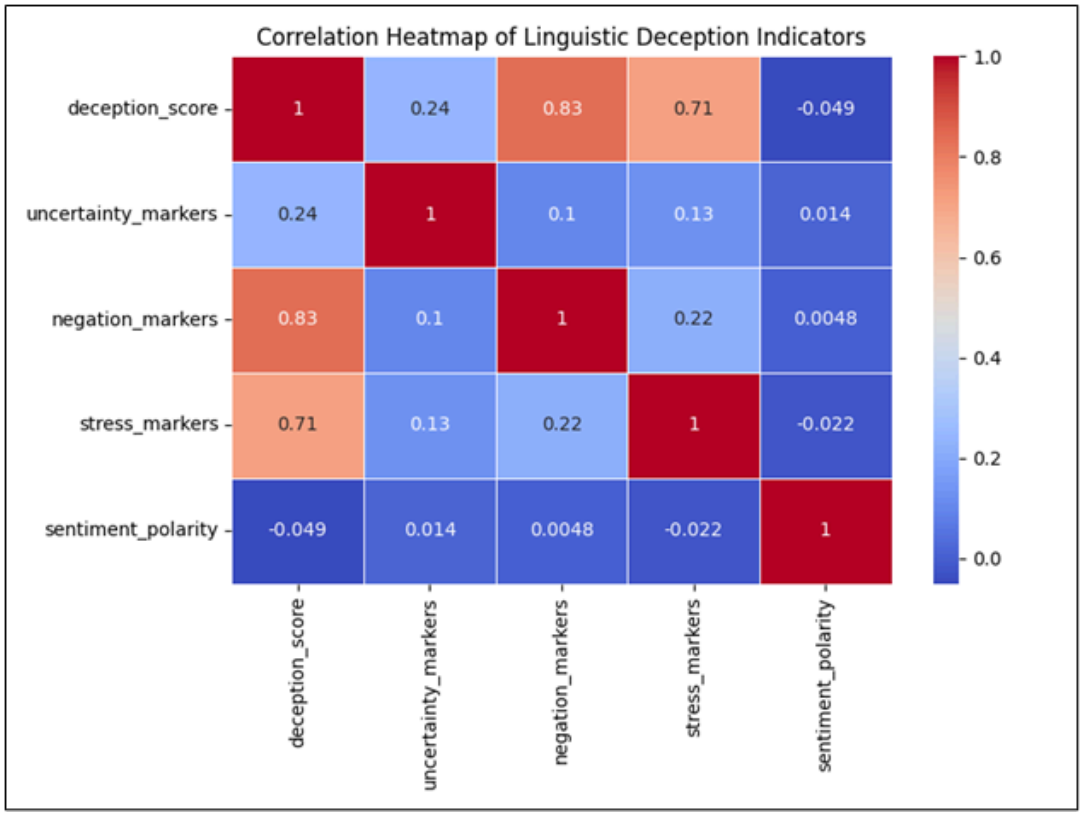


Figure 2: The heatmap visually illustrates the strength of correlations between linguistic features, highlighting clusters of variables that frequently co-occur in courtroom discourse.

4.5-High-Risk Discourse Segments: The identification of high-risk speech segments is one of the study's primary analytical results. Elevated deception ratings from the combined language indicators were used to extract these portions.

High-risk segments typically contain multiple markers simultaneously, such as:

- negation expressions
- uncertainty markers
- emotionally charged language
- elevated cognitive load scores

The existence of several indicators implies that these sections might indicate purposeful linguistic placement within courtroom narratives or areas of communicative strain.

high_risk_sample

Case	Speaker	Text Segment	deception_score	uncertainty_markers	negation_markers	stress_markers
S4	Lawyer	Because:- (1) A girl or a woman in the tradition bound non-permissive Society of India would be extremely reluctant even to admit that any incident which is likely to reflect on her chastity had ever occurred; (2) She would be conscious of the danger of being ostracised by the Society or being looked down by the society including by her own family members, relatives, friends, and neighbours; (3) She would have to brave the whole world; (4) She would face the risk of losing the love and respect of her own husband and near relatives, and of her matrimonial home and happiness being shattered; (5) If she is unmarried, she would apprehend that it would be, difficult to secure an alliance with a suitable match from a respectable or an acceptable family; (6) It would almost inevitably and almost invariably result in mental torture and suffering to herself; (7) The tear of being taunted by others will always haunt her; (8) She would feel extremely embarrassed in relating the incident to others being over powered by feeling of shame on account of the upbringing in a tradition bound society where by and large sex is taboo; (9) The natural inclination would be to avoid giving publicity to the incident lest the family name and family honour is brought into controversy; (10) The parents of an unmarried girl as also the husband and members of the husband's family of a married woman, would also more often than not, want to avoid publicity on account of the fear of social stigma on the family name and family honour; (11) The fear of the victim herself being considered to be promiscuous or in some way responsible for the incidentBharwada Bhoginbhai Hirjibhai vs State Of Gujarat on 24 May, 1983 Indian Kanoon - http://indiankanoon.org/doc/207774/ 4regardless of her innocence; (12) The reluctance to face interrogation by the investigating agency, to face the court, to face the cross examination by Counsel for the culprit, and the risk of being disbelieved, acts as a deterrent.	39.0	1	8	25
S4	Lawyer	Because:- (1) A girl or a woman in the tradition bound non-permissive Society of India would be extremely reluctant even to admit that any incident which is likely to reflect on her chastity had ever occurred; (2) She would be conscious of the danger of being ostracised by the Society or being looked down by the society including by her own family members, relatives, friends, and neighbours; (3) She would have to brave the whole world; (4) She would face the risk of losing the love and respect of her own husband and near relatives, and of her matrimonial home and happiness being shattered; (5) If she is unmarried, she would apprehend that it would be, difficult to secure an alliance with a suitable match from a respectable or an acceptable family; (6) It would almost inevitably and almost invariably result in mental torture and suffering to herself; (7) The tear of being taunted by others will always haunt her; (8) She would feel extremely embarrassed in relating the incident to others being over powered by feeling of shame on account of the upbringing in a tradition bound society where by and large sex is taboo; (9) The natural inclination would be to avoid giving publicity to the incident lest the family name and family honour is brought into controversy; (10) The parents of an unmarried girl as also the husband and members of the husband's family of a married woman, would also more often than not, want to avoid publicity on account of the fear of social stigma on the family name and family honour; (11) The fear of the victim herself being considered to be promiscuous or in some way responsible for the incidentBharwada Bhoginbhai Hirjibhai vs State Of Gujarat on 24 May, 1983 Indian Kanoon - http://indiankanoon.org/doc/207774/ 4regardless of her innocence; (12) The reluctance to face interrogation by the investigating agency, to face the court, to face the cross examination by Counsel for the culprit, and the risk of being disbelieved, acts as a deterrent.	39.0	1	8	25
D3	Unknown	Section 299 Section 300 A person commits Subject to certain culpable homicide if the exceptions culpable homicide act by which the death is is murder if the act by which caused is done -- the death is caused is done -- INTENTION (a) With the (1) With the intention of intention of causing death; or causing death; or (b) With the (2) With the intention of intention of causing such bodily causing such injury as the offender bodily injury as knows to be likely to is likely to cause cause the death of the death; or person to whom the harm is caused; or (3) With the intention of causing bodily injuryVinod Kumar @ Raju vs State Nct Of Delhi on 2 July, 2025 Indian Kanoon - http://indiankanoon.org/doc/182937635/ 9 to any person and the bodily injury intended to be inflicted is sufficient in the ordinary course of nature to cause death; or KNOWLEDGE (c) With the (4) With the knowledge knowledge that that the act is the act so imminently is likely to cause dangerous that it must death in all probability cause death or such bodily injury as is likely to cause death, and without any excuse for incurring the risk of causing death or such injury as is mentioned above.	30.5	4	7	12
D3	Unknown	Section 299 Section 300 A person commits Subject to certain culpable homicide if the exceptions culpable homicide act by which the death is is murder if the act by which caused is done -- the death is caused is done -- INTENTION (a) With the (1) With the intention of intention of causing death; or causing death; or (b) With the (2) With the intention of intention of causing such bodily causing such injury as the offender bodily injury as knows to be likely to is likely to cause cause the death of the death; or person to whom the harm is caused; or (3) With the intention of causing bodily injuryVinod Kumar @ Raju vs State Nct Of Delhi on 2 July, 2025 Indian Kanoon - http://indiankanoon.org/doc/182937635/ 9 to any person and the bodily injury intended to be inflicted is sufficient in the ordinary course of nature to cause death; or KNOWLEDGE (c) With the (4) With the knowledge knowledge that that the act is the act so imminently is likely to cause dangerous that it must death in all probability cause death or such bodily injury as is likely to cause death, and without any excuse for incurring the risk of causing death or such injury as is mentioned above.	30.5	4	7	12
D2	Unknown	The other aspects like not calling the police official from the concerned police station, no photography of the spot of recovery or not calling the crime team or not making any attempt to pick up chance prints from the handle of the weapon also create furtherState vs Naresh Orthjers on 11 March, 2025 Indian Kanoon - http://indiankanoon.org/doc/88884465/ 20doubt about the alleged recovery.	20.5	0	9	7
S7	Unknown	Phulpatta Devi and RenuRamesh Harijan vs State Of U.P on 21 May, 2012 Indian Kanoon - http://indiankanoon.org/doc/104710706/ 6did not sleep in the house of Ramesh, however, as he was living permanently in the city and did not say that he was present on that day in the village, his evidence cannot be taken into consideration so far as this issue is concerned.	20.5	0	11	4
S7	Unknown	Phulpatta Devi and RenuRamesh Harijan vs State Of U.P on 21 May, 2012 Indian Kanoon - http://indiankanoon.org/doc/104710706/ 6did not sleep in the house of Ramesh, however, as he was living permanently in the city and did not say that he was present on that day in the village, his evidence cannot be taken into consideration so far as this issue is concerned.	20.5	0	11	4
D2	Unknown	The other aspects like not calling the police official from the concerned police station, no photography of the spot of recovery or not calling the crime team or not making any attempt to pick up chance prints from the handle of the weapon also create furtherState vs Naresh Orthjers on 11 March, 2025 Indian Kanoon - http://indiankanoon.org/doc/88884465/ 20doubt about the alleged recovery.	20.5	0	9	7

Table 2

Examples of language patterns seen in the high-risk segments include attempts to reframe or misinterpret preceding remarks, hedging expressions, and repeated denials. In the institutional context of the courtroom, speakers frequently use these linguistic techniques to control the credibility of their testimony.

During cross-examination, when participants must answer direct and frequently difficult questions from opposing counsel, certain patterns commonly arise. Speakers may use negation markers, uncertainty expressions, and stress-related linguistic signs in these situations, which raises the computer analysis's deception ratings.

Because these segments include language cue clusters linked to cognitive burden and defensive communication techniques, the computational model classified them as high-risk. For instance, frequent negation (e.g., "I did not", "I never", etc.) and uncertainty markers (e.g., "perhaps", "I think", "it seems") may indicate attempts to minimise accountability or steer clear of conclusive statements.

These results imply that language traits associated with deceit in courtroom discourse are not dispersed at random but rather typically surface in situations when there is interactional pressure, especially during adversarial questioning. The discovery of these patterns shows how effective computational linguistic methods are in identifying speech structures linked to possible dishonesty in court testimony.

4.6-Stance Identification Results: Discourse fragments were divided into three communicative categories using the stance identification model:

- Assertion
- Denial
- Uncertainty

According to the findings, assertive statements dominate judicial narratives, especially in the sections that describe factual findings and judicial reasoning. Nonetheless, denial and ambiguity postures are more common in accused comments and witness evidence.

While uncertainty postures sometimes include hedging statements like perhaps, maybe, or I think, denial stances are closely linked to negation markers.

These findings imply that posture classification can offer valuable insights into the linguistic positioning of speakers during courtroom discussions.

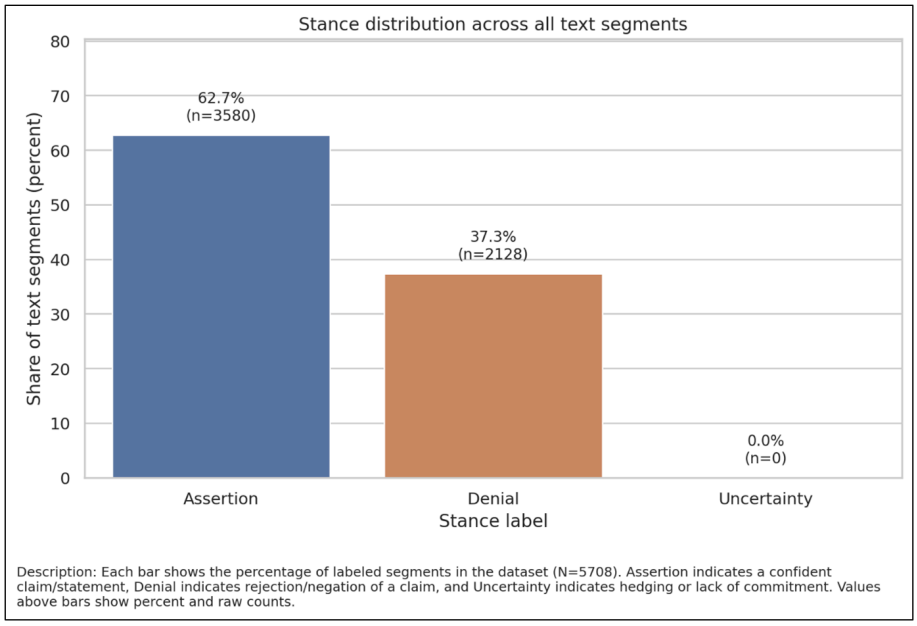


Figure 3

4.7-Lexical Dispersion in High-Risk Segments: A lexical dispersion analysis was performed on the high-risk dataset to better explore language behaviour in potentially misleading conversations.

The study determined the most common lexical items in high-risk conversation segments. Themes of rejection, doubt, and evidentiary explanation are frequently associated with these phrases.

Typical lexical patterns consist of:

- references to memory or recollection
- repeated use of negation terms
- references to events, time, and actions

When reacting to disputed accusations, speakers may employ particular language tactics, as indicated by the recurrence of such lexical elements.

The concentration of negation markers and cognitive verbs indicates that speakers frequently use linguistic strategies linked to managing uncertainty and justifying their statements. This lexical grouping corresponds with deception research findings showing that deceptive speakers often depend on repetitive discourse markers and self-referential structures to uphold narrative consistency under cognitive strain. Therefore, the lexical frequency pattern supports the broader computational findings of this study, indicating that high-risk segments exhibit distinctive lexical signatures that may serve as indicators of deception within forensic discourse.

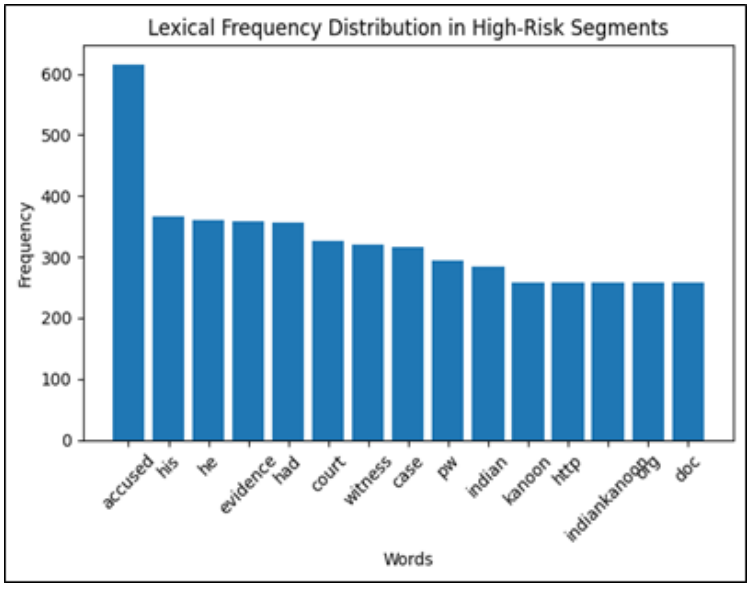


Figure 4 illustrates the lexical frequency distribution of the most recurrent words identified in high-risk deception segments extracted from the courtroom transcript corpus. The visualisation highlights the dominant lexical items that appear most frequently in segments associated with elevated deception scores. Words such as “not”, “did”, “know”, and “said” occur with high frequency, reflecting patterns of negation, defensive framing, and narrative reconstruction commonly observed in deceptive discourse.

The concentration of negation markers and cognitive verbs indicates that speakers frequently use linguistic strategies linked to managing uncertainty and justifying their statements. This lexical grouping corresponds with deception research findings showing that deceptive speakers often depend on repetitive discourse markers and self-referential structures to uphold narrative consistency under cognitive strain. Therefore, the lexical frequency pattern supports the broader computational findings of this study, indicating that high-risk segments exhibit distinctive lexical signatures that may serve as indicators of deception within forensic discourse.

4.8-Interpretation of Findings: When considered collectively, the findings show that several interacting linguistic cues, rather than a single diagnostic feature, are responsible for the emergence of deception-related speech patterns.

In courtroom narratives, portions of elevated communication stress can be identified through the use of negation markers, uncertainty expressions, emotional tone, and cognitive load indicators.

A systematic, large-scale analysis of courtroom discourse is made possible by the combination of computer text analysis and forensic linguistic interpretation. The study identifies recurrent linguistic patterns that could go overlooked in conventional qualitative analysis by analysing big textual datasets.

By showing how natural language processing techniques can be applied to institutional legal texts to investigate complex communicative phenomena like deception, credibility construction, and discourse positioning, these findings add to the expanding field of computational forensic linguistics.

V. Discussion

The results of this work show how computational linguistic analysis can identify patterns of strategic communication in judicial testimony, adding to the expanding corpus of research on deception -

detection and institutional discourse. The current study demonstrates how language cues linked to cognitive pressure and communicative adaptability manifest in legal procedures by fusing corpus-based techniques with discourse analysis. The findings imply that dishonesty in courtroom language is both an institutionally shaped communicative practice and an individual psychological reality, impacted by adversarial questioning, legal strategy, and the formal limitations of judicial proceedings.

5.1-Deception Research and Linguistic Indicators: Deceptive communication frequently incorporates recognisable linguistic cues, including enhanced negation, hedging, and indirect wording, according to long-standing research in deception studies. Research in this area, such as Jeffrey Hancock and colleagues' *Deception Detection from Linguistic Cues (2005)*, has demonstrated that distancing techniques and linguistic structure changes intended to conceal accountability or lessen commitment to factual claims are frequently found in deceptive statements.

These findings are corroborated by the current analysis. Particularly in situations when speakers were answering direct questions, segments with higher deception scores regularly revealed clusters of negation markers, uncertainty expressions, and stress-related signs. These patterns imply that attempts to control credibility through linguistic modification rather than just outright lying may be a part of misleading discourse. In other words, rather than using straightforward factual contradiction, deceit in courtroom language frequently takes the form of discursive techniques of mitigation and reframing.

5.2-Cognitive Load and Communicative Pressure: Cognitive Load Theory, which contends that dishonest communication demands more mental effort than truthful communication, is another significant theoretical viewpoint pertinent to the findings. According to academics like Aldert Vrij in Detecting Lies and Deceit (2008), lying raises cognitive demand since people have to concurrently invent information, keep an eye on the coherence of their own narratives, and foresee any obstacles from others.

This framework is compatible with the linguistic indications found in the computational study. Increased stress markers and complex negation patterns were frequently associated with elevated deception scores, which may indicate the cognitive strain encountered during high-pressure interactions. The cognitive load on speakers is expected to increase in courtroom settings where utterances are scrutinised and subject to cross-examination. Linguistic indicators linked to cognitive overload may therefore become more noticeable, especially when speakers try to balance conflicting narratives or answer unexpected queries.

These results support the notion that identifying misleading statements should not be the exclusive focus of deception detection. Instead, deceit might be best viewed as a cognitively demanding communicative process where speakers modify their language use in response to institutional demands.

5.3-Forensic Linguistics and Institutional Communication: Courtroom speech has long been acknowledged in the field of forensic linguistics as a unique communicative setting with uneven power dynamics and formal rules. Legal language frequently reflects institutional interests rather than just conversational norms, according to academics like Malcolm Coulthard and Alison Johnson in *An Introduction to Forensic Linguistics* (2007).

The study's findings support this viewpoint. Variations in the distribution of indicators connected to deception were revealed by linguistic variance among speakers, including judges, attorneys, witnesses, and accused people. In argumentative sequences, legal professionals—especially attorneys—frequently showed higher deceit ratings. This might just be a reflection of the strategic framing inherent in adversarial legal argumentation rather than a sign of deliberate dishonesty.

On the other hand, testimony ascribed to accused people and witnesses often included linguistic elements linked to narrative reconstruction and ambiguity, indicating a different communication orientation. These variations emphasise how crucial it is to understand deception signs in the institutional framework of legal discourse, where communicative pressure, legal procedure, and rhetorical strategy interact in intricate ways.

5.4-Courtroom Discourse and Interactional Dynamics: Legal procedures are marked by structured interactional patterns, especially during examination and cross-examination, according to research in courtroom discourse analysis. According to Janet Cotterill's 2002 book Language in the Legal Process, cross-examination frequently puts speakers under aggressive questioning and forces them to react fast and accurately.

The current study demonstrates that linguistic patterns linked to greater deception scores are often produced in such interactional circumstances. High-risk speech segments frequently surfaced during conversations where speakers had to defend or clarify earlier claims. In these circumstances, speakers may use techniques like hedging, negation, and repetition as ways to respond to outside pressure while preserving narrative coherence.

These findings imply that intentional attempts to deceive, as well as the interactional constraints inherent in courtroom questioning, may give rise to deception-related linguistic traits. As a result, it is important to carefully consider the larger communicative context in which the assertions are made when interpreting computational detection techniques.

5.5-Implications for Computational Forensic Analysis: There is a lot of promise for forensic linguistic research when computer methods are combined with discourse analysis. Computational models can help researchers discover conversation segments that require more in-depth qualitative analysis by methodically finding linguistic patterns linked to cognitive stress and communicative adjustment.

But the results also highlight how crucial contextual interpretation is. Linguistic signs of dishonesty should be interpreted as signals of communicative conflict or strategic discourse management rather than as conclusive proof of dishonesty. Computational techniques can offer important insights into how institutional communication functions in judicial settings when paired with qualitative analysis and legal knowledge.

Overall, the study's findings show that the cognitive and institutional dynamics of legal discourse are intimately linked to language characteristics associated with lying. Researchers can gain a better understanding of how language serves as a strategic and cognitive tool in legal procedures by computationally analysing these patterns.

VI. Limitations and Future Research

Although the results of this study offer insightful information about linguistic patterns associated with lying in courtroom discourse, a number of caveats need to be noted. In order to properly understand the findings and direct future computational forensic linguistics research, it is critical to acknowledge these limitations.

6.1-Dataset Scope and Representativeness: English-language court records from Indian court rulings make up the majority of the corpus used in this study. These texts are written reconstructions of spoken testimony rather than verbatim transcripts of live courtroom interaction, despite the fact that they offer rich instances of courtroom discourse. The linguistic trends found in the research may be influenced by the fact that judicial rulings frequently summarise or paraphrase witness testimonies and legal arguments.

Additionally, the dataset is restricted to a certain geographic jurisdiction and legal framework. Because of this, the linguistic traits found in this study might represent the norms of Indian legal discourse and might not be entirely applicable to other legal systems or linguistic groups.

In order to overcome this constraint, future studies could use audio-based courtroom recordings, multilingual legal corpora, or direct courtroom transcripts, which might offer a more thorough depiction of spontaneous speech patterns.

6.2-Interpretation of Deception Indicators: Interpreting verbal cues linked to dishonesty is another restriction. The computational model finds patterns that are frequently connected to cognitive pressure or defensive communication tactics, such as negation marks, uncertainty expressions, and stress indicators. These indicators, however, should not be taken as conclusive proof of dishonest intent.

Speakers often use sophisticated linguistic techniques in institutional settings like courtrooms because of interactional pressure, rhetorical goals, or legal restrictions. Therefore, higher deception scores may not always indicate intentional deceit but rather communication stress or argumentative framing.

Therefore, in order to effectively differentiate between strategic legal rhetoric and truly false communication, future research should integrate computational analysis with qualitative discourse analysis and legal interpretation.

6.3-Model Simplification and Feature Selection: This study's computer model is based on a set of pre-established language indicators, such as stress-related lexical patterns, negation markers, and uncertainty expressions. These characteristics are only a small portion of the language elements that could affect courtroom discourse, even though they offer a helpful beginning point for identifying possible deception signs.

More advanced models could incorporate additional features such as:

- syntactic complexity and sentence structure
- semantic role analysis
- discourse coherence patterns
- prosodic and acoustic features from spoken testimony

Future research may be able to create more advanced deception detection frameworks that can capture more complex linguistic and cognitive patterns by incorporating such features.

6.4-Future Directions for Computational Forensic Linguistics: Despite these drawbacks, the current work shows how computational methods can be used to analyse institutional discourse in legal contexts. This work could be expanded in a number of ways by future research.

First, larger and more varied corpora might be created to study linguistic patterns associated with deceit in various legal systems and cultural situations. Second, speech segments might be automatically classified using machine learning approaches based on linguistic and contextual feature combinations. Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, legal scholars, and computational researchers could contribute to the development of more reliable analytical frameworks for courtroom discourse analysis.

Future research may improve our knowledge of how language reflects institutional dynamics, strategic communication, and cognitive processes in the judicial system by combining computational techniques with conventional discourse analysis.

VII. Conclusion

Through the use of computational linguistic techniques on judicial texts, this study investigated deception as a discursive phenomenon within the institutional context of courtroom communication. The study showed how deception-related patterns can be found through systematic computer analysis by analysing a corpus of criminal case judgements and identifying language elements linked to cognitive strain and communication pressure.

The results revealed that discourse segments with higher deception scores frequently contained clusters of negation markers, uncertainty expressions, and stress-related linguistic indicators. These characteristics were more noticeable in exchanges that resembled cross-examination frameworks and were linked to aggressive questioning and argumentative speech. Such findings support existing research suggesting that deception is often reflected not through isolated linguistic markers but through combinations of linguistic signals that emerge under cognitive and interactional pressure.

The research also revealed significant variations among courtroom participants. While other speakers had somewhat lower levels of deceit-related indicators, speech attributed to attorneys and accused individuals frequently indicated higher deception ratings. These variations suggest that deception-related linguistic patterns may be shaped by the institutional roles and communicative strategies of courtroom participants, rather than being solely the product of individual psychological factors.

From a methodological perspective, the study demonstrates the value of combining computational text analysis with forensic linguistic frameworks. Large amounts of legal language were extracted and analysed thanks to the automated pipeline created in this study, which made it possible for researchers to find speech patterns that might not be readily apparent through manual analysis alone. These methods provide new opportunities for analysing institutional discourse in legal contexts and add to the expanding field of computational forensic linguistics.

Overall, the findings indicate that deception in courtroom discourse should be understood as a complex interaction between cognitive processes, linguistic strategies, and institutional constraints. In order to facilitate more in-depth assessments of communication within legal systems, computational approaches offer a helpful tool for identifying discourse segments that call for additional qualitative examination.

Larger multilingual corpora, the incorporation of audio features from oral testimony, and the application of sophisticated machine learning algorithms to enhance the detection of deception-related verbal patterns are some ways that future research may build on this work. Computational forensic linguistics may continue to advance our knowledge of how language functions within the frameworks of court communication through such interdisciplinary initiatives.

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The Complex Interplay between India's Ethnic Conflicts, National Security, and Grand Strategy

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ABSTRACT

The handling of India's internal diversity, especially its ethnic conflicts, is essential to the country's rise to regional prominence. These disputes, which range from caste and language-based tensions in the heartland to Kashmir and the Northeast, threaten not only national unity but also the development and implementation of India's grand strategy. This essay examines the complex relationships that exist between India's changing strategic perspective, national security apparatus, and ethnic conflicts. It explores how the state tries to strike a balance between democratic governance and securitized responses, as well as how domestic unrest influences military deployment, diplomatic stances, and regional aspirations. The paper makes the case that a sustainable grand strategy must balance external assertiveness with internal pluralism through the use of interdisciplinary lenses from political science, security studies, and ethnic conflict theory. The results highlight the importance of narrative control, targeted development, and inclusive federalism as components of national security and strategic vision.

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I.Introduction

India's internal issues are increasingly influencing its national security and strategic vision. The Indian state faces a complex terrain of identity politics due to its more than 2,000 ethnic groups, 22 official languages, and deeply ingrained caste, religious, and regional identities. The unity and integrity of the country are constantly threatened by these internal divisions, which frequently show up as conflict, ranging from large-scale movements for autonomy to insurgencies and communal riots.

This article examines the connection between India's grand strategy and its ethnic conflicts. Grand strategy is frequently viewed as an externally focused endeavor. It is defined as the alignment of a nation's means and ends across political, military, and economic dimensions. However, internal conflicts in India limit regional ambition in addition to depleting state resources. Caste-based mobilizations in central India, the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, and ethno-nationalist movements in the Northeast all require ongoing state attention. These issues have an impact on foreign policy, military deployments, and even relations with Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan.

This study contends that India's internal diversity is a key factor in determining its geopolitical behavior and not just a domestic governance issue by placing ethnic conflict within a larger security framework. The paper describes how ethnic unrest has impacted India's border security, counterinsurgency doctrine, intelligence infrastructure, and regional diplomacy, drawing on case studies, policy analysis,

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and theoretical models. It also looks at how India's grand strategy aims to control, appropriate, or represses these internal conflicts in order to appear strong and stable on the international scene.

The study poses important queries: Can India lead the region without addressing its internal problems? What relationship exists between its militarized responses to dissent and its democratic ethos? And what can be learned about balancing national security objectives with ethnic diversity from international experiences? These dimensions will be examined in the sections that follow, starting with a summary of India's ethnic landscape and the country's historical conflict legacies.

II.Historical Faultiness and Ethnic Diversity

India has one of the world's most diverse ethnic groups. India exemplifies what Benedict Anderson referred to as a "imagined community"—an intrinsically pluralistic and negotiated nationhood—with hundreds of communities distinguished by language, religion, caste, tribe, and geography. Despite being constitutionally celebrated, this diversity has historically led to conflict, especially when identity becomes politicized or territorially entrenched. A historical examination of colonial legacies, postcolonial nation-building, and the ensuing uneven federalism is necessary to comprehend India's ethnic faultiness.

III.Ethnic Categorization's Colonial Legacy

Through administrative borders, censuses, and the establishment of "martial races" and "tribal" classifications, British colonial rule formalized ethnic and caste identities. In addition to solidifying ephemeral social identities, these practices established the divide and conquer concept of governance. For example, the colonial state's unequal treatment of plains and hill tribes, or Hindu and Muslim communities, created the conditions for regional and communal unrest that persisted after the Raj. The most painful outcome of this ethnic division was the 1947 partition of India, which led to the ongoing conflict in Kashmir and Hindu-Muslim tension.

IV.Ethnic anxiety and postcolonial nation-building

Following independence, India's leaders embraced a constitutional model that fused a centralized government with liberal democracy. Even though India was proclaimed a "Union of States" in Article 1 of the Indian Constitution, Article 356 gave the federal government the authority to overrule state governments, particularly when doing so would protect national security. Early on, the conflict between national identity and sub-national aspirations, as well as between unity and federalism, became apparent.

The 1950s saw a significant reorganization of state borders, mostly along ethnolinguistic lines, as a result of movements for linguistic states. Some dissatisfaction was quenched, but regional identities were solidified within a competitive political system. Demands for autonomy from the Nagas, Mizo's, Tamils, and Sikhs intensified over the years into political impasses or armed conflicts. The conflict between ethnic identity and national unity is best exemplified by the Khalistan movement in Punjab in the 1980s and the numerous insurgencies in the Northeast.

V.Identity Assertion and Structural Inequities

India's economic growth has been uneven on both a social and spatial level. Tribal and ethnic minority populations are frequently found in areas that have remained underdeveloped, such as the Northeast, portions of central India, and border regions. Economic grievances and political radicalization have resulted from these groups' exclusion from state services, land dispossession, and militarization.

The ethnic landscape is further complicated by caste-based disparities. A new wave of identity-based mobilization was sparked by the Mandal Commission report from the 1990s, which extended affirmative action for OBCs. Although caste is not a strictly ethnic concept, its combination with regional and linguistic identities has produced strong identity politics that affect national cohesion, as seen in Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar.

VI.Secularism and Religion in the Dynamics of Conflict

Religious identity has been a major factor in many ethnic conflicts, particularly those involving Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Christian relations. Religious polarization has been both a cause and an effect of ethnic conflict, as evidenced by the 1992 destruction of the Babri Mosque, the 2002. Gujarat riots, and ongoing communal tensions. The state's ability to strike a balance between pluralism and sovereignty has become more difficult as a result of the rise of Hindutva politics in the twenty-first century, which has further widened identity lines by frequently portraying religious minorities as threats to internal security.

VII.Significant Ethnic Conflicts and Their Effects on National Security

The internal ethnic conflicts that have dotted India's post-independence history have had a significant impact on the country's national security framework. Ethnic conflicts present two challenges, unlike external threats: they threaten territorial integrity and put the state's democratic fabric to the test. In order to demonstrate how ethnic tensions have forced the state to reevaluate its military, intelligence, and diplomatic strategies, this section examines four crucial conflict zones: Kashmir, the Northeast, Punjab, and Central India.

VIII.The Most Globalized Ethnic Conflict: Kashmir

The most well-known and persistent ethnic-nationalist conflict in India is the one in Kashmir. An important turning point was the insurgency that broke out in 1989, which had its roots in the disputed accession of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947 and was exacerbated by Indo-Pakistani wars. Initially secular and nationalist in tone, the call for azadi (freedom) was quickly appropriated by Islamist organizations with Pakistani cross-border backing. India was forced to establish counterinsurgency mechanisms such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and deploy more than half a million troops in the region after the insurgency escalated into a full-fledged proxy war. There have been numerous ramifications for national security. militarization of domestic politics, with nationalist sentiments frequently stoked by Kashmir. internationalization of India's domestic affairs as a result of claims of self-determination and human rights abuses made by Pakistan and other international powers. Foreign policy, particularly with regard to China and Pakistan, is being shaped by counterinsurgency, which has resulted in surgical strikes and doctrines like "Cold Start" following the Uri and Pulwama attacks. Although Kashmir's special status was revoked in 2019 by Article 370, the region is still highly securitized, with claims of normalization being undermined by sporadic violence, digital blackouts, and political detentions.

IX.Northeast India: Fragmented Identities, Persistent Insurgencies

Since independence, there have been ongoing insurgencies in northeast India, which is made up of eight states and numerous tribal and linguistic communities. Autonomy, independence, or ethnic recognition have been sought by movements headed by the Naga National Council (later NSCN), ULFA in Assam, and various Meitei and Kuki factions in Manipur. The ongoing paramilitary presence, such as the Assam Rifles and Border Security Force, is one of the consequences for national security. Fragile ceasefires are the result of intricate peace talks, frequently involving numerous factions and splinter groups. Cross-border ramifications: Arms trafficking and militant safe havens are made easier by porous borders with China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. With some success (the Mizo Peace Accord of 1986) and numerous ongoing failures (the current ethnic conflicts in Manipur between the Meiteis and Kukis), the state's response has alternated between using force and making accommodations. Only a portion of the region's alienation has been lessened by infrastructure development and integration initiatives like the "Act East" policy.

X.Punjab: The Militarization of Internal Security and Khalistan

An ethnic and religious insurgency, the Khalistan movement in Punjab in the 1980s and early 1990s called for a Sikh homeland. Mass violence, state repression, and intense communal polarization were all features of the conflict, which was sparked by perceived discrimination, economic grievances, and past traumas like Operation Blue Star. The centralization of intelligence activities, including the growth of the Intelligence Bureau and the internal mission of RAW, has implications for national security. Trade-offs between surveillance and human rights have resulted in claims of extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances. Global image management and diaspora activism, as pro-Khalistan lobbying in the US, UK, and Canada shaped global conversation. By the middle of the 1990s, the insurgency had been put down by a combination of economic incentives, political involvement, and counterinsurgency. Recent events, like the farmers' demonstrations and the resurgence of diaspora activism, indicate that if structural problems are not resolved, ethnic grievances might reappear.

XI.Adivasi Opposition and the Naxalite Insurgency in Central India

The Naxalite–Maoist insurgency in central India, especially in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha, is the voice of oppressed Adivasi (tribal) communities. Although the movement's ideological roots are not strictly ethnic, it has benefited from indigenous resistance to mining projects, land alienation, and state-led displacement. The security ramifications include the establishment of paramilitary zones, like the "Red Corridor," where thousands of security personnel are stationed; state-sponsored militias, like Salwa Judum, which conflate military and civil authority; and the development-security conundrum, where infrastructure is viewed as both a tool for promoting peace and a target for insurgents. Although militarily successful in certain regions, the government's "clear, hold, and build" approach has failed to address more profound ethnic and environmental grievances or provide inclusive development. In conclusion, India's main ethnic conflicts are entwined with the development of its national security doctrine rather than being discrete incidents. They restrict foreign policy, violate democratic norms, and force a militarized posture. The following section will examine how India's larger grand strategy both shapes and is shaped by these internal divisions.

The Calculus of Strategy: External Posturing and Internal Stability: Grand strategy is frequently thought of as a guide for coordinating a country's long-term economic, military, and political goals with its available resources and geopolitical context. However, India's grand strategy has developed within the limitations of its complicated and conflictual internal environment. In addition to diverting attention from outside goals, internal ethnic conflicts have had a direct impact on how India asserts its authority, defines its identity, and plans its defense

XII.The Concept of Internal Sovereignty and Grand Strategy

Although it hasn't always been formalized, India's great strategic tradition has always placed a high value on internal sovereignty as the cornerstone of external power. For example, the Nehruvian model of moral leadership and non-alignment was based on the idea that India must first control its internal diversity in order to behave respectably abroad. This resulted in a careful balancing act that required centralizing authority to maintain unity while allowing for diversity.

This paradigm has been put to the test on numerous occasions by ethnic conflicts, including those in Punjab, Kashmir, and the Northeast. The central state sees internal dissent as a challenge to sovereignty rather than just a democratic expression due to the inability to fully resolve them, which has resulted in a persistent security-first mentality. The flexibility of India's external strategies is limited by this securitized lens, particularly in South Asia, where neighbor relations are impacted by ethnic spillovers.

XIII.Ethnic boundaries and strategic depth

Due to its geographic location, India is at risk from unfriendly or unstable neighbors. Ethnic frontier zones have become crucial to India's strategic depth calculations due to China's proximity to insurgents in the Northeast, Pakistan's involvement in Kashmir, and the porous border with Myanmar. Force is being used to reinforce ethnic integration and territorial control in Kashmir and Ladakh as a result of the military buildup that followed clashes with China and Pakistan. Targeting Northeast insurgents, the cross-border strikes (like the one in Myanmar in 2015) sent a message that internal unrest would not be permitted to grow outside. The two most significant initiatives that have heightened ethnic tensions at home and raised international concerns from Bangladesh and others are the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam. Therefore, India's ability to exert control over its ethnic margins frequently gives its external posture legitimacy, making internal coherence a requirement for international credibility.

Diplomatic Constraints of Ethnic Insecurity: Human rights issues resulting from ethnic conflicts often pose a challenge to India's diplomatic engagements, particularly with Western democracies. In international fora, diaspora demonstrations, and U.S. congressional hearings, Kashmir has been the target of criticism. Global rights organizations have also taken notice of ethnic tensions in the Northeast.
Global rights organizations have also taken notice of ethnic tensions in the Northeast. In response, India has used information diplomacy and narrative control tactics, such as banning foreign journalists, curating public diplomacy through MEA outlets, and lobbying in Western capitals to connect domestic threats to the discourse surrounding international terrorism. This has allowed India to portray itself as a victim of an externally sponsored insurgency rather than a minority oppressor.

India has become defensive and reactive in multilateral settings as a result, especially when it comes to issues of minority rights and self-determination, even though this has been successful in garnering short-term international support.

XIV.Internal Threats and Military Modernization

Internal as well as external threats have frequently been the driving forces behind India's defense modernization. Central paramilitary forces (CRPF, BSF, and Assam Rifles) have had to be expanded for internal security rather than traditional warfare, and counterinsurgency in Kashmir and the Northeast has made the use of advanced surveillance technologies, UAVs, and cyber intelligence necessary. Another important step was the establishment of specialized commands, such as the Rashtriya Rifles, to handle ethnic insurgencies.

The distinction between domestic counterinsurgency and conventional deterrence is blurred by this dual-use military doctrine, which influences defense procurement and budgetary priorities. The costs of this dual focus were made evident during the 2020 Galwan conflict with China, when India's military was overburdened with border defense and population control. In conclusion, India's internal ethnic landscape is inextricably linked to its grand strategy. In addition to strategic alliances and military modernization, internal legitimacy and unity are necessary for the pursuit of regional dominance and worldwide influence. Ethnic disputes are not merely side topics; rather, they are ingrained in India's strategic thinking.

XV.Federalism, Counterinsurgency, and Intelligence Reactions

India's counterinsurgency strategies, which combine military tactics with intelligence operations and political responses, have greatly influenced the country's approach to managing its internal ethnic conflicts. A tense relationship between federal institutions and state governments has resulted from the state's reliance on centralized power, frequently at the expense of federal autonomy. Furthermore, both official and informal intelligence services have been essential in negotiating the challenging landscape of interethnic conflict and domestic insurgencies.

XVI.Counterinsurgency Strategy: From Kashmir to the Naxalite Belt

From its early lessons in Kashmir and the Northeast to its current emphasis on the Maoist insurgency in Central India, India's counterinsurgency (CI) doctrine has undergone significant change. India has employed a mix of intelligence gathering, hard power, and "hearts and minds" tactics over the decades, with varying degrees of success. With the deployment of more than half a million soldiers under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Kashmir has witnessed a militarized counterinsurgency model. The defense of national sovereignty has been used to defend the use of force, including the detention of civilians, search operations, and the repression of political dissent.The state's attempts to maintain control over the area by both force and diplomacy have been hampered by this oppressive strategy, which has also increased local discontent. Both military and diplomatic solutions, frequently negotiated with insurgent leaders, have been applied to the Northeast. For example, the 1986 Mizo Peace Accord, which integrated the rebels into mainstream politics, ended the Mizo insurgency. On the other hand, despite numerous ceasefires and peace negotiations, the Naga conflict has not been resolved. Although attempts at political reconciliation have been made in tandem with the use of force, dissatisfaction is still fueled by the absence of significant autonomy or development in tribal areas.

A different problem arises in Central India, the birthplace of the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency. In this case, the Indian government uses a containment strategy that combines military operations with an emphasis on community involvement and infrastructure development. However, long-standing tribal disenfranchisement and displacement brought on by massive mining operations still feed the insurgency.
India's counterinsurgency efforts in each of these instances demonstrate the state's concentration of power and its reliance on military means to stifle regional and ethnic demands. Although this has frequently been successful in maintaining physical control, it has not addressed the underlying issues, which has strengthened ethnic identity politics.

XVII.The Problem of Local Autonomy and Federalism

The division of power between the federal government and state governments is still a controversial topic, despite the fact that India's federal structure is intended to accommodate its enormous diversity. Federalism has been characterized by tensions between central intervention and state autonomy when it comes to handling ethnic conflicts. The central government has regularly used Article 356 of the Constitution to impose President's Rule, dissolving state governments and assuming direct control in areas like Kashmir, the Northeast, and portions of Central India. The ability of local governments to handle ethnic issues is frequently weakened by this centralized approach.

The Special Status of Kashmir: By virtue of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which gave it autonomy over all but defense, foreign policy, and communications, Jammu and Kashmir enjoyed special status for many years. The notion that the central government should run the state instead of the state assembly using democratic procedures was further solidified in 2019 with the repeal of Article 370.

Northeastern States: Ethnic insurgencies have demanded more autonomy or even independence from states like Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam. But generally speaking, the central government has adopted a "top-down" strategy, trying to mediate peace agreements while maintaining authority over regional institutions. This has frequently resulted in discontent, as insurgents have criticized the central government for its unwillingness to grant significant autonomy and the apparent inability of peace agreements to resolve regional ethnic grievances.

Essentially, the desire for local autonomy is in opposition to India's centralization in response to ethnic unrest. One characteristic that distinguishes India's approach to ethnic conflicts is the tension between federalism and central authority.

XVIII.The Function of the State and the Informal Network in Intelligence and Security Agencies
India's counterinsurgency efforts have been significantly shaped by its intelligence network. To keep an eye on and address ethnic tensions, agencies like the National Investigation Agency (NIA), Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and Intelligence Bureau (IB) collaborate. In addition to monitoring insurgent activity, these organizations also monitor and manage ethnic movements that may jeopardize national security.

The Function of RAW and IB: As the agency in charge of domestic intelligence, the Intelligence Bureau has frequently been at the forefront of keeping an eye on insurgencies, especially in the Northeast and Kashmir. Although RAW's primary focus is on external threats, it has also managed cross-border ethnic movements, especially in Kashmir, where intelligence sharing has become essential due to Pakistan's involvement in the insurgency. Both agencies have managed diplomatic relations to lessen international pressure while conducting clandestine operations to stifle ethnic movements.

Unofficial Networks: Informal networks, such as local militias, community leaders, and ethnic organizations, frequently play an important but unofficial role in intelligence gathering outside of official intelligence agencies. This leads to a hybrid system in which ethnic networks occasionally contest the state's monopoly on intelligence. Although the state's surveillance strategy is frequently linked to these unofficial networks, they also reveal the complexities of ethnic grievances that are not publicly discussed.

XIX.Human Rights and Global Consequences
India's counterinsurgency and intelligence tactics have frequently resulted in human rights violations, even though they may provide temporary stability. Conflict areas like Kashmir and the Northeast are rife with accusations of torture, extrajudicial executions, and enforced disappearances. The international community, international watchdogs, and human rights organizations have all criticized these violations. Nevertheless, such worries are frequently subordinated to India's strategic priorities.

India's international reputation is also impacted by its internal security measures. India's actions in Kashmir and the Northeast have been closely examined by international actors, particularly Western countries, who have called for reforms and adherence to international human rights standards. India, on the other hand, frequently uses counterterrorism rhetoric to defend repressive measures, arguing that they are required to preserve national sovereignty and stop terrorism. In conclusion, India's intelligence system, federal response to ethnic demands, and counterinsurgency doctrine are all closely related to the larger issue of national security. These initiatives have preserved state authority and territorial integrity, but they have frequently made ethnic grievances worse, making it more difficult to develop a cohesive grand strategy. India's Grand Strategy: Between Democracy, Realpolitik, and Regional Power will be discussed in the following section.

XX.India's Grand Strategy: Balancing Regional Power, Democracy, and Realpolitik
India's grand strategy requires a careful balancing act between its democratic values and the demands of regional power dynamics and national security. Both internal ethnic conflicts and external pressures have a significant impact on its strategic goals, making it more difficult for it to project power and preserve stability. India must negotiate the rough seas of ethnic diversity and political instability, which frequently jeopardize its internal unity, as it aims to establish itself as a major player in regional and global security. This section explores the conflicts and opportunities that exist between India's democratic framework, realpolitik, and grand strategy.

XXI.Strategic Pragmatism and Democratic Aspirations
One of the main tenets of India's foreign policy is its status as the largest democracy in the world. It aims to establish itself as a world leader in promoting human rights, democracy, and an international order based on rules. These principles, however, frequently clash with its internal security requirements and the

realpolitik factors that influence its strategic perspective. International Democracy Advocacy: India has continuously defended democratic principles internationally, especially in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. In order to protect its own borders and internal order from internal ethnic conflicts, it supports the ideals of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference.

Conversely, India's grand strategy is heavily influenced by pragmatism and realpolitik, especially when it comes to handling the security threats posed by China, Pakistan, and regional instability. For example, the pursuit of national interests without excessive dependence on outside forces is reflected in India's strategic autonomy. India has regularly put security concerns ahead of its democratic principles when resolving its ethnic conflicts, especially in Kashmir, the Northeast, and Central India. Policies of repression, monitoring, and control over ethnic movements have resulted from this, and they frequently violate international human rights norms.

XXII.South Asian Strategic Posturing: Stability and Power

India's regional environment, which is complicated by ethnic conflicts, territorial disputes, and historical hostilities with neighbors, has a significant impact on its strategic thinking. The India-Pakistan rivalry dominates the security environment in South Asia, and India's grand strategy is made more difficult by Pakistan's backing of insurgent groups in Kashmir and the Northeast and the continuous border disputes with China in Ladakh.

Relations between India and Pakistan: For many years, the India-Pakistan rivalry has revolved around the conflict in Kashmir, with each nation interpreting the area from distinct ethnic and geopolitical perspectives. India has taken a tough stance in response to Pakistan's backing of separatist movements in Kashmir, frequently defending its internal repression under the pretext of national sovereignty. A lengthy conflict with multiple wars, ceasefires, and diplomatic impasses has resulted from this. In this instance, India's grand strategy is centered on controlling internal dissension without jeopardizing national security while preserving regional stability through deterrence.

Northeastern China: India's security concerns are further complicated by China's support for insurgent movements in the Northeast and its strategic interests in South Asia. In addition to creating tension, the Sino-Indian border dispute has affected India's regional military and intelligence plans. India must strike a balance between its regional aspirations and the need to secure its borders and resolve internal ethnic conflicts in light of China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean and its backing of Pakistan in the Kashmir dispute.

Regional Power Dynamics and the Indian Ocean: One of the main pillars of India's ambitious plan to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative and project power in the region is the country's expanding naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Ethnic conflicts and the security of India's maritime borders are closely related because insurgent groups operating along Bangladesh's and Myanmar's porous borders have the potential to destabilize the area. The interplay between domestic political realities and regional security concerns is reflected in India's ability to handle these internal conflicts while demonstrating its naval might.

XXIII.Global Aspirations and Strategic Autonomy

A key component of India's grand strategy is its pursuit of strategic autonomy. Since independence, India's foreign policy has been centered on the idea of strategic autonomy, which is the capacity to make decisions on one's own behalf based on national interests. The internal difficulties brought on by ethnic conflicts and the requirement to manage its diverse demographic landscape, however, make this goal more difficult.

Autonomy and Alliances in Balance: India's wish to retain strategic autonomy while interacting with international powers on matters of trade, defense, and security frequently shapes its relations with major

powers like the US, Russia, and the EU. For example, India's goal of reducing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific is in line with its involvement in the Quad, the quadrilateral security dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. However, India is hesitant to fully align with any global power that might use human rights issues to criticize its internal policies because of the country's ongoing ethnic tensions, particularly in Kashmir and the Northeast. India's Position in Multilateral Organizations: India has continuously pushed for a bigger say in international affairs, particularly in the G20, the World Trade Organization, and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). But occasionally, its credibility in these forums has been damaged by internal ethnic conflicts. India has frequently been urged by the international community, especially in the West, to improve its record on human rights, particularly in Kashmir. However, India's response has generally focused on securing its internal unity while promoting a just international order and asserting its sovereignty and non-interference, establishing itself as a leader of the Global South.

XXIV.Role of Nationalism in India's Overarching Strategy

Under the influence of Hindu nationalist ideologies, nationalism—in particular, the assertion of cultural and ethnic identity has grown in importance within India's grand strategy.This change affects India's external posture as well as its internal ethnic dynamics. Domestic Consequences: Policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) have exacerbated ethnic tensions, and the rise of Hindu nationalism especially since the election of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has led to a focus on majoritarian values. Hindu and Muslim communities, as well as other ethnic groups like Dalits and Adivasis, are now more divided than before as a result of these policies. Underpinned by a narrative of cultural unity, the national government's concentration of power runs the risk of alienating minority ethnic groups and escalating internal instability.

External Consequences: India's nationalism has been a source of both strength and conflict on the global scene. Although India portrays itself as a powerful, cohesive country, its internal ethnic identity conflicts, especially in relation to how Muslims, Dalits, and other minorities are treated, have sparked concerns in international fora. Relations between India and its neighbors, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, where ethnic and religious minorities are also important, are hampered by its aggressive nationalism. India may find it more difficult to engage in flexible diplomacy or form partnerships with nations that value inclusive governance if it pursues a strong national identity that is based on a specific cultural vision.

To sum up, India's grand strategy is characterized by a complex interaction between its realpolitik calculus, democratic values, and dedication to national sovereignty. Ethnic conflicts within its borders influence its external relations and regional aspirations in addition to posing a threat to internal cohesion. India must reconcile its internal ethnic conflicts with its ambitions for global leadership if it hopes to increase its prominence in the world.

XXV.India’s Future Strategy: Addressing Internal Conflicts and Regional Stability

India's future policy must address the twin issues of resolving internal ethnic disputes and establishing its dominance in the region. India must negotiate the intricacies of its varied population and regional environment as it looks to strengthen its standing on the international scene. A strategic realignment that prioritizes regional stability and internal cohesion is required due to the enduring ethnic conflicts and the unstable geopolitics of South Asia. This section examines how India can strengthen its regional and international strategic posture while resolving its internal ethnic conflicts.

Reevaluating Ethnic Integration and Internal Security: India's internal security strategy needs to change from reactive counterinsurgency tactics to a more comprehensive framework that tackles the underlying causes of ethnic unrest. Integrating ethnic and regional diversity within the Indian state's broader framework is essential to achieving lasting peace. In order to ensure that ethnic communities,

particularly in conflict-prone areas like Kashmir, the Northeast, and tribal areas, have a significant stake in governance, a future strategy should incorporate inclusive governance. This could entail giving local governments more authority, updating current laws like AFSPA, and encouraging political discourse with ethnic leaders to resolve issues. The 1986 Mizo Peace Accord provides a model for incorporating rebel groups into the political system, but doing so will call for a rethinking of state-society relations rather than just a halt in hostilities.

In order to lessen the appeal of insurgency and ethnic separatism, economic development is essential. In addition to improving marginalized ethnic communities, investments in infrastructure, healthcare, and education will help these areas become more integrated into the national economy. Addressing economic inequality as a cause of ethnic and regional conflict must be the government's top priority.

While promoting a sense of national cohesion, India must endeavor to acknowledge the cultural uniqueness of its diverse ethnic groups. This entails safeguarding cultural heritage, upholding indigenous rights, and making sure underrepresented groups are heard in national discussions about India's future.

Social cohesion will be strengthened by fostering pluralism and tolerance at the societal level, which will lessen conflict between majority and minority ethnic groups.

National Security Approach: Transitioning from Preventive Diplomacy to Counterinsurgency

India's national security strategy needs to be revised to include preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution in addition to military deterrence and counterinsurgency. India must acknowledge the significance of non-military instruments in preserving stability, even though conventional hard power is still necessary to combat both internal insurgencies and external threats.

Preventive Diplomacy: Addressing ethnic movements before they turn violent should be the main goal of India's grand strategy. Diplomatic outreach to nearby nations that harbor insurgent groups or encourage transboundary ethnic solidarity movements—like Pakistan's role in Kashmir and Myanmar's in the Northeast—may be one way to achieve this. India can encourage regional stability and lessen outside support for insurgencies by participating in regional discussions.

Multilateralism and Regional Cooperation: India will be better able to handle ethnic conflicts with transnational ramifications if regional security frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are strengthened. In order to stop ethnic militancy from spreading across borders and destabilizing the area, cooperative security measures and intelligence-sharing procedures with nearby nations will be essential.

Integration of the Civil and Military: India will be better equipped to handle internal conflicts if civil and military authorities coordinate better, particularly in conflict areas. A more thorough approach to managing ethnic conflicts will result from the incorporation of civilian institutions into governance and reconstruction initiatives, even though military tactics like counterinsurgency are still crucial.

XXVI.Great Power Competition and Regional Stability

India must strike a balance between managing its ethnic and geopolitical issues and pursuing national security as it looks to establish itself as a regional power. The stability of the region depends on India's relations with its immediate neighbors, China, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, which need to be managed carefully. Furthermore, India's internal unity must guide its role in the Indo-Pacific as part of its counter-Chinese strategy.

Handling Pakistani Relations: The biggest threat to regional stability continues to be the rivalry between India and Pakistan, especially with regard to Kashmir. To avoid further escalation, India must maintain its

stanc on Kashmir while simultaneously looking into opportunities for diplomatic contact with Pakistan. Trade and communication, two strategies that foster confidence, may be used to lessen tensions and avoid proxy wars. India must exercise caution, though, making sure that any involvement doesn't undermine its sovereignty or give Pakistani extremist groups more confidence.

Aligning strategically with China: China presents a strategic challenge that calls for a nuanced response, both in terms of the territorial disputes in Ladakh and its larger geopolitical influence in South Asia. India needs to talk to China in order to prevent conflict, even though it must keep a strong deterrent posture along the border. Modernizing the military and bolstering border infrastructure should be part of the future plan, as should looking into ways to defuse tensions through bilateral or multilateral discussions.

Balancing Regional Relations: The stability of the region will be greatly influenced by India's relations with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, nations with similar cultures and ethnicities. In order to support economic growth while upholding ethnic diversity and sovereignty, India must carefully manage these relationships. For example, maintaining good relations will be aided by diplomatically addressing border security issues with Dhaka and attending to the concerns of Muslims in Assam who speak Bengali.

Indo-Pacific Strategy and Power Projection: India's aspirations in the Indo-Pacific region depend on its capacity to control regional instability and ethnic diversity within the region. India must make sure that its internal disputes do not affect its foreign policy as it builds up its naval force to oppose China's maritime strategy. India is better equipped to fight terrorism, safeguard international shipping lanes, and contribute to regional security if it is strong and stable.

XXVII.Global Strategy and International Partnerships:

India must acknowledge that its internal problems will impact its international standing as it aspires to become a global power. International collaboration will be essential for security and the economy. India must make sure, though, that its external goals are not jeopardized by its internal ethnic conflicts. Engagement with Major Powers: A key component of India's future strategy will be its interactions with superpowers such as the US, Russia, and the EU. While handling domestic ethnic issues, especially those pertaining to human rights, these relationships must be fostered. India's ability to successfully project both soft and hard power is essential to its expanding role in global governance through organizations like the UN, G20, and BRICS. India can raise its diplomatic profile by resolving internal ethnic disputes in an open and inclusive way.

Development assistance and economic diplomacy: Trade agreements, infrastructure development, and investments that support internal stability should be given top priority in India's economic diplomacy. The nation can generate employment and lessen economic inequality, which is frequently the cause of ethnic conflicts, by utilizing programs like Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India). Furthermore, India's position as a major actor in the global economy may be strengthened by its expanding influence in international financial institutions.

XXVIII.India's Grand Strategy for the Future

India’s grand strategy will keep changing as it encounters new obstacles at home and abroad. India must prioritize inclusive policies that resolve ethnic grievances without undermining national unity, preventive diplomacy that works with regional neighbors and international powers to defuse tensions before they worsen, and strategic autonomy that enables India to preserve its sovereignty while meaningfully interacting with the international community in order to successfully navigate the complexities of ethnic conflicts, national security, and regional stability. India can establish itself as a major actor in the new multipolar global order by tackling its internal issues and displaying strength on the outside. But doing so will necessitate striking a careful balance between economic diplomacy, military might, and soft power, as well as acknowledging that social cohesiveness and internal unity are the true sources of national security.

Conclusion

The distinct interaction of regional power ambitions, national security requirements, and ethnic diversity shapes India's grand strategy. Its future course as a global power will depend on its capacity to resolve internal disputes while claiming its place in regional and international affairs. India must understand that maintaining internal harmony and tackling the root causes of ethnic unrest are just as important to national security as military might as it develops its strategic framework.

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Historical Geography of India: From Indus Valley to Colonial Cartographies

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ABSTRACT

The historical geography of India reflects a long transformation in spatial understanding, territorial organisation, and cartographic practices shaped by shifts in political power, culture, economy, and knowledge systems. This study traces developments from the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 3300–1300 BCE) to British colonial cartography (1947), using historical geography, postcolonial theory, and critical spatial analysis. The Indus Valley Civilisation exhibited advanced urban planning, with cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro featuring grid layouts, water management, and trade links with distant regions. These settlements represent a proto-urban geography rooted in environmental adaptation rather than rigid territorial boundaries. In the Vedic and classical periods, spatial imagination became cosmological, with concepts like Sapta Sindhu and Bharatavarsha framing the subcontinent as sacred space. Expanding empires such as the Mauryas and Guptas institutionalised administrative networks and territorial divisions. Medieval Islamic and Mughal regimes further refined spatial governance through revenue systems like the Ain-i-Akbari, blending indigenous and Persianate traditions. Colonial rule marked a rupture with the introduction of scientific cartography, exemplified by the Great Trigonometrical Survey. Drawing on Foucault and Said, this paper critiques colonial mapping as a tool of control and epistemic dominance. It highlights continuities, such as river centrality, and shifts from sacred to scientific spatial frameworks, emphasising ongoing postcolonial efforts to reclaim indigenous geographical knowledge.

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Historical geography of India, Indus Valley Civilisation, Vedic period; Mauryan Dynasty, Mughal Empire, Colonial cartography, Spatial theory, Postcolonialism, Territorial evolution.

I. Introduction

Background and Rationale: Historical geography is an interdisciplinary field that combines history, geography, and cartography in the study of the changes in spatial patterns and mutual interactions between human societies and their environments across time (Butlin, 2009). With this kind of integration, the landscapes are not only perceived as fixed physical objects but in the form of social spaces, the meaning of which are constantly transformed by cultural, political, and economic influences. In the Indian case, historical geography provides a perspective to analyse periodical territorial changes experienced in the subcontinent, starting with the civilisations around ancient rivers, to the successive imperial empires, thus explaining how geographical knowledge was created, subverted and stolen. The geographical history of India is theoretically relevant due to its ability to break down the force of space, power, and identity. Based on the idea of cultural landscapes by Carl Sauer, who assumes that human-caused alterations leave memorable cultural imprints on natural landscapes, the historical geography of India displays the layered changes, including the agrarian

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adjustments of the Gangetic plains (Sauer, 1925). Similarly, the critique of orientalism by Edward Said reveals how the colonial representations created the Orient as an exotic and eternal space, thus justifying the imperial domination through the cartographic and discursive processes (Said, 1978). These frameworks shed some light on how geographical accounts have been used to advance hegemonic purposes, especially in South Asia, where native spatial epistemologies such as the Vedic cosmologies of the past have always struggled with external impositions.

Parallels on the world level may be made with other ancient civilisations. As an example, the urban formulation of the Indus Valley reflects on the hydrological projects in Mesopotamia, where the river systems (Tigris and Euphrates) promoted similar proto-urban settlements, which highlights the universal motifs of environmental determinism in the emergence of the states (Wright, 2010). South Asia, however, continues to dwell on the development of how the Indus and Ganges rivers created unique cultural ecologies that do not correlate with the role of the Nile in the unification of Egypt. The period of this research, i.e., between the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 3300-1300 BCE) and the British colonial cartographies (until 1947 CE), sums up the radical changes in the perception of space. It encompasses the shift towards cosmological geographies, when space was sacralised (e.g., Bharatavarsha in the Vedic literature), to scientific representations of territory, which imposed grid-based territoriality. Those changes are also evident in the cadastral surveys in the Roman Empire of Europe, but in India, they signify a break in the indigenous comprehensive ways of looking to subtle but discontinuous colonial approaches, such as the Great Trigonometrical Survey (Edney, 1997). In turn, such a period summarises the spirit of the spatial reconfigurations inspired by the empire building, environmental transformation, and the creation of knowledge in South Asia.

Research Objectives: The purpose of the study is to theoretically examine the development of geographical ideas and spatial organisations in ancient India.

- To explore the interaction of geography, power, and empire-building in the historical epochs.
- To criticise the colonial cartographies as the tools of imperial rule and evaluate their lasting influence on the modern Indian geography.

Scope and Limitations: The conceptual and theoretical division of this work depends on a review of secondary literature, archival exegeses, and conceptualisations, avoiding the use of primary data collection. Dependence on historical documents, maps, and academic research helps to build the argument according to the qualitative approaches used in historical geography. Its geographical focus is limited to mainland India, and it focuses on macro-level trends (i.e., riverine systems and imperial provinces) without taking into consideration more specific sub-regional diversities (i.e., Dravidian south versus Indo-Gangetic north) so that no specific patterns are lost in the analysis. The post-independence developments are not marked in view of the emphasis on pre-1947 evolutions that preempt the colonial legacies without advancing to the contemporary geopolitics.

Restrictions are numerous, such as barriers to the ancient indigenous sources, which are lost frequently either through invasion, degradation of the environment, or through colonial repression. By way of example, the scarcity of deciphered Indus scripts limits the first-hand information concerning the spatial perceptions, so they have to rely on the archaeological suggestions (Schwartzberg, 1992). Similar plights plague Mesoamerican studies in the world, with colonial annihilation of codices limiting pre-Columbian knowledge of geography. Such gaps in South Asia require a wary interpretation that is aware of the biases that exist in the holes of the surviving records, which in many cases are filtered through colonialism.

Structure of the Paper: The paper is chronologically but thematically arranged. Section 2 provides the conceptual background that combines the spatial theory and the postcolonial theory. Section 3 explores ancient origins, the path through the Indus-Valley urbanism to Vedic geographies. Section 4 discusses imperial geographies in classical and medieval periods, including Mauryan networks and Mughal systems of administration. Section 5 is the critical appraisal of colonial cartographies, examining European mapp -

-ings and indigenous resistances. Section 6 brings continuities and discontinuities together, and Section 7 wraps up by reflecting on what it implies to decolonise geography.

II. Theoretical Framework

Historical geography is based on the active interaction of human societies and space throughout the course of their evolution, and it focuses on how cultural, economic, and political processes define spatial structures. Spatial diffusion, hypothesised by Torsten Hagerstrand, is one of the core theories that describes how innovations and ideas spread across geographical landscapes following hierarchical and contagious patterns (Hagerstrand, 1967). This idea is used in the Indian context as to the spread of agricultural technologies in the Indus valley civilisation, whereby the trade networks are used to spread the urban planning practices in core centres like Harappa to outlying areas, thus reflecting world analogies in Mesopotamia of spreads of river-based diffusions in supporting early state formations (Wright, 2010). But South Asia had a singular topography, in the Himalayan obstacles and the monsoon-dependent plains fed these diffusions in riverine lines, resulting in regional specialisations and not the standard diffusions along the more interwoven medieval trade routes in Europe.

The concept of landscape as text, developed by Denis Cosgrove, views the environment as symbolic, which can be deciphered using cultural ideologies and power relations (Cosgrove, 1998). The Ganges River basin is one of the landscapes in the Indian subcontinent that is defined by the Vedic myths of sanctity and economic significance, which basically makes the river an important cultural conduit that can feed agrarian communities as well as large pilgrimage corridors. Both the Ganges, in South Asia, and the Nile, in ancient Egypt, are the main arteries of divinity in their respective cosmologies, but in the former case, the Ganges supports a more diffuse hydrological history, which binds together the various ethnicities, whereas in the latter, the Nile is a more centralised, pharaonic entity. In the same way, the Indus River, which played the role of centralising ancient urbanisation, was a text of environmental harmony, disturbed by climatic changes, and thus by the way landscapes enshrine the contingencies of history.

The social construction of space is a theory by Henri Lefebvre that spaces are constructed in perceptual dimension, conceived dimension, and lived dimension to reflect power relations in society (Lefebvre, 1991). Within the territory of the historical geography of South Asia, this is translated into the manufacture of imperial spaces, including Mauryan road networks that imagine the unity of the territory but allow live experiences of connectedness. The Indus, Ganges, and others are economic lifelines socially built as trade and migration axes, much like the Rhine in the feudal integrations in Europe, but now adjusted to the Indian rhythms of the monsoon, which imposes seasonal spatial productions with no equivalent in the temperate world. All of these theories describe the historical geography of India as a strong fabric that was created with the help of diffused innovations, symbolic cultural manifestations, and spaces that were created by social forces.

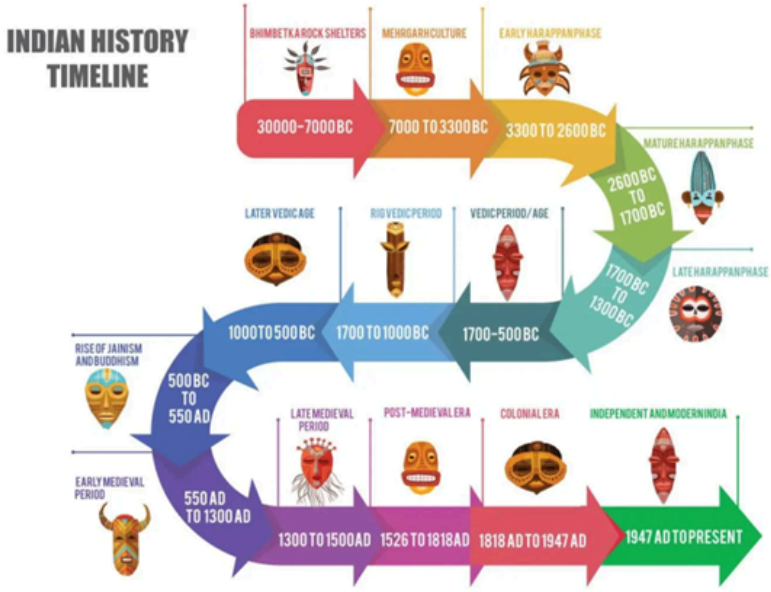
Postcolonial and Critical Geography Equatorials: The Postcolonial theory offers a critical perspective through which the colonial mappings of indigenous spaces with Eurocentric visions were imposed and erased local epistemologies. The questioning of the subaltern voices by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raises the question of whether the marginalised groups can narrate their spatialities during the hegemonic discourses (Spivak, 1988). This is the case in colonial India, where local cartographic practices (e.g., tribal maps of forested borders) were silenced by British survey maps that depicted South Asia as an empty land to be taken advantage of. International equivalents are African cases of colonial mappings where European grids had also silenced oral spatial knowledge,s but in India, where the subaltern spatial agency survived via resistance movements, e.g, Deccan, thereby contesting the imperial impositions more explicitly than in the settler colonies of the world, like in Australia.

The ideas of hybridity and third spaces introduced by Homi K. Bhabha bring out cultural ambivalences in the colonial experiences whereby a blend of the native and imperial geographies is made to create new spatial perceptions (Bhabha, 1994). This destroys the Eurocentricity of colonial cartographies, as can be

seen in the Great Trigonometrical Survey, which refolded Mughal administrative boundaries with trigonometric accuracy, but applied a scientific rationality that marginalised Vedic cosmologies according to which the subcontinent is a mandala of sacred realms. The indigenous systems, including the Bharatavarsha, a comprehensive spatial account of the Vedic cosmology, including mountains, rivers, plains, etc., were counter-narratives, opposing the disintegrating colonialism. Equally, administrative divisions of the Mughal period described in documents like the Ain-i-Akbari were hybrid Persian-Indian spatial orders comparable to Ottoman cadastral in the Middle East but tailored to the local ethno-linguistic mosaic of South Asia. These are further criticised by critical geography, which, based on the spatial dialectics of David Harvey, was the location of capital accumulation where the colonial maps enabled the extraction of resources and were a replicated version of enclosures in Europe but intensified through caste-touched land tenures of India (Harvey, 2001). Therefore, postcolonial views expose India as a geographical arena of contention, in which the indigenous knowledges interfere with colonial legacies.

Methodological Approach: Since this is a purely theoretical study, the methodology of the research focuses on a qualitative synthesis of historical literature, maps, and scholarly literature (based on archives like the atlas of Joseph E. Schwartzberg) to recreate the spatial evolutions (Schwartzberg, 1992). This includes hermeneutic interpretation of materials, including the Vedic hymns and the colonial gazetteers, in order to reveal hidden geographical notions without actual fieldwork. Comparison of historical periods, ancient Indus, medieval Mughal, and colonial British, points to changes including the movement of cosmological to scientific mappings, with similar changes in Chinese imperial cartography between mythical and grid-based, but oriented to river-centred paradigms of South Asia.

Based on content analysis, thematic coding clusters data into spatial themes, such as sacred spaces (e.g., temple networks), and trade routes (e.g., extensions of the Silk Road into India) based on thematic coding. It is a deconstructive reading of maps as ideological artefacts because this approach was based on the critique of the imperial surveys by Matthew H. Edney (Edney, 1997). Such constraints as the use of translated texts, which may bias native voices, are also present, as are problems in the study of Mesoamerican. Nevertheless, the approach to the subject matter creates a subtle theoretical discourse, intersecting between the geographies of world history and the cathedral of the South Asian spatial heritage.



(UPSCTree, n.d.)

III. Ancient Foundations: Indus Valley and Vedic Foundations

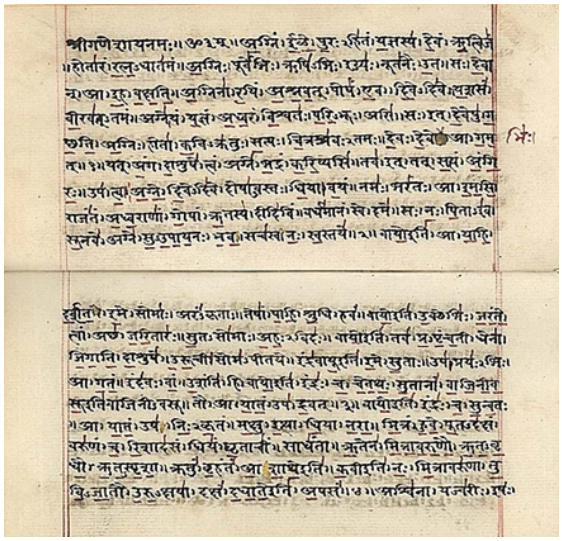
Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 3300–1300 BCE): The Indus Valley Civilisation IVC is one of the earliest urban cultures in South Asia, characterised by careful city planning and urban structure, which illustrated the evolutionary adjustments to environmental limitations. Large cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were grid-patterned with standardised structures of baked bricks, with wide streets facing cardinal directions, and with extensive drainage systems, including covered sewers and public baths (Kenoyer, 1998). This plan indicates a centralised government that valued hygiene and shared order, a heterarchical type of government instead of being strictly hierarchical, and thus contrasts with the ziggurat-based cities of Mesopotamia at the time. Hydrology geography was instrumental in the patterns of settlement: the alluvial plains along the Indus River and its tributaries became productive land for agriculture, the monsoon floods creating the need for elevated platforms and water-control structures like reservoirs in Dholavira (Possehl, 2002). This ecological adjustment highlights hydrological determinism theories where the riverine process defines urban resilience, which is a dynamic whose effect is similar to the effect of the Tigris-Euphrates system on Sumerian city-states in Mesopotamia. However, it was the decentralised structure of the IVC network, with more than 1,000 locations, that focused on regional interdependence, rather than central control (Wright, 2010).

The integration of the IVC into the early globalisation is further explained through trade networks. Etched carnelian beads and steatite seals have also been found at Mesopotamian places like Ur, showing exchanges both by sea and by land through the Persian Gulf (Ratnagar, 2004). These links made the Indus a crucial point of proto-global commerce, exporting cotton cloth and importing metals, including copper. Using the implementation of the core-periphery model, developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, but applied to modern world-systems, to give an analogy, the Mesopotamian state acts as a core feeding on the Indus periphery, giving rise to unequal exchange, a stimulus to specialisation of craft activities in the IVC. South Asian experience, however, indicates a much more mutual relationship, that both IVC levels of weight and measure in turn affected Mesopotamian standards, thus suggesting the contrary (and more exploitative) coreperiphery relationships in the Nile-focused economy in ancient Egypt. It is through this theoretical lens that the spatial organisation of the IVC can be seen as both more functional and also embedded in larger economic geographies, providing the groundwork to later South Asian geographies of territories.

Vedic Period (c. 1500–500 BCE): The Vedic period is associated with urban materiality or cosmological geographies as is being described in the Rigveda, the oldest Indo-Aryan text. The Rigveda illustrates the subcontinent as a holy terrain that has a divine connotation. At the centre of such ontogenesis is the image of Sapta Sindhu (the land of seven rivers), including the Indus and its tributaries, and the symbol of fertility, purity, and world order (Witzel, 2005). The earth is depicted in the Vedic hymns as a flat disc held by mountains and rivers form lifelines as the linking points between the human and the divine world. Space in this cosmological system is theorised as a mandala in which rituals strengthen the claims of the territories. The collaboration between environmental factors (the Himalayas as boundaries and the Punjab plains as pastoral centres) into an integrated spatial narrative gives sacred over profane borders priority.

The migrations and territorial expansions of this period are theorised with the help of the Aryan migration hypothesis telling that the Indo-Aryan populations entered South Asia around 1500 BCE due to the environmental factors of aridification (Anthony, 2007). This is consistent with arguments on environmental determinism, where climatic changes such as reduced monsoon predictability inclined nomadic pastoralists to the southeast, where cultural exchanges and language dissemination occurred. Geographically, this comes in the form of a gradual movement of foci of the river northwest to the Gangetic plains, facilitating agricultural intensification and social stratification. There are similarities with Indo-European migrations in Europe, e.g., the Yamnaya culture in the Danube valley, where steppe conditions are the same drivers of the territorial conquests. In South Asia, the Vedic accent on ritual landscapes, e.g., fire altars as space markers, produced new syncretic geographies, which were a mixture of migrant and indigenous Dravidian features (Parpola, 2015). Environmental determinism has been criticised, with emphasis on agency, in that Vedic societies were adapted to fit various ecologies and were not overly mechanistic. This is why the geographies of this era depict space as being contested effectively,

creating precedence for the subsequent imperial expansions in the area.



A manuscript of the Rigveda, transcribed in the Devanagari script, dates back to the early 19th century. This text was originally passed down through oral tradition. (Staal, 1986)

The transition to Iron Age and Early State Formations: A further shift to the Iron Age (c. 1000-500 BCE) stimulated the formation of early states in South Asia, where geographical factors like fertile Gangetic plains enabled the emergence of the Mahajanapadas - sixteen territorial polities, like Magadha and Kosala. Iron technology allowed clear-cutting and plough culture to develop the alluvial Doab region, to create a demographic and economic centre, which theorists explain using the ideas of territoriality as the establishment of control over known spaces (Erdosy, 1995). Boundary-making entailed natural entities, like rivers like the Yamuna that served as barriers, and forests that served as boundaries and as such formed proto-state identities in the process of competing over resources.

When applied to the geographical theory, this spatial arrangement echoes concepts of geographical advantage suggested by Alfred Thayer Mahan, who used a naval concept of geographical advantage, modified to the context of the ground (in the case of rivers), to increase trade and military movement. This is akin to the fertile crescent in Levantine city-states but fitted to the hydrology of South Asia (monsoon) (Mahan, 1890). Environmental affordances overlap with social processes: the black earth of the Gangetic plains was conducive to surplus production, thereby creating urbanisation at places like Kausambi, and the Vindhyas connections between north and south. This reflects the development of the Greek polis system in Mediterranean basins, in which arable valleys fostered territorial conflicts, but South Asian Mahajanapadas focused on the rise of spatial hierarchies based on caste rather than on democratic gatherings (Thapar, 2002). The idea of ethnic frontiers by Barthians explains the fact that the Mahajanapades negotiated porous frontiers by the formation of alliances and warfare, unlike the Chinese Warring States, which formed hard walls. This conceptualisation of geography in South Asia views geography as a mediator of statecraft; in between ancient urbanism and classical empires, though with a synergistic emphasis on the long-term spatial survival of the subcontinent.

IV. Imperial Geographies: Classical and Medieval Times

Mauryan and Gupta Empires (c. 322 BCE-550 CE): The Mauryan Empire, which was established by Chandragupta Maurya and then perpetuated by his successors, is a turning point of the imperial geography of South Asia, in which the spatial policies united vast areas stretching from the northern boundaries to the Deccan plateau. The edicts made by Ashoka that were written on the pillars and the bedrock all over the subcontinent served as spatial markers of imperial ideology, spreading Buddhist dhamma and at the same time establishing territorial sovereignty (Thapar, 2002). These inscriptions were

carefully placed in pilgrimage places and border areas, and thus theorised space as a vehicle of moral governance which mixed religious cosmology with political control. By relying on the connectivity theory, the Mauryan road systems, including the Uttarapatha road that connected Pataliputra to Taxila north, served the purpose of trade, the movement of the military, and administrative control in a similar way that the Roman viae publicae connected the Mediterranean empire with a created connectivity (Laurence, 1999). However, these infrastructural networks in South Asia focused on the control of the different ecologies, including the dry Punjab and fertile Gangetic plains, and thus enabled faster movement of troops as well as the collection of tribute and the creation of a single imperial space according to the Lefebvre framework (Lefebvre, 1991). This interconnection was in contrast to the more decentralised Persian Royal Road, highlighting Mauryan innovation in order to adjust to monsoon areas to ensure long-term imperial unity.

Often described as the Golden Age, this legacy was carried on by the Gupta Empire, with the diffusion of culture, whereby geography encouraged new scientific and artistic developments never before witnessed. The river valleys of the Himalayan foothills to the Vindhyas, where the empire had its river valleys, especially the Ganges, were the highways along which ideas could flow just as the Silk Road did in Han China, in cultural exchanges but based on agrarian surplus in South Asia (Liu, 2010). The Gupta period also saw the spread of Sanskrit learning and mathematical innovations. Using spatial diffusion models (Hagerstrand, 1967), the Gupta period witnessed the development of astronomical mappings of the heavens by Aryabhata in the Aryabhatiya, which conceptualised the heavens using a zero and place-value system under the influence of the observational horizons of the subcontinent (Plofker, 2009). Cities like Ujjain, with an astronomical meridian, are geographically facilitated and lead to the creation of a knowledge economy that was spread throughout the trade routes to Southeast Asia. Contrary to the Roman Golden Age during the reign of Augustus, where architecture took precedence, Gupta space coordinated intellectual inquiry to the geographical permanence, and the juxtaposition between South Asian imperial space and cosmology and empiricism highlights the distinctive combination of cosmology and empiricism.

Delhi Sultanate and Medieval Islamic Invasions (c. 1206-1526 CE): With the Islamic invasions that were being orchestrated by the Medieval Islamic powers, South Asian geographies were reconfigured through the forces being directed by the northwestern passes like the Khyber and Bolan, hence allowing the Turkic and Afghan contingents access to the Indo-Gangetic plains. Muhammad of Ghur used topographical weaknesses and the idea of the Hindu Kush to the Suleiman ranges as points of strategic entry to enhance military benefits (Jackson, 1999). Environmental determinism sheds light on the role played by topography in such strategies, where dry passes were considered to be the best use of cavalry strategies rather than foot-based infantry, just like in the Mongol invasions of Central Asia, where the best use of mobility was to conquer the place (Weatherford, 2004). However, the invaders in South Asia evolved to fit the humid lowlands by setting up fortified bases, the most significant one being Delhi, which became a geopolitical centre drawing riverine trade and agrarian earnings, thus contrasting with the Ottoman use of plateaus in Anatolia as defensive bases.

The iqtata system brought about administrative geographies of the Delhi Sultanate: a feudal system of spaces, which provided military elites with land grants based on revenue collection and loyalty (Habib, 1999). This division of the sultanate into iqtas, which acted as semi-autonomous units similar to European manorial systems but combined with Islamic waqf endowments to provide spatial equity. Iqtas reorganised agrarian spaces, theorised as spaces of production (Lefebvre, 1991), so as to encourage irrigation in the Doab area and impose tribute on the peripheral areas like the deserts of Rajasthan. The parallels can be found worldwide with the Timurid assignment of the lands in Persia, but South Asian iqtas had a unique hybridisation of Persianate bureaucracy and native village systems, with the resilience in this region, in changes of dynastic reigns, between Slave and Lodi rulers. This period was therefore a period of transition out of classical unity and into fragmented feudalism, the imposition of Islamic spatial orders onto the heterogeneous landscapes in the subcontinent.

Mughal Empire (c. 1526–1857 CE): The Mughal Empire was a symbol of advanced imperial geographies, which incorporated the traditions of Central Asia with South Asian novelties during the reign of such emperors as Babur and Akbar. The mansabdari system of Akbar, where officials were ranked in terms of military service and revenue assignments, worked as pre-modern cartography, mapping orders on the territorial divisions; this was carefully recorded in the Ain-i-Akbari- a comprehensive gazetteer of administrative, economic, and cultural information (Abu'l-Fazl, 1873/2010). The text was a database of space, by surveying soils, crops, and peoples at subas (provinces) and thus resembling the imperial gazetteers of Ming China, despite focusing on fiscal accuracy using zabt measurements (Richards, 1993). The centralisation of large ecologies in South Asia, such as deltas of Bengal, ports of Gujarat, and so on, was made possible through such mappings and, thereby, overturned regional autonomies.

The assimilation of different geographies, such as the conquest of the Deccan by Aurangzeb, built up Mughal space to the south, overcoming Vindhya obstacles by the logistical system similar to the Spanish conquests in the Andes, but adapted to monsoon war (Subrahmanyam, 2005). This synthesis of space created hybrid spaces with Persianate and Indic influences. Culturally, the space in Mughal gardens and architecture was represented by the cultural landscape theory (Cosgrove, 1998), and the charbagh in the Taj Mahal represented the order of paradise in high-disorder landscapes. These landscapes marked imperial ideology onto the landscape, reflecting geometries of absolutism at Versailles in France, but adding streams of water reminiscent of Ganges sanctity into the creation of sensual experiences of power. Mughal geographies, therefore, conceptualised the empire as an aesthetic-administrative mosaic which left behind a legacy of space over the region.



Map of the Mughal Empire at its peak in the year 1700. (Joppen, 1907)

V. Colonial Cartographies: The British Imperialism and Spatial Reconfigurations

Early European Discoveries (c. 1498-1757 CE): The first European experiences with India established a revolutionary period in South Asian cartography, where maps were used as predecessors to colonial territorial assertions. The Portuguese who came through Vasco da Gama in 1498 focused on the coastal geographies and created nautical maps like the Cantino Planisphere (1502), which depicted the western coast of India in a meticulous manner that enhanced ports like Calicut to the spice trade (Sánchez, 2013). These cartographic effects theorised spaces of the coast as strategic islands, thus enabling the process of enclave colonialism via fortified factories, similar to Spanish portolan charts of the Americas that claimed littorals of the Caribbean to extract its resources. The Portuguese cartography, however, adopted local Malabar pilot knowledge in South Asia, hybridising European projections and the local monsoon navigation, and thus setting precedence to other territorial claims without penetrating the interior.

This path was further pursued by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which created systematic atlases to dominate the eastern coasts and Bengal deltas, such as the Joan Blaeu Atlas Maior (1662) (Koeman, 1970). These were theorised as mercantile geographies, using hydrological elements like the the Hooghly River as a node to define the trade, and following their cartography of the Spice Islands of Indonesia, but adjusted to the estuarine complexities of South Asia. This strategy was first followed by the English

East India Company (EIC), which was established in 1600 and focused on the promotion of geographical regions of trade by having factories at Surat, Madras, and Bombay. The maps of the East India Company, like the one created by John Thornton in the 1680s, delimited particular geographic space which was subject to manipulation as a valuable commodity under chartered prerogative, resulting in the formation of early colonial territories. This reflected French mappings in West Africa, but in India, the EIC was more focused on textile hinterlands, which assimilated the agrarian spaces, forming the foundation of territorial expansion during the Mughal decline.

British Colonial Mapping Projects (c. 1757-1947 CE): After the Battle of Plassey (1757), the mapping of British colonies grew into a kind of imperialism, scientifically, the famous one being the Great Trigonometrical Survey (GTS) initiated by William Lambton in 1802 and developed by George Everest. The GTS has utilised triangulation to develop a geodetic grid covering the subcontinent that can be criticised as a means of epistemic domination in the view of Michel Foucault's power-knowledge nexus, whereby surveying gave birth to truths that justified control (Foucault, 1977). The maps that came as a result of this made India an object of measurement, replacing flowing native borders with fixed grids, similar to the U.S. Public Land Survey System, which imposed order on Native American lands but created a nightmare in South Asia because of grid zodolites across varied landscapes of India (Edney, 1997). This scientific front led to a blinding of imperial ambitions, to property taxes and military conciliation.

The economic geographies were further reconfigured through infrastructural developments like the railways and canals, which were theorised through dependency theory as the means of uneven development (Frank, 1966). Expanding since 1853, the railways connected raw material peripheries (e.g. Punjab wheat fields) to metropolitan ports, forming export-oriented enclaves but deindustrialising interiors, a pattern which was replicated elsewhere, for example, the Belgian rail networks in Congo, which only exploited minerals but did not industrialise the interiors. Colonial geography contributed to continuing underdevelopment, such as the Ganges Canal (1854); this irrigation system enabled cash crops to be grown in Doab areas, creating large spatial disparities. Irrigated cores thrived, and the peripheries with their salinisation effects, reminiscent of the impact of Porfirian railroads in Mexico under U.S. dominance, were increased in the South Asian context.

Resistance and Indigenous Responses: Cartographies of colonisation were agitations of indigenous struggles and were theorised by subaltern geographies challenging imperial spatial discourses. The Revolt of 1857, or First War of Independence, represented this kind of dynamic, and insurgents such as Rani Lakshmibai retook territories using guerrilla tactics in the ravines of Bundelkhand, and playing with British maps that depicted it as conquerable (Bates, 2013). Based on the subaltern theory of Gayatri Spivak, they are silenced voices through which they express a different geography, like the sacred place of Jhansi fort as an icon of sovereignty (Spivak, 1988). Colonial maps replaced the already existing histories, such as the Mughal parghanas, with a district that dismembered communal estates, and, similar to the Australian colonial surveys, but in South Asia, they sparked peasant rebellions, such as the Deccan Riots (1875).

Indigenous responses included counter-cartographies, such as the secret surveys made by Pundit Nain Singh, commissioned, on the one hand, by the British but flavoured with Tibetan spatial knowledge, fusing resistance with and against collaboration (Waller, 1990). According to the theoretical views, oral geographies of subaltern communities, including Adivasis in forested borderlands, resisted enclosure. It can be compared to the resistance enacted by Andean indigenous peoples during the Spanish colonial period. Such resistance in South Asia saved the vernacular spaces, which were a challenge to the totalising eye of colonial cartography.

Cartography of Virtue and Refusal: In post-colonial South Asia, the legacies of colonial cartographies as inherited spatial inequalities represent themselves in boundaries like the Durand Line (1893), which arbitrarily divided Pashtun lands between British India and Afghanistan, becoming thereby a source of consistently unresolved conflicts (Hopkins, 2009). Theoretised through world-systems analysis, these lines reproduce peripheral location, robbing resources and creating false ethnic separations, similar to

SykesPicot lines in the Middle East but worse still, the partition by the Radcliffe Line in South Asia (1947) that displaced millions of people. The inherited disparities comprise city-country inequalities, in which the colonial port cities, such as Mumbai, became economic centres at the expense of the hinterlands in structures of dependency (Kosambi, 1986).

Postcolonial theories, like the one of inherited spatiality, argue against the fact that these maps institutionalised uneven development in the sense that the gains of the Green Revolution were limited to the canal-irrigated areas of Punjab, which resembled the Brazilian ones in the development of favelas. This legacy is present in the current conflicts in India, like the Kashmir McMahon Line, and it emphasises the role of colonial geographies in defining the national imaginaries and the geopolitical crises.



The British Indian Empire in 1909. British India is shown in pink; the princely states in yellow. (Edinburgh Geographical Institute & J. G. Bartholomew and Sons, 1909)

VI. DISCUSSION

The current research paper condenses the development of the historical geography of India since the Indus Valley Civilisation, up to the cartographic practices of the British colonial rule, and as such, enables one to see both continuities and sharp discontinuities in the spatial organisation, perception, and management of South Asia. Across more than five thousand years, some geographical characteristics have continued to be of focus to human habitation, commerce and cultural fantasy. Riverine centrality is the most salient continuity. Since the Indus and its dependents contributed to Harappan urbanism, the Sapta Sindhu of Vedic cosmology has served to support the grounds of the Mauryan and Gupta empires, the Ganges Canal system under British dominion, and rivers have always served as economic life lines, holy axes, and ways of communication (Thapar, 2002; Schwartzberg, 1992). Trade routes, pilgrimage systems, and political jurisdiction continued to follow these hydrology systems and thus established a repetitive adaptation to monsoon-oriented sceneries, which is what defines South Asian geographies compared to the drier or colder climate regime of Mesopotamia or medieval Europe.

The amalgamation of sacred and symbolic space is also permanent. The Vedic cosmology has positioned the subcontinent as a mandala-shaped dwelling place of divinity (Bharatavarsha), and Mughal gardens and architecture continued to etch the designation of the divinity onto the physical landscape in the form of charbagh patterns and symbolism of water (Cosgrove, 1998). Even colonial infrastructures such as railways and cantonments, frequently superimposed already sacred nodes, thus demonstrating the way power always functions via the symbolism of space.

However, critical transitions are characterised by major ruptures. The most drastic change was made in

the colonial period: the change between the cosmological and administrative mapping and the scientific trigonometric cartography. Space was integrated into religious, moral, or fiscal systems in the pre-colonial systems; Vedic sacred geography, Mauryan edicts, and Mughal Ain-i-Akbari revenue surveys imprinted space onto the systems. However, the Great Trigonometrical Survey (1802-1871) impose secular and geodetic grid, which made India readable to extraction and rule, thus, instituting the power-knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1977; Edney, 1997). This discontinuity matched, but exceeded, the analogous changes in Qing China or Ottoman cadastral reforms because British mapping systematically destroyed the native epistemologies under the pretext of scientific universality.

In theory, the historical geography of India is a challenge to Eurocentric narratives of global historical geography. The criticism of Orientalism offered by Edward Said can be viewed with a certain level of relevance: colonial maps created India as a stagnant exotic realm that needed the European system to be ordered (Said, 1978). South Asia, conversely, created advanced geographical infrastructure centuries before European contact, including Harappan standardised planning, Gupta astronomical accuracy, and as such, the subcontinent makes the subcontinent a counter-example to diffusionist models which give the Mediterranean or North Atlantic a pre-eminent role in the modern geographical thought (Wallerstein, 1974). The experience of India also adds to the development of the post-colonial geography by demonstrating how subaltern spatial practices were maintained despite imperial overlay and thus a response to Spivak, who insisted that one should reclaim silenced voices (Spivak, 1988).

Global parallels reinforce these insights. Riverine centrality is also a reflection of the Nile in ancient Egypt and the Yellow River in China, but the variability of the South Asian monsoons gave rise to a more decentralised urbanism than either Mesopotamia with its centralised hydraulic state or imperial China (Wright, 2010). Colonial scientific mapping is also similar to French mapping of Algeria and British East African surveys; however, India was particularly prone to epistemic violence due to the scale and already existing cartographic traditions (Edney, 1997).

Critical analysis of sources shows major gaps. The research is based on very substantial sources of elite textual and archaeological data, which consist of Vedic Hymns, Ashokan edicts, Mughal chronicles, and British surveys, whereas the non-elite, subaltern, and indigenous points of view are underrepresented. The Indus script that has not been deciphered, the oral history of the Adivasi people and the spatial knowledge of lower-caste agriculturalists and women are mostly lost or distorted into the dominant glasses (Spivak, 1988). This is reflective of more general issues in global historical geography, in which the archives give greater weight to literate, urban, male, and imperial discourses. Further studies ought to combine digital humanities, oral histories and subaltern cartographies to solve such silences.

To sum up, the historical geography of India provides a good example of decolonising the field. As the proposed research highlights the continuities in riverine and sacred space through foregrounding and discontinuities introduced by colonial science through the lenses of rupture, the current study promotes how South Asia has contributed to and has persevered the global trends in spatial production. The theoretical synthesis provides more to a pluralistic approach to historical geography, a decentred Europe, which acknowledges the long-standing contribution of the subcontinent to the formation of human spatial imaginaries.

VII. CONCLUSION

The current research is a hypothetical analysis of the historical geography of India, between the Indus Valley Civilisation and the end of British colonial rule. It clarifies an extensive and active development of spatial conceptions, territorial organizations and cartography that extends beyond 4000 years. The continuities and transformative ruptures that have been extraordinary in shaping the geographical imagination of the subcontinent are forecasted in the analysis.

One of the most enduring continuities is the primary role of river systems as economic, cultural and symbolic life-lines. The Indus served as the bearer of some of the oldest urbanized civilizations in the

world; the Sapta Sindhu defined the Vedic sacred space; the Ganges made it possible to consolidate the empire in classical forms during the Mauryas and Guptas; and even Mughal and British systems were subsequently using the same hydrological conduits and re-engineering them (Thapar, 2002; Schwartzberg, 1992). This lasting riverine orientation is also what sets the historical geography of South Asia apart in comparison with much of the rest of the world, where rivers often serve in a secondary capacity to either coastline (Mediterranean) or steppe corridors (Central Asia). The incorporation of sacred and cosmological perspectives into spatial cognition is equally constant: since the Vedic Bharatavarsha as a ritual landscape, through the Mughal charbagh gardens as symbols of the paradise, and, even though colonial cartography could neither replace nor overlook pilgrimage networks (Cosgrove, 1998).

The greatest breakthrough was experienced during the colonial era when native forms of spatial knowledge that were based on cosmology, moral governance, and adhocracy were orderly reduced to a scientific, geodetic paradigm. The Great Trigonometrical Survey and the cadastral projects which accompanied it did not just map territory; they established a new ontology of space as an abstraction, quantifiable, and controlled space, which introduced what Foucault argued was a form of deployment of disciplinary power, through creating knowledge (Foucault, 1977; Edney, 1997). Although this epistemic shift was similar to comparable ones in French Algeria, Qing China and British East Africa, it was especially acute in South Asia since the existing traditions of space were deep and articulate, only to be superimposed.

In theory, this research will be involved in Scopus-indexed research in a number of ways. It fills in the antiquarian and colonial historiography, showing that much of the homogeneous geography of modern India, the river-centric settlements, religion-based territoriality and hereditary spatial differences, is unintelligible without going deep into history. Second, it drives postcolonial historical geography into the future by preempting South Asia as an active site of knowledge production of space instead of a passive recipient of European modernity. The analysis reclaims native epistemology of the Vedic cosmology, Mughal revenue cartography, and subaltern resistances, to critique diffusionist, Eurocentric structures that still prevail in much of world historical geography (Said, 1978; Wallerstein, 1974). By doing this, it is complying with the demands to decolonise geographical thought and to acknowledge non-Western inputs into ideas of space, territory, and mapping.

The journey of India is not isolated but connected to the larger world picture, which is evidenced by similarities across the earth. Although South Asia is similarly central to rivers as the Nile in Pharaonic Egypt or the Yellow River in imperial China, the monsoon variability peculiar to the area supported less centralised and flexible settlement patterns. The trigonometric surveying imposed by the colonialists has analogies in the Spanish grid in Latin America and the British triangulation of Ireland, although the scale, inherent complexity, and opposition in India made the epistemic struggle more noticeable and persistent (Craib, 2004). Through these comparisons, these nations place South Asia in a new perspective, not as an exception but as a critical case that adds value to comparative historical geography.

This theoretical synthesis presents several research directions that can be taken in the future. GIS-based reconstruction of past geographies and their digital mapping are viable possibilities. It would be possible to visualise the spatial continuities and disjunctures of ancient Harappan sites, Mauryan road networks, Mughal subas, and colonial districts superimposed on modern base maps, and extend the work of the Digital South Asia Library and the Historical Atlas of South Asia (Schwartzberg, 1992). These would also be able to provide a quantitative analysis of the settlement density, trade connectivity and environmental transformation over time.

The distinctiveness of the riverine-sacred-geopolitical nexus of South Asia could be further challenged by comparative studies with other long-term regions, including the Nile Valley, Mesoamerica or the Yellow River basin. Also, by incorporating subaltern and gendered histories using oral histories, folk cosmologies, and Adivasi spatial knowledge would overcome the elitism bias that prevails in a large portion of the archival record (Spivak, 1988). Lastly, the historical geography would directly be linked to the modern

policy discussions by discussing the role of colonial cartographic legacies in the ongoing geopolitical disputes (e.g., Durand Line, Radcliffe Line, McMahon Line).

In short, the history and geography of India can be viewed as a rich and disputable historical archive of human spatial imagination, one that has retained profound continuities and which has been radically reconfigured by colonialism. This study has provided a contribution to a more pluralistic, decolonised vision of the processes through which space is produced, represented and negotiated over time and space by positioning South Asia at the centre of global historical-geographical studies.

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Integrating Sustainable Development Goals into Local Governance: Practices, Challenges, and Opportunities for Indian Municipalities.

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ABSTRACT

The integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into local governance frameworks is crucial for achieving India's development objectives and fostering sustainable growth at the grassroots level. This research paper examines the practices, challenges, and opportunities associated with integrating the SDGs into the operations of Indian municipalities. Given the local governments' pivotal role in translating national policies into actionable programs, this study examines how municipal bodies in urban and rural settings are aligning their development strategies with the global SDG framework. The analysis relies primarily on secondary qualitative sources, including previous scholarly works, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and government reports, to construct a robust analytical framework. The paper further identifies underexplored opportunities to strengthen local governance, enhance meaningful community participation, and leverage digital technologies to address implementation challenges. It underscores the pivotal role of local governments in advancing the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India and offers strategic, policy-relevant insights to strengthen institutional integration, intergovernmental coordination, and the coherent alignment of local development planning with broader sustainability objectives.

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I. Introduction

Local governance constitutes the institutional frameworks, administrative mechanisms, and participatory processes through which sub-national authorities exercise political, fiscal, and developmental responsibilities. It embodies the principles of decentralisation, accountability, and citizen-centric decision-making, enabling local institutions to mediate between state priorities and community needs. Globally, effective local governance is acknowledged as a fundamental catalyst for sustainable development, as it facilitates context-specific policy implementation, enhances responsiveness, and promotes inclusive engagement. Within the ambit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), local governments occupy a strategically pivotal role, translating national and global imperatives into localised, actionable strategies. Their mandate extends beyond conventional service delivery to orchestrating multi-sectoral coordination, fostering social equity, and integrating environmental and developmental imperatives into local planning frameworks. However, their efficacy is frequently circumscribed by institutional fragilities, resource constraints, and fragmented governance architectures.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, constitute a comprehensive and globally endorsed framework for addressing the multifaceted challenges of

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contemporary development, including socio-economic inequality, environmental degradation, and the promotion of peace and justice. Designed to be universally applicable, the 17 SDGs provide an integrated agenda for guiding policy formulation, programmatic interventions, and institutional action, offering measurable indicators that allow governments, local authorities, and civil society actors to align development priorities with global sustainability imperatives.

Within this context, local governments occupy a strategically pivotal role in translating national and global objectives into actionable, context-specific strategies. Their mandate extends beyond service delivery to orchestrating multi-sectoral coordination, fostering social equity, and integrating environmental and developmental imperatives into local planning frameworks. Nonetheless, challenges such as institutional fragilities, resource constraints, and fragmented governance architectures often limit their effectiveness. This study critically examines these structural and operational challenges while illuminating opportunities for reinforcing institutional capacity, enhancing participatory governance, and leveraging technological innovations, thereby contributing to the effective localisation of the SDGs and the advancement of sustainable, resilient, and inclusive local development.

The significance of this study is anchored in its contribution to advancing scholarly understanding of the mechanisms through which the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be effectively localised within systems of subnational governance. By situating global sustainability imperatives within the operational frameworks of local institutions, the study elucidates how local governments function as pivotal agents in translating normative global agendas into contextually relevant, actionable policies. This study underscores the strategic importance of aligning governance structures, fiscal mechanisms, and participatory processes with the multidimensional objectives of the SDGs, thereby enhancing policy coherence, social inclusivity, and institutional resilience. Ultimately, the study enriches the discourse on sustainable governance by demonstrating that the localisation of the SDGs is not merely an administrative task but a transformative process that redefines the paradigms of development, accountability, and community empowerment.

Sustainable Development Goals:

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which came into force on 1 January 2016, represent a normative expansion and conceptual advancement of the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While building upon the developmental priorities and lessons of the MDGs, the SDGs adopt a broader, more integrated, and universally applicable framework, extending the agenda beyond basic human development to encompass issues of sustainability, inequality, governance, and institutional capacity. In the Indian context, the MDG framework facilitated notable advancements in select developmental domains, particularly in expanding access to universal primary education, improving gender parity in educational attainment, and supporting broader economic growth trajectories. However, progress remained uneven and sectorally imbalanced, with comparatively limited achievements in critical health-related outcomes, including reductions in mortality and morbidity, as well as in addressing environmental and public health determinants. Following the adoption of the SDGs, the Government of India has undertaken systematic efforts to realign and upscale MDG-era initiatives within the broader, integrated framework of the 17 SDGs (in the fig.1), seeking greater coherence, convergence, and sustainability in development planning and implementation.

These goals represent a comprehensive global blueprint for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all. They provide a universal framework for addressing pressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation, while promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions. Table 1 illustrates the 17 SDGs and their description, reflecting their individual focus areas and collective vision for sustainable progress.



Figure 1

Table: 1

Goal No.	Description
1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation
10	Reduce inequality within and among countries
11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable
12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development
15	Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels
17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Source: https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/

II. Objectives

This study seeks to examine the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within municipal governance in India, with a focus on institutional structures, policy processes, and implementation practices. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Assess the extent and nature of SDG integration within municipal governance frameworks, urban policies, and local development strategies in India.
- Examine the institutional, financial, and administrative capacities of municipalities to design and implement SDG-oriented initiatives at the local level.
- Identify and analyse key structural, operational, and contextual challenges faced by urban and rural municipalities in localising the SDGs.
- Evaluate the role of intergovernmental coordination and policy coherence in enabling or constraining

effective SDG implementation at the municipal level.
- Explore opportunities for strengthening SDG localisation through enhanced community participation, technological innovations, and improved governance mechanisms.
- Formulate evidence-based policy recommendations to enhance the effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability of SDG integration within municipal governance systems in India.

Through these objectives, the study aims to generate a comprehensive and policy-relevant understanding of SDG localisation within Indian municipalities and to propose strategic pathways for addressing existing constraints while leveraging emerging opportunities to improve implementation outcomes.

III. Structure of the Paper

This paper is structured into six sections. **Section 1** sets the context of the study by outlining its background, significance, and research objectives. **Section 2** reviews the relevant scholarly literature and develops the conceptual and theoretical framework informing the analysis of SDG localisation and local governance. **Section 3** details the research methodology, including the study design, data sources, case selection criteria, and analytical techniques employed. **Section 4** situates Case Studies of Successful Municipal Initiatives toward Integrating SDGs into Local Governance. **Section 5** critically discusses these findings in relation to existing literature, identifying key challenges, opportunities, and governance implications. **Section 6** concludes the paper by synthesising the principal insights, advancing policy-relevant recommendations, and outlining avenues for future research.

IV. Literature and Theoretical Framework

Literature Review: Besse, R.A., Sato, I., & Endo, K. (2025). "SDG Localisation: A Systematic Review of Key Themes and Research Modalities." JICARI Repository. Besse, provide a global systematic review demonstrating that SDG localisation requires multi-level policy coherence and institutional embedding. This comprehensive review synthesises over 150 studies on SDG localisation, positioning municipalities as pivotal actors in operationalising the 2030 Agenda. The authors propose a "multi-scalar coherence model," highlighting how institutional alignment between global, national, and local tiers determines policy success. For the Indian context, the study emphasises the fragmentation between central mandates and local planning systems. Besse et al. argue that municipalities in developing nations require *context-specific frameworks* that reconcile national SDG strategies with decentralised governance realities. Their work provides theoretical grounding for understanding why Indian urban governance often struggles to embed SDGs structurally rather than symbolically.

Guha, J., & Chakrabarti, B. (2019). Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through decentralisation. Conducted a systematic review highlighting how decentralisation strengthens the localisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by empowering local governments. They argue that effective SDG achievement depends on genuine fiscal and administrative devolution, which enhances participation, accountability, and policy responsiveness. However, they caution that decentralisation without adequate capacity can widen inequalities. For India, the authors note that weak municipal finances and limited autonomy hinder local SDG implementation. Overall, the study positions local governments as key actors in co-creating sustainable development, linking decentralisation directly with the success of the 2030 Agenda.

Despite substantial advances in global and national research, significant gaps remain in understanding the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within India's urban governance landscape. Empirical, municipal-level studies that link SDG adoption to measurable developmental outcomes are notably scarce, while much of the existing scholarship remains policy-descriptive, offering limited critical analysis of governance processes, power dynamics, and institutional constraints. The literature further exhibits an urban bias, privileging large, resource-rich cities and neglecting smaller municipalities and non-metropolitan areas. Longitudinal and comparative studies examining institutional learning, fiscal capacity, and leadership continuity are also limited. Moreover, global discourses on SDG localisation often remain insufficiently connected to India's complex administrative and fiscal realities. Collectively, these

gaps underscore the need for context-sensitive, empirically grounded, and outcome-oriented research that captures the multifaceted institutional, financial, and participatory dimensions of SDG implementation within urban local bodies.

Theoretical Framework: The integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into local governance frameworks, particularly within Indian municipalities, can be analytically understood through a range of interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives encompassing governance, sustainability, decentralisation, and multi-level policy coordination. This section delineates the theoretical foundations underpinning the study, drawing upon Governance Theory, Sustainability Transitions Theory, Multi-Level Governance (MLG), and Decentralisation Theory.

Collectively, these frameworks offer critical insights into the institutional, political, and administrative dynamics shaping SDG localisation and provide a robust analytical lens for examining the challenges, implementation practices, and transformative opportunities confronting municipalities in the Indian context.

- **Governance Theory**

Governance Theory provides a foundational analytical framework for examining decision-making processes, policy implementation, and coordination across multiple levels of government and a plurality of stakeholders. In the context of SDG integration, governance is conceptualised beyond the confines of the state to encompass civil society organisations, private sector actors, and international institutions. Scholarly literature emphasises governance as the capacity to collectively steer societal processes toward desired developmental outcomes through mechanisms of collaboration, coordination, and negotiated interaction among diverse public and non-public actors.

- **Sustainability Transitions Theory**

Sustainability Transitions Theory examines the processes through which societies shift from dominant, often unsustainable, configurations of practices and technologies toward more sustainable socio-technical regimes. The theory emphasises transformative change within key socio-technical systems such as energy, transportation, and waste management, which are central to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the context of Indian municipalities, Sustainability Transitions Theory offers a valuable analytical lens for understanding how local governments can facilitate the transformation of urban systems toward sustainability. Advancing initiatives such as sustainable urban mobility (SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) and environmentally sound waste management (SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production) require coordinated changes in governance arrangements, institutional practices, and technological innovation. These transitions are typically evolutionary rather than abrupt, unfolding through incremental policy adjustments, shifts in practices, and technological adoption, and are frequently constrained by entrenched interests, regulatory rigidities, and institutional inertia.

- **Multi-Level Governance (MLG)**

Multi-level Governance (MLG) Theory analyses the interactions and distribution of authority across multiple tiers of government, local, regional, national, and international, particularly in the context of complex policy challenges that necessitate coordination and collaboration beyond a single level of governance. As articulated by Hooghe and Marks, MLG denotes a system in which political authority and decision-making competencies are dispersed and shared across overlapping governmental levels. This perspective is especially pertinent to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which inherently require vertical and horizontal coordination among local, state, national, and international actors. In the Indian context, MLG assumes critical significance for SDG localisation due to the country's constitutionally decentralised governance architecture, wherein municipalities remain structurally dependent on state and central governments for policy guidance, fiscal transfers, and technical support. The effectiveness of municipal SDG integration is therefore contingent upon coherent policy alignment, intergovernmental collaboration, and the substantive devolution of authority, functions, and resources from higher tiers to local governments.

- **Decentralization Theory**

The theory examines the transfer of authority, responsibilities, and resources from central governments to sub-national and local institutions, emphasising its implications for democratic governance and development outcomes. Bardhan and Mookherjee argue that decentralisation can enhance local democracy, improve governance efficiency, and enable public authorities to respond more effectively to context-specific needs and priorities. Within the framework of SDG localisation, decentralisation is therefore viewed as a critical institutional mechanism that empowers municipalities to translate global development objectives into locally relevant and actionable strategies.

In the Indian context, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) marked a significant step toward institutionalising decentralisation by expanding municipal authority over urban planning, infrastructure provision, and service delivery. However, the realisation of decentralised governance remains uneven, constrained by persistent challenges related to fiscal autonomy, intergovernmental resource allocation, and local institutional capacity. Decentralisation theory further emphasises the importance of robust accountability structures and participatory governance mechanisms, which are crucial for ensuring that SDG-oriented policies are responsive to local priorities and grounded in community engagement.

- **Institutional Theory**

Institutional Theory emphasises the influence of formal rules, organisational structures, and informal norms in shaping the behaviour of institutions and actors. As articulated by DiMaggio and Powell, institutional environments condition organisational practices through shared norms, regulatory frameworks, and cognitive expectations, thereby influencing how local governments operate and respond to policy imperatives. In the context of SDG localisation, municipalities often function within institutional constraints that can restrict policy innovation and limit the adoption of integrated and transformative sustainability initiatives. In India, institutional characteristics such as bureaucratic rigidity, hierarchical decision-making processes, and fragmented urban governance arrangements frequently impede the effective integration and implementation of the SDGs at the municipal level. Institutional Theory further draws attention to the role of “institutional entrepreneurs”, actors capable of challenging established norms and practices in catalysing organisational change and advancing SDG integration within local governance systems.

V. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design grounded primarily in secondary data analysis. The research relies extensively on scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy briefs, and government reports, to examine the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into local governance within the Indian context. Sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and methodological rigour, drawing from reputable databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and official government repositories. This secondary data-based approach enables a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge, facilitating the identification of conceptual trends, policy gaps, and implementation challenges. A thematic content analysis was employed to critically interpret and categorise insights from the reviewed materials, ensuring analytical depth and coherence. By triangulating evidence across academic and institutional sources, the methodology ensures robustness, validity, and contextual richness, aligning with the study’s objective of developing a theoretically grounded and empirically informed understanding of SDG localisation in Indian municipalities.

VI. Case Studies of Successful Municipal Initiatives toward Integrating SDGs into Local Governance

Recent scholarship demonstrates that several Indian municipalities have pioneered locally contextualised models of SDG integration, reflecting how governance innovation, digital transformation, and participatory planning can operationalise sustainability within city management systems. Case studies, which are drawn from credible research between 2021 and 2025, illustrate this evolving practice landscape.

Pune Smart City Mission: Data-Driven Sustainability Integration

According to More et al. (2025), *"Technological Intelligence and Urban Sustainability: The AI Revolution in India's Smart City Mission" (ResearchGate),* Pune emerged as a national exemplar of data-intelligent governance by embedding SDG targets within its Smart City Command and Control Centre. The municipality developed AI-enabled platforms for real-time monitoring of urban services such as transport, waste, and water-mapped directly against SDGs 6, 11, and 13. This institutionalised evidence-based decision-making improved transparency and fostered interdepartmental coordination. The case highlights how technological intelligence, when aligned with participatory governance, can convert global sustainability frameworks into operational urban policies.

Sulthan Bathery Municipality, Kerala: Grassroots Governance and Circular Economy

Siby (2025) in *"Waste to Resilience: Grassroot Governance and Community Action in Sulthan Bathery Municipality, Kerala" (Journal of Disaster Studies and Climate Resilience)* documents a community-centric waste-management initiative aligned with SDGs 11 and 12. The program combined decentralised composting units, women's self-help groups, and school partnerships to transform waste into local resources. Its success stemmed from robust local leadership, participatory mechanisms, and integration of SDG indicators within municipal service delivery. The study exemplifies bottom-up SDG localisation, emphasising resilience, gender inclusivity, and sustainable resource use at the ward level.

Bengaluru and Nagpur: AI-Enhanced Urban Mobility and Pedestrian-Centric Planning

Jaganathan (2025), in the *Proceedings of Digital Frontiers in Buildings and Infrastructure*, explores how Bengaluru and Nagpur municipalities embedded SDG 11 targets into urban mobility planning using big-data analytics. The cities introduced AI-based pedestrian-flow modelling and redesigned public spaces to enhance accessibility, safety, and carbon reduction. This cross-sectoral model of governance linked transport, environment, and public health departments through a shared SDG framework, demonstrating the potential of smart infrastructure for sustainability transitions.

Auroville Township and Ecological Governance

Reza, Hossain, & Bokhtear (2025), in *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change*, highlight Auroville's experiment with recreational forests and eco-governance in Tamil Nadu. The municipality leveraged local ecological knowledge to balance conservation, tourism, and livelihood generation, integrating SDGs 13 (Climate Action) and 15 (Life on Land). The initiative's participatory co-management structure showcases how local ecological stewardship and multi-stakeholder collaboration can achieve sustainability co-benefits beyond administrative mandates.

Collectively, the examined case studies underscore that the successful localisation of Sustainable Development Goals within Indian municipalities is contingent upon three interrelated dimensions. The fusion of technological innovation with participatory governance demonstrates that effective SDG integration relies on the simultaneous deployment of digital intelligence and community inclusion. Initiatives such as AI-enabled urban management and grassroots waste resilience projects reveal that technology becomes transformative only when embedded in transparent, citizen-responsive systems. The municipalities that institutionalised learning mechanisms and an adaptive governance framework, including monitoring dashboards and interdepartmental coordination units, exhibited greater continuity and resilience in sustaining SDG implementation beyond externally funded project cycles. Finally, the success of these initiatives rests on contextualization and co-production, where local governments interpret and operationalise SDG targets in alignment with socio-cultural, economic, and ecological specificities. Taken together, these experiences affirm that municipal innovation, cross-tier coordination, and community partnership form the foundational architecture for translating the global SDG framework into context-sensitive, actionable, and enduring urban development strategies within India's complex governance landscape.

VII. Challenges in Integrating SDGs into Local Governance

The integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into local governance structures presents a multidimensional set of challenges, particularly within the context of India's urban municipalities. While India has made visible progress in institutionalising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within national and subnational policy frameworks, the localization of these goals at the municipal level remains fraught with systemic, structural, and operational challenges. Scholarly literature between 2020 and 2025 reveals that these challenges emerge from a combination of institutional fragmentation, fiscal dependence, data asymmetries, capacity deficits, and limited citizen participation, all of which hinder the translation of global sustainability frameworks into actionable local outcomes.

Institutional Fragmentation and Weak Intergovernmental Coordination

A recurrent challenge is the absence of institutional coherence and vertical coordination across governance tiers. urban local bodies (ULBs) in India operate within a densely layered institutional environment, where multiple state departments, parastatal agencies, and development authorities exercise overlapping mandates. This institutional fragmentation results in blurred accountability, duplication of functions, and policy incoherence, constraining the potential of municipalities to pursue integrated and SDG-aligned development agendas.

This fragmentation leads to duplication of mandates, inconsistent policy directions, and poor integration of SDG indicators into city development plans. The lack of a unified urban governance architecture impedes coordinated action, as municipal priorities are often subordinated to state or centrally sponsored schemes, weakening local ownership of the SDG agenda.

Fiscal Constraints and Dependence on Higher-Level Transfers

Fiscal centralisation continues to constrain the financial autonomy of Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in India, limiting their ability to implement sustainable development priorities. Despite three decades since the 74th Constitutional Amendment, ULBs remain dependent on state and central transfers, with limited capacity to generate own-source revenue. The World Bank (2022) notes that municipal revenues account for less than 1% of India's GDP, compared with 6–7% in middle-income countries, reflecting a severe decentralisation gap. According to Ahluwalia (2019) and Reddy (2021), property taxes, ULBs' principal source of revenue, suffer from weak collection efficiency, outdated valuation systems, and political reluctance to reform. Consequently, most cities rely heavily on intergovernmental transfers, often tied to centrally sponsored schemes, reducing fiscal flexibility. NIUA (2023) emphasises that the absence of predictable, formula-based grants and the underutilization of instruments like municipal bonds or pooled finance mechanisms hinder long-term sustainability planning. To effectively localise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), strengthening municipal creditworthiness, diversifying local revenue sources, and ensuring performance-based fiscal transfers are essential steps toward resilient urban governance.

Data Deficits and Measurement Challenges

Accurate, disaggregated, and timely data form the cornerstone of effective SDG localisation. However, data gaps and methodological inconsistencies remain a persistent constraint within India's urban governance ecosystem. According to the NITI Aayog (2023) SDG India Index Report, while national and state-level data frameworks have matured, most Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) still lack standardised systems for monitoring SDG progress. Data on indicators related to urban poverty, solid waste management, housing, and climate resilience remain fragmented across departments and often inconsistent in methodology. This lack of municipal-scale disaggregation conceals significant intra-city disparities, especially between formal and informal settlements, undermining evidence-based policymaking and targeted interventions.

Further, most ULBs depend on state statistical bureaus or line departments for data, which delays updates and limits spatial granularity. World Bank (2022) reports that the absence of integrated urban data platforms and weak institutional capacity to manage open data systems hinder transparency and

inter-departmental coordination. The National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) has initiated urban observatories and data-driven tools (such as the DataSmart Cities Strategy under the Smart Cities Mission), but adoption remains uneven across municipalities. Strengthening municipal data ecosystems through capacity building, interoperability standards, and real-time data integration is crucial for embedding SDG monitoring into everyday governance.

VIII. Opportunities for Integrating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into Local Governance

Despite the structural and institutional constraints faced by Indian Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), the evolving urban policy landscape presents several opportunities to align local governance mechanisms with the SDG framework. A key opportunity lies in the mainstreaming of SDG principles through smart urban infrastructure and digital governance platforms, which have enhanced transparency, citizen participation, and service delivery efficiency. The integration of technology-driven solutions, such as GIS-based monitoring, open data portals, and e-governance systems, provides local governments with tools to map, monitor, and evaluate SDG progress at disaggregated scales.

Second, decentralised and community-led planning initiatives are increasingly recognised as pathways for inclusive SDG implementation. Experiences from cities like Pune and Bhubaneswar demonstrate that participatory planning and co-production with civil society organisations enhance social ownership and ensure the contextual relevance of sustainability initiatives. This bottom-up engagement supports adaptive governance models, fostering collaboration among local stakeholders and creating resilient urban ecosystems aligned with SDG 11 (“Sustainable Cities and Communities”).

Third, the emergence of climate finance and innovative fiscal instruments, including green municipal bonds and district cooling systems, provides ULBs with new opportunities for financing sustainability transitions. Such mechanisms align local development priorities with national and global climate commitments, reducing fiscal dependency on higher levels of government. Moreover, the localisation of sustainability frameworks in heritage cities like Jaipur has shown that integrating cultural heritage conservation with energy efficiency and sustainability goals can yield both ecological and economic co-benefits.

Finally, the policy convergence between India’s national programs, such as the Smart Cities Mission, AMRUT 2.0, and Swachh Bharat Mission 2.0, and the SDG framework creates institutional pathways for coherence and resource optimisation. These initiatives encourage inter-departmental collaboration and capacity-building within municipal administrations, advancing multi-scalar governance integration.
In sum, the opportunities for embedding SDGs within India’s local governance architecture lie in digital innovation, fiscal decentralisation, participatory governance, and policy convergence. Harnessing these drivers can enable municipalities not only to localise SDGs effectively but also to pioneer models of sustainable urban transformation adaptable to other developing contexts.

Conclusion

The localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Indian municipalities constitutes both an urgent developmental imperative and a complex governance endeavour. As India progresses toward fulfilling the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the role of urban local bodies (ULBs) becomes increasingly pivotal in translating global aspirations into locally responsive actions. Positioned as the tier of government most proximate to citizens, municipalities serve as critical institutional arenas for contextualising and operationalising the SDGs in ways that reflect local needs, capacities, and socio-economic realities.

This study has examined the evolving dynamics, challenges, and opportunities surrounding the integration of SDG principles into local governance frameworks across India. The analysis demonstrates that, while substantial progress has been achieved in aligning municipal programs and development plans with SDG targets, particularly in metropolitan and resource-endowed cities, significant asymmetries persist.

National flagship initiatives such as the Swachh Bharat Mission, Smart Cities Mission, and Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation *(AMRUT)* underscore a growing policy recognition of sustainable development imperatives at the subnational level. However, smaller and peri-urban municipalities often continue to struggle with resource inadequacies, institutional fragmentation, and limited administrative capacity, resulting in uneven implementation and monitoring outcomes.

The findings highlight several systemic challenges that constrain effective SDG localisation: fiscal centralisation and weak municipal finance systems, inadequate technical and data management capacities, fragmented intergovernmental coordination, and deficient performance monitoring mechanisms. Yet, these structural impediments coexist with emerging opportunities. The increasing emphasis on innovative financing mechanisms, including municipal bonds, public-private partnerships, and climate-linked funds, combined with renewed efforts to strengthen decentralisation under the 74th Constitutional Amendment, presents a fertile policy space for transformation. Moreover, community participation, digital governance platforms, and data-driven urban management systems are enhancing accountability and enabling a more inclusive approach to sustainable urban development.

The policy recommendations derived from this study emphasise the necessity of a comprehensive, multi-scalar, and inter-sectoral approach to advancing SDG integration. Strengthening institutional capacity through training, inter-departmental coordination, and digital innovation must be coupled with enhanced fiscal autonomy, predictable revenue streams, and performance-linked grants. Developing robust data ecosystems at the city level, institutionalising open-data observatories, and embedding monitoring and evaluation frameworks within municipal governance will be essential for tracking SDG progress and ensuring policy coherence. Furthermore, cultivating citizen engagement and multi-stakeholder collaboration can reinforce democratic accountability and sustain long-term urban resilience.

Ultimately, while significant structural constraints persist, the localisation of the SDGs offers a transformative opportunity to reimagine India’s urban governance paradigm. By embedding sustainability into the institutional DNA of municipalities, India can not only accelerate progress toward its national development priorities but also contribute meaningfully to the global sustainable development agenda. Achieving these outcomes will require sustained political will, capacity-building, and cooperative federalism that empowers cities as agents of transformation rather than passive implementers of centrally designed schemes.

If effectively harnessed, SDG localisation can serve as the cornerstone of a new urban governance ethos, one that is participatory, evidence-based, and equity-oriented, ensuring that India’s urban transition remains both sustainable and inclusive. Through strategic alignment, institutional innovation, and shared accountability, Indian municipalities can play a defining role in realising the vision of the 2030 Agenda, ensuring that no one, and no city, is left behind.

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From Jokowi to Prabowo: Strategic Continuity in Indonesia–India Relations under Modi's India

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ABSTRACT

India and Indonesia occupy increasingly significant positions in the evolving Indo-Pacific strategic order.This article examines Indonesia–India relations across the transition from President Joko Widodo to President Prabowo Subianto, situating this shift within the broader strategic trajectory of Narendra Modi's India. It asks whether Indonesia's change in leadership signals policy recalibration or reflects structural continuity in its engagement with India. Rather than being primarily shaped by individual leadership preferences, bilateral alignment is sustained by converging systemic pressures in the Indo-Pacific, institutionalized defence and maritime cooperation frameworks, and shared middle-power aspirations for strategic autonomy within a rules-based regional order. By demonstrating how systemic incentives condition—but do not eliminate leadership agency, this study contributes to debates on foreign policy continuity, middle power diplomacy, and the resilience of strategic partnerships amid domestic political change in the Indo-Pacific.

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I. Introduction

Relations between Indonesia and India are rooted in centuries of civilizational exchange, maritime connectivity, and cultural interaction across the Indian Ocean (Vice President's Secretariat of India, 2015). From ancient Hindu-Buddhist and later Islamic influences that shaped parts of the Indonesian archipelago to post-independence solidarity within the Non-Aligned Movement, the bilateral relationship has historically reflected both symbolic affinities (Hardiati, 1994). In the contemporary era, these historical ties have evolved into a structured strategic partnership embedded within the broader geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

Since President Joko Widodo assumed office in 2014, Indonesia has pursued a pragmatic and infrastructure-driven foreign policy orientation, emphasizing maritime connectivity and economic diplomacy (Humas, 2015). The consolidation of the Indonesia–India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during Jokowi's tenure aligned with India's expanding regional engagement under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Act East and Indo-Pacific strategies. The election of President Prabowo Subianto for the 2024–2029 term, however, introduces a leadership transition that might plausibly generate foreign policy recalibration. Unlike Jokowi's economically focused leadership style, Prabowo is widely perceived as more strategic-nationalist with a stronger emphasis on defence and geopolitical positioning (Yadav, 2025). Such differences raise an important analytical question: should leadership transition in Indonesia produce meaningful change in its engagement with India? This question carries broader significance beyond bilateral relations. Indonesia and India occupy pivotal positions in the

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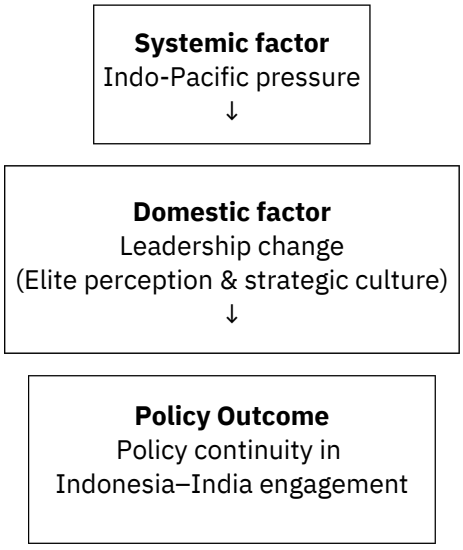
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evolving Indo-Pacific order as emerging middle powers navigating intensifying great-power rivalry (eka, 2026). Much of the existing Indo-Pacific scholarship, however, concentrates on US–China competition, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or India–ASEAN relations at a macro level. The Indonesia–India dyad remains comparatively underexamined, particularly with respect to how domestic political transitions shape its trajectory. Moreover, while leadership change has long been debated in foreign policy analysis, systematic assessments of leadership transition in Southeast Asia remain underdeveloped. The assumption that new leaders necessarily recalibrate foreign policy priorities often goes untested in emerging middle powers.

This article addresses this gap by examining Indonesia–India relations across the transition from Jokowi (2014–2019; 2019–2024) to Prabowo (2024–2029) within the structural context of Modi's assertive Indo-Pacific orientation. It asks: To what extent does Indonesia–India strategic partnership reflect structural imperatives rather than leadership preference? The central argument advanced here is that, despite leadership transition from Jokowi to Prabowo, Indonesia–India relations demonstrate substantial strategic continuity driven by structural Indo-Pacific realignments, convergent middle-power aspirations for strategic autonomy, and shared maritime security concerns under Modi's increasingly consolidated regional strategy.

Theoretically, this study adopts a neoclassical realist framework to explain foreign policy continuity amid domestic political change. Neoclassical realism posits that systemic pressures—such as shifts in regional power distribution and security competition—shape state behavior, but these pressures are mediated through domestic-level variables, including elite perception, strategic culture, and leadership interpretation (Ripsman et al., 2016). In this context, leadership transition functions as an intervening variable rather than a determining variable in shaping Indonesia's India policy. While individual leaders may adjust emphasis or rhetoric, structural incentives embedded in the Indo-Pacific strategic environment constrain the range of viable policy alternatives. The causal mechanism proposed in this article, therefore, proceeds as follows:

Table 1
Neoclassical Realist Framework on the Foreign Policy Framework



Source: Made by Author

Methodologically, this study is based on a qualitative comparative case study of Indonesia–India relations across two presidential administrations. The analysis relies on a systematic examination of official policy documents, joint statements, defence cooperation agreements, trade and economic data, and elite policy narratives between 2014 and 2025. By tracing patterns of diplomatic engagement,

defence institutionalization, and strategic discourse across the leadership transition, the study assesses whether observable policy outputs reflect recalibration or continuity.

By foregrounding the interaction between systemic constraints and leadership agency, this article contributes to three strands of scholarship. First, it advances debates on foreign policy continuity by demonstrating how leadership change does not necessarily disrupt structurally embedded strategic alignments. Second, it enriches middle power diplomacy literature by examining how convergent strategic autonomy agendas sustain bilateral partnerships outside great-power frameworks. Third, it expands Indo-Pacific studies beyond major power rivalry by offering a focused analysis of the Indonesia–India dyad as a stabilizing axis within the regional order.

The neoclassical realist framework guides the analysis. Subsequent sections examine Indonesia–India relations under Jokowi, early policy signals under Prabowo, and the structural drivers underpinning continuity. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of leadership transitions for middle-power partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

RESULT

Modi's India as a Structural Variable in the Indo-Pacific Order

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy outlook on systemic factors is shaped by a perception that the global order is undergoing a structural transformation characterized by power diffusion, intensifying geopolitical competition, and the gradual shift of economic and strategic gravity toward the Indo-Pacific (Bhatia, 2026). From New Delhi's perspective, the post–Cold War liberal order—long dominated by Western powers—is evolving into a more multipolar configuration in which emerging powers must secure greater strategic autonomy and regional influence.

Within this changing global structure, Modi's strategic thinking places the Indo-Pacific at the center of India's geopolitical calculus. The region is perceived as the primary arena where economic connectivity, maritime security, and major-power competition intersect. India views the Indo-Pacific not merely as a geographical construct but as a strategic system linking the Indian Ocean and the Pacific through trade routes, energy flows, and naval mobility (Baruah, 2020). This systemic perception informs India's effort to expand its diplomatic, economic, and security engagement across Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the broader Indian Ocean region.

A central systemic concern shaping Modi's worldview is China's rapid rise and expanding maritime presence. Beijing's growing naval capabilities, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the development of strategic infrastructure across the Indian Ocean are interpreted in New Delhi as altering the regional balance of power (Baruah, 2018). Rather than pursuing confrontation, India's response under Modi has focused on strengthening strategic partnerships, expanding maritime domain awareness, and reinforcing India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean (Chadha, 2025).

The transformation of India's regional posture under Prime Minister Narendra Modi constitutes a critical structural variable shaping the Indo-Pacific strategic environment within which Indonesia formulates its foreign policy. Rather than treating India merely as a bilateral partner, this section conceptualizes Modi's India as part of the broader systemic pressures that condition Indonesia's strategic choices. In neoclassical realist terms, India's evolving regional activism contributes to the external constraints and incentives that shape Indonesia's policy continuity across leadership transition.

This systemic assessment explains the consolidation of several policy frameworks under Modi's leadership. Since assuming office in 2014, Modi has consolidated India's outward-looking orientation through the intensification of the Act East Policy (Gaens & Ruohomaki, 2017). While Act East originated under previous administrations, Modi elevated it from diplomatic engagement to strategic integration, deepening defence cooperation, connectivity initiatives, and maritime collaboration with Southeast Asian

states (Caudhury, 2025). This shift embedded India more firmly within Indo-Pacific strategic architectures, increasing its salience for regional middle powers such as Indonesia.

A central doctrinal pillar of Modi's regional approach is the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) framework, which emphasizes maritime security, blue economy cooperation, and capacity-building across the Indian Ocean (Kumar, 2025). Under Prime Minister Modi, India's maritime policy has expanded from the SAGAR doctrine toward the MAHASAGAR initiative (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions), indicating a broader effort to project India's influence across regional and global maritime spaces. This shift reflects New Delhi's aspiration to position itself as a central actor in shaping maritime security and governance in the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of Home Affairs of India, 2025). For Indonesia—an archipelagic state advancing its own Global Maritime Fulcrum vision under Jokowi—India's maritime expansion generates structural alignment rather than competition. Shared concerns over sea lane security, piracy, and strategic chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait and the Andaman Sea create convergent threat perceptions.

India's pursuit of strategic autonomy further reinforces its compatibility with Indonesia's long-standing non-aligned foreign policy doctrine (Monnappa, 2025). While India has deepened engagement with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), it has simultaneously resisted formal alliance commitments, preserving policy flexibility (Ashwarya, 2025). This calibrated positioning allows Indonesia to engage India without undermining ASEAN centrality or its own hedging posture vis-à-vis major powers. In this sense, India's selective alignment strategy reduces the political cost for Indonesia to sustain strategic cooperation across leadership transitions.

Defence modernization under Modi also contributes to the structural environment. Expanded naval capabilities, indigenous defence production initiatives under "Atmanirbhar Bharat," and growing defence exports to Southeast Asia signal India's long-term commitment to regional security presence (Press Information Bureau of India, 2025). For Indonesia, which seeks diversified defence partnerships amid intensifying US–China rivalry, India represents a supplementary security partner that does not carry the same geopolitical baggage as major powers. This structural opportunity persists regardless of changes in Indonesia's domestic leadership configuration.

Finally, Modi's economic nationalism and supply chain diversification strategies interact with Indonesia's own resource diplomacy and downstream industrialization agenda (Isaac, 2026). Although bilateral trade volumes remain modest compared to Indonesia's trade with China or Japan, both states share an interest in reducing overdependence on a single major power and strengthening South–South economic corridors. These convergent economic objectives contribute to the institutionalization of cooperation frameworks that are resilient to leadership turnover.

At the same time, Modi's strategic worldview emphasizes strategic autonomy as a core organizing principle of India's external relations. While India participates in multilateral security arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the United States, Japan, and Australia, it continues to avoid formal alliance commitments (Zajączkowski & Pulami, 2025). This approach allows India to engage multiple partners while preserving decision-making independence within a fluid regional order.

From a systemic perspective, Modi interprets the Indo-Pacific as a contested yet opportunity-rich strategic space in which India must simultaneously balance rising-power competition, secure maritime interests, and expand its diplomatic footprint. This perception of shifting global power distribution and maritime strategic competition constitutes a key structural driver shaping India's external engagement with regional middle powers, including Indonesia.

Taken together, these developments suggest that Modi's India has become embedded in the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape as a stable external reference point. From a neoclassical realist perspective,

this external structural configuration constrains the range of viable policy alternatives available to Indonesian leaders. Whether under Jokowi or Prabowo, the systemic incentives to maintain engagement with India remain largely constant. Leadership transition, therefore, operates within an already structured strategic environment shaped in part by India's sustained regional activism.

Jokowi's Indonesia: Maritime Developmentalism and Strategic Pragmatism

President Joko Widodo's perception of systemic dynamics in the global and Indo-Pacific environment was shaped less by traditional geopolitical competition and more by economic transformation and maritime connectivity. Unlike leaders who prioritize ideological or security-driven foreign policy agendas, Jokowi approached the evolving regional order primarily through a developmental lens. The shifting center of global economic gravity toward Asia and the growing strategic importance of maritime trade routes informed Jakarta's emphasis on strengthening Indonesia's role as a maritime hub linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Shekhar & Liow, 2014).

Within this systemic context, Jokowi interpreted the Indo-Pacific not primarily as a theatre of great-power rivalry but as an arena of economic interdependence and maritime governance. Jokowi perceived the Indo-Pacific less as a geopolitical battleground and more as a maritime economic space in which Indonesia could leverage its archipelagic geography to enhance connectivity, trade, and regional cooperation (Cabinet Secretary of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018).

Upon assuming office in 2014, Jokowi introduced the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) as the central organizing vision of Indonesia's strategic outlook. The GMF emphasized maritime infrastructure development, sea lane security, port connectivity, and the revitalization of Indonesia's archipelagic identity. Although initially framed in ambitious geopolitical language, the doctrine evolved into a policy instrument focused primarily on domestic economic transformation and maritime capacity-building rather than external power projection (Laksmana, 2019). This orientation reflected a broader pattern of maritime developmentalism: foreign policy was increasingly subordinated to economic growth objectives and infrastructure modernization.

His Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) vision reflected this perception by prioritizing maritime infrastructure, port development, sea-lane security, and connectivity across the archipelago. Rather than positioning Indonesia as a balancing power within regional security competition, the GMF framed Indonesia as a maritime connector capable of facilitating trade flows and regional cooperation (Munabari & Sellita, 2024).

Jokowi's foreign policy style was marked by economic pragmatism. Economic diplomacy became a defining feature of Indonesia's external engagement, with Jakarta actively seeking investment partnerships to support national development priorities (Haryono, 2019). Within this framework, India was not approached as an ideological ally or strategic counterweight, but as a complementary maritime partner capable of contributing to Indonesia's port development, connectivity initiatives, and defence diversification. The emphasis remained functional rather than doctrinal.

At the same time, Jokowi's interpretation of systemic pressures also reflected Indonesia's long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy through 'Bebas-Aktif" (free and active) foreign policy (Wardhani & Dugis, 2023). While acknowledging the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, Jakarta under Jokowi avoided formal alignment with any major power. Upon assuming office in 2014, Jokowi introduced the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) as the central organizing vision of Indonesia's strategic outlook. The GMF emphasized maritime infrastructure development, sea lane security, port connectivity, and the revitalization of Indonesia's archipelagic identity. Although initially framed in ambitious geopolitical language, the doctrine evolved into a policy instrument focused primarily on domestic economic transformation and maritime capacity-building rather than external power projection (Laksmana, 2019). This orientation reflected a broader pattern of maritime developmentalism: foreign policy was increasingly subordinated to economic growth objectives and infrastructure modernization.

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From a neoclassical realist perspective, Jokowi's leadership mediated systemic pressures through a developmentalist strategic culture. The rise of China, the increasing centrality of maritime trade routes, and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept generated external incentives for Indonesia to strengthen maritime partnerships. However, these systemic dynamics were filtered through Jokowi's pragmatic leadership orientation, which prioritized economic deliverables and infrastructure diplomacy over overt geopolitical positioning. As a result, Indonesia's response to structural change was shaped less by balancing imperatives and more by developmental objectives.

This orientation was reflected in Indonesia's cautious balancing posture amid intensifying US–China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific (Rayhana, 2023). While Indonesia deepened economic ties with China—particularly through Belt and Road–linked infrastructure projects—it avoided formal alignment and resisted strategic polarization (Pasaribu et al., 2023). Maritime incidents in the North Natuna Sea demonstrated Jakarta's willingness to defend sovereignty, yet these tensions were consistently framed in legal rather than confrontational terms (Majumdar, 2021). Such calibrated balancing reduced incentives for abrupt foreign policy shift toward any single partner, including India.

Within this broader strategic posture, Indonesia's engagement with India under Jokowi exhibited convergence without alliance formation. Maritime cooperation, coordinated patrols near the Andaman Sea, defence dialogues, and port development initiatives—particularly in Sabang—reflected shared interests in Indian Ocean security. The elevation of bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signaled institutional consolidation rather than ideological alignment. In this context, India's SAGAR doctrine and Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) overlapped in their emphasis on maritime security and connectivity, creating structural compatibility between the two countries' strategic outlooks (Gupta, 2018).

Jokowi's limited ideological orientation in foreign policy further reinforced this pattern of continuity. Unlike leaders who emphasize normative or civilizational diplomacy, his administration prioritized tangible outcomes. As long as cooperation with India aligned with Indonesia's development agenda and maritime security priorities, there was little domestic incentive for policy recalibration. In neoclassical realist terms, systemic Indo-Pacific pressures—particularly maritime competition and supply chain diversification—were translated through a developmentalist lens that favored stability and incremental institutionalization over

strategic rupture.

Consequently, Indonesia's response to Modi's expanding regional role was neither reactive alignment nor strategic distancing. Instead, India was incorporated into Indonesia's broader hedging strategy, which emphasized diversification of security partnerships, enhancement of maritime domain awareness, and preservation of diplomatic flexibility. Over time, this approach led to the institutional embedding of Indonesia–India cooperation across defence, maritime, and economic domains, making the relationship increasingly routinized by the end of Jokowi's presidency.

This institutionalization was reinforced by sustained high-level diplomatic engagement. Between 2014 and 2024, President Jokowi visited India four times, indicating Indonesia's recognition of India as a key strategic partner in South Asia. Reciprocally, India was the most frequent South Asian visitor to Indonesia, with four high-level visits, compared to fewer engagements from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan (Antara, 2015; Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2018, 2022). This pattern reflects India's growing strategic relevance as a major Indo-Pacific actor and a maritime partner whose priorities increasingly intersect with Indonesia's GMF vision. The frequency of bilateral exchanges suggests that India's rising geopolitical and economic profile translated into sustained diplomatic attention from Jakarta.

Economic engagement further illustrates this structural relationship. Between 2019 and 2024, India consistently accounted for the largest share of Indonesia's trade with South Asia, with total trade increasing from USD 19.19 billion in 2019 to USD 28.38 billion in 2024 (Brief Embassy Report on Bilateral Relations – ITJ Division, DGCI&S, Kolkata., 2024.; Commercial Intelligence and Statistics of India, 2023). Although trade peaked in 2022 before moderating, this fluctuation reflects post-pandemic normalization rather than disengagement. The persistence of high trade volumes indicates that Indonesia–India economic relations are structural rather than cyclical.

This pattern underscores India's role as Indonesia's primary economic gateway to South Asia, supported by complementarities in energy, commodities, manufacturing inputs, and maritime connectivity. The resilience of trade flows despite global disruptions points to a form of strategic economic interdependence, which reinforces broader geopolitical convergence within the Indo-Pacific framework.

Beyond trade, the substantive scope of bilateral cooperation under Jokowi further demonstrates the depth of the partnership. Compared to other South Asian countries, Indonesia–India relations are more comprehensive and forward-looking, anchored in maritime and defence collaboration as core pillars. This includes cooperation in maritime security, defence industry development, and Indo-Pacific stability. These security dimensions are complemented by expanding partnerships in trade, infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing, as well as emerging cooperation in renewable energy, digital technology, and research capacity building. At the societal level, people-to-people exchanges—through education, tourism, interfaith dialogue, and civil society engagement—contribute to long-term relational stability (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018a). Taken together, these dimensions reflect a mature

partnership that extends beyond symbolic engagement toward operational convergence.

This institutional depth is analytically significant. By the time of the leadership transition in 2024, Indonesia–India relations were no longer dependent on personal rapport or ad hoc initiatives. Instead, they were anchored in established defence mechanisms, recurring diplomatic engagements, and convergent maritime frameworks. Consequently, the transition to Prabowo's presidency occurred within a structured policy environment shaped by maritime developmentalism and strategic pragmatism, limiting the scope for abrupt policy deviation.

Prabowo's Indonesia: Defense Nationalism and Strategic Consolidation

The transition from President Joko Widodo to President Prabowo Subianto introduces a leadership profile associated with a stronger emphasis on defence and strategic nationalism. However, rather than assuming policy rupture, this section assesses whether early foreign policy signals under Prabowo indicate substantive recalibration or consolidation within existing structural constraints. Given the early stage of his administration, the analysis focuses on observable policy direction and institutional continuity rather than long-term projection.

Prabowo's political trajectory has been closely tied to defence affairs and military modernization. His tenure as Minister of Defence underscored Indonesia's commitment to upgrading military capabilities, diversifying procurement sources, and strengthening deterrence posture (Hakim, 2026). This orientation continues under his presidency, reflected in sustained emphasis on naval expansion, air force modernization, and domestic defence industry development. Rather than representing a strategic departure, these priorities intensify Indonesia's existing modernization trajectory within the Minimum Essential Force framework.

At the level of foreign policy doctrine, early signals indicate continuity in Indonesia's longstanding commitment to strategic autonomy and non-alignment. Official statements emphasize sovereignty protection, maritime security, and balanced engagement with major powers, without indicating any departure from ASEAN centrality or Indonesia's Indo-Pacific Outlook (Cabinet Secretary of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026). This suggests that Prabowo's defense nationalism operates within an established hedging strategy, combining capability enhancement with diplomatic flexibility.

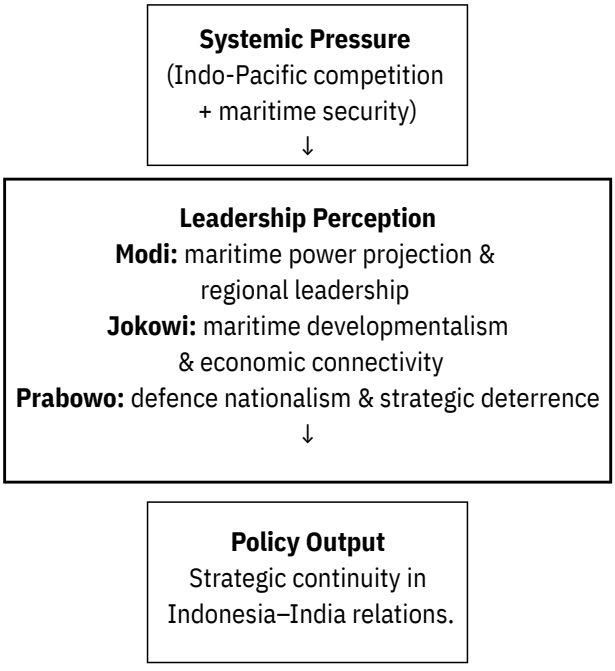
Empirically, this continuity is reflected in Indonesia's sustained engagement with India. Early diplomatic exchanges and defence dialogues point to ongoing cooperation in naval collaboration, maritime domain awareness, and defence industrial linkages. India continues to function as a complementary partner within Indonesia's broader effort to diversify external security relationships without escalating geopolitical tensions. The absence of policy retrenchment or rhetorical distancing indicates that bilateral relations remain embedded within institutional frameworks established during the previous administration.

Prabowo's state visit to India from 23–26 January 2025 further illustrates this pattern of consolidation.

His role as Chief Guest at India's 76th Republic Day symbolically elevated bilateral ties, while substantively advancing cooperation through twelve memoranda of understanding spanning defence, energy, health, maritime security, cyber cooperation, and the digital economy (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2025). The near-finalization of a US$450 million BrahMos supersonic missile agreement—featuring technology transfer and potential local production—highlights the deepening of defence cooperation alongside Indonesia's broader modernization agenda (Strangio, 2026). Parallel developments in energy security, renewable cooperation, and health diplomacy demonstrate a preference for multidimensional partnerships in which security cooperation is embedded within wider economic and technological engagement.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, these developments reflect the interaction between systemic pressures and leadership perception. Prabowo interprets the evolving Indo-Pacific environment primarily through the lens of intensifying security competition, maritime vulnerability, and shifting power balances (Yadav, 2025). The Indo-Pacific is thus understood not only as an economic space but as a strategic theatre where naval capability, technological competition, and geopolitical rivalry shape regional stability. However, this perception does not translate into alignment behavior. Instead, it reinforces Indonesia's strategic autonomy by emphasizing defence capability, partnership diversification, and maritime resilience.

Table 2:
Neoclassical Realist Framework on the Foreign Policy Framework Between Indonesia-India under Jokowi-Prabowo and Modi Leadership



Source: Made by Author

Within this structural context, defence modernization becomes a functional response to systemic pressures. The growing importance of secure sea lanes, coupled with regional military expansion, elevates the strategic value of Indonesia's archipelagic geography. Strengthening naval and air capabilities is therefore framed as necessary for credible deterrence and sovereignty protection (Kementerian Pertahanan RI, 2022). Procurement initiatives—

including advanced missile systems and major platform acquisitions—illustrate how systemic incentives are translated into national defence priorities.

Despite this more security-oriented interpretation of the regional environment, the underlying logic of Indonesia–India relations remains stable. Shared interests in maritime security, strategic autonomy, and Indo-Pacific stability continue to provide a basis for cooperation. Leadership transition thus affects emphasis and policy tempo, but not the strategic direction of engagement. Indonesia's partnership with India is sustained not by personal leadership alignment, but by converging structural incentives and institutionalized cooperation.

In this sense, Prabowo's leadership represents strategic consolidation rather than recalibration. His defence-oriented approach reinforces existing patterns of engagement while operating within the same structural constraints that shaped policy under Jokowi. Consequently, Indonesia's India policy remains embedded in a broader framework of middle-power hedging, where diversification, flexibility, and autonomy continue to guide foreign policy behavior.

Comparative Analysis: Continuity or Strategic Recalibration?

The preceding sections examined Indonesia–India relations under contrasting leadership profiles: Jokowi's maritime developmentalism and Prabowo's defence-centric strategic nationalism. The central analytical question is whether leadership transition produced meaningful recalibration or whether continuity predominates across core strategic dimensions. Rather than narrating policy developments, this section compares key domains of bilateral engagement to assess patterns of persistence and adjustment.

Under Jokowi, maritime cooperation with India aligned with the Global Maritime Fulcrum vision, emphasizing connectivity, port development (including Sabang), and coordinated patrols near the Andaman Sea. Maritime collaboration was embedded within economic and infrastructure priorities (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018b). Under Prabowo, maritime security remains central, but with greater emphasis on deterrence and on strengthening naval capabilities. However, there is no evidence of reduction or doctrinal shift in cooperation with India. It assesses a substantial continuity. The maritime domain reflects structural imperatives rooted in shared Indian Ocean security and global political concerns rather than leadership preference.

Jokowi's later term saw the gradual consolidation of defence dialogues and the diversification of partners, including India. Defence cooperation was institutionalized but not rhetorically foregrounded. Prabowo's presidency places stronger rhetorical and operational emphasis on defence modernization and procurement. However, India remains a complementary security partner in Indonesia's diversification strategy. It assesses a tactical recalibration of emphasis but strategic continuity of direction. Defence nationalism intensifies cooperation rather than reorients it.

Under Jokowi, economic pragmatism guided engagement. India is regarded as a credible and strategic partner, particularly in connectivity and energy cooperation. Under Prabowo, early signals indicate continuity in trade diversification and downstream industrialization priorities. There is no observable decoupling or reprioritization away from India.

It assesses a continuity driven by economic diversification logic and shared South–South developmental aspirations.

Jokowi maintained Indonesia's Indo-Pacific Outlook while avoiding formal alignment in great-power blocs. Engagement with India was compatible with ASEAN centrality and hedging behavior. Prabowo's discourse emphasizes sovereignty and strategic autonomy but does not depart from Indonesia's non-aligned tradition. India's strategic autonomy posture facilitates sustained alignment without entanglement in alliances. It assessesstrong structural continuity. Both administrations operate within

Indonesia's long-standing hedging architecture.

Under Jokowi, economic interdependence with China coexisted with maritime friction in the North Natuna Sea. Indonesia avoided overt balancing behavior. Under Prabowo, defence modernization could be interpreted as a form of subtle deterrence signalling. However, there is no evidence of explicit alignment with India against China. It assesses a continuity in calibrated balancing. China functions as a structural constraint shaping Indonesia's diversification strategy, including engagement with India. Across these five dimensions, the evidence indicates that:

1. Maritime and Indo-Pacific positioning show strong structural continuity.
2. Defence ties demonstrate recalibration in emphasis but not strategic redirection.
3. Economic engagement remains pragmatically stable.
4. The China factor operates as a systemic driver rather than a leadership-dependent variable.
5. The strategic autonomy of India and the "Bebas-Aktif" are shared as policy principles.

Leadership transition, therefore, modifies tempo, rhetoric, and prioritization, but does not fundamentally alter Indonesia's India policy trajectory. This comparative analysis returns to the theoretical framework. Does Indonesia's India policy reflect structural determination, or does leadership agency meaningfully shape outcomes? From a neoclassical realist perspective, systemic pressures in the Indo-Pacific constitute the primary explanatory layer. Intensifying maritime competition, strategic uncertainty generated by US–China rivalry, and India's own consolidation as a regional security actor create enduring incentives for Indonesia to maintain diversified partnerships. These pressures constrain the range of viable foreign policy alternatives available to Indonesian leaders. However, structural determinism alone is insufficient. Leadership agency remains visible in three domains:

1.Rhetorical framing — Jokowi emphasized development; Prabowo emphasizes defence sovereignty.
2.Policy tempo — Defence cooperation may accelerate under Prabowo.
3.Symbolic signaling — Leadership style affects diplomatic messaging.

Yet these variations operate within structural boundaries. Leadership transition functions as an intervening variable rather than a determining force. Structural incentives shape the strategic direction, while leadership influences emphasis and implementation. This finding carries broader implications for middle-power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. Emerging middle powers such as Indonesia operate within increasingly dense strategic environments where autonomy is preserved through diversification rather than realignment. Bilateral partnerships that are institutionalized within defence, maritime, and economic frameworks become resilient to domestic political turnover. In such contexts, leadership change does not automatically translate into foreign policy rupture.

The Indonesia–India case, therefore, challenges assumptions that personalist leadership styles in emerging democracies necessarily generate policy volatility. Instead, it demonstrates how structural imperatives and institutional embedding can stabilize bilateral partnerships even amid leadership transition. For Indo-Pacific scholarship, this suggests that middle-power interactions deserve greater analytical attention beyond major power rivalry frameworks.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine whether Indonesia's leadership transition from Joko Widodo to Prabowo Subianto represents a rupture or recalibration in Indonesia–India relations within the broader context of Narendra Modi's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy. Contrary to assumptions that leadership change in emerging democracies necessarily produces foreign policy volatility, the findings demonstrate substantial strategic continuity across administrations. While rhetorical emphasis and policy tempo differ—maritime developmentalism under Jokowi and defence-centric assertiveness under Prabowo—the underlying trajectory of Indonesia–India engagement remains anchored in structural Indo-Pacific imperatives.

The analysis has shown that maritime cooperation, defence institutionalization, economic diversification, and calibrated balancing vis-à-vis China persist across leadership transitions. Tactical recalibration is observable in the heightened defence emphasis under Prabowo, yet this shift intensifies rather than redirects established strategic frameworks. Leadership transition thus operates as an intervening variable shaping implementation and signaling, but not fundamentally altering Indonesia's India policy.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce a neoclassical realist interpretation of foreign policy continuity. Systemic pressures—particularly intensifying maritime competition, strategic uncertainty generated by US–China rivalry, and India's consolidation as a regional security actor—constrain the policy alternatives available to Indonesian leaders. At the same time, leadership agency remains relevant in mediating emphasis, institutional prioritization, and diplomatic rhetoric. The Indonesia–India case, therefore, illustrates how structural incentives and domestic agency interact to produce continuity within bounded flexibility. This contributes to broader debates on foreign policy change by demonstrating that middle powers embedded in dense regional security environments exhibit greater resilience to leadership turnover than often assumed.

The findings also carry implications for middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. As regional fragmentation deepens and strategic competition intensifies, middle powers increasingly rely on diversified partnerships rather than exclusive alignments. Indonesia's sustained engagement with India reflects this logic of strategic diversification. Rather than serving as a balancing coalition against a single major power, the partnership functions as part of a broader hedging architecture aimed at preserving autonomy and minimizing vulnerability.

For ASEAN centrality, the continuity of Indonesia–India relations reinforces the region's capacity to maintain diplomatic equilibrium amid great-power rivalry. India's own commitment to strategic autonomy and selective alignment reduces the risk that bilateral cooperation undermines ASEAN-led mechanisms. In this sense, the durability of Indonesia–India engagement supports a plural and non-exclusive Indo-Pacific order in which middle powers retain maneuvering space. The case suggests that ASEAN centrality is more likely to be preserved when member states institutionalize diversified partnerships rather than pivot toward rigid bloc politics.

Looking ahead to the evolving Modi–Prabowo era, the trajectory of Indonesia–India relations is likely to remain conditioned by structural maritime and security incentives. Continued naval modernization, supply chain diversification, and Indian Ocean governance initiatives will provide enduring grounds for cooperation. However, the depth of engagement will depend not only on systemic pressures but also on institutional capacity and economic complementarities. Rather than anticipating dramatic realignment, the more plausible trajectory is incremental consolidation within existing strategic parameters.

In a fragmenting Indo-Pacific order characterized by fluid alignments and intensifying competition, the Indonesia–India case underscores a broader pattern: leadership change does not automatically disrupt structurally embedded partnerships among middle powers. Strategic continuity, mediated through institutionalization and shared autonomy-seeking behavior, may prove more characteristic of middle power diplomacy than episodic realignment. Recognizing this dynamic enriches our understanding of how regional order evolves beyond the actions of major powers and highlights the stabilizing potential of resilient middle-power partnerships.

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Subject and object dualism: Problematique of the discipline of the international

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ABSTRACT

The subject and object separation with its roots in Cartesian dualism constructs the realm of 'the international' as universal and cosmopolitan. Europe emerged as a homogeneous space embedded in modernity ushered by enlightenment and renaissance, invented static spatio-temporality, synchronic history and geography, and installed the rest of the world (object) in this montage of ontological singularity (Kumar, 2023). The knowledge was produced by the civilised West and engraved on the tabula rasa of inferior and uncivilised non-West. The politicisation and naturalisation of the vocabulary of the paternalistic eurocentric world view led to the construction of 'the international' as monochromatic realm. A multifaceted multilayered epistemic approach to international can ground the subject and object into a relational epistem of ontological multiplicity. The examination of problematique of subject and object have the potential to free the ship of 'international' from the firm docking of the Eurocentric harbour and anchor it to the pluriverse of knowledge. This approach can explain the absent silent thought of space outside West.

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Introduction

The subject is the knower who constructs the object. The object is to know itself through the lens of the subject as it has no mind of its own. This subject and object dualism manifest itself in the construction of Europe as superior in relation to the inferior and uncouth non-West in the realm of the international. The autopoietic model of growth by Europe embedded in modernity occupies the positionality of subject which produces the object following its own expediency. The problematique of subject and object dualism underpinning Eurocentric meta-theoretical routes of the 'international' requires looking into Goldmann (1995) 'discourse about IR discourse' (Kumar, 2023). This notion put forth the discipline of IR into the dock of scrutiny. The history, geography, the politics, the identity of IR needs reexamination and needs inclusion of the context of distinct sociological topographies. The theories and methodologies of the discipline of International Relations being embedded in idiosyncratic ontology constitutes the world as a whole. There is a need to integrate the vernacular tropes of epistemology into the cosmopolitan episteme whose meta-theoretical routes are deeply Eurocentric. Mignolo (1995) reflects the role play of subject-object dualism and eurocentrism when he argues that the world is not one, but it is one for Europeans.

These concerns about the epistemological and the political implications of examining the situatedness of knowledge instead of taking it as pre-given have assumed increasing importance in IR since the Third Debate (Saramago, 2019). The positivist model of 'truth as correspondence' and its understanding of knowledge as a direct representation of an objective and independent world entailing a separation between subject and object critiqued by the post-positivists (Ibid.).

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Non-European scholars must bring into the consideration the distinct ontological embeddedness of their respective societies, which demands the instrumentalization of the episteme for the purpose of explaining the phenomenon known as 'the native' (Kumar, 2023). The native is the product of the subject object dualism. Eurocentism is a contest between alterity and alterity of doubleness grounded on the very premise where constructing 'the other' and Europe as an epicentre, is accepted as the truth.

There is a need to actively look out the metatheoretical limitations that have been superimposed upon modes of understanding of the phenomenon of 'international' by grand theories of IR. Walt (1998) has analysed that a single theory is insufficient to explain complexities of the field of 'international' and suggest a pluriversal discipline. Neorealism is based on the premise that the world order is some fixed tangible entity. It is a singular monovalent notion, which imagined in terms of an ontology of the structuralist constant (Kumar, 2023). The materialist determinism in structural theory as propounded by Waltz, governed by the historicist logic of teleology which denies any possibility of transformational logic (Hobson, 2000). The methodological linearity of positivism through its endeavours to transcend history traps into unconscious ideology (Cox,1986) and the history on which structural realism is based works on a methodology that separates the subject and object (Ibid.). In this way, history seen as objectified data, something which can arranged in strict chronology being oblivion to other parallel events. The grand theories have established a monolithic portrait of the world.

Construction of the 'international' through subject-object dualism

This portrait grounded in the ontological singularity which can be situated in the metaphysics of modernity (Kumar, 2023). Derrida (1968) concept of différance and iteration are pivotal in basing the subject as superior. Most of the dominant theories of IR reduce the phenomenon of 'international' to a particular static synchronised time and space. The predominately eurocentric universal model of the international dreads a multifaceted and multilayered epistemic approach as the latter approach brings in context of different sociological topographies, thereby dismantling the control of 'the subject' on object. The subject i.e., West is constructing knowledge itself and imposed it on object in a homogenous manner. The object in this way, is made aware about itself by the subject. Fanon (1952) in Black Skin, White Masks has highlighted that how ontologically being a Black man is not possible as the language of thought and recognition itself is of coloniser. The object embraces international paternalism as a discourse of benevolence rather than of exploitation, where the intervening subject acts on behalf of the weak and inferior object in such a way that it keeps prioritising the subject (Hobson, 2012). The order and anarchy dichotomies too build on the subject-object dualism. Anarchy emerges as the foundational truth and a self-evident proposition in designing the ontology of the 'international domain.' The anarchy-hierarchy principle has framed the linguistic cartography and conceptual vocabulary of the discipline of IR (Schmidt, 1998). The subliminal Eurocentrism of modern realism leads the international anarchy to deploy the conceptions of formal or informal hierarchy and gradated sovereignty where the West held as the subject of world politics while the East portrayed as the passive object following the norms of the Western powers (Hobson, 2012).

The emphasis on the systemic analysis was in fact founded on the motivation of making the international discipline in terms of methodological design of pure science. The theories were supposed to give an objective theorem of world order which explains as well as simultaneously predicts both war and peace. Thus, in a way 'international' consists of elements which are constant substratum of a changing and accidental manifestations (Cox, 1986). The nonlinear formulation grounded in historicist teleology presents a monochromatic view of the 'international.' The hegemony of the grand theoretical narrative is maintained by persistent repetition, reiteration and representation of the vocabulary which get its meaning from the Euro-American underpinning (Kumar, 2023 cited Derrida,1978). The 'civilisation' which had been the most important categorisation in defining the realm of international itself was parochial, located in the definitive Eurocentric conception of time and space. Its definition designed on the eurocentric antinomies of science, reason, logic vs dogma, irrationality and blind belief (Kumar, 2023).

The distinction between enlightened modern world and a dark backward world pivoted upon a Manichean yardstick that differentiates societies between the culture of the post-enlightenment Europe and the culturally nonage races that lie beyond Europe (Kumar, 2023). It is in this montage where the subject and object get constructed. The question of what proper knowledge is and what is not, fabricates the agency of knowledge production. The Euro-American world takes the position of producers of knowledge basing its legitimacy on the fact that this world is 'civilised' based on modernity and science. The knowledge comes from rational enquiry and empirical observation in line with pure science. The rest of the world is to consume the knowledge uncritically to be able to be part of the 'international.'The object by default of being backward, considered as incapable of producing any knowledge and must mimic the pre-given progress teleology to be part of the IR discourse. Thus, in this way the subject and object dualism forms the foundation of intellectual history of the West which is ontological singular embedded in the principles of synchronic history.

Hegel has been one of the prominent influences in the framework of the grand theories of IR. His concept of 'the end of history' implies that the trajectory of history progresses to achieve the given goal and after realisation of the aims, the process of history culminates. Thus, for Hegel (1971) the post-enlightenment Europe due to its ability to logic and reason is a free world and represent 'the end of history' and Asia which lags in progress of civilisation, is the beginning of history (Kumar, 2023). Now, this conception of 'the end of history' exteriorises world history into hetero-spatial and hetero temporal civilisational formations, where the West and the East come as the places to exist in different time zones simultaneously (Ibid.). In this way, we can see how the subject has carved the road which must be taken. The path is reductionist, monovalent well as universal.

The very combination of post-cartesian positivist conception of instrumentalist knowledge and the post-hegelian notion of historicist teleology constitutes the foundational pillars of the grand theories of IR (Kumar, 2018 cited Davetak, 1995; Dodson, 2007). The hypostatisation of knowledge which was exclusively located in the monolithic metaphysics of modernity has served as the disseminator of knowledge to the object i.e rest of the world (Ibid.). The notion of culture hijacked in this subject and object dualism is based on post-Christian epistemology. Anghie (1996) highlights that how the sovereignty doctrine itself brought in to address the problem of cultural difference, which later formed the base for Grotius international law. The only valid knowledge was the knowledge by the logic and rationality of Cartesian dualism which accentuated the materialistic separation of the subject and the object. The mind served the montage of a singular civilisational geography, and the matter was supposed to follow it blindly. The Foucauldian nexus of knowledge/power is crucial in colonising the minds of the object (Kumar, 2023). Behera (2009) argues that modern Western belief systems premised on the separation between human beings (subject) and nature (object) and this very distinction serves as the basis for an instrumental relationship of domination. Seen from Nietzschean lens, the dark medieval age of Europe which had the ability to delegitimise Europe's position as the subject removed carefully from historical evaluation. Foucault has problematised the modern forms of knowledge which appear as given and natural, are contingent socio-historical constructions of power and domination and the task of enlightenment was to multiply the political power of reason (Kumar, 2023).

The language of translation and the language of mediation elaborate sovereignty doctrine as historically contingent and thereby serves for the unproblematic articulation of a European model of governance (Niang, 2018). The Berlin Conference of Africa (1884-1885) confirmed this sovereignty principle and asserted civilisational, cultural, racial, and political dominance of Europe over Africa (Ibid.). Africans divided into some arbitrary bounded identities to make nation states. The politicisation and naturalisation of this sovereignty principle considered Africa as tabula rasa and thus the subject provides the knowledge of the object called Africa. The language of colonisation- discovery, civilization and rescue perfected fiction into facts (Singh, 1996), and in this way the object got to know its history.

The order and anarchy dichotomy which is based on subject and object dualism to legitimise the superiority of the West over the rest of the world, which I have mentioned earlier can be reflected by examining neorealism. Neorealism is one of the grand narratives of international politics which again is based on structuralist ontology of system-centrism dismissing the agency of the unit level actors. Karl Popper (1959 as cited in Kumar, 2023) in his work 'The Logic of Scientific Discovery' explains the notion of falsification, which Waltz employs to make his conception of world order in allegiance to scientific theory. The notion of 'demarcation' which Popper uses for the purpose of differentiating between science and pseudoscience, has been employed by Waltz to distinguish between an anarchical and non-anarchical world (Kumar, 2023). The balancing equilibrium of Waltz's bipolarity model of the international system emanates from the Westphalian conception of international society. The Westphalian sovereignty model has been universalised by the subject by serving it on the platter and the object has idealised it to an extent where the the order of eating the dish from the platter too needs learning from the subject. The oriental world had to think now of their stepping into modernity, which was not the concern before, thus in a way the subject was making them aware of themselves. This paved the way for intellectual colonisation by the subject and a particular context limited in monovalent sociological topography through lexical cartography became cosmopolitan. In culmination the enlightenment universalism is an overarching imperial project which got internalised in such a way that it became a characteristic feature of the object.

The colonial encounter turned sovereignty into a reality which rationalised the configurations of differentiation (Nayar, 2014). Europe placed as a homogeneous space which endowed with the highest degree of human development. This homogeneity of space situated in a particular temporal trajectory i.e., the emptiness of time got its manifestation in uniformity, regularity and governmentality which emerged as byproducts of enlightenment (Kumar, 2023). The paradigms of European knowledge have been sanitised of references to substantive traces of others in the European self and the very coloniality of its power structure on the other (Quijano, 2007). This domination of Europe over the rest of the world as manifestation of the subject and object relations produces an alleged 'time gap', this gap introduces the problem of coevality (Fabian, 2002 as cited in Tickner and Smith, 2020). This 'time gap', later transformed into empty time where the non-age world is inferior to the West. The dual modality of historical time enabled representation of events as at once contemporaneous and non-contemporaneous and in between also allowed presentation of some conditions as more progressive than the others (Koselleck, 1988). This is what Goody (2006) refers to as 'theft of history'. It can, therefore, that every single dynamic, every aspect, and the process of international imbibes some degree of interdependence and intersubjectivity (Tickner and Smith, 2020).

Hedley Bull (1977) conception of international society originated in Europe with the Westphalian treaty. It is through colonisation by Europe that the rest of the world was integrated into the international order. This can also be genealogically connected to Waltzian balancing equilibrium (Kumar, 2023). In a way, the paradigmatic situatedness of the Westphalian Treaty has assumed the status of 'Copernicus revolution' in the discourse of IR (Linklater & Suganami, 2006 as cited in ibid.). However, this revolution which keeps Europe at the centre of cosmos, is half baked and resists the idea of ontological multiplicity. The modern West was the result of renaissance and enlightenment which brought the idea of thinking man. However, the geography where modernity could not reach, were considered as incapable of having any mental faculty or inferior weak mind, thereby the subject and object were craftily framed. The white man used the logic of inferior mind to exploit the resources as the native were not capable of rationality. Taking inspiration from Rousseau that freedom is not a fruit which can be grown under all conditions, self-determination was actively denied to the non-West based on the premise that they were not mature enough (Niang, 2008). The productive logic of capitalism was imposed on the rest of the world. Modernity, therefore served as the temporal taxonomy that gave Europe the power and exclusivity over thinking and with this authority taken as legitimate Europe took over writing histories of the world beyond suited to its own expediency.

The concepts of State, sovereignty, territoriality, anarchy, hierarchy, and order have been foundational in determining the semantic and semiotic trajectory of discourse of International Relations (Kumar, 2023). These concepts constitute the global lexicon of the ontological, epistemological and pedagogical formulations of the structured dissemination of knowledge in the domain of International Relations. The non-west thus inherited these concepts as a borrowed, alien language and practice; an effort to master the borrowings is possible, however, could never be made as their own (Niang, 2018). European disregard to the non-Western world and heuristic ignorance grounded in the cartesian dualism between subject and object creates an ontological imaginary of the world beyond Europe, which is typically stereotyped as uncouth, despotic and unruly. These sedimented meta theoretical lens induces a void between the realm of theory and the practical world. Its clear manifestation is observed when Western knowledge attempt to script the story of the history and nature of non-West. The historical project results in provincialization of globe as its epistemology is grounded in problems of modernity which resorts to the ontological singularity of the post-Hegelian interpretation of history (Kumar, 2023). As a result, a Eurocentric Westphalian conceptualisation of State, sovereignty, territoriality and spatiality guides its meta-theoretical imagination (Spruyt, 2020). The locating of cultural social situatedness of all knowledge process is crucial but has been ignored by positivist grand theories of IR which have assumed the immutability of world politics and thus, as a consequence are liable to reproduce, even if unintentionally, the perspectives of the national, state or class interest that predominately shape and benefit from existing world order and reiterates the subject-object dualism (Saramago, 2019).

The road to decolonising the dualism

Integration of mid level theory providing ontological distinctiveness with grand theories of IR by way of deparochializing the epistemic practices and vernacularisation of the vocabulary of grand theories (Kumar, 2023). The historicist teleology is inherently flawed guiding the ontological singularity of global world order. Sinocentric tributary system, the Islamic imperial geography, the South Asian Galactic empires have existed before the Westphalian big bang, therefore, Hendrik Spruyt (2020) demonstrates that international orders can also be formed even in absence of a hegemon (Kumar, 2023). Guha (1998) has highlighted the myth of ideological neutrality, which is central to liberal historiography, which performs the dual function of changing the world as well as simultaneously keeping the current state. The virgin births of IR needs to introduced in the institutions with a word of caution. Hoffman (1977) has highlighted that how International Relations was made as an American social science. Aron characterised international relations as the specialised activity of diplomats and soldiers, isolating the discipline from domestic policy (Hoffman,1977).

Gadamer (2013) has argued that the past cannot be seen as some objective phenomenon that can be decoded with mere positivist empirical enquiry rather the historical consciousness that acts as an epistemic lens of the understanding of the past tends to be deeply situated in the ontology of particular tradition (Kumar, 2023). Hence, horizontal dialogues are necessary to bring in alternative knowledge and in alternative knowledge and worldview. Horizontal dialogues entry into the debates of IR discourse would help in transcending anthropocentrism and the dualisms of modernity, particularly the nature/society divide (Tickner and Smith, 2020). The historicist teleology of Hegel which specifically builds the semantic base for the wall of separation between subject and object should be abandoned as the only way, there is need to see history in diachronic terms. The prismatic idea of civilisation which considers a spectrum of diverse cultural life forms should be the way out rather than treating the post-enlightenment of Europe as the only legitimate source of knowledge (Maletz, 1983). In this light, colonisation acted as as a form of self inscription onto the lives of people who were conceived artificially by pinning them into a particular cultural and geographical space which was hollow and blank (Spurr,1994).

Foucault has asserted that man is simultaneously subject and object of knowledge, this idea as a transcendental doublet can help in designing the conceptual map of a decolonised International Relations (Kumar, 2023). Locating at how the IR theory became the principle epistemic mediating and

disseminating the story of the history and how it got conditioned into a doublet that simultaneously manifests in the form of the subject as well as the object of spatio-temporal trajectory of the era of post-enlightenment era serves as the locus of decolonising the discipline (Ibid.). There has been effort to envisage a new era of 'non-Western IR.' However, such theorisation can lead to dangerous relativism diminishing any dialogue between national schools (Owen, et al., 2017). Moreover, non-Western IR falls again in the shadow dualism battle of who is the subject making the emancipation of the discipline of international difficult. This also makes IR about 'us and them' and therefore transforms into a self-referential project (Owen, et al.,2017). In this light, Prakash (1990) jests the Third World countries try to write their history as mere project of essentialism arising from a fixed space of enunciation (cited Kumar, 2025). Bilgin (2020) argues that IR needs to be opened up to researchers beyond West. Acharya (2014) talks of conception of Global IR, which can transcend the separation between the West and the rest by taking in account resistance and local constructions of global order.

Conclusively, Descartes' (1641) subject and object dualism which makes the distinction between the knower and what is known needs a pedantic look from the Heidegger perspective of Dasein which implies being in the world can help shed the distinction (Çüçen, 1998). The principle of relationality can lead us to the path of countering the subject and object dualism. It can provide a conceptual map for the arena of discipline of international relations which values interdependence. The paternalism of the Eurocentric theoretical framework of the grand theories of IR where the West is the subject and non-West is the passive object can be shed once the relationality principle enters the forte of international. This brings forth the idea that West and non-West are dependent on each other for the progress of history and displaces Europe from the position of subject. The international needs shaping through ontological multiplicity which takes in account the context of different sociological topographies. Designing any such discipline must take in account that multiplicity is not just about creation of national schools in international, but it also entails taking in account dissimilar cultural dialogue. The language English needs to serve as the lingua franca rather than being a lexical tool aiding the concealment of alternative knowledge systems and reiterating that the object has no mind. The object does have a mind of its own and is not tabula rasa, however, its rationality not guided by post-enlightenment of a particular geography. The reification of state as fixed territorial spaces is problematic as "chronopolitics" keeps changing the geographical basis of conventional international relations theory (Agnew, 1994, p.). This dynamism requires integration n the discipline of 'international' in real sense. Pogge (1993) has proposed the idea of vertical dispersal of sovereignty. This can prevent the hegemonisation and homogenisation of nation states. Therefore, sovereignty principle has played important role in historicist teleology. Seeing sovereignty as "a relational norm, as a divisible norm and as a modernization-bound norm" (Niang, 2018, p.) can rehistoricize the temporality in the discipline. Acharya (2014) questions why the Cold war period was seen as "long peace" despite battle deaths taking place outside Europe (p. 648). This predicament highlights how characterisations of time periods across world is centred on the subject's convenience.

Conclusion

The discipline of international is based on accounting dynamism on the world stage, however, in all practical sense, the discipline cages the plurality and constructs idea of cosmopolitan entailing subject-object dualism. The West defines what it is to be cosmopolitan, the rules are set by the subject to include the object. The paper, however, doesn't ask to abandon or displace the grand theories of the discipline, rather it actively proposes to situate the grand theories in their respective cartographic spatio-temporal location. The concepts deployed in the discipline of 'international' should be reformulated so that the bias toward the subject can be minimised. For example, sovereignty as a principle was used by West to ground its position in the global map, however, this same principle alienates and questions the autonomy of the non-West (Niang, 2008). The whole bucket of 'failed state' seeks its legitimacy from the very point that subject knows better. In contemporary geopolitical scenario, US invasion on Venezuela was deploys subject and object dualism; the object needs nurturing under the subject. Looking at the discipline from this lens reminds us of the paradox highlighted by Chatterjee (1993) that we tend to think that colonialism

is something which we have kept behind, however, when we talk of modern world, we keep invoking and worshipping the linearity. The concept of 'discovery' needs to be problematised. The decolonial lens involving anthropology as the methodology can question the privileged epistemological position of the West. The subject i.e the discoverers brought in new knowledge which was circulated via binaries such as civilization and barbarism; tradition and modernity (Singh, 1996). The native agency becomes an empty signifier (Kumar, 2025). Space is abstract and lacks human values, can be accessed discursively through symbols and representations but is empty; however place is a location marked by human experiences (Tuan 1977 as cited in Chatterjee, 2019). The domain of 'international' stemming from subject and object dualism concerns itself with only space. However, what is needed is grounding of the discipline of 'international' in the ontological plurality, so that people and place as concepts are not ghettoised. The core of dualism doesn't allow the autonomy for heteronormativity to coexist and thereby it is crucial to be critical of the very foundation of the discipline, so that subaltern can speak as well as gets heard. The discipline should be cautious to not get caught in the maze of relativism rather should aim for pluralism. Tickner (2011) has urged to "uncover stories about forgotten spaces that respect difference, show tolerance and compassion, and are skeptical about absolute truths".

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Beyond the Binary: Gender Diversity and the Transformation of Environmental Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The twenty-first century presents pressing challenges in environmental sustainability, with climate change and ecological degradation interacting with social inequalities. This paper explores the role of gender-inclusive perspectives in shaping environmental attitudes and behaviours, extending ecofeminist insights beyond traditional women-centred frameworks (Warren, 1990; Merchant,1980). Drawing on empirical evidencefrom Hampel, Boldero, and Holdsworth (1996), which demonstrates that adolescent girls exhibit higher environmental responsibility than boys even when controlling for socio-economic factors, and the United Nations Environment Programme (2025), which highlights gender-differentiated climate impacts, the study examines how socialisation, gender identity, and normative structures influence ecological engagement. Contemporary research on gender egalitarianism (Echavarren, 2023)further indicates that societies with stronger genderequality norms display higher environmental concern, supporting the integration of intersectional and nonbinary perspectives into sustainability discourse. The paper identifies significant gaps in understanding the ecological behaviours of non-binary and transgender populations and proposes avenues for future research, including policy development, environmental education, and participatory governance. By situating environmental responsibility within an inclusive genderframework, this study contributes to theoretical and practical discussions on equitable and effective ecological stewardship, highlighting the potential of new-age feminism to informsustainable practices and environmental policy.

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Gender identity, ecofeminism, environmental consciousness, climateaction, intersectionality, gender-inclusive policy

I. Introduction

Environmental responsibility is often framed as a universal concern. However, this assumption overlooks how environmental attitudes and vulnerabilities are shaped by social structures, including gender. While research acknowledges gender differences in ecological behaviour, it continues to rely on binary categories that do not reflect contemporary understandings of identity.

In this paper, gender identity refers to an individual's internal understanding of their gender, which may or may not align with the sex assigned at birth. Recognising this distinction is important because environmental research has traditionally relied on fixed categories such as "men" and "women," leaving out a range of lived experiences. Similarly, environmental consciousness refers to the awareness, concern, and behavioural commitment individuals show toward ecological sustainability.

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Early ecofeminist scholars such as Carolyn Merchant (1980)argue that the Scientific Revolution transformed nature into what she describes as a “passive object,” something to be controlled rather than respected. This shift, according to Merchant, parallels the historical subordination of women within patriarchal systems. In other words, the domination of nature and the domination of women are not separate processes but structurally linked. This insight remains important because it highlights how systems of power shape both ecological and social relations.

Similarly, Karen Warren (1990) introduces the concept of the “logic of domination,” which she defines as a framework that justifies inequality through hierarchical thinking. Warren argues that once difference is framed as inferiority, it becomes easier to legitimise both environmental exploitation and gender oppression. This idea helps explain why environmental degradation is not only a technical issue but also an ethical one rooted in systems of inequality.

However, both Merchant and Warren rely on a relatively stable category of “women,” which does not account for the complexity of gender today. Judith Butler (1990) challenges this assumption by arguing that gender is not fixed but “performatively constituted” through repeated social actions. This means that gender is not something one is, but something one does within a set of social expectations. Applying this to environmental behaviour shifts the focus from identity to the norms that shape it.

Building on these perspectives, this paper argues that environmental responsibility must be analysed beyond binary gender categories. Without this shift, existing frameworks remain limited in their ability to explain how diverse identities engage with ecological issues.

II. Literature Review

Ecofeminism provides a foundational framework for linking gender and environmental thought. Merchant (1980), in The Death of Nature, argues that the rise of modern science replaced an organic view of nature with a mechanistic one. She describes this transformation as a shift from seeing nature as “alive” to viewing it as a resource to be exploited. This argument is significant because it connects environmental degradation to broader historical changes in how power operates.

Warren (1990) extends this analysis through her idea of the “logic of domination.” She explains that systems of oppression rely on dualistic thinking, such as man versus woman and culture versus nature. Once these dualisms are established, they create a structure where one side is valued over the other. In the context of environmental responsibility, this helps explain why nature is often treated as inferior and expendable. However, Warren’s framework, while analytically strong, does not fully question the stability of these categories themselves.

This limitation is addressed by Val Plumwood (1993), who critiques what she calls the “mastery of nature” framework. Plumwood argues that simply reversing hierarchies or celebrating women’s connection to nature does not dismantle the underlying structure of domination. Instead, she calls for a rejection of dualistic thinking altogether. This is particularly relevant to this paper, as it supports the need to move beyond binary categories rather than simply redefining them.

From a material perspective, Bina Agarwal (1992) shifts the discussion toward lived realities. She argues that environmental engagement is shaped less by symbolic connections to nature and more by access to resources. For example, in rural contexts, women’s environmental roles are often determined by their responsibility for fuel, water, and food. Agarwal’s work is important because it grounds ecofeminist theory in socio-economic conditions, particularly in the Global South.

Empirical studies further complicate the discussion. Hampel, Boldero, and Holdsworth (1996) find that adolescent girls show higher levels of environmental concern than boys. However, they do not attribute this to inherent differences. Instead, they suggest that these patterns emerge from socialisation proce-

-sses. Similarly, Zelezny, Chua, and Aldrich (2000) argue that gender differences in environmental attitudes are “learned rather than innate.” This reinforces the idea that environmental behaviour is shaped by cultural expectations rather than biology.

More recent research by Echavarren (2023) introduces a structural dimension. He finds that societies with stronger gender egalitarian values tend to show higher environmental concern. This suggests that when social hierarchies are reduced, individuals are more likely to adopt broader ethical perspectives, including concern for the environment. This finding supports the argument that environmental responsibility is not just an individual trait but is embedded in social systems.

Despite these developments, a key gap remains.Most of this literature continues to operate within a binary understanding of gender. Transgender and non-binary identities are largely absent from both theoretical and empirical discussions. This paper addresses this gap by arguing that a more inclusive framework is necessary to fully understand environmental responsibility.

Gender Socialisation and Environmental Behaviour

Empirical research consistently shows that gender influences environmental attitudes, but the reasons behind this require careful interpretation. Hampel, Boldero, and Holdsworth (1996) found that adolescent girls report higher levels of environmental concern than boys, even when socio-economic factors are controlled. The authors suggest that this difference is not accidental but shaped by early socialisation. In their study, environmental responsibility is linked to values such as care and responsibility, traits that are more strongly encouraged in girls during childhood. This means that environmental behaviour is not biologically determined but socially learned.

Zelezny, Chua, and Aldrich (2000) extend this argument by analysing cross-cultural data. They conclude that gender differences in environmental attitudes are “learned rather than innate.” In other words, individuals adopt ecological values based on the expectations placed on them within their social context. This strengthens the claim that environmental responsibility is shaped by cultural norms rather than fixed identity.

However, both studies operate within a binary framework, comparing men and women as stable categories. Judith Butler (1990) challenges this assumption by arguing that gender is “performatively constituted.” By this, she means that gender is produced through repeated actions rather than existing as a fixed trait. Applying Butler’s argument here shifts the focus. It suggests that what we interpret as “gendered environmental behaviour” is actually the result of repeated social practices and expectations.

This perspective allows for a more flexible understanding of environmental responsibility. Instead of asking why women care more about the environment, it becomes more useful to ask how certain behaviours come to be associated with femininity or masculinity. This shift is crucial for this paper because it opens up the possibility of analysing environmental behaviour beyond binary categories.

Gender Equality and Environmental Concern

While individual behaviour is important, broader social structures also shape environmental responsibility. Echavarren (2023) finds that societies with higher levels of gender equality tend to report stronger environmental concern. He argues that gender egalitarian attitudes contribute to a wider culture of social responsibility. This means that when societies reduce hierarchical divisionsbetween men and women, they also tend to developmore inclusive and future-oriented perspectives, including concern for environmental sustainability.

This argument builds on earlier ecofeminist insights but reframes them at a structural level. Instead of suggesting that women are inherently closer to nature, Echavarren’s findings indicate that equality itselfcreates conditions for environmental awareness. This supports the idea that environmental

responsibility is not tied to identity alone but is shaped by the organisation of society.

The United Nations Environment Programme (2025) provides further context by highlighting the uneven impact of climate change. The report notes that women are disproportionately affected due to limited access to resources, restricted mobility, and lower participation in decision-making. This means that environmental vulnerability is closely tied to structural inequality. The report does not suggest that women are naturally more vulnerable, but rather that social systems place them at greater risk.

Agarwal (1992) makes a similar argument in her analysis of environmental participation in India. She emphasises that access to resources such as land, water, and fuel shapes how individuals engage with environmental issues. According to Agarwal, women's environmental roles are often a result of necessity rather than choice. This shifts the discussion away from symbolic associations and toward material realities.

However, these discussions remain limited by their reliance on binary categories. By focusing only on men and women, they exclude individuals whose experiences do not fit within this framework. This paper argues that without addressing this limitation, both research and policy remain incomplete.

Beyond the Binary: Expanding the Framework

A key limitation in existing environmental research is the absence of transgender and non- binary perspectives. This gap reflects a broader issue in how gender is conceptualised. Most frameworks assume that gender exists as a fixed binary, which does not reflect contemporary understandings of identity.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduces the concept of intersectionality to explain how different forms of inequality interact. She argues that individuals experience marginalisation in overlapping ways, shaped by factors such as gender, race, and class. Applying this to environmental contexts helps us understand that vulnerability is not determined by a single identity but by multiple, intersecting structures.

When this framework is extended to gender diversity, it becomes clear that transgender and non-binary individuals may face unique environmental challenges. For example, access to shelter, healthcare, and public services can be more difficult due to social exclusion. During environmental crises such as displacement or natural disasters, these challenges can intensify.

Judith Butler's (1990)argument about gender performativity also becomes relevant here. If gender is not fixed, then policies based on rigid categories fail to account for lived realities. This creates a gap between policy design and actual experience.

For instance, disaster relief systems are often structured around binary gender categories, which can create barriers for gender-diverse individuals. Access to shelters, sanitation facilities, and identification-based services may become difficult during climate-related displacement. This example highlights how environmental policies, when designed without gender diversity in mind, can unintentionally increase vulnerability.

This paper argues that including non-binary perspectives is not simply about representation. It is essential for improving both the accuracy and effectiveness of environmental frameworks.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

A gender-inclusive approach to environmental responsibility requires changes at multiple levels.

First, policy frameworks must move beyond binary classifications. Current systems often rely on limited categories, which results in incomplete data. Without recognising diverse gender identities, policies cannot fully address environmental vulnerability.

Second, environmental education should engage with gender norms. As Hampel et al. (1996) and Zelezny et al. (2000) show, environmental behaviour is shaped by socialisation. This means that education can play a key role in reshaping how individuals relate to environmental issues.

Third, participatory governance needs to be more inclusive. Agarwal(1992) highlights that access to decision-making spaces is shaped by structural inequalities. Expanding participation to include diverse gender identities can lead to more effective and representative environmental policies.

Finally, future research must address existing gaps. Most empirical studies continue to rely on binary frameworks. Expanding research methods to include gender-diverse populations will provide a more comprehensive understanding of environmental responsibility.

Gender-inclusive frameworks are essential not only for understanding environmental attitudes but also for shaping effective climate action strategies, particularly in adaptation and community-level resilience planning, where local knowledge and social inclusion directly influence outcomes.

III. Conclusion

This paper has examined how gender shapes environmental responsibility, moving from ecofeminist theory to empirical research and contemporary debates on gender diversity. While existing literature provides valuable insights, it remains limited by its reliance on binary frameworks.

Merchant (1980) and Warren (1990) establish the connection between domination and environmental exploitation, but their work assumes stable gender categories. Later scholars such as Agarwal (1992) and Echavarren (2023) shift the focus toward material conditions and social structures, showing that environmental concern is shaped by access and equality. However, even these approaches do not fully address gender diversity.

By drawing on Butler (1990) and Crenshaw (1989), this paper argues for a more flexible and inclusive framework. Environmental responsibility is not simply a matter of individual choice but is shaped by social norms and structural inequalities.

Addressing environmental challenges requires frameworks that reflect the complexity of real-world identities. Moving beyond the binary is therefore not an optional extension but a necessary step for both research and policy.

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